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Waste and prestige; the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in the Netherlands from a social perspective

1. Introduction

The regional Meuse Valley Project has been in operation since 1987 (Wansleeben/Verhart 1990, 1995). This is a cooperation between the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden and the State University in Leiden. The central aim of this project is to study the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in the southern part of the Netherlands. One of the themes is to analyse the nature of contacts between hunter/gatherers and farmers and what this has meant for the transition from a food-consuming to a food-producing economy.

In literature, the ideas and models about contacts range from peaceful coexistence to a complete state of war, or from an intensive interaction to a forbidding separation (Blackburn 1982; Hart/Hart 1986; Turnbull 1961, 1965, 1983; Woodburn 1968, 1988). The final result of these contacts was that hunter/gatherer communities rapidly or gradually incorporated elements of that farming economy.

The neolithisation models often assume that there is one single decisive factor in this process, such as changes in climate, population pressure, outside economic pressure or social relationships (Bender 1978, 1981, 1990; Bender/Morris 1988; Binford 1968, 1984; Gebauer/Price 1992; Gregg 1988; Zvelebil 1986). Others hold that in the transitional situation a combination of factors is operating (Dennell 1985). The aim of this article is to focus on the social elements in the transition from Mesolithic to Neolithic by studying ethnographic data.

2. Ethnographic information

Most of the models for the change from Mesolithic to Neolithic are backed up by ethnographic data of societies which are at this moment in a transitional stage from hunter/gatherer to farmer. Well-known names in this respect are the Hadza (Woodburn 1988), the Okiek (Blackburn 1982; Woodburn 1988), the Aka and Mbuti-pygmees (Bahuchet/Guillaume 1982; Turnbull 1961, 1965, 1983; Waehle 1986) the San Bushmen (Barnard 1992; Hitchcock 1982; Kent 1989; Lee 1979, 1992; Wiessner 1982, 1983; Wilmsen/Denbow 1990) and the Agta (Griffin 1984; Griffin/Estioko-Griffin 1985; Peterson 1978). However, these societies all appear to have had contacts with outsiders for a long time. As a matter of fact, these are second-stage

contacts: a stage where the mutual desires of the different societies involved are met. As archaeologists we must conclude that these ethnographic descriptions are unsuitable for the reconstruction of the first stage of contact between farmers and hunter/gatherers in northwestern Europe. They do, however, provide us with very useful information concerning the development of contacts over time.

How else to discover what happened in a first stage of contact, what was the nature of these contacts and what were the implications for the neolithisation process? To solve this problem an attempt has been made to study the contacts of mutually different socio-economic systems in more detail.

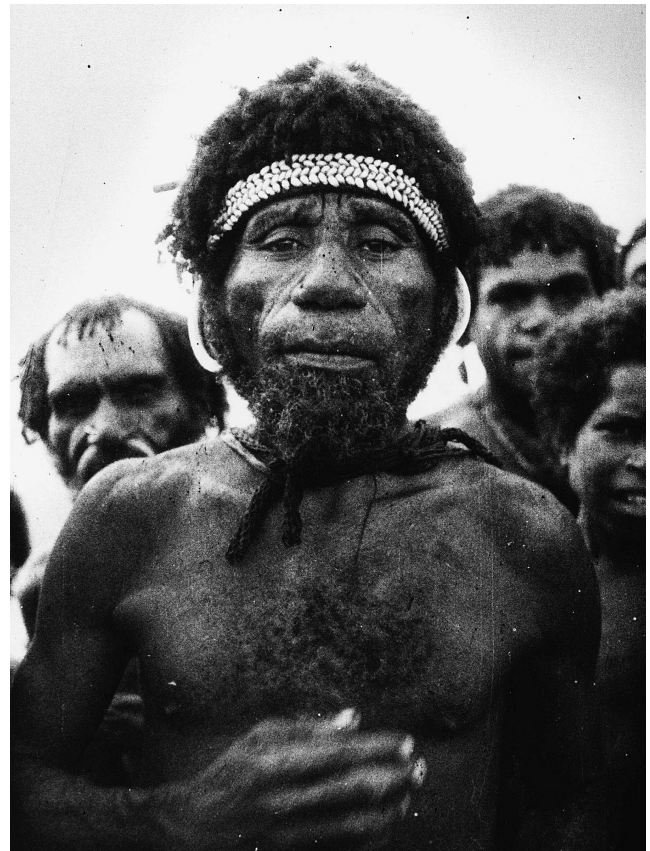


Figure 1. Azaro man, New Guinea (Coll. Leahy).

This research was specifically aimed at the first stage of contact, the responses and the development of mutual relationships, the material reflection of these contacts and the changes in the role and meaning of objects that can be related to these contacts. From this, general models can be developed for the relationship between Mesolithic hunter/gatherers and farmers in northwestern Europe and more specifically in the Netherlands. The results of this analysis are compared to the models and ethnographic data of the second stage of contact, i.e. the stage still to be found today in for example Africa.

Most descriptions of contacts between different socio-economic societies are of sub-recent age, like the Greenland Inuit and Vikings (McGovern 1980, 1985), Greenland Inuit and Europeans (Israel 1969), Canadian Inuit and European whalers and fur traders (McFadden Clark 1977; Ray 1974, 1975), Australian Aborigines and English colonists (Lourandos 1985; Mulvaney 1989), American Indians and Europeans (Pagden 1993; Smith 1987). These descriptions are often coloured, incomplete and poorly documented. Strangely enough there is one exception. This fascinating description of contact is by no means ancient and, by our present criteria, can even be called modern. As an example, and not as an analogy, we will discuss this contact in more detail now.

3. An Australian in Papua New Guinea

In 1930 the Australian Michael Leahy set out with a group of Papuans from the coast into the interior of the former Australian New Guinea, prospecting for gold. All his experiences have been recorded in diaries, articles, photographs and on film (Connolly/Anderson 1988; Leahy 1936, 1991). In the five years he repeatedly visited the area, he found hardly any gold but did collect a treasure trove of ethnographic information.

The interior of New Guinea had always been regarded as uninhabited and uninhabitable. By the late twenties a slow trickle of information started, suggesting that people were living there after all. Leahy attempted to trace upstream, so deep into the interior, the source of the gold that was won in the lower courses of the rivers. To his amazement the interior proved to consist of a very fertile agrarian area in which tens of thousands people were living.

The white prospectors attempted at the first contacts to secure first of all good relations with the local population and secondly to obtain food by way of gifts. They had taken along beads, salt, textiles and metal objects. Initially the Papuans were only interested in the salt and textiles. It turns out that in a situation of first contact only the objects recognizable to the own culture can be exchanged. The metal objects, however superior in quality and effectivity, at first do not play a significant part. Most interest is directed at the

shells, or a substitute in the shape of porcelain saucers (fig. 2). It turns out that what is most important is not the primary function of the exchanged object, but the part it can play in their own competitive exchange system. The exotic character of the exchanged objects and their association with the outsiders make them valuable. This leads to the phenomenon that anything exotic and associated with the outsiders may start to play a part in the exchange system. At this stage even the waste of the visitors, like empty tins (figs 1 and 3), bottles, coloured labels, old razor blades, empty boxes, cartridge cases, coloured textiles, metal keys and car parts, assumes a certain value and is used in the exchange system or worn as personal decoration.

Over the next years Leahy spends in the area, the import of highly desirable objects grows tremendously. With these, to outsiders cheap, objects labourers can be recruited to win the gold or to provide other services and food can be exchanged. The effects on the traditional exchange system are disastrous: a gigantic inflation occurs. Furthermore there is a development we would like to call a kind of delayed prestige. The acquisition of economically useful commodities, as the iron axes and commercial food crops, leads to a greater surplus production which in its turn may be used to gain more prestige.

4. Conclusions from the ethnographic data

From the New Guinea examples (Healey 1990; May/Nelson 1982; Nelson 1976; Radford 1987; Salisbury 1962; Schieffelin/Crittenden 1991) and the other situations of first contact we studied, a number of preliminary conclusions can be drawn:

1. The results of first contacts are mainly apparent within the social subsystem and hardly or not at all within the economic subsystem.
2. The meaning the outsider attaches to an object often does not match the meaning given by the local population.
3. To a large extent the value of these objects proves to be subject to inflation (fig. 4). This results in a quantitative increase in the number of objects or in the appearance of other valuable objects to play a part in the exchange system.
4. The flow of commodities between two different sociocultural systems is highly different. The local population is interested in objects, almost never in food. Their own food is sufficient for their daily subsistence; only the food that has a value in the prestige system is exchanged. The outsiders, on the other hand, are exclusively interested in food and profitable raw materials, never in artefacts, which are often regarded as inferior.
5. Only at a much later stage – which we referred to as the second phase of contact in the case of the modern hunter/



Figure 2. Presentation of wealth. The left man is wearing a porcelain saucer on the front of his head as substitute for a shell (Coll. Leahy).

gatherers – economic motives come into operation, and then mainly as a possibility for ‘delayed prestige’. At this stage the transition to another economic system may occur.

Are the developments and characteristics described above also evident in northwestern Europe? In the situations of contact we studied the local population exchanged among other things shells, feathers, hides, fur, textiles, fish, meat, food crops, medicinal herbs, resin, pigments, honey and salt. All of these are products unlikely to have been preserved and we will not find evidence for their former presence. In testing these conclusions we shall therefore have to restrict ourselves to the imperishable component of the material culture, i.e. stone and pottery.

5. The Netherlands and northwestern Europe

In the south of this country the presence of Bandkeramik colonists and their successors, the Rössen Culture, seems to

have had hardly any economic effects on the local population (Louwe Kooijmans 1993a, 1993b; Wansleben/Verhart 1990, 1995). The transition to a farming way of life has not occurred until the end of the Rössen phase. In the succeeding Michelsberg phase a farming economy does exist, with strong Mesolithic overtones.

We can infer this from the distribution patterns of artefacts and the location of the settlements in the Meuse Valley. In the Bandkeramik phase we find a concentration of settlements in the loess region, small settlements in the adjacent coversand area and a distribution of pottery and adzes in a northerly direction (fig. 5 and 6). In the Rössen phase there are no settlements in the loess region. In the coversand area we find a pattern identical to that of the previous phase: a thin distribution of pottery and Breitkeile. In the Michelsberg phase there is a completely different pattern: settlements abound in the entire coversand area.



Figure 3a. Man wearing a tin as decoration (Coll. Leahy).

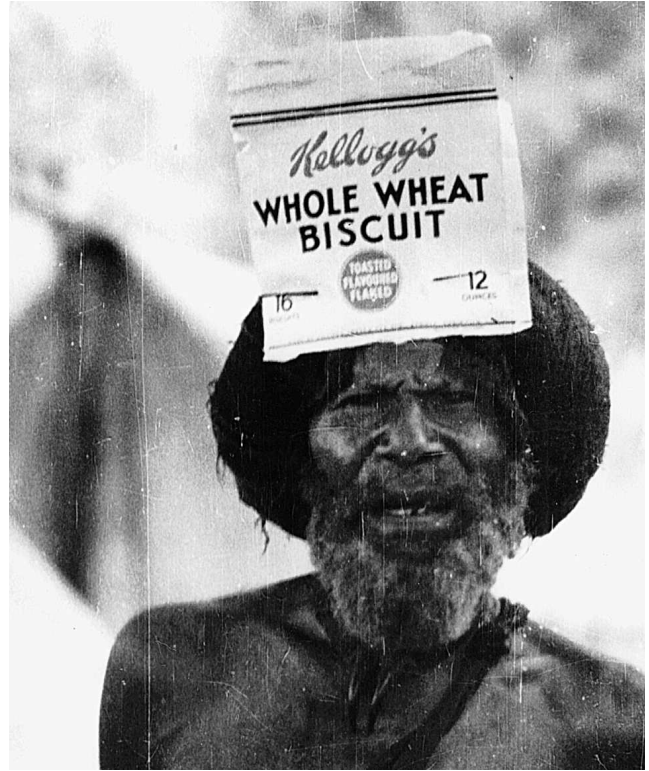


Figure 3b. Man wearing a biscuit bag as decoration (Coll. Leahy).

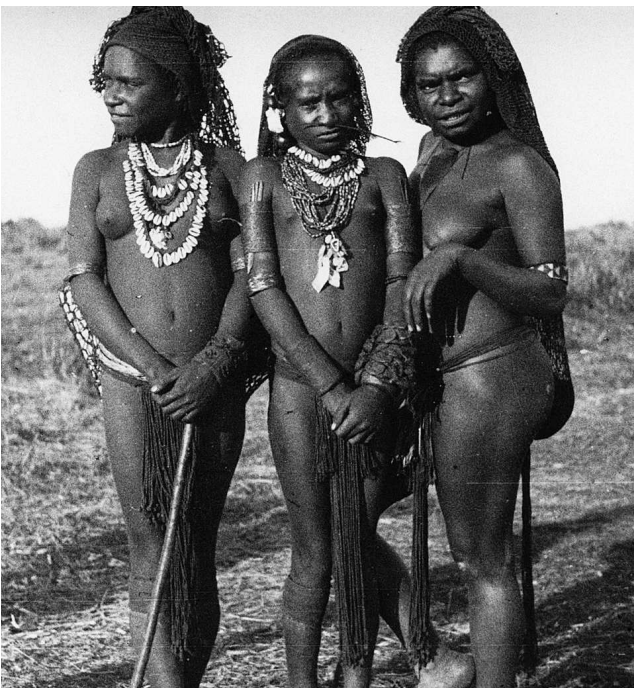


Figure 4. The amount of personal decoration of Mount Hagen women around 1933 (left) and Mount Hagen children in 1936/37 (right) (Coll. Leahy).



Figure 5. Northwestern Europe and the distribution of Bandkeramik pottery outside the loess zone. Bandkeramik occupation clusters hatched; loess dotted.

During the periods of the Bandkeramik and the Rössen Culture we therefore have a phase of contact, without any visible effects on the economic subsystem. We do find their artefacts in the coversand area, well away from their settlements. Most of these are stray finds, but some are not. From Dürrenberg, Germany, the existence of a Late Mesolithic grave sprinkled with red ochre is known, containing microliths and an adze (Bicker 1936). In addition there are Late Mesolithic find spots with adzes, Breitkeile and occasionally pottery, as for example Schletau (Breest 1988), Grabow (Breest 1987) and Weidenthal-Höhle (Cziesla 1992) in Germany and Ysselstein, Helmond and Gassel (Brounen/De Jong 1988) in the Netherlands. How to interpret these finds?

Numerous explanations have been put forward by other researchers. The distribution of these artefacts is thought to be the result of the settling of Early Neolithic farmers, scouting expeditions by these farmers, cattle transhumance camps, or theft or exchange of objects by Mesolithic hunter/gatherers. The first two options seem not very plausible. Outside the loess zone no settlements have been found in these parts so far that can be compared to those we know from the loess itself. The scouting expeditions may have played a part in the distribution, but it must have been

limited. The material reflection will have been small, in contrast to the actual distribution pattern and the mutual differences in the distribution of pottery and adzes. The third option, cattle camps, may explain the distribution of artefacts in the immediate adjoining coversand area. The model Bakels (1978) has developed for the Graetheide cluster suggests a shortage of pasture in the loess zone and necessitates a transhumance system for cattle. In this way the coversand area around the loess may have been exploited. However, this option is only valid in the area immediately adjoining the loess. The finds that were located more to the north and west seem to be the result of another mechanism. We consider this distribution to be the reflection of contacts between hunter/gatherers and farmers and of an exchange among hunter/gatherers. This may refer to robbed material as well as exchanged objects.

In the case of robbed material we may think of raids, but also of collecting or scavenging waste, like pottery sherds, in abandoned settlement areas, more particularly in those small temporary settlements or camps in the coversand region (fig. 5). Part of the distribution pattern of the pottery can be explained in this way. Another part, however, is sure to be the result of exchange. For Mesolithic hunter/gatherers pottery will be associated with the new arrivals and therefore



Figure 6. Northwestern Europe and the distribution of Bandkeramik adzes outside the loess zone. Bandkeramik occupation clusters hatched; loess dotted.

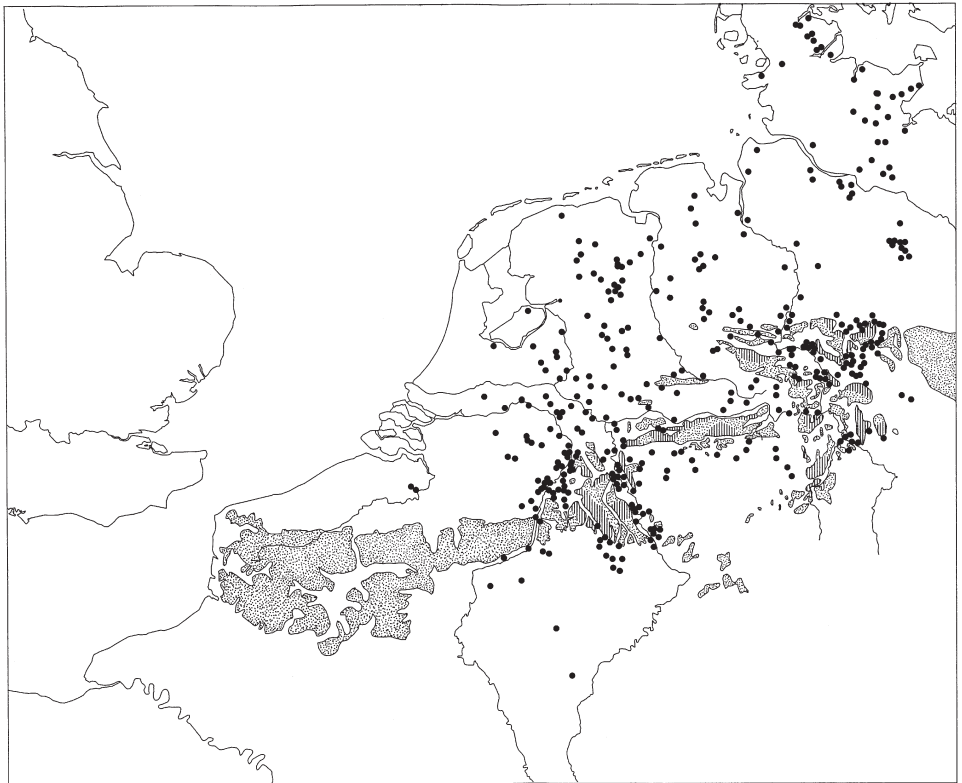


Figure 7. Northwestern Europe and the distribution of Rössen Breitkeile outside the loess zone. Rössen occupation clusters hatched; loess dotted.

have an exotic appeal. This association gave it an added value. To the farmers it was a cheap commodity, but as the potential new owner should be able to associate the pottery with the original user – in other words should know that original user – it would have had a restricted distribution. The archaeological distribution pattern supports this hypothesis. A second factor that may play a part in the limited size of the distribution pattern is the fragility of pottery.

The distribution of adzes shows another pattern (fig. 6). We notice a concentration in the vicinity of the Bandkeramik settlements and a fanning out in a northerly direction. The adzes represented a relatively high value in Bandkeramik society, as demonstrated in the study of grave inventories (Van de Velde 1979). So the chances are remote that they were left behind on abandoned settlement areas. The distribution seems more likely to be the result of exchange. Functionally comparable artefacts occur among the implements of Mesolithic hunter/gatherers. So to them this artefact was a recognizably functional object made more valuable by its exotic character. It did not have to be associated directly with the original owner or maker. This resulted in a wider distribution. To explain the concentration of adzes in the outer loess zone an inflationary process might be put forward. Pottery became a less desirable exchange object in favour of adzes.

In the next chronological phase, the Rössen Culture, we see that pottery, in the shape of complete pots, is exchanged over a limited distance. We think it likely that a change in meaning occurred here, from primarily prestigious object to more functional object. The exchange is very well documented, as demonstrated by the find of imported Rössen pots at Hüde on the Dümmersee (Schwabedissen 1966, 1979). The restricted distribution pattern may have been caused by the fragility of the material here as well. The distribution of perforated adzes and Breitkeile (fig. 7) seems to indicate the growing importance of these implements in the prestige system. The pattern becomes noticeably more dense and extends even to the south of Scandinavia.

The first indications of economic changes date from this phase as well. In the settlements of Bergschenhoek, Brandwijk, Hazendonk, Swifterbant and a German site as Hüde we encounter the first food crops and bones of domesticated animals (Deichmüller 1969; Louwe Kooijmans 1993a, 1993b; Schwabedissen 1979).

6. Conclusion

In the circumstances described above the neolithisation process may initially be considered a process of intensification. This intensification was directed in the first instance at increasing the opportunities within an exchange system based on kinship and political alliances. This first phase is

characterized by, among other things, an exchange of prestigious objects. This is followed by a second phase with the emphasis on delayed prestige. During this phase the interactions with Neolithic groups intensify and gradually economic elements are incorporated into Mesolithic society. Finally, this will result in a Neolithic society.

As a final remark we put forward that these ideas and data may suggest that we consider the social element to be the sole crucial factor in the neolithisation process. This is by no means true. We merely wanted to emphasize the often underrated importance of social factors. We think that the neolithisation process is an interplay of several factors: demographic, economic, perhaps climatological and social. But we do think that the social factor has a leading part, especially in a first stage of contact.

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