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Introduction

During the meeting in Halle we heard about a large number of finds and features that provide us with a variety of new facts and ideas about Mesolithic humans, graves, mortuary practices and the relation to society in general.

The find material has increased dramatically in the last few decades. According to Meiklejohn et al., the count in 1979 was 44 burials from ten countries. In 2013 the situation had changed to 207 find sites from 24 countries. I wonder how many new finds were made while we were sitting listening to each other.

When I excavated the Skateholm cemeteries in the 1980s, just a small number of graves and even fewer cemeteries were found. As we have now been informed, the number of graves and cemeteries as well as loose finds of human bones has expanded in a way that must be considered extreme when we consider the whole of prehistory. It is an impressive picture of graves, primary and secondary, as well as parts of humans. It gives me great pleasure to find that interpretations of graves and mortuary practices that I was rather uncertain about, and some of my colleagues even more sceptical about, have been demonstrated in at least one locality and often at several.

The survey below includes themes and perspectives that were presented and debated during the conference and in the time between the sessions, along with what I noticed during my reading of the manuscripts. As regards the latter, I refer solely to the manuscript and the references cited there.

Distribution of the presentations

The majority of the presentations were site-specific accounts, often with comparative sidelights. A smaller number were general treatments of graves (Ahola; Gramsch; Schulting), the interred (Orschiedt/Kind), mortuary practice (Arias; Peyroteo-Stjerna; Sulgostowska) and grave goods (Arias) within either a national unit or some large geographical area. A few articles focused on describing the phenomenon of Mesolithic graves or mortuary practice in the Early Neolithic (Gehlen; Grünberg; Meiklejohn et al.). The articles give a good general view of Mesolithic graves and mortuary practice, in several cases considering contemporary phenomena in Western Asia and North Africa. For the majority of the articles dealing with graves within a limited or a larger geographical area, however, there was a distinct bias (Fig. 1). The majority concern Northern Europe, with a special concentration in Southern Scandinavia. On the other hand, much of Eastern Europe is missing. It is not because there is any shortage of graves in this area, as there are large cemeteries in western

Russia. Unfortunately, there are only two presentations of the extensive Russian grave finds, one concerning a couple of find sites in the north-west (Oshibkina) and another about bird bones in Yuzhniy Oleniy Ostrov (Mannermaa). There is still an information barrier here, partly depending on linguistic obstacles and difficulties for researchers wishing to take part in Western European conferences.

Should we use the term Mesolithic?

The meaning of the term Mesolithic differs somewhat depending on where you are in Europe. Should we not use the term hunter-gatherer-fishers instead? In the Baltic area the people were still hunter-gatherers far into the Middle Neolithic. However, there is uncertainty about what such a change of terminology would lead to. In certain areas there are hunter-gatherers in Sweden contemporaneous with farmers far into the Neolithic. As some colleagues have shown, there are links to the mortuary practice during the Late Upper Palaeolithic (for example Fontana et al.; Orschiedt/Kind; Küßner; Peyroteo-Stjerna). It is still unclear to what extent the Mesolithic people contributed to the development of Neolithic societies, how this transformation happened, and how people with different origins, traditions and economic systems treated each other. There may have been intense cultural exchange with interactions (Gehlen).

Loose human bones

The theme of »Loose Human Bones« (LHB) attracted considerable interest (for example Brinch Petersen; Sørensen; Gumiński/Bugajska; Meiklejohn et al.). The question was what they actually represented. Could they be parts later brought out of graves, for example, through destruction by farming operations? Could they be remains of a mortuary practice and thus have a special symbolic meaning? One aspect of this problem is the interest in skulls.

The famous head burials from the Ofnet cave and Hohlenstein-Stadel are of special interest. At both sites, a similar mode of deposition is visible. Heads were separated from the trunk and deposited in pits with ornaments and the use of red ochre. Some of the skulls show unhealed traumata. There are no postcranial bones from the pits or elsewhere in the find layer (Orschiedt/Kind). There is an ongoing debate as to whether these finds represent a typical local Late Mesolithic burial custom or are related to violent episodes.

Head or skull burials have not been identified so far in Scandinavia, despite the considerable number of graves, although skull fragments occur several times as loose bones

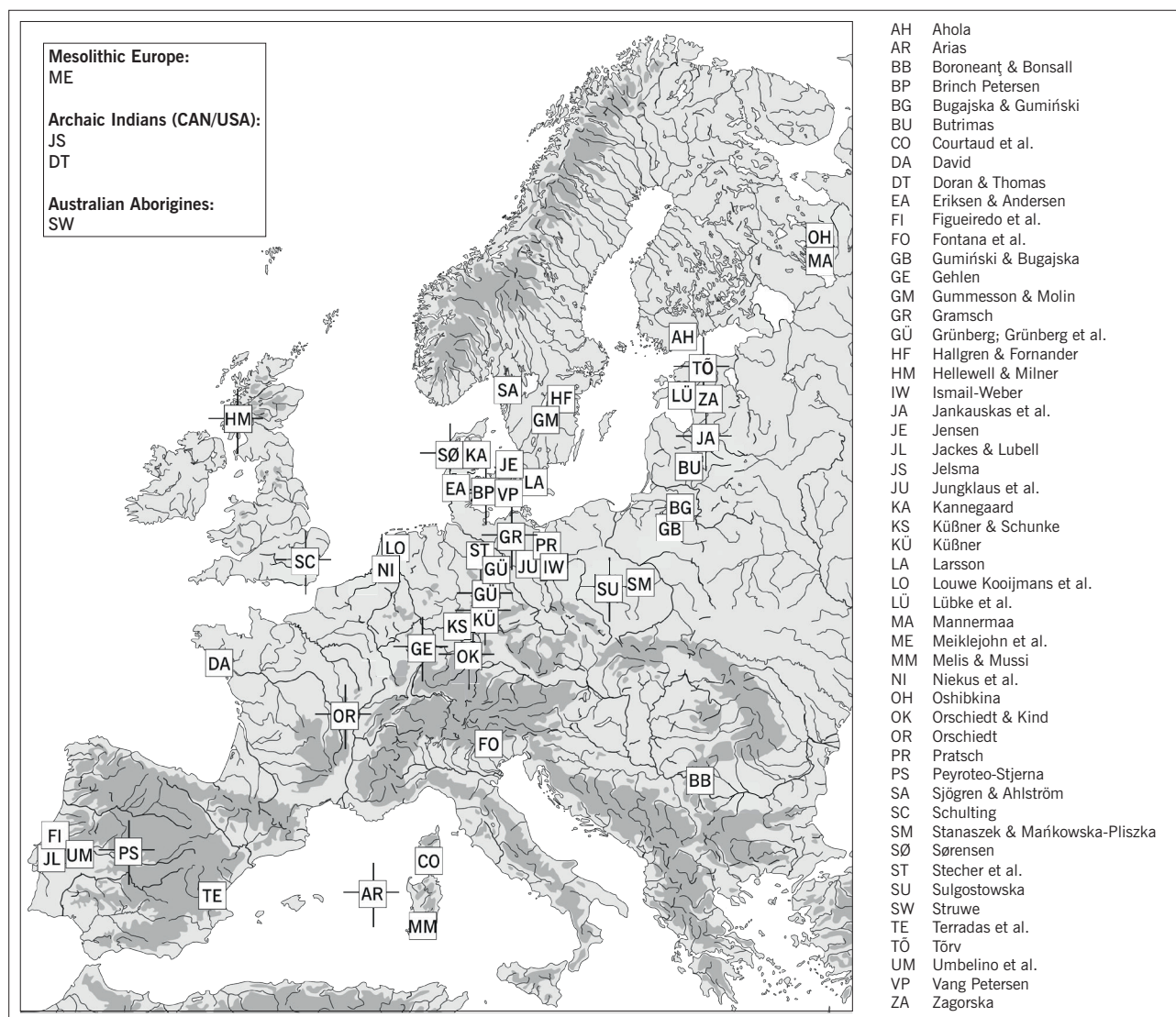


Fig. 1 The distribution of contributions in a geographic perspective. Squares on crosses mark that the articles have a wide geographical range.

or occasionally in assemblages (Sørensen). There seems to be an interesting difference in deposition which cannot be explained through secondary phenomena. After the body had been placed in the grave, in a few cases it is possible that rituals allowed parts of the skeletons to be dug up later (Larsson 1993).

Evidence for the exhumation of skulls can be found, on the other hand, at a number of contemporary Iron Gates sites, where it is seen as representing »multistage burial rituals« (Boroneant/Bonsall). There are also examples here of skulls being removed from graves, then burned and reburied. Another example is the find site of Lokomotiv, by Lake Baikal in Siberia. Here 29 out of 124 skeletons were missing skulls (Bazaliiskiy/Savelyev 2003).

In Northern Europe skulls can occur in a very special ritual complex that clearly differs from »ordinary« burials. Here, the finds of skulls set up on poles in a shallow lake at Motala, Sweden, can make us wonder who was subjected to this kind of treatment – friend or foe (Hallgren/Fornander)? Indications that loose bones from coastal sites could be remains of people from inland may give us reason to suspect antagonisms between different groups (Brinch Petersen).

Traces of other forms of interference could possibly be linked to the same kind of violence, where hands or fingers were cut off and have been interpreted as amulets (Brinch Petersen). Scalping can be included in the violent treatment, where cut marks reveal the use of force, as do traces on the skull showing that the interred person survived the attack for a time (Brinch Petersen; Jankauskas et al.; Ahlström 2008). Scalping is attested here both among loose skull parts and on the interred.

In a Danish case the fragmentation of the bones is perceived as the result of cannibalism. When presented at the Halle meeting, this topic encountered the fiercest opposition, but if the find scenario is not cannibalistic, what is it then (Brinch Petersen)?

At both Strandvägen, Sweden (Gummesson/Molin) and Hardinxveld, Holland (Louwe Kooijmans et al.), conspicuous skeletal parts – skulls and the shafts of major long bones – were found in the aquatic zone. The finds of skulls on poles at Motala in Sweden can probably be assigned to the same category (Hallgren/Fornander). Deposition in the water and the subaquatic sediments may be regarded as essentially also a type of »burial«, comparable with the »cultic« depo-

sition or offering of objects that was so widely practised in later times (Louwe Kooijmans et al.).

What is a grave?

The question »What is a grave?« is extremely relevant. It took some time, for example, before the dog graves were accepted and now they are found over almost all of Europe (Diniz/Arias 2012; Gumiński/Bugajska; Louwe Kooijmans et al.). How many human and possibly canine bones are needed for a feature to be interpreted as a grave? Where does the dividing line go between a feature that is interpreted as a grave and one that is instead perceived as belonging to the copious material designated as loose bones? The intention here is not to suggest a definition, if that were at all possible, but we must be aware of the large grey area between the designations »grave« and »loose bones«.

Cremation graves can be particularly interesting in this context. The fact that only fragments of legs and heads were found in cremation graves at Rotterdam, Holland, suggests that only partial skeletons were cremated (Niekus et al.). Burnt bones are often included in the category of loose bones. It is much more complicated to ascertain that all the parts of a body are in a cremation grave than in a grave where the deceased was laid without being cremated. It may be the case that parts of the body ended up in a feature that is perceived as a grave, while other parts are found among loose bones or ended up in other grave structures (Gumiński/Bugajska; Gummesson/Molin). The fact that cremation burials at Dudka in Poland are all secondary deposits (Bugajska/Gumiński) supports the view that burnt human bones were treated differently from unburnt ones. The possibility that the burnt bones from one and the same person ended up in more than one cremation grave usually cannot be ruled out.

Grave or graves

The question is if and when graves are noticed. To be able to identify graves at all depends on several factors. In shell middens, for example, it seems to be difficult or impossible to identify a grave before the skeleton is observed. Here material from the surroundings appears to have been used to cover the grave. The burials at Moita, Portugal, were more often placed directly on the sand over shallow pits, with small sand »pillows« (Jacks/Lubell). There are examples showing that the same material removed when digging the grave was used to fill it again, consciously or unconsciously hiding its location, which makes it more difficult to identify graves (Larsson).

If graves are located beside settlement sites, this makes identification easier, as attention has already been aroused by the presence of culture layers and waste material. The variation in the occurrence of red ochre is also a situation that ought to affect the identification of graves. Just under 12 % of the graves in Southern Europe have red ochre (Arias), while the corresponding figure for cemeteries in Northern Europe is 65–80 % (Zagorska). In other regions, such as Finland, graves are identified through the presence of red ochre,

while skeletal material has totally disappeared (Ahola). The latter phenomenon ought to be of great significance in the many regions where organic material is rarely preserved. Here it is only cremation graves that can be relatively easy to document (Niekus et al.).

Whether only occasional graves or accumulations of graves are found can also depend on the technicalities of the excavation. The distance between graves can be significant here. In an example from Denmark, the graves were located at a distance of 10 m (Kannegaard). There can be many cases where a too limited excavation around a grave means that the remaining graves have not been identified.

Another aspect concerns the location of graves. A significant number of cemeteries in Northern Europe are located on islands or in areas that were islands during the Mesolithic. In the future this state of affairs can facilitate deliberate searches for Mesolithic graves. In central Germany, for instance, graves seem to be located on hills (Gramsch), which may be a form of parallel to location on islands. Here it can be an important factor for localisation because most graves are not adjacent to remains of settlement sites.

Another factor that may have consequences for settlement along all the coasts of Europe is shore displacement. Extensive areas which were attractive settlement areas in the Early Mesolithic are under water today. This change in the relationship between land and water may have had significant consequences for the placing of graves. Remains of human skeletons in the North Sea indicate this (Schulting). More regional tectonic shifts, as for example in southern Denmark and Germany, have meant that graves have been found in submarine locations (Andersen 2013).

The question is if and how the grave is noticed. In shell middens it seems difficult or impossible to identify the grave before the skeleton has been observed. Here material from the surroundings appears to have been used.

What is a cemetery?

Some participants at the conference pointed out their dislike of the word cemetery, saying that it was better to talk about an accumulation of graves. But what kind of facts do we then need in order to accept that there is some kind of relationship between the graves? In certain cases there is a noticeable difference in time between graves within the same accumulation, with a chronological difference of half a millennium (Jensen; Sulgostowska). The durations of the burial sites ranged from 30 to 4020 years, with a median of 390 years. Contrary to our earlier findings, there appears to be a trend for duration to increase with cemetery size (Meiklejohn et al.).

Bayesian modelling of radiocarbon dates might give us a shorter interval for the use of the site, but it is still within several generations. It is also a question of how long the memory within a society lasts. According to some analyses of Neolithic monuments, it is 175 years (Whittle et al. 2011). The actual grave location may have been known for a much longer time.

Since the number of cases with graves cutting into each other is relatively small, further burials probably took place

within the time when the exact location of the graves was known or there was some form of grave marking (Larsson).

It is also important to study the relations between habitation and grave(s). In some cases they might be contemporary, in others centuries or millennia passed before the locality of a cemetery was changed into a settlement site (Jensen).

As regards graves adjacent to settlements, the burial phase can be contemporary with the time when settlement occurred on the site. An extreme case is Zvejnieki, Latvia, where burials occurred during approximately five millennia, and in this time there is evidence of settlement at the nearby settlement site (Zagorska).

When it comes to the relationship of graves in accumulated contexts, considerable similarities between graves as regards special depositions or grave goods can be an indication of a close chronological connection between the interred. One example concerns noticeable combinations of grave goods within a find site at Nederst, Denmark (Kannegaard).

Another question is: Who used an accumulated grave site? Were the locations with graves used just for a local group of people or for some people within a wider social context? Might remains of the deceased have been carried from temporary burial places to graves at the main cemetery with a complex and long-running ritual (Bugajska/Gumiński)?

These questions cannot be answered today, but in the near future analyses of, say, strontium and mtDNA may yield results that allow a detailed analysis of the interred, the internal relationship between the interred, and their relation to the surroundings, as exemplified by the presentation of the burial place of Port au Choix, Newfoundland, Canada (Jelsma).

Are those sites with graves really ordinary settlements or do they have a special function in relation to mortuary practices? A study of the cemeteries at Skateholm resulted in a hypothesis that the related sites were not of an »ordinary« kind (Strassburg 2000). The high number of cemeteries in or close to settlement sites in Southern Scandinavia and elsewhere is a good marker for disproving that hypothesis.

Features and finds in connection with graves

One aspect to which significance should be attached is the relationship between graves and artefact depositions, as well as features in the vicinity. An example is the deposition of objects of different types close to certain graves on the site at Zvejnieki, Latvia (Zagorska). Another concerns the relationship between a burial and a hut foundation with human bones found at Nivå, Denmark (Jensen). Here parts of the buried skeleton appear to have been dug up and incorporated in the material from the hut.

Beneath the cultural layer at Donkalnis, Lithuania, stains filled with red ochre, small animal bones, fragments of fish-bone, wild animal teeth and tooth fragments were encountered. It appears that these were ceremonial pits, most probably connected with funeral festivities (Butrimas). Near each grave of the Popovo cemetery, Russia, deep pits were found filled with animal bones and fragments of tools. The pits were covered with ochre. The filling contained specific parts of animals – parts of jaws or extremities which symbolised gifts to the buried person (Oshibkina).

The grave filling

The whole procedure from digging the grave to refilling might take a considerable time; even longer, when graves were redug and later refilled again and formed the location of secondary burials.

»It is necessary to imagine different manipulations going from deposition to filling-in, and this over a relatively long time period, at least long enough for the time of skeltonisation« (Courtaud et al.). Perhaps our interest should be extended even further, from the point where a member of the community is seen to be dying until the interred has been totally incorporated among the anonymous (Larsson).

I have seen a lot of plans of graves but many fewer profiles. A significant problem is that it is seldom stated at what level in relation to the interred an artefact is found. In far too many cases, not enough attention has been paid to the filling of the grave. Sometimes the colour of the filling is considered (Zagorska) or its stone content (Jensen). It is understandable that the finds in the filling were not taken into account to any great extent in earlier excavations. When the filling is noticed, for example, through careful plotting of every artefact and ecofact, it can reveal interesting relations between, for example, remains of meals attested in the stomach region of the deceased and finds of meal remains in the filling (Larsson). Another example is finds in the filling which suggest that they were brought from a nearby settlement site layer (Jensen), which may in addition have been deposited several generations before the burial (Larsson in press). In some cases the filling can contain burnt human bones (Gummesson/Molin; Gumiński/Bugajska) which show secondary burial.

Grave goods

Grave goods are among the key issues in the interpretation of past funerary behaviour (Arias). It may seem that there is no problem in the identification of what can be described as grave goods. There are a number of artefacts that the majority of colleagues would judge to be deliberately deposited into another world. The absence of grave goods can likewise be considered a problem in some cases. Almost half of all graves lack artefacts which can be interpreted as grave goods (Arias). But the question is whether all these lack something which can be interpreted as grave goods.

Even in cases where there is scarcely any uncertainty about grave goods, there can nevertheless be doubt. In analyses where one is interested, for various reasons, in ranking graves, problems can arise. Some graves are furnished with an unusually large number of artefacts, such as the grave in Janisławice in Poland (Sulgostowska), Bad Dürrenberg in Germany (Grünberg et al.), Tévéc and Hoëdic in France (Arias) and Mondeval de Sora in Italy (Fontana et al.). This is where we are faced most clearly with the question whether the same attention should be paid to all artefacts. Among these graves too, there are artefacts about which there can be uncertainty. This applies not least to animal bones.

In some cases it can be complicated to attribute the grave goods found in a grave with two or more persons. Based on

the find situation in a couple of graves in Denmark with finds of a woman and a child, an interesting explanation has been put forward for the accumulation of a number of animal-tooth beads and other animal bones perceived as belonging to a papoose which should be attributed to the child rather than to the woman (Vang Petersen). This interpretation should be applicable to comparable graves where children are found.

In a number of graves there are factors which cause differences in the assessment of what constitutes grave goods and what does not. As we have seen above in the case of features and finds, there are depositions beside the grave or at a short distance from the grave which contain artefacts. These are of the same types that could have been deposited as gifts to the deceased, besides which they are usually accompanied by red ochre to indicate the special character of the objects. How these should be assessed in relation to the deceased is uncertain. Here one can talk about a form of grave deposition which is incorporated in the mortuary practice.

Animal bones can be understood as food for the journey to the next world. But their symbolic value is evident, for example, from the graves in Dudka, where a categorisation of the deceased has been based on either a plentiful occurrence of fish in the grave or an almost total absence. One group at the cemetery consists of graves containing remains of turtle and bird bones (Gumiński/Bugajska). Previously a similar interpretation of animal bones has been based on the finds in Oleniy Ostrov, Russia (O'Shea/Zvelebil 1984).

Another category of deposited artefacts is those consisting of organic material. In certain graves there are copious amounts of charcoal which may be the remains of cremated bark coffins (Sulgostowska). At Skateholm, Sweden, colouring has been documented which may be parts of a dugout canoe (Larsson). But there can also be remains of other artefacts. In a grave from Nivå, Denmark, there was a discoloration which probably consisted of an organic residue, which survived because a stone in the grave protected it. The size and shape of the spot suggest that it may be the remnants of a box or bowl made of wood or bark (Jensen).

There are some cases where seemingly ordinary stones may have had a special meaning. One example can be cited from a child grave at Nivågård, Denmark (Jensen/Møller Hansen 1998). An oval flint was found in one eye socket, and in the mouth there was a worked stone in the form of a tongue. The marking of the eye socket with a stone or a piece of amber is attested from Zvejnieki, Latvia (Zagorskis 2004; Nilsson Stutz et al. 2013).

The examples above, along with the situation concerning the grave filling cited above, show that in many cases it is not possible to arrive at a strict categorisation of what can be designated as grave goods or not.

Excavations in magazines and archives

Although a long time has passed since some graves were found, and despite all the events in the form of wars and political changes, as well as antiquarian changes, one is not infrequently surprised to learn that finds and archival material have actually survived (Sjögren/Ahlström; Lübke et al.). The fact that new information just seems to appear out of the archives provides hope for the future, if we dig deeper in boxes and shelves.

It may be the case that there are more grave finds which have not been noticed in museum stores because of erroneous interpretations of graves and problems in identification. An interesting example is the Early Mesolithic cremation grave at Hammelev, southern Denmark, which was located in an Iron Age context (Eriksen/Andersen). It was chiefly through the occurrence of red ochre that the archaeologists became aware of the chronological discrepancy. Perhaps more Early Mesolithic cremation graves are to be found among excavated Bronze Age and Iron Age graves in Southern Scandinavia and elsewhere?

On the other hand, there is also uncertainty about how to relate to older descriptions of graves, for example, the earlier finds in Portuguese shell middens (Jacks/Lubell). Just as certain factors have been ignored, others may have been over-interpreted. This is an important point of source criticism that must be taken into consideration.

DNA analyses

Analyses of DNA have a great future, but we have to be aware that a considerable number of Mesolithic humans have no DNA left, or at least it is in such small quantities that it is useless for present methods.

When and to what extent should we provide samples to the DNA analysts? The method is still in its development stage. Do we need to protect the best samples for the future? As regards DNA, results obtained by this method of analysis occur only once in the present publication (Hallgren/Fornander). In comparative material from Newfoundland (Jelsma) it is concluded that the burial clusters do not represent separate genetic populations. DNA analysis corrected five out of six identifications previously made on the basis of skeletal morphology. Since it is stated in some articles that DNA analyses are one approach used in ongoing projects, we may expect in the very near future to see results that will further contribute to different aspects of relations between ethnic groups and the appearance of individuals (Stanaszek/Mańkowska-Pliszka; Terradas et al.).

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