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The social structure of Early Neolithic society in South Scandinavia

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The investigation of the Neolithic of South Scandinavia has by tradition been characterized by typological and chronological studies. In recent years, however, a growing interest has emerged to deal with a broad specter of cultural relationships in order to understand the basic structure of the neolithic societies.

This paper should be seen as a contribution to the understanding of the social structure and life way of Early Neolithic society in South Scandinavia, based on a brief survey of five categories of source material. These are:
— Regional patterning of material culture
— Settlement patterns
— Burial practices
— Anthropological evidence on warfare
— Exchange patterns.

Regional patterning of material culture

This scheme presented by professor C. J. Becker in 1947 on the origin and development of the TRB culture (Becker 1947) is well known by all archaeologists concerned with the European Neolithic. It was based on South Scandinavian material, but he made it into an European system. Today it is difficult to maintain Beckers view.

Two problems have arisen. Firstly, Beckers division, based as it was on a typological division of the Early Neolithic material into A, B and C groups, cannot be maintained in face of the growing number of settlement sites with closed find contexts. Secondly, even if a division into groups that looks somewhat familiar to those suggested by Becker still can be seen, his basic assumptions concerning the chronological development seems to fail. Instead, many of the differences in the material considered by him to be chronological seems to have a regional background (Madsen u. Petersen 1984).

Today the Early Neolithic can be divided into an Early Neolithic I from approximately 3120 to 2780 b.c., and an Early Neolithic II from approximately 2780 to 2630 b.c. in uncalibrated C14-years. Early Neolithic II covers approximately 100 years calibrated, and it include the greater part of the material that Becker termed megalithic C. It may be divided into three local groups. The Virum group is found east of the Great Belt, the Fuchsberg group west of the Great Belt excluding the northernmost part of Jutland, and a third group in the latter area combining elements from the Fuchsberg group with local elements from the preceding Early Neolithic I phase (Andersen u. Madsen 1977).

Early Neolithic II shall not concern us further here, as in fact it is much closer connected culturally with the Middle Neolithic than with Early Neolithic I. Instead I shall concentrate on Early Neolithic I.

This period covers as much as 500 years calibrated, and is thus a very long period. The following division can be suggested: The A group is the one of Beckers groups that has gone through the least changes over the years. Nevertheless, many new forms can be added to the pottery inventory (Nielsen, P. O. 1984), and most important, many pots fomerly believed to belong to this group have been transferred to the Svaleklint group mentioned below (Nielsen, E. K. 1983). An important observation concern the distribution of Beckers A group, or Oxie group as now it is commonly called (Larsson 1984). Originally believed to cover all of South Scandinavia, it can now be shown to be a group heavily centred upon the eastern parts of that area. In Jutland only a few scattered finds are seen along the coasts (Madsen u. Petersen 1982-83; Nielsen, P. O. 1984).

The most profound changes to Beckers system concern his B and non-megalithic C groups. It has turned out that the almost undecorated B material, and the richly decorated non-magalithic C material are found together in closed contexts. The simple B type pottery predominates in the settlements, while the rich and complex non-megalithic C type pottery predominates in the burials. Yet they are two aspects of the same cultural unit (Madsen u. Petersen 1982-83).

This composite material is, as Becker realised in connection with the non-megalithic C component, a material with marked regional variation. Becker operated with a Jutlandic, a Zealandic and a South Swedish non-megalithic C. The same regional divisions apply today, but in all three groups we now have to include his B type material (Madsen u. Petersen 1982-83).

New names have been coined for these groups. The Volling group is the name given to the material found in North and Middle Jutland (Ebbesen u. Mahler 1980). It is probably the best known of these regional groups due to several new investigations of both burials and settlements (Madsen u. Petersen 1982-83). The Svaleklint group on Zealand and the Svenstorp group in Scania are the eastern counterparts of the Volling group (Madsen u. Petersen 1982-83).

The dating of the Oxie group on the one hand, and the Volling, Svaleklint and Svenstorp groups on the other, is in no way simple. The numerous C14-dates suggests that they are all contemporary, and that no chronological preference can be given to the one or the other. However, due to excessive kinks in the calibration curve at this time, it is difficult to handle chronological differences on a minute scale as here by means of C14 alone.

In want of stratigraphical evidence, one can of course take to typological considerations, claiming that the more simple Oxie material has to be older than the material from the other groups. In Jutland, however, this cannot be the case, partly because the Volling group in large areas seems to be the only group present in Early Neolithic I, and partly because several recent investigations of kitchen middens shows the the Volling group follows immediately after the Late Ertebølle culture without any hiatus[1].

It is obvious from what has been said so far that there is a lot of regional variation present at the beginning of the Neolithic. Yet, the picture is not complete. None of the groups referenced so far seem to occur in South Jutland at all. An indication of what may possibly be expected here, can be seen in a mapping of the unchambered long barrows categorised by the pottery associated with them. It appears that in North and Central Jutland the pottery belongs to the Volling group as one would expect, whereas in South Jutland the pottery is decorated with vertical stripes on the belly sherds, and thus typologically of Beckers megalithic C type (Kristensen 1988).

Now indeed, it is unreasonable to assume that the unchambered long barrows in South Jutland should belong to Early Neolithic II exclusively, while further north they belong to Early Neolithic I. Consequently we have to reappraise Schwabedissens Satrup group - a group he claimed to belong to Early Neolithic I, but with megalithic C style pottery. C14-dates from one of Schwabedissens sites do indeed point towards Early Neolithic I (Schwabedissen 1979).

To add further to the regional variety of Early Neolithic I we also have the two settlement sites Stengade II (Skaarup 1975) and Siggeneben Süd (Meurers-Balke 1983) lying not far from each other at the coast of the Baltic Sea on Langeland and in Holstein. They represent yet another cultural variation best to be discribed as an amalgamation of Beckers A and B types.

I am convinced that a common oldest cultural unit of the TRB culture in South Scandinavia do not exist. On the contrary it seems as if the initial stage was one based on multiple roots, rather than on a single cultural substratum brought to the area by migration. It is currently not possible to see the regional patterning at the beginning of the Neolithic as a mirror reflection of the regional pattern in the Late Ertebølle culture. Nevertheless it is worth noting that the most marked cultural differences in the Early Neolithic was between East and West Denmark exactly as it was during the Late Ertebølle culture, and I suspect that it is the regionalisation of Late Ertebølle society that we see reflected in the composite cultural patterning of the earliest Neolithic.

If we can conclude that the early farming population in South Scandinavia had its roots in the local mesolithic population, already divided ethnically, then this do indeed have implications for the structure of Early Neolithic society.

Settlement patterns

The knowledge of the Early Neolithic settlement patterns has grown considerably in recent years. Not so many years ago the view held on Early Neolithic settlements and their organisation was based on the Barkær site. Here two parallel rectangular 85 m long and 6-7 m wide structures were considered to be long houses (Glob 1949). The structures

[1] S. H. Andersen, personal communication.

were found to be subdivided into approximately 3 m wide sections by means of hurdle fences. At least 22 and 29 compartments were present in the two structures respectively. It was assumed that the two houses were inhabited by some fifty nuclear families - one family in each compartment. Considering that all compartments were of the same size a picture was painted of a true collectivized community, where everybody were equal and jointly worked together on the basic tasks of clearing the forest and cultivating the fields. It was a picture of a true primeval communistic society.

Today the Barkær structures are no longer considered to be houses. They are beyond doubt long barrows. Further, new investigations of Early Neolithic I settlement sites are currently giving a different and much more reliable picture.

Investigations in Jutland show that we may separate two very different types of settlements (Madsen 1982). One type of site is hunting and fishing stations. In the coastal areas of North and Central Jutland we find them as shell middens placed in the exact same position as, and often directly upon the older Ertebølle shell middens. Although there is a direct site continuity and although this continuity is determined by the exploitation of basically the same resources, there are important differences between the mesolithic and the neolithic middens. One such difference is that the neolithic middens contain heavy ash layers and many fire cracked stones, a feature never found in the mesolithic middens. A likely explanation for this is that a comprehensive food processing and conservation took place on the middens in order to take the food away to other sites. Indeed, a major difference between the Mesolithic and the Neolithic pattern of exploitation may have been that during the Mesolithic it was more of a day to day exploitation, while during the Early Neolithic it was a batch exploitation.

The other type of sites, the base settlements or agricultural sites, was different. A good example is the Mosegården site, preserved beneath a long barrow (Madsen u. Juel Jensen 1982). The size was approximately 500 m, and a tentative estimate from the remains suggest a duration of habitation of less than ten years with a population probably no larger than ten to twenty persons. In the centre of the settlement was a stone built fire place, and to the east were traces of various activity areas plus a very pronounced dump area with black cultural soil containing a major concentration of flint and pottery. To the west of the fireplace was a distribution of postholes indicating one or a few light buildings, the exact form of which could not be determined. From the fireplace and into this building area were concentrations of flint and pottery indicating a primary activity area.

Questions concerning the type of houses can now be answered on a couple of other sites in South Scandinavia. From Mossby (Larsson u. Larsson 1986) and Bygholm (Rønne 1979) we have a couple of identical house plans. They consist of approximately 12 m long and 5 m wide oval structures with one row of 3 to 4 central postholes, and a single line of smaller postholes in the oval outline of the wall.

The Mosegården site (Madsen u. Juel Jensen 1982) is situated on sandy soil at the very edge of a bog area, which probably included a lake as well during the Neolithic. Unfortunately bones are not preserved due to the acid sandy soil, and this severely reduce our possibilities for a detailed knowledge of how the resources around the site were exploited. However, it seems safe to assume that the major activities at the site were of a farming nature. The sandy soils were probably used for agricultural activities while the damp areas and the ecotones surrounding them would be the type of land best suited for husbandry without major changes to the natural environment.

The Mosegården site is not the only site of this type. Others begin to appear all over South Scandinavia. Apart from a number of sites in Jutland they are found in numbers in Scania in connection with systematic settlement studies (Larsson 1984; 1987-1988). In most cases the sites are very small, and there is a clear tendency for them to lie on sandy soil close to damp areas.

A general discription of the earliest neolithic settlement pattern in South Scandinavia would be as follows: The farming sites of the Early Neolithic population were generally small. They contained only one or a few extended families who lived in short long houses with rounded ends. The duration of occupation seems to have been limited. An estimate from Mosegården says between 3 and 10 years. The land use probably included two different activities. One was agriculture on the sandy soil, the other was animal husbandry using the natural resources.

However, the farming activities carried out from these sites constituted only a part of the Early Neolithic farmers life. At certain times of the year, or just at regular intervals, part of the population on the site would move to one of the fishing and hunting stations. For a site in the coastal area like Mosegården this meant the shell middens. The optimal areas for these sites along the coast were in fact few and spatially restricted. This ment that people from a number of the dispersed agricultural sites would have to move longer or shorter distances to particular resource areas for fishing and hunting. Here they would either live together on the same sites, or on very nearby sites utilising the same resources. It is probable that the exploitation of the resources at the middens was intensive during the periods of visit, and that an amount of processed and conserved food was brought back on return to the farming sites.

Burial customs

For years it was assumed that the graves of the earliest farmers in South Scandinavia were exclusively simple inhumation graves in oblong pits - the so called earth graves. Although graves of the type did exist, it is today clear that he major part of the known graves, and indeed the major part of those considered to be simple earth graves were complex wooden chambers placed in long barrows. Most of the reliable information comes from Jutland (Madsen 1979). Two major types can be separated among the wooden chambers:

The Konens Høj type of graves had solid timber gables at either and of the burial floor. They seem to have been made of skilfully hewn planks. The side walls have been assumed to be of a more flimsy structure with lather leaning against a central ridge supported by the gables. Recently, evidence has been found for horizontal timber in the side walls.

The Troelstrup type of graves are long rectangular graves with entrances in one end, and often with what seems to be a small forecourt or passage. The side and rear walls are built of stone, wood or a combination of both, while the roof seems to have consisted of a flat timber cover. Other types of chambers than these two may turn up, and in addition we have evidence for various types of wooden coffins in the longbarrows.

The barrows, mostly with an east west orientation, are either rectangular or trapezoidal. The latter form turns up more frequently now in new excavations (Kristensen 1988). In most cases the barrows have a transverse bedding trench in the eastern, broader end, holding a heavy timber facade. In a few cases there seems to be a forecourt arrangement in connection with these facades, and as a rule pottery has been placed at the facades as offerings. In many cases the barrows are also surrounded by a palisade. There are indications that the terminal facades and possibly also the surrounding palisades existed for some time prior to the construction of the barrows. And further that the terminal facades in many cases were destroyed by fire before the barrows were erected. Likewise, the wooden chambers were destroyed by fire and/or pulled down before the erection of the barrows.

Due to the generally acid soils in Jutland there are few burials with bones preserved. One is a Troelstrup type grave from Sjørup in Northern Jutland (Jørgensen 1977). Here five persons were buried side by side fully articulated in a chamber that had been burned down. The age distribution of the five individuals is interesting. Only one was an adult aged 20-30 years. The others were children with an age difference between the three youngest of only two years. A heavily worn flint axe, and a few amber bead were the only burial gifts. Whether this burial represent part of a family that had found an unfortunate death either through epidemic illness or through violence is of cours uncertain, but it is interesting to note that a group of persons, in this case mostly children, with no special status marking, could be given a burial that involved a huge labour investment.

Another illuminating case is a burial in a wooden coffin in a long barrow at Bygholm in central Jutland (Rønne 1979). Here four adults were buried simultaneously, two by two in each end of the coffin with heads in opposite directions. No gifts were associated with the burial. Again it seems likely to be a case of members of the same group who happened to die at the same occasion.

Only a few more graves in Jutland have bone fragments preserved, and not enough to tell whether one or more persons were buried simultaneously. Likely enough both single and multiple burials were frequent.

Turning to eastern Denmark, we find that known burials from Early Neolithic I are much fewer than in Jutland. However, evidence for long barrows with wooden constructions of the same type as in Jutland are known (Kaul 1987),

and it may indeed be suspected that many more of these long barrows are hidden in the cores of the many Early Neolithic II megalithic long dolmens of the area. There are also evidence for more plain burials of a type closely resembling the late mesolithic ones. For example the well known Dragsholm grave from Zealand. Here in a simple burial pit in a kitchen midden a young man was buried with a personal equipment that marked him as a hunter and warrior (Brinch Petersen 1974).

What does the burial rites tell us about the structure of the earliest farming society in South Scandinavia? Naturally, the long barrows with their complex and work demanding features are at the centre of the question. Only a very small part of the population can have ended their days in a long barrow, but does this mean that they were the elite of the society, and indeed since the burials also included infants, are we dealing with an elite born into their position? This could be one way of looking at the evidence, but in my opinion not the correct way. I favour another explanation for the use of the long barrows.

I believe that we are dealing with a segmented population with some sort of lineal descent. Each segment lived scattered across the countryside in small settlement units of hardly more than one or a few families. A major problem for each segment would thus be to remain united as a group and to keep safe from fatal engagements with other groups. Consequently, it was important to display group solidarity and unity. This could be done in many ways, and one of these would be through participation in complex, labour consuming burial customs following the death of one or a group of individuals. The specific reason for the decision to make a burial in a long barrow may have varied from occasion to occasion. In one case it may have been an important person who died, and to whom many other persons were tied by obligations. In other cases it may have been for entirely different reasons. As an example take the five individuals in the Sjørup grave, four of which were children. I see no reason why they should have had any chiefly status at all. Of course, we will never know the correct historical background, but the following scenario could in my opinion be correct: Due to a raid from a neighbouring group some children and an adult had been killed. Their kinsmen did not take this lightly, and it was felt to be a situation that called for an act of revenge on the offending group. In order to give the right background for this move, the group was wisely gathered to pay tribute to the dead through an elaborate burial ceremony.

Now this is only a scenario, a way of picturing the type of situation we might be dealing with. In this case the scenario presuppose that a good deal of violence were going on in society at the beginning of the Neolithic. Do we have any evidence for this?

Evidence for violence

There are indeed some evidence for violence during the Early Neolithic. One of these - trepanations of the crania - has been known for years, but not considered to be evidence of violence. However, a new anthropological study by P. Bennike (1985) has shown that trepanation, which clearly has a peak of occurrence during the Ertebølle culture and the TRB culture, frequently is associated with leassons of the skull, probably caused by blows with heavy striking weapons. Both the leassons and the trepanations tend to be on the left side of the crania close to the top, as would be the case if inflected during man to man combat between right handed individuals. Bennike argues convincingly that the trepanations represent attempts so save persons with fractures of the skull stemming from combat with axes or clubs. Thus trepanation, normally considered by archaeologists to have a religous or cult medicine background, may indeed have a rather trivial cause - violence.

Leassons of the skull and associated trepanations are however not the only evidence for violence. Injuries from bow shots are known, and especially one example is often referred to. The Porsmose man (Becker 1952), now dated by C14 to the Early Neolithic, was killed by at least two arrows. One in the breast region, and one that penetrated obliquely through the face. The latter arrow had very probably hit him after he had been downed by the breast shot.

A third group of finds consists of skeletal material from bog offerings (Bennike u. Ebbesen 1986). There are quite a few human skeletons associated with offerings in the bogs, and we now have definite proof that at least some individuals were deliberately killed. In two cases strangulation with cords are attested, and in other cases slaying with axes seems highly probable, although unfortunately, it cannot be proved that the fractures of the skulls are not secondary.

As a whole we find surprisingly clear evidence for violence in the Early Neolithic, as was indeed the case with the Ertebølle Culture, and presumably also with the Middle Neolithic TRB Culture. Further, much of the evidence points

directly to warfare using both bow and arrow, and perhaps predominantly man to man combat with axes or clubs. It supports an assumption of frequent strives between groups, and it makes it at least acceptable to assume that the multiple burials can represent the victims of clashes between groups.

Exchange patterns

The exchange patterns are also of considerable interest for the understanding of the structure of Early Neolithic society.

There seems to be two levels of exchange visible in the archaeological material. One is an internal South Scandinavian exchange centring upon amber beads and flint axes. The other is an external European exchange which at least included copper, and perhaps had this material as a carrier for the far distance exchange network.

When we speak of exchange of copper, it is the often discussed copper horizon with which we deal. However, it is not warranted to speak of a European copper horizon any more. C14-datings clearly drags the involved cultures in the „horizon" from each other, and place them over a period of up to 1000 years. In South Scandinavia copper has presumably been present from the beginning of the Neolithic and throughout. The major part of the copper prior to the late Neolithic period seems to come from Early Neolithic II, including the well known hoards from Bygholm (Reinecke 1929-30) and Årupgård (Sylvest u. Sylvest 1960). Copper objects from definite Early Neolithic I contexts are few. We may point to the tiny pieces of copper from the Konens Høj (Stürup 1965) and most probably also the copper disk from Salten Langhøj (Becker 1947). The very similar copper disk from Rude is now with certainty dated to the corded ware culture (Madsen 1979).

There is however one other type of copper object that belongs to Early Neolithic I. This is the polygonal battle axe of copper. We only know it from a stray find (Brøndsted 1957, 181), but of course there is no doubt that it is the prototype for the many polygonal axes of stones that occur all over the TRB culture in Europe. In South Scandinavia these primarily belong to the Early Neolithic I period (the late types to Early Neolithic II). The occurrence of the polygonal battle axe of stone right across the TRB culture from South Scandinavia to the Alpine region shows clearer than anything the extend of the European exchange network at that time.

Turning to the internal exchange network of South Scandinavia, amber is found rather frequently in the graves. Further we know quite a few impressive deposits of amber beads in pots placed in bogs. The largest of these contains approximately 13.000 beads and there are several with more than thousand beads (Becker 1953).

Flint axes are found in great numbers all over South Scandinavia, but to a great extend they seem to have been produced within rather restricted geographical areas, where ample supplies of high quality flint are available imbedded in chalk. Primarily along the Limfjord, on the eastern tip of Djursland, on Møn, Stevns, and in Eastern Scania.

The thin butted flint axe represents a large investment of labour in order to create objects with a design and finish far beyond what is functionally needed. Axes, serving well as merely axes, could have been produced in most parts of Denmark from locally available flint in the moraine, but the thin butted axes were made from the high quality flint of the chalk regions mentioned above, and distributed to the rest of South Scandinavia from these regions. The importance of these chalk regions for the production and distribution of flint axes is emphasized by the finding of several regular flint mines.

We thus find formalized exchange networks bringing particular types of desired items from restricted source areas to the South Scandinavian region in general. The non utilitarian character of the amber, the copper and the polygonal stone battle axes, as well as the marked non utilitarian dimension, we find added to the thin butted flint axes, are important in this connection. They stress the symbolic and communicative nature of the exchange rather than bare economic necessity. The exchange was probably centred on the interface between segments at the tribal and inter tribal level. In a highly structured fashion the exchange system secured contact at a level in society that otherwise would entirely have been given over to warfare. The importance of the exchange networks, and the importance of their stabilising effect, may be seen from the fact that they centre on the most important personal ornament - the amber bead, on probably the most important symbol of male power, the polygonal battle axe, and indeed on the key work tool of the forest farmer, the thin butted flint axe.

To sum up the evidence on the structure of Early Neolithic society in South Scandinavia discussed in this paper we find the following pattern:

At the beginning of the Neolithic, South Scandinavia seems to have been subdivided into a number of regional areas within which the earliest cultural development differed. The differences noted may well stem from differences in ethnicity present from the outset of the Neolithic and relating to ethnic differences in late Mesolithic society.

Looking at the evidence from settlements, burials and exchange systems, it can be argued that society was segmented on a minor scale than traceable in the pottery groupings. The basic segments probably were lineage based, but we have no means of knowing whether formal tribal structures existed. The importance of exchange networks may, however, lead to the reasonable suggestion that alliances between segments was an important organising factor in society.

From the more recent investigations it is obvious that the settlement pattern was very dispersed, and we may take it for granted that the individual segments normally did not live in a daily face to face situation. Naturally, this may have posed problems with the integrity of the segments, and many special, frequent or infrequent, activities have been called for to keep the kinfolks united. One of the more infrequent ones was the communal effort of burying people in long barrows.

To the segment the erection of a long barrow probably was an inward turned event - a symbolic gesture. The specific reason could be the death of a prominent person in the segment, or perhaps it could be an unfortunate fate for members of the segment, and hence for the segment as a whole. Such an event could be a raid from a neighbouring group causing the death of several people. Indeed the skeletal material from the Early Neolithic in general tell its own story of frequent, violent death. Probably warfare was the rule rather than the exception, as is often the case in segmented societies. To counterbalance this tendency for uncontrolled negative reciprocity, the formalised exchange systems had an important role of creating alliances that secured a minimum of peace and the continuing existence of the segments.

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