

VI. Survey and Case Studies

Interpreting Mesolithic axe deposits from a region in Western Norway

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Introduction

This paper discusses the distribution of Mesolithic ground and pecked stone axes in the Sognefjord area, Western Norway. The paper will primarily deal with the circumstances surrounding these axes' discovery – their context –, and how they have been interpreted. In order to create a complete understanding of this material, the distribution of habitation sites in the area will also be discussed. It will be argued that isolated Mesolithic axes found in the inner and middle part of the Sognefjord area are ritual deposits or votive offerings.

The paper is based on distributional studies of *both* ground and pecked stone axes and habitation sites, but special emphasis has been put on the contextual study of the ground and pecked stone axes (Fig. 1 & 2). The axe material in question has previously been viewed as stray finds and has therefore not received enough attention, because their contexts have not been evaluated in detail. It has been argued that no contextual information is available for these finds, and because of this they have not been regarded as useful in any interpretation of the Mesolithic. However, as I will argue, in ignoring this material, and its contextual information, one also overlooks important aspects of Mesolithic society in Western Norway.

Chronology

The time period in question is the middle and late Mesolithic, dating from 8500 to 5200, before present, uncalibrated dates. The dating of the archaeological material is based on both chronological and typological studies of the ground and pecked stone axes and on radiocarbon dated sites (Bjerck 1983; Bjørgo 1981; Nygaard 1990; Nærøy 1993; Olsen & Alsaker 1984).



Fig. 1. Pecked stone axe



Fig. 2. Ground stone axe

The Sognefjord area

Situated in the county of Sogn og Fjordane, the Sognefjord is the longest fjord in Norway, stretching more than 200 km inland. The area is surrounded by mountains

to the north, south and east, and the North Sea to the west, making it a naturally bounded area (Fig. 3).

The geographical setting of the Sognefjord area with its varying topography and climate, from the coast to the interior, have led to the division of the area into three different sections; the coastal-, middle- and inner regions (Schei 1980: 40ff). The diversity between the coastal region on the one hand and the inner and middle regions on the other, is of special importance to my analysis.

At the coast, mountains rise to about 500 m above sea level in a relatively open landscape dominated by islands, sounds

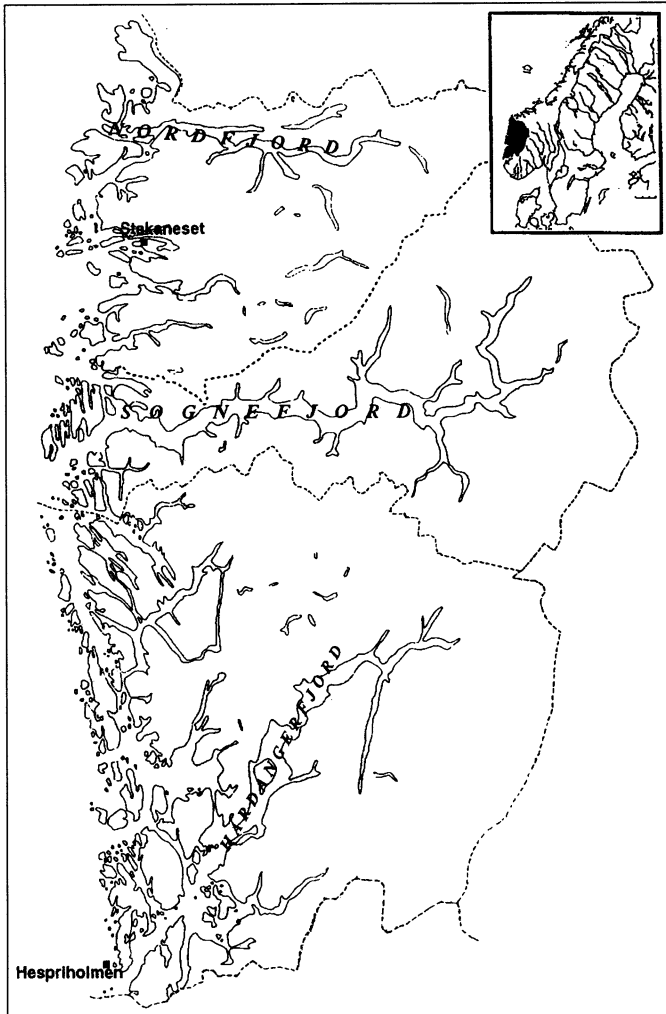


Fig. 3. Western Norway, with the Sognefjord area outlined

and inlets. This differs from the situation further inland, in the middle and inner regions, where the main fjord splits into narrower fjords, and the mountains rise to an altitude of more than 2400 m above sea level. In these areas, the combination of narrow fjords with steep sides and high mountains provides a striking contrast to the coastal lowlands.

Approach

The background for this study was the detailed mapping of the distribution of Mesolithic axe finds and habitation sites in the area under investigation. This was mainly based on research reports from previous archaeological investigations and information given by private persons regarding their discovery of archaeological material. These distribution studies revealed that habitation sites occurred in the coastal region whereas the stray axe finds occurred on both the coast and in the middle and inner regions of the fjord. It further revealed that the habitation sites in the coastal region were the result of archaeological surveys and excavations, while axe finds in the whole of the Sognefjord area have mainly been made by private persons. To investigate whether these differences in the distributional pattern were determined by the restricted number of intensive surveys carried out in the inner and middle regions, or represented a pattern from the past, archaeological investigations were carried out. In addition to these investigations, special effort was paid to document in detail the information on the contexts of the axe finds, in order to evaluate the possible intentions behind the deposition of these finds, which again would help to explain their particular distribution. The axe-finds were therefore investigated both from a macro- and a micro-perspective. In this study macro-perspective refers to studies of the regional distribution of the ground and pecked stone axes, while micro-perspective covers the investigations regarding the local context of the axe finds.

Traditionally, the ground and pecked stone axes from the inner and middle regions of the Sognefjord area have been viewed as stray finds, but through detailed studies of find reports, I have discovered that these finds do have considerable information about the context in which they were found.

Field work

During the spring and summer of 1993 and 1994, three months of field investigations were undertaken. The purpose of these investigations was on the one hand to locate Mesolithic sites in the middle and interior part of the fjord area, and on the other to examine the local context of the axe finds. In order to locate Mesolithic sites, we undertook extensive field walking and test pit surveys of specific areas where one would expect to find habitation sites and where ground or pecked stone axes had been found previously. Examination of the local context was done by identifying the exact location of the sites for earlier axe finds and by additional archaeological investigations in order to achieve more information regarding the specific context of the finds and their topographical and geographical setting. During these investigations, special effort was made to contact the people who

had discovered the axe finds and to collect the detailed information about the axes' recovery and their surroundings when they were discovered.

Contextual analyses

The Mesolithic material from the Sognefjord area shows distinct differences between the distributional pattern of ground and pecked stone axes on the one hand and habitation sites on the other. A high proportion of the ground and pecked stone axes are found in the inner and middle part of the fjord, while habitation sites occur along the coast (Fig. 4).

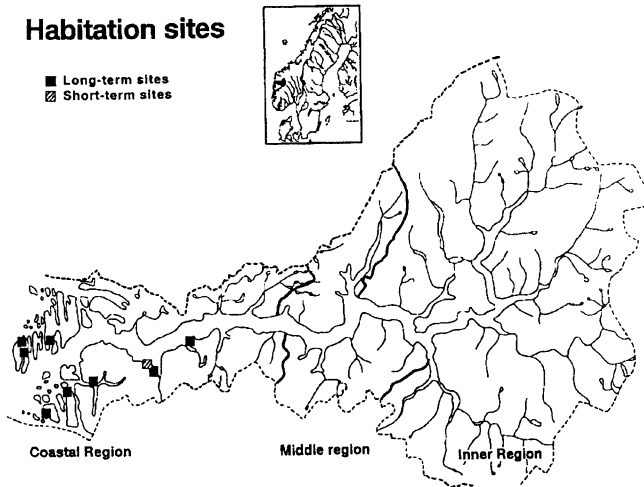


Fig. 4. Habitation sites in the Sognefjord area

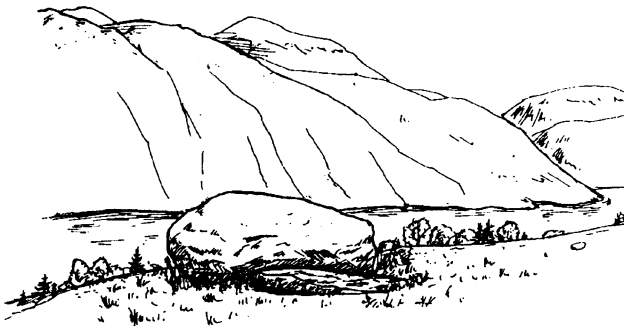


Fig. 5. Illustrations from a site in Balestrand in the middle region of the Sognefjord area. Two ground and one pecked stone axe were found under the flagstone in front of the boulder. The boulder and the flagstone were removed in 1932. Illustrations are based on verbal descriptions of the site (Illustration by Ragnar Løken Børsheim)

No Mesolithic habitation sites have been found in the inner and middle regions of the fjord area, despite several archaeological surveys, including my own fieldwork. The only archaeological material from the Mesolithic period appearing in these regions are the isolated finds of ground and pecked stone axes.

These differences in the distributional pattern of ground and pecked stone axes on the one hand and habitation sites on the other, seem to indicate that different activities took place in the inner and middle regions of the fjord, in contrast to the coastal region. It is therefore my suggestion that the Sognefjord area was divided into two different zones of activity – with one zone covering the coastal region, where habitation sites dominate, and another zone covering the

inner and middle regions of the area, where axes dominate. In the following, special emphasis will therefore be put on the archaeological material from the inner and middle part of the fjord, and the possible intentions behind this pattern will be investigated.

Detailed studies of the information collected regarding the axe finds, and the close examination of sites where the axes were found, has revealed several interesting results. Many axes have been found in special contexts such as under flagstones, under or beside large stones or boulders, in brooks and in screes. The circumstances in which these finds have been discovered clearly distinguishes their locations from habitation sites. Each of these contexts will therefore be evaluated in the following (Fig. 5).

Hypothesis

During the last 25 years of Western Norwegian stone age research, different interpretations of the Mesolithic axe-material in the Sognefjord have been presented. In these interpretations, the axes has been viewed as finds representing habitation sites (Olsen 1981: 180ff, 1992: 252), they have been interpreted as grave finds (Brøgger 1906: 8f; Bakka 1953: 38; Nygaard 1990: 233), and they have been considered to originate from people who exploited the high mountains and the interior parts of Norway (Bjørge 1981: 158; Johansen 1978: 97f, 269; Olsen 1992: 244). Regarded as stray finds, they could also be interpreted as representations of hoards or caches, or even occasional losses. In the following, each and every one of these interpretations will be evaluated against the available data.

Although several habitation sites from the middle and late Mesolithic have been discovered in the high mountains to the east of the Sognefjord area, these sites have not provided any material to indicate a clear connection between the highland and lowland regions of Western Norway. Comparative studies of the Mesolithic material from the mountain sites and Mesolithic material elsewhere in Southern Norway indicate that the lines of contact from the mountain were more likely towards the east or south (Indreid 1994: 273ff; Lødøen 1995: 47f). The pecked and ground stone axes found along the Sognefjord have mainly been made from diabase and greenstone. Geochemical and visual analyses of these axes, show that they originate from quarries which have been discovered on the western Norwegian coast (Olsen & Alsaker 1984). These studies clearly indicate that the axe-material found in the inner and middle part of the fjord is related to the cultural tradition of the coast of Western Norway in the middle and late Mesolithic.

Due to the lack of habitation sites in the inner and middle parts of the fjord, I find it unlikely that the axes represent grave finds, given that Mesolithic grave finds elsewhere in Scandinavia have been found in the vicinity of what is interpreted as habitation sites (Albrethsen & Brinch Pettersen 1977: 1ff; Englund 1982: 13ff; Larsson 1981: 11ff; Knutson 1995: 171ff), indicating that they buried their dead close to their habitation sites. I find it most probable that people in the Sognefjord area also buried their dead in close vicinity to their habitation sites. Some axes have also been found in brooks, marsh or other contexts which precludes the possibility of interpreting them as grave finds.

Accidental loss of the axes is yet another suggested explanation of stray finds in general. The distribution of the axes in the Sognefjord area forms such

patterns that it is highly unlikely that the axes were lost by accident. The large amount of axes in the inner and middle part of the fjord in contrast to the coast is one example of such a pattern, and one is not likely to lose material objects in a repetitive pattern (Dahlquist 1986: 90ff; Johansen 1993: 25). Some axes have also been found beneath stones or flagstones, and one is not likely to lose axes in such a location. A few axes included in this study might have been lost by accident, but their number is regarded to be so small that their significance is of minor importance.

It has been argued, as an explanation of the lack of Mesolithic sites in the inner and middle fjord regions, that recent historical and mechanical farming activity has destroyed the Mesolithic sites. Archaeological investigations in the inner and middle part of the fjord, including my field work, have revealed several sites from later periods, such as the late Neolithic and the Bronze Age. It is therefore unlikely that farming activity has destroyed the Mesolithic sites, leaving sites from younger periods to be discovered.

Some archaeologists have argued that attention has only been paid to conspicuous objects such as axes, making them the only artefact identified, and therefore collected, by private individuals. On the contrary, it is shown that less conspicuous material such as flakes of quartz, quartzite or flint have indeed been collected (by private individuals). This material is, however, impossible to link to any specific period, and might equally be connected to the late – Neolithic, the Bronze Age or even the early Iron Age. What is striking in this respect, is that this latter material seems to support the absence of Mesolithic sites in the inner and middle part of the fjord. A high proportion of flake material has been collected by private individuals in the coastal area, while considerably less has been gathered in the inner and middle part. Since sites dating from the late Neolithic to the early Iron Age have been found in the inner and middle parts of the fjord, it is more probable that the undatable flake material found in the same regions is connected to these younger periods.

I argue that the above mentioned explanatory framework is unable to provide us with an adequate interpretation and understanding of the axe deposits. Interpreting the axes as remnants from hoards, stores or similar profane deposition, provides no explanation as to why the same kind of object was regularly deposited in the inner and middle regions of the fjord. It provides us with no interpretation of why these objects were deposited or hidden in these regions, and furthermore leaves us with no explanation to the question; why were these objects never retrieved? It should furthermore be noted that most of the axes found in the Sognefjord area are well made and have no evidence of use. They might therefore not have been part of the profane spheres in the middle and late Mesolithic society of Western Norway.

I will therefore argue further that these axes were left as ritual deposits or votive offerings. This hypothesis is based firstly on the contextual investigations of the axe finds and secondly on the diverging distributional pattern between pecked and ground stone axes on the one hand and habitation sites on the other. By following previously established criteria for the identification of votive offerings (Fig. 6) (Mandt 1991: 431ff; Colpe 1970: 34ff), I have interpreted a total number of 40 axes from the inner and middle regions of the Sognefjord as votive offerings. This stands in opposition to the situation in the coastal region, where

Definitions of Votives

- 1) Objects - same or different type found together, or in the contexts 3-7.
- 2) Single objects found in the contexts 3-7.
- 3) Object(s) found in a fixed pattern or position.
- 4) Object(s) found wrapped or in a container which cannot be interpreted as a grave.
- 5) Object(s) found under or by a big boulder, rock or flagstone, in a scree or close to a rocky wall.
- 6) Object(s) found in a well, brook or similar waterconnection.
- 7) Object(s) found in marsh.
- 8) Object(s) found in contexts which makes a combination of the contexts 1-7.

(Mandt 1991)

- 9) Object(s) found in contexts or on sites which makes no connection to the every day life and which is not covered by the context 3-7.
- 10) Object(s) found in contexts as 9), and which shows patterns of repeted action.

(Colpe 1970)

Fig. 6. Interpreting Votive offerings. Definitions based on Gro Mandt (1991) and Carsten Colpe (1970)

Distribution of Votive Offerings

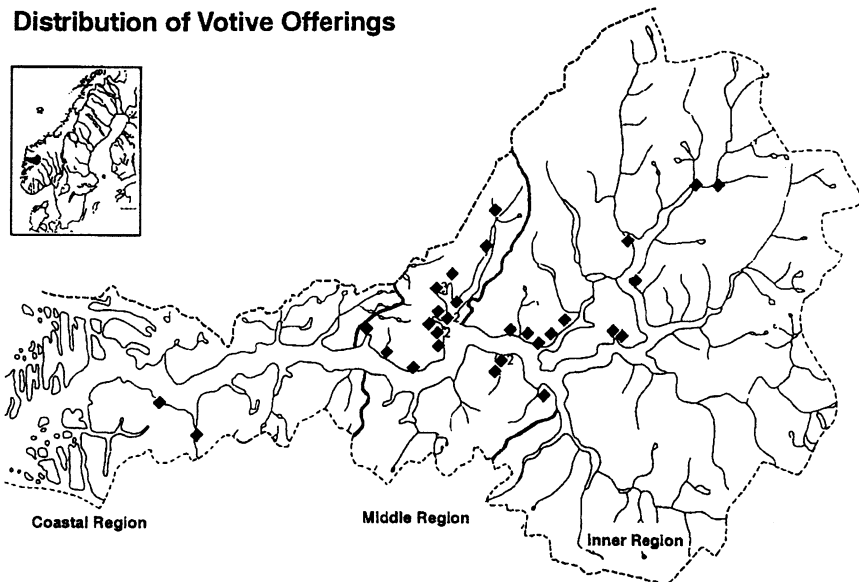


Fig. 7. The distribution of Votive offerings in the Sognefjord area



Fig.8. The illustration shows an intact locality in Luster, in the inner region of the fjord. Two pecked stone axes were found immediately to the right of this boulder (*Illustrations by Ragnar Løken Børshheim*)

only 2 of a total number of 9 axes have been interpreted as votive offerings according to the same definitions (Fig. 6, 7 & 8).

Similar detailed investigations of the middle and inner parts of other areas in Western Norway have not yet been undertaken, but it is my suggestion that the distribution pattern of Mesolithic axe finds and habitation sites demonstrated in the Sognefjord area is representative for the whole of Western Norway (in general).

The general distributional pattern of Mesolithic finds in Western Norway seems to support the view presented above. A vast number of habitation sites have been found along the coast, but no clear traces of habitation sites have been discovered in the inner and middle parts of the Western Norwegian lowland. The only finds appearing from the Mesolithic in these regions are ground and pecked stone axes. These axes have not been investigated as intensively as has the axe material from the Sognefjord area, however several axes have been documented with contextual information similar to those discovered in the inner and middle part of the Sognefjord area. This gives weight to my assumptions that the distributional pattern of Mesolithic finds in the Sognefjord area is a general distributional pattern from the Mesolithic in Western Norway. This is, however, an issue which could be explored in future research.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that material that was previously viewed as stray finds and therefore regarded as uninteresting, actually contains valuable information that can help us approach important aspects of the Mesolithic society in Western

Norway, such as ritual and belief. The local geography and topography of an area is also an important variable that can help us structure and interpret the archaeological material.

Another aim and challenge for future research is to explore the intentions behind the axe deposits; why the axes were sacrificed, and which factors were important in choosing the location for this ritual practice. This perspective can therefore help us in our attempt to understand prehistoric perceptions of a landscape or the symbolic value of an area. Numerous examples from ethnographic studies have shown how nature and landscape are incorporated into a society's world view and given a cultural and symbolic meaning, making the mental adaptation to an area just as important as the physical adaptation. This perspective is, however, the subject of another paper.

I have outlined here a new approach to the understanding of archaeological material often viewed as stray finds. By examining this material in more detail, and from different perspectives, it is possible to reach deeper into different aspects of prehistoric societies.

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Mezolito kirvių liekanos viename iš Vakarų Norvegijos rajonų

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Santrauka

Šis darbas paremtas mezolito medžiaga, rasta Vakarų Norvegijos Sognefjord rajone. Mezolito radiniai išsiskiria tuo, kad daugybė pavienių šlifuočių ir tašytų kirvių aptikta į šalies gilumą nusidriekusiame ir vidurinėje šio rajono dalyje. Tuo tarpu beveik visos gyvenvietės rastos pajūrinėje fiordo dalyje.

Kirviai į šalies gilumą nusidriekusiame ir vidurinėje minėtojo rajono dalyje rasti pavieniai arba grupėmis, tačiau niekaip nesusiję su gyvenvietėmis. Tradiciškai jie buvo traktuojami kaip atsitiktiniai radiniai ir nesulaukė pakankamo dėmesio. Šio straipsnio tikslas – išnagrinėti šių radinių svarbą bei kontekstą, ką jie reprezentuoja ir kokios galimos tokio jų išdėstymo priežastys. Straipsnyje pateikiami argumentai, kad minėtieji kirviai palikti kaip ritualiniai arba aukojimo elementai.

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