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Gijn, Annelou van; Zvelebil, Marek; Bradley, Richard; et al., ; Gijn, Annelou van; Zvelebil, Marek

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Faculty of Archaeology
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contents

Torsten Madsen

Ideology and social structure in the earlier Neolithic of south Scandinavia. A view from the sources

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to outline the structure of various sets of data of importance to the understanding of ideology and social structure in the earlier Neolithic (and partly Mesolithic) in South Scandinavia, or in terms of archaeological cultures the Funnel Necked Beaker (TRB) and the Ertebølle culture.

The paper is divided in two parts. First I will look at some selected evidence bearing on the social structure of the Ertebølle and the TRB culture. The evidence, I believe, tend to suggest that in certain aspects there was little structural change from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic. In the second part I will look at evidence for the ideology of the TRB culture. I will not include the Ertebølle culture into this part, as it appears as if there is a considerable shift in ideology at the transition from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic.

The Ertebølle as well as the TRB culture can be divided chronologically into a number of phases (e.g. Brinch Petersen 1993, 47; Nielsen 1993, 85). For the purpose of this paper, however, I will work with the following division where the dates are based on calibrated C-14:

- Ertebølle: 5400-3900 BC
- Early Neolithic I: 3900-3500 BC
- Early Neolithic II: 3500-3300 BC
- Middle Neolithic A I: 3300-3100 BC
- Middle Neolithic A II-V: 3100-2800 BC

2. Sources on social structure

2.1. Patterns of territorial behaviour

The strength of territorial behaviour and the size of territories marked, are important elements for the understanding of social structure in the Mesolithic and Neolithic. The evidence is one sided of course. Elements of territorial behaviour may be recognised as such, whereas lack of evidence cannot be translated into statements of lack of territorial behaviour.

The settlement pattern of the Ertebølle culture exhibits a distinct clustering in coastal areas, and a marked tendency for large settlement sites is obvious (S.H. Andersen 1993, 66). This, however, does not by itself indicate a strong territorial behaviour, since the clustering must in part be due to the concentrations of the sea-based resources favoured. On the other hand, especially prominent concentrations of stable resources can be a strong instigator of a territorial behaviour in a hunter-gatherer population.

The material remains, however, show evidence for marked regional divisions. This is most clearly seen on Zealand. Here a study of stylistic elements on flake axes has shown that along the eastern coast of the isle three distinct groups can be distinguished and that the area of each group measures no more than 30-50 km across (Vang Petersen 1984, fig. 15). Another indication of regional differentiation is the marked variation in burial tradition between east Zealand (Albrethsen/Brinch Petersen1977; Nielsen/Brinch Petersen 1993) and southern Scania, as evidenced by the Skateholm burials some 50 km away (Larsson 1988, 170-72). On a somewhat larger, yet still local scale, we find considerable variability in the material remains, especially on an east-west axis, with the Great belt as the major divider.

At the beginning of the Neolithic an inland dispersal of the settlement areas occurs. The old coastal areas are not abandoned, but all over we find new small sites on mainly well drained sandy soils, and especially the distribution of burials indicate a very marked movement inland (Madsen 1993, 96; Thorvildsen 1941, fig. 41). Even close to the coasts the sites tend to shift location from beach positions to sandy patches behind the coast (Madsen/Jensen 1982).

In the earliest phase of the TRB culture we are dealing with two different pottery traditions (Madsen 1994, 235). One is named the Oxie group. It has the most limited distribution, chiefly in the eastern parts of South Scandinavia, and is the one with the most obvious roots in the Ertebølle Culture. It is the other, however, which in this context is of major interest, as it is the bearer of what may be seen as the ideological characteristics of the TRB culture. Volling, Svaleklint, Havnelev, Svenstorp, Mossby, Vrå, Stengade II, Siggeneben Süd, are names applied to it. The many names are not due to a rivalry of who has the right of the name giving site, but is a result of a high degree of regional variation in the decorative style of the pottery. Our knowledge of the data is still too limited to allow us to say exactly how local the style variation really is, but it seems surprisingly localised considering the fact that we are dealing with pottery occurring immediately after a major cultural transition.

With the EN II and further into the MN A I we see a unification of the pottery styles covering all of South Scandinavia, and even the Northern lowland fringes of central Europe: uniform, basic style schemes with a possible ideological background dominate our perception, but below, there seems to be minute style variations that may be attributed to a basic territorial patterning. They are not at all well studied, however, and for the moment being must remain hypothetical.

If, however, we look at the distribution pattern of causewayed enclosures and megalithic tombs, we find very convincing evidence for even very small scaled regional divisions. This is most clearly demonstrated in a study in eastern Jutland, where megalithic tombs cluster densely around known and presumed enclosures, with distances of only 5-10 kilometres between clusters (Madsen 1982). Comparable clusters are found around many of the known enclosures. At Sarup, where a lack of known tombs near the site originally led to the assumption of a regional status of the enclosure (N.H. Andersen 1981, 82), surveys followed by excavations have now revealed 35 megalithic tombs within one km from the site (N. H. Andersen 1993, and personal communication).

In the MN A II-V the pottery degrades gradually. During this process the regionalisation in the pottery decoration styles (as long as there are any decorations left) becomes very obvious again. Thus even between neighbouring clusters of megalithic tombs differences may be noted (Gebauer 1988, 115). Apart from this there is a tendency for nucleation in the settlement pattern with huge and rather permanently settled sites (Madsen 1982). Further there is a strong continuity in settlement areas (Davidsen 1978, 159-160) and in burial areas (Gebauer 1988, 117) with a frequent re-use of existing megalithic tombs.

2.2. Physical violence

In the Ertebølle and the TRB culture there is an astounding amount of evidence for violence, often of a fatal nature. On face value the evidence points to about the most violent period in Danish Prehistory.

Arrow shots seem to be a frequent cause of death (Albrethsen/Brinch Petersen 1977, 14; Larsson 1988, 91; Madsen 1990b, 40), but even more common are lesions to the skull. We find several skulls with fractures as well as clear marks from impact of axes. A special group of evidence are trepanations, many of which were successful. They cluster on the upper left part of the head, and are today considered to be surgical operations to save victims from open fractures of the skull inflicted by striking weapons (Bennike 1985, 92 ff.). A third group of finds consists of skeletal material from bog offerings (Bennike/Ebbesen 1987). There are quite a few human skeletons associated with offerings in the bogs, and at least some of these were deliberately killed. In two cases strangulations with cords are attested, and in other cases slaying with axes seems highly probable.

It is tempting to see this ample evidence for violence in direct connection with the evidence from the material culture for small scale regional divisions. Thus, it may be that the tendency for an atomised group pattern is associated with a high degree of negative reciprocity on the inter-group level.

2.3. Burial practices

The major part of the Mesolithic burials are from the beginning of the Ertebølle culture or from the end of the preceding period. Here we find ochre colouring as well as sex and status differentiation's in the burials. In the later part of the Ertebølle culture the burials are rather few and generally unfurnished and without ochre (Nielsen/Brinch Petersen 1993, 77). In Denmark skeletons nearly always lie in a supine position, extended with the arms along the side, whereas in Scania there is a greater variability, including burials in hocker as well as sitting position (Larsson 1988, 103 ff.). Although most graves contain individual burials, more than one person in a grave is not uncommon: as many as eight persons have been found in one grave (Brinch Petersen 1988).

From the TRB culture we have only a few burials, where we can identify the individuals through the skeletal material. Thus in EN I there are only three graves, where we can be positive of having the full internment. Surprisingly, two of these graves contain four and five individuals respectively, buried at the same time in supine extended position with the arms by the sides (Madsen 1993). All evidence from other less well preserved burials suggest the same type of interment, although we do not know whether multiple burials are the exception or the rule.

A study has been carried out to establish sex and status differentiations in the EN I burials, but in vain. The richness of the furnishing varies considerably, but there does not seem to be a consistency in the combinations. This may reflect that there are no overriding rules, but it may also mean that multiple burials are more common than we tend to believe. Most of the burials are found in wooden chambers or coffins in long barrows. A tradition of placing pottery, mostly richly decorated lugged beakers, at the terminal facades of the barrows is prominent.

In EN II we still can follow the tradition of supine extended burials. At the same time a custom of placing one or two flasks (either lugged or collared) at the feet of the deceased develops. Other items are rare and, again, there is no particular structure showing sex or status differentiations. In addition, pottery (lugged beakers, bowls, and funnel beakers) is placed at various positions along the periphery of the mound.

In MN A I we completely loose track of the nature of the burials. It is the main but also the final phase of building megalithic tombs, and unfortunately the subsequent reuse of the tombs has completely obliterated the primary burials. Cleared materials from the chambers, however, indicate a frequent furnishing with pottery. Pottery depositions outside the tombs increase substantially, and they are, as a rule, placed at the entrance.

The large clusters of megalithic tombs, and the short distances between the clusters, suggest a very high rate of tomb building. Indeed an estimated 25.000 megalithic tombs in Denmark (Ebbesen 1985, 40; Skaarup 1993, 104) have been built within 400 years, averaging more than 60 tombs a year. Within the major clusters numbering 30 tombs or more it would have meant an average building rate of one tomb every 10 to 15 years, and probably more in the peak periods.

Megalithic tombs in South Scandinavia have been interpreted as evidence for a stratified society, and indeed for chiefdoms (Kristiansen 1984; Skaarup 1990). Together with the wooden chambers in long barrows from the preceding period they certainly seem associated with the death and burial of particular individuals, in contrast to for instance Great Britain, where clear indications for ossuary functions are observed (Hedges 1984,133 ff.; Kinnes 1992, 98 ff.). The multiple burials and indeed the frequency of the tombs, however, does not speak in favour of a marked stratification.

From MN A II the construction of megalithic tombs ceased. There was, however, an extensive re-use of the tombs. Considerable amounts of material in the chambers date from MN A II and onwards, and at the entrances the practice of depositing pottery continued. In a few well-investigated cases we can count 7-8 distinct depositions[1], probably indicating the same number of interment episodes, covering a period of approximately 100 years. Towards the end of the TRB culture deposition of pottery outside the tombs ceased, but instead a new tradition of depositing fire cracked flint axes appears (Skaarup 1993, 109). At the same time the importance of axes inside the chambers markedly increases.

Due to the continuos re-use of the megalithic tombs during the rest of the Neolithic and into the Bronze age, we know very little of the character of the burials. In Scania it seems quite certain that by the end of MN A the tombs are used as ossuaries, as evidenced from the presence of sorted heaps of bones on several tomb floors (Strömberg 1971a, 1971b). There is even a case of dismembered bones in a pit under the floor of the passage grave Carlshögen, dating to the early MN A, and probably contemporary with the building of the tomb (Strömberg 1971a, 58 ff.). Scania, however, is different from the rest of South Scandinavia. The number of tombs is extremely low, and the dense clustering is not present. It is presently uncertain to which extent the development towards an ossuary function of the tombs also took place in Denmark, although at Klokkehøj on Southern Fyn heaps of bones from many individuals dating to the end of MN A were found (Thorsen 1981).

2.4. Causewayed enclosures

There is currently a little more than 30 known enclosures in Denmark, but with the knowledge we have now, we can expect every major cluster of megalithic tombs to have an enclosure associated with it. Certainly, we can expect the number of enclosures to amount to several hundred.

Obviously, much emphasis has been placed on the huge, seemingly planned and organised construction works. At first sight, this seems to indicate a strong central authority, reigning a considerable number of subjects. But things may not be that straight forward. All enclosures were built within EN II and MN A I, contemporary with the megalithic tombs (Madsen 1988). Generally they consist of one or more rows of interrupted ditches and occasionally also palisades.
A closer investigation of those cases with multiple rows of ditches suggests that they may not all be contemporary. Furthermore, when we look at the individual ditch segments within a row of ditches we find an often complex pattern of reuse. Cuttings are followed by a sequence of refilling and subsequent re-cutting (N.H. Andersen 1993; Madsen 1988).

The enclosures are of course monumental constructions but, more importantly, they are the foci of continuous action: digging holes, doing some rituals associated with the holes, and covering everything up again. We have, of course, difficulties deciding whether activities in different ditch segments are contemporary or not, but at least the activity pattern is segmented in the sense that every ditch segment constitutes an activity area by itself. Combined in time and space across the enclosure we get an aggregate of segmented activity. It is this aggregate which is really the monument, and I doubt very much that we can see this aggregate as evidence of a central authority. Rather, I would like to stress the segmentation as important, indicating a co-operative venture of segmented populations.

2.5. Social structure: hierarchy or segmentation?

It is obvious that the spectacular megalithic tombs and the impressive causewayed enclosures can induce the casual investigator to conclude a highly hierarchical society. This has been taken to extremes, with some authors even speaking of kingdoms (Körner/Laux 1980). Personally, I find very little evidence for a hierarchical structure in the TRB culture (see also Madsen 1990a). On the contrary, I feel that the evidence generally points towards a strongly segmented society with a high degree of negative reciprocity. Balancing the negative reciprocity, however, requires a number of important communal transactions, all heavily ritualised. The

causewayed enclosures may have played an important role in this connection, but also exchange, which I haven't dealt with here, must have been important (including mined flint for magnificent axes, amber for ornaments, and indeed quantities of exotic copper) (Madsen 1991, 494). A segmented society seems to have prevailed during the Ertebølle period as well, and it is questionable whether any major changes in the overall pattern of social organisation occurred with the transition from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic.

3. Sources on ideology

3.1. Monuments – a key to ideology?

There is no doubt that the monuments – tombs and causewayed enclosures – played a dominant role in society. Apart from whatever practical purposes these monuments may have had in TRB economic and social life, it seems safe to assume that key features of the ideology were associated with and deeply embedded in these monuments.

We are, I believe, far from understanding this ideology. Compared to the later cultural development in South Scandinavia, the impressions we get from the sources are odd and alien. We can only hesitantly attempt to understand the hinterlying ideas. One point to start from could be the universal appearance of the two types of monuments in northern and western Europe. Not only do they appear all over, but a comparison shows an astonishing similarity in structure and activity patterns in widely separate regions. Thus despite the distance between South Scandinavia and southern England, and despite the vast differences in material culture that may speak against any closer contact, there is a surprising agreement in the structure of the long barrows in both regions (compare Kinnes 1992 with Madsen 1979), and the same is true with part of the activity patterns within the enclosures (Madsen 1988, 332).

An explanation for these similarities could be that the monuments are the carriers of virtually the same ideas – ideas with a common origin. This origin could very well lie along the fringes of the late linear pottery cultures, and in those areas which have been part of the process that created the cultural and economic practices for the type of agriculture that spread into North and Northwest Europe around 4000 BC, well adapted to the forested moraine landscapes. Hodder (1990) has suggested that the early trapezoidal long barrows are structural copies of the late linear pottery houses, an idea that I am willing to share. He also suggests that the barrows were considered as houses by the various groups in North and Northwest Europe. This old and often stated idea is less likely, I believe. The form of the houses varied considerably within the area, but none of them seems to have been of a form that resembles the linear pottery houses. In South Scandinavia we find, for instance, small oval huts (Eriksen 1992). The long barrows more likely represent a structure associated with ideas of an archaic home, and ideas of passage to this.

The enclosures may also be seen in relation to linear pottery enclosures, but we are currently on uncertain ground. We should note, however, that enclosures and monumental tombs in North and Northwest Europe are very intimately associated, and that we cannot understand the one without the other. This is not only because of the frequent occurrence of human bones, particularly skulls, in the enclosures, but it is also borne out by similarities in ritual activities performed at the two types of monuments. Basic elements in South Scandinavia are pottery and fire.

3.2. The unification of pottery

The pottery of the northern and western groups of the TRB culture is renown for its high quality, technically as well as artistically. For those not primarily studying the TRB culture it is less appreciated, I believe, that there is a marked uniformity of style from Holland in the Southwest to Scania in the Northeast, a distance of 800 kilometres. This is especially true of the great styles of the early Middle Neolithic. Thus bowls from one end of the area are hardly distinguishable from bowls from the other end, and the same is true slightly later with shouldered vessels (for a general overview of the TRB pottery, see Midgley 1992).

A case of fashion? Hardly! First of all, the decorative styles are strictly bound to specific forms. A bowl has one type of decoration, a pedestal bowl another, and a shouldered vessel a third. With a few specific exceptions, decorations never cross from one type to another. Secondly, particular types have a tendency to occur in particular contexts. From the very beginning of the TRB culture in Denmark we find richly decorated lugged beakers with repeated decoratiove patterns on neck and belly. These lugged beakers are most frequently found at the facades of the long barrows, and seldom in other contexts.

In the following EN II phase the decoration style changes considerably. Yet the tradition of the richly decorated lugged beakers is maintained, and even if the decoration patterns themselves have changed considerably (now dominated by chevron bands in the so called Fuchsberg style), the repetition of patterns on neck and belly continue. The bowl is introduced at this time, and it receives the same chevron band type of decoration. Both the lugged beakers and bowls in Fuchsberg style are now increasingly found at the kerbs of megalithic tombs. They are also frequently found at the enclosures, where at Sarup, for instance, we find them at the palisade, and in the peripheral ditches (N.H. Andersen 1993, 102).

The Fuchsberg style directly develops into the style of vertical bands characteristic of bowls and lugged beakers in

the MN I-II. In South Scandinavia the bowls are most frequently found in the pottery deposits at the entrances. It is probable that a specific meaning was attached to this pottery. The close association of rich decoration with the lugged beaker and later the bowl form for almost a millennium, and the repeated patterns on neck and belly, as well as the consistent use of these types in connection with depositions at the facades, whether of tombs or causewayed enclosures, stresses this point. The prospect becomes no less interesting when we consider that the social structure probably involved a marked territorial behaviour among rather small groups, and with a marked tendency for negative reciprocity.

Thus the cogent style/form combinations probably had a very clear meaning that was well understood across the socio-political landscape. The huge amount of high quality pottery that was 'consumed' and destroyed in large scale rituals that may frequently have gathered many more than the local social group, seems to support the idea of an inherent meaning, which may well have been activated on these occasions.

3.3. The importance of fire

Whereas the meaning of the pottery may be hard, if not impossible, to understand, we may be a little better off with fire. Fire is an often overlooked, yet possibly important element in the TRB-culture when we talk about ideology. Seemingly, fire is present everywhere to a degree of pyromania. It is a constant element in association with the monumental tombs, and it plays a dominating role in connection with the enclosures.

In the EN I long barrows, fire was used to destroy the wooden chambers, before they were covered over with earth. Likewise the heavy terminal timber facades were, if not destroyed, then heavily scorched by fire. In the EN II and MN I megalithic tombs fire was used to crack the floor tiles and burn the clay beneath the floor to a red colour. It was further used to crack flint nodules which were used as packing around the chamber or in crushed small fragments as a fine white floor layer. The fire cracked flint could further be placed in small quantities inside vessels, or along with vessels in small heaps at the pottery depositions in front of the tombs. At this time only unused nodules of flint seems to have been cracked by fire.

At the enclosures there are heavy traces of fires in the ditches, often as it seems covered up while burning. There are major pottery deposits that have been destroyed by overheating, possibly deliberately. There is masses of burnt daub, more than in any other period of Danish prehistory, and probably more than can be explained by accidental firing of houses.

Towards the end of the TRB culture the use of fire cracked flint becomes massive. We have passage graves, where a 30 cm thick layer of burnt flint nodules surround the burial gifts of late TRB burials and covers up bone material from previous burials. Outside the tombs the pottery depositions are substituted by a deposition of fire-cracked flint tools, mostly axes.

To understand this excessive use of fire we have to realise the nature of the TRB economy. The natural environment was heavily forested, and a slash and burn economy has been assumed for many years. For various reasons this assumption was strongly discredited in the seventies and eighties (Rowley-Conwy 1981). From recent pollen investigation beneath barrows from the early Neolithic and the early middle Neolithic, it has now been proven that slash and burn constituted a very important element in the land management (S.Th. Andersen 1993a, 1993b). Indeed, as it looks now, the settled areas was dominated by a secondary forest of first birch and later coppiced hazel, used as the basis for the slash and burn activities.

Against this background fire may well have attained a meaning as a life creator through destruction. Fire was a destructive force, but in the process of destruction the foundation of new life was laid down. Thus, when fire was used extensively in burial contexts, it may well be a reflection of how the nature of life was understood. Furthermore, fire was indeed the force that created and preserved the pottery. Firing may well have been considered the action that created meaning and importance to the pottery. If I should give a bid for a single basic element on which the ideology of the TRB society was build, it would be fire. Together with pottery, it is the element that dominates our evidence for rituals, and seen in relation to the economy it is an element of potentially understandable meaning.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, I regrettably have to admit that there is little to conclude. I have tried to point out that there is nothing to suggest a change of the basic social structure from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic. Throughout, I believe, we deal with a strongly segmented, competitive society. Apart from this, I fear we are still far from a closer understanding of the social structure.

Even more speculative is our understanding of the ideology. The seemingly irrational nature of the evidence prevents our understanding of the ideas governing TRB society. With the corded ware culture and further on through prehistory, people start to behave in a more "normal" and understandable way. In the TRB culture, however, we are left with a few hints of meaning only. Even if we may believe that we are capable of understanding these individual elements, I fear we may never reach a point, where we can claim that we have a coherent understanding of the TRB universe.

note

1 As at Nørremarksgård close to Horsens in Eastern Jutland. The site was excavated by the author. It is still unpublished.

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Torsten Madsen
Institut for Forhistorisk Arkaeologi
Moesgård
DK-8270 Højbjerg