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Richard Bradley

Domestication as a state of mind

1. Introduction

Prehistorians are fascinated by transitions, but these transitions are of two different kinds. There are the changes that undoubtedly happened in the past, and these set the agenda for many programs of research. The development of academic archaeology has also been punctuated by abrupt changes of perspective. It is where the two converge that there is so much misunderstanding.

A classic example of these problems is provided by the Mesolithic/Neolithic transition, for this epitomizes both of these processes. Scholars working on either side of this threshold adopt quite different approaches. Mesolithic specialists emphasize adaptation to the natural environment, whilst those who study the Neolithic are more often concerned with ideology and social relations. There is also a difference of scale. The Neolithic period is interpreted through a close reading of the archaeological record, with the result that models can be particularistic and frustratingly diverse. Mesolithic society, on the other hand, is often interpreted through the ethnographic record. It seems hardly surprising that the transition between those periods is so difficult to discuss. This paper considers the interpretation of Mesolithic burials in Europe and is an attempt to break down some of these intellectual barriers. It treats Mesolithic ideology in the same manner as Neolithic systems of belief. In taking an even-handed approach it may also shed light on the adoption of agriculture.

Some of the earliest manifestations of Neolithic culture are provided by burial mounds, but we also find an important series of flat cemeteries in the Late Mesolithic period. We discuss them in quite different ways. We feel entitled to connect the Neolithic monuments with a wider cultural phenomenon: either with the tradition of long mounds that extends across northern Europe or with the still more extensive distribution of the first megalithic tombs. In either case we might interpret those structures as a symbolic transformation of domestic architecture. Yet faced with Mesolithic burials – and still more with entire cemeteries dating from that period – we engage in a completely different kind of discussion. We link the very existence of such graves with changes in the pattern of settlement, with economic intensification or with control over critical resources (Chapman 1981; Clark/Neeley 1987). In every case we fall back on generalizations drawn from ethnography. In contrast to the Neolithic burials, the symbolism of the Mesolithic graves is largely ignored.

That seems strange, and it does so for two reasons, one theoretical and the other empirical. The empirical reason is that the dominant symbols of such Mesolithic burials are actually shared across large geographical areas (Kayser 1990): areas that are just as extensive as the spread of early megaliths. Yet we are reluctant to come to terms with such similarities, although we do so with fewer inhibitions in Neolithic archaeology. The theoretical reason for my unease is that this is precisely the kind of evidence that might provide us with some information on the appropriateness of the models that we have drawn from ethnography. Was there a Mesolithic world view? Had it more in common with the ethic of sharing found among modern hunter gatherers? And did those perceptions change at the beginning of the Neolithic period?

2. Mesolithic burial practices

Mesolithic burials in north and north-west Europe share a number of persistent features. Some of these originated in the Upper Palaeolithic, but is noticeable how few of them lasted into the Neolithic period. Not all of these features are present on every site, nor were they all used simultaneously, but beneath these local variations a number of more general patterns stand out. To emphasize the contrast with more conventional accounts of the period, this paper draws on the same sample of sites as Clark and Neeley (1987) in their study of social differentiation. These are supplemented by a few more recent discoveries.

Perhaps the most striking feature was the use of red ochre. This is a very widely distributed practice and one which has a lengthy history. It is also evidenced during the Upper Palaeolithic period and it continued to be followed during the Neolithic. It is not limited to burial sites, and red ochre is recorded from sites in Norway which belong to the same period as the establishment of cemeteries in areas further to the south (Bang-Andersen 1983). Even after the introduction of domesticates to southern Scandinavia red ochre continued to be deposited in graves, although these were generally

located on or beyond the agricultural frontier (Wyszomirska 1984). The normal interpretation of such deposits is that they symbolized life-blood, although this view has been criticized by Hill in a wider review of the limitations of cognitive archaeology (1994, 90).

Another striking feature is the presence of a set of grave goods made almost entirely of organic materials. In the Late Mesolithic grave at Dragsholm in Denmark the most elaborate artefact was a decorated bone dagger, and the only tool in the grave was also made of bone. The assemblage was dominated by a great array of beads and pendants, formed from animal teeth (Brinch Petersen 1974). The common element among these finds is that they originate in the animal kingdom. In that sense they refer both to the natural world and to important components of the food supply. Such a connection is often evidenced by bone or antler artefacts from Mesolithic graves, but the distribution of these deposits overlaps with that of related artefacts, for perforated shell beads also occur in European Mesolithic cemeteries. Again these objects have a lengthy history, and like the use of red ochre, they can be traced back to the Upper Palaeolithic. By contrast, in the Neolithic period there was a much stronger emphasis on the deposition of stone artefacts. The distinction between the two assemblages might be that in these Mesolithic graves objects associated with the natural world were modified very little so that their original sources were still apparent. The creation of stone artefacts – ground stone axes in particular – obscured the orginal form taken by the parent material. A useful point of comparison is provided by those cases in which we can compare the funerary assemblage with the material that was used in everyday life. Although stone artefacts are by no means absent from Mesolithic graves, they form a much higher proportion of the domestic assemblage. The contrast is perhaps most apparent at Oleniostrovski Mogilnik where what I would call 'organic' artefacts are most frequent in the women's graves (O'Shea/Zvelebil 1984). The same seems to be the case at Skateholm (Larsson 1989).

Related to this is the provision of antler in the grave. It is a feature that links Mesolithic burials in widely separated areas of Europe, from north-west France to southern Scandinavia. Some of the antlers have been shed and so they do not seem to be a by-product of hunting expeditions. Others were converted into artefacts, and in both the regions that I have mentioned some of them were decorated. Their main function, however, seems to have been to provide a kind of framework for the body in the grave, and it may be no accident that they can be found together with deposits of red ochre.

It would be easy to suppose that these finds emphasize the importance of deer to the subsistence economy, but that would not explain the significance of the shed antlers in these burials. Nor does it provide a reason why the antlers should be favored rather than other parts of the body. On the other hand, the fact that antlers could be shed and replaced every year make them a very potent source of symbolism. The mature stag provides a powerful metaphor for fertility, as we know from later rock art, and the annual growth of its antlers makes them an ideal symbol of regeneration. That may be why they occur in Mesolithic graves over such a wide area.

These deposits of antler can hardly be compared with the other finds of animal bone in the burials. These appear to have been placed in the graves intentionally, and for the most part they seem to show that the dead were accompanied by offerings of food. There are also more substantial gifts of meat joints, as well as groups of fish bones which presumably result from the same process (Kayser 1990).

It is uncertain how we should interpret the comparatively widespread occurrence of dog bones in these graves. This is because of the distinctive ways in which these animals were treated. Some appear to have been sacrificed in the graves of members of the community, whilst others were buried separately within the cemetery at Skateholm and were even provided with red ochre and with offerings in their own right. In one of the graves at that site these items were arranged in the same configuration as they were in the human burials (Larsson 1990).

As Hayden (1990) has observed, the domestication of the dog is a widespread phenomenon among late hunter gatherers. In some cases they may have played an essentially economic role, used in hunting wild animals or even as a supplementary source of food, but the special treatment paid to the dogs at Skateholm suggests something else as well. Here they not only accompanied their owners to the grave; they seem to have been treated as individuals in their own right and were buried with at least as much formality as the humans found in the same cemetery. It would be quite wrong to invoke a specific ethnographic model, but one reading of this observation would suggest that the inhabitants of Skateholm made no distinction between the human and animal populations of the site.

That might also provide a reason why isolated human bones could be treated in the same ways as isolated animal bones. Occasional beads were fashioned out of human teeth, and there is also some evidence for the circulation of human bones during the Mesolithic period. This evidence is of two kinds. First, there are sites at which only parts of the body were buried, most probably after they had lost their articulation. In other cases the remains seem to have been rearranged. There is comparable evidence from other sites where isolated human bones are found (Larsson/ Meikeljohn/ Newell 1981). There seems to be evidence that certain parts of the body were selected deliberately, as the representation

of different bones does not seem to result from differential preservation. Two examples perhaps illustrate these points. The famous nests of skulls at the west German site of Offnet are now known to be of Mesolithic date (Meikeljohn 1986), whilst recent excavations in the shell middens on Oronsay in Scotland show that it was mainly the extremities of the body that remained in the settlement (Mellars 1987, 9-16). The more substantial relics were presumably taken away.

This is one practice that certainly survived into the Neolithic period, when it forms a major feature of the mortuary ritual at megalithic tombs and other sites. There is one other characteristic of the later Mesolithic period which endures for an even longer period of time. Some years ago I commented on the way in which Neolithic votive deposits seemed to be most apparent around the agricultural frontier (Bradley 1990, 43-75). I now believe that I was not radical enough and that the practice of making offerings in natural locations was actually a Mesolithic development. There are a number of clues that point in this direction, although none of them is of particular significance when taken in isolation. There are occasional hoard finds. Let me quote two recent examples. A remarkable group of decorated bone and shell artefacts were buried together in the Breton settlement site of Beg-er-Vil and the position of this feature was marked by a deposit of antlers (Kayser/Bernier 1988). In the same way, a hoard of ground stone axes was found in another settlement in south-west Ireland, very near to a small group of cattle bones (Woodman/O'Brien 1993). In Scandinavia Lars Larsson has already pointed to possible hoards of Mesolithic artefacts and to what seem to have been deliberate deposits of antler placed in shallow water (1983, 78-81). There is evidence that complete deer carcasses might be treated in the same way (Møhl 1978), and it is clear that some of the stone axes imported into northern Europe before the adoption of agriculture are also found in rivers and bogs (Karsten 1994, chapter 12). The same is true of some isolated Ertebølle pots (Bennike/Ebbesen 1987), and here again we may be seeing an anticipation of a practice that was at its most intense at the start of the Neolithic period.

A new site in south-west Scania lends weight to these suggestions. This lies on the former shore of Lake Yddingen and is being exacavated by Per Karsten to whom I owe this information. It dates from about 6000 BP and, although it was undoubtedly a settlement, it does have a number of features that stand out from the normal range of activities. There are two lengths of shallow ditch, one of which contains an imported axe, whilst the other included an axe which had been set upright in the ground and burnt. In the edge of the lake two antler picks were discovered together with a large stone. One of these antlers had anthropomorphic decoration, whilst fragments of human skull, again accompanied by a stone, were found in a similar position. Elsewhere on the edge of the refuse layer an antler point was found in direct association with a mint condition axe, whilst Karsten has observed that the more elaborate flake knives also seem to have been discarded towards the limits of the occupied area. Some of the same features occur among the graves at Skateholm.

So far I have highlighted six recurrent features in the archaeology of Mesolithic Europe, none of which is related in any obvious way to the practicalities of food production. Five of them form a regular feature of the Mesolithic grave assemblage from Karelia to Portugal, although not all need be present at the same sites or even in the same regions. Those features are: the use of red ochre; the use of what I have called organic grave goods; the deposition of antlers with the dead; the special importance of food remains in the funerary assemblage; the significance of the domestic dogs in the mortuary ritual; and the circulation of isolated human bones. To this we can add increasing evidence for the creation of votive deposits in natural locations. The material deposited in these places overlaps with the contents of the graves. Given the wide distribution of these elements, it is perhaps less surprising that these finds share so many features with Lepenski Vir (Srejović 1972). Again we find deposits of human crania, together with offerings of fish and animal bones. There is evidence for the circulation of human bones and also for the use of red ochre in the burial rite. Still more striking is the emphasis placed on deposits of antler.

Of course there are other features that are not shared with sites in northern Europe, particularly the monumental sculptures and the curious buildings with which they are associated. Whether these were houses or altars, they stand out from the evidence in other parts of Mesolithic Europe where there are no structures of this kind. Indeed, there is little to show beyond the slab-lined cists of Brittany, the tiny cairns associated with human burials in southern France (Rozoy 1978, 1115-26) and the small ritual building at Skateholm (Larsson 1988). The very rarity of such remains after generations of fieldwork and may be one of the main features that distinguishes the Mesolithic from the Neolithic.

3. Conclusion

How are we to understand these similarities? First, it is clear that Mesolithic ritual placed considerable emphasis on the natural world. We see this through the importance attached to organic grave goods, as distinct from the wider repertoire used in the domestic assemblage. It is particularly obvious when we consider how much of this material was based on bone and antler. The same attitudes may be evidenced by the cemetery at Skateholm where some of the dogs appear to have been buried as if they were human beings. This emphasis on the natural world is also consistent with the provision of votive deposits in locations such as rivers and lakes. Instead

of the antagonism between culture and nature supposed by Ian Hodder (1990), we might think in terms of a reciprocal relationship, more akin to the animistic beliefs so often reported among hunter gatherers. If we need a European parallel we should turn to the Saami (Ahlbäck 1987).

Secondly, this material seems to emphasize the importance of fertility and regeneration. There is the pervasive symbolism of the red ochre which seems to stand for human blood. There is the equally powerful symbolism expressed by the use of antlers at sites as far distant from one another as Vedbaek, Téviec and Lepenski Vir, and there is a more tentative suggestion of the same emphasis on fertility in the association of organic artefacts with the burials of women. Again it seems as if the natural world was perceived as a creative principle rather than a source of danger. That is what Bird-David (1990) means when she refers to the 'giving environment'. Some hunter gatherers do not distinguish sharply between their own fortunes and the character of the world around them, and they may refer to the environment in which they live in terms of such metaphors as procreation and kinship (Bird-David 1993). That is a very different interpretation from Ian Hodder's reading of Lepenski Vir, with its striking opposition between death and life, the wild and the domestic (Hodder 1990, 21-31).

If so, we might come closer to recognizing the problems posed by the adoption of farming. It is not simply a matter of subsistence and nutrition. In my interpretation this form of partnership with nature is inconsistent with the direct ownership of resources, which is, of course, the social meaning of domestication. It also seems likely that in a world in which human identity was not felt to lie outside nature – a world in which natural places could take on a special significance – monuments would have little part to play. The same applies to the creation of a new range of grave goods based, no longer on bone and antler, but on the complete transformation of the raw materials; the obvious examples are pottery and ground stone axes. Zvelebil and Rowley-Conwy (1986) have discussed the reluctance of some hunter gatherers to take up farming even when the techniques and materials were available to them, and they suggest that in such cases economic change may have been very gradual. No doubt some of that reluctance did have its roots in the subsistence economy. I would add that some of it may also have been based on ideology. Until that belief system lost its force, domestication may have been literally unthinkable.

Having said this, I will make one last suggestion. Both the ownership of resources and the building of monuments reflect the eventual breakdown of such inhibitions, and both involve the development of different attitudes to the natural world: the adoption of new beliefs as well as the adoption of new techniques. If Mesolithic communities had engaged in a reciprocal exchange with nature, the metaphor certainly changed. The new idiom was concerned with power. Monuments were constructed to dominate the landscape and to withstand the process of natural decay. The domestication of plants and animals was another form of control, and the creation of arable and pasture involved a still more drastic modification of the natural terrain. In that sense both processes were really rather alike and once traditional beliefs began to lapse, as they did through contacts across the agricultural frontier, both could be found together.

In fact the process of ideological change was as long drawn-out as the process of economic change, and the two reinforced one another. I shall end by illustrating one aspect of that transformation. As we have seen, deposits of artefacts and animal remains seem to span the Mesolithic/Neolithic transition in northern Europe. They probably originated during the Mesolithic period, but votive offerings in bogs were much more common during the Neolithic. But if the choice of location was the same, the character of these deposits was changing. Organic material was still deposited, and so were human and animal remains, but a growing proportion of the finds consisted of stone axes and pots, for in some respects these were the key symbols of a new way of life. Gradually the situation was transformed. Artefacts were still used as votive offerings, but now the locations of some of these deposits shifted, and they were also found at earthwork or stone-built monuments. It is at this time that there is environmental evidence for intensified food production (Bradley 1990, 57-64). The two processes went together, but not through cause and effect. They ran in parallel because they were the two main features of a new socioeconomic system. They were the outcome of a process of economic change, but they were also the result of new ways of imagining the world.

That is why it is helpful to think of domestication as a state of mind.

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