

Cultural and regional boundaries in the Neolithic of the western coast of Norway – a present or past construction?

MORTEN RAMSTAD

Cultural evolutionism, the construction of a perspective

The first to make use of the notion 'culture' in Norwegian archaeology was the archaeologist Oluf Rygh (Storli 1993:13, Trigger 1989:163). In 1866 he suggested the existence of two independent Stone Age cultures: one in the north, characterized by its ground slate artefacts, and one in the south, with artefact types more similar to the European material. Through time, the south Scandinavian Stone Age was believed to represent the origin of the Scandinavian inhabitants of Norway, while the Arctic Stone Age was mainly connected to Saami ethnicity (Storli 1993:13ff). This must be considered in light of the cultural evolutionism that was the basis for the academic society's debate at the time, which put human societies on an evolutionary scale parallel to that of Darwin's evolutionism (Trigger 1989:114). Nineteenth century cultural evolutionists viewed the development of culture as a natural and cumulative processes which implied human advance (Shanks & Tilley 1987:144). Therefore, cultures and forms of culture were measured and placed on a scientific scale of degrees of development. In a global perspective, the Europeans divided the world into "us", the clever developers, and "them", the rest of the world's people with poorer ability to develop, placed lower on the scale (Furset 1994:5ff). The division between agriculture and non-agriculture was to become important in this perspective. Agriculture was associated with the beginning of civilisation. It implied surplus to substantial settlements and a further development of culture in general. Hunter-gatherers were at the opposite pole: mobile, unorganized, without ability to control a freakish nature and with poor ability to develop.

The north Scandinavian groups, or Arctic Stone Age, were at the time regarded as culturally inferior to the south Scandinavian Stone Age groups. Influential Scandinavian archaeologists such as Montelius, Rygh, Winther and Lorange invested much of time in isolating and identifying sites and artefacts belonging to the Arctic Stone Age (Storli 1993:17). At the same time they stressed the continuity between artefacts belonging to the South Scandinavian Stone Age and findings from the Iron Age (e.g: Gustafson 1906, Rygh 1885). In light of the near absence of the most characteristic "megalithic finds" in Norway this

must be seen against the background that slate artefacts were in fact known from all over Norway, that is, slate was also found with the flint artefacts, which were connected to Southern Scandinavia. Ingrid Storli suspects that these efforts “were due to a concern that the whole of Norway might be considered part of “Arctic Stone Age territory” (Storli 1993:21). If the Norwegian Stone Age was “Arctic” this would mean that we were placed lower on the evolutionary ladder than our south Scandinavian “neighbours” during the Younger Stone Age. Slate artefacts were regarded as relating to a primitive hunter-gatherer economy, thus belonging on the bottom of the evolutionary ladder. By overlooking slate artefacts archaeologists were able to identify the Norwegian Younger Stone Age with a larger European cultural community which was considered to be the climax of biological and cultural evolution. In this way Norwegians were regarded as relatives of the people who introduced agriculture into Norway (Gjessing 1945:3f, Helliksen 1993:24ff). We were the relatives of the culturally innovative south Scandinavians who brought the first steps of civilization to our country. In contrast the “Arctic” Stone Age, originating from the north and east, represented the “others who did not have the same potential for development, and who lived at a stone age level until our time” (Storli 1993:21).

The culture-historical approach and functionalism

By the end of the 19th century cultural evolutionism lost terrain in the European academic environment. The idea that the West, through the industrial revolution, represented the top of an evolutionary scale was abandoned. Increasing social and economic conflicts weakened faith in industrialism and its ability to better the human condition. Instead one stressed humans as being conservative by nature and not very innovative (Trigger 1989:150ff). As a result, external factors such as migration and diffusion were given more weight in explaining cultural changes. The focus was now put on the cultures themselves, rather than on the culture’s level of development (Trigger 1989:206). Archaeologists from Western Europe related archaeological cultures to the material remains of prehistoric people, to actual groups of people. These theories gained terrain in Norwegian archaeology at an early stage, though in a different form. A more functionalistic view, or adaptive concept of culture was stressed among the Norwegian archaeologists, compared to archaeologists outside Scandinavia (Furseth 1994:78).

From the beginning of the 20th century, Mesolithic sites were discovered in middle Norway. They revealed significant numbers of flint implements, and were thus interpreted as having cultural bonds to the Danish Mesolithic. Additionally, slate points and other slate artefacts were found over a larger area in Norway, in the south as well as in the north. At the same time the numbers of tools that could be connected to southern Scandinavian agricultural groups were still small in number (Gjessing 1945:5). Around 1920, the problem concerning slate artefacts in Southern Norway had a “natural solution”, as they were classed within a south Scandinavian theory of origin (Gjessing 1945:4). Now the slate industries were explained as “a north-Scandinavian phenomena building on traditions from the south” (Helliksen 1993:31). A common explanation was that population growth led to increased use of flint, which resulted in the dependence on other raw

materials as flint does not exist naturally in Norway (Bjørn 1921, Gjessing 1920, Shetlig 1925). Hence the slate tools were only copies of more progressive south Scandinavian tool types. The existence of other races or cultures in Norway was merely not in question anymore. Ethnic groups such as the Saami had not participated in the making of Norway's earliest prehistory (Shetelig 1922:339ff, Gjessing 1920:168ff). At the same time, the lack of south Scandinavian archaeological material dating to the Neolithic in Norway was explained as a result of difficult agricultural conditions. The local climatic and topographical conditions in Norway differed from those in the rest of Europe to such an extent that it was natural that Neolithic Norway had a different character than elsewhere in Europe (e.g. Brøgger 1925, Shetelig 1922:1925 Gjessing 1920).

The consequences of the interpretations given at the time led to a view of Neolithic Norway as formed by one common culture. The primitive aspects of the Neolithic were, as we have seen, now ascribed to the nation's peculiarities. Even though the Norwegian Stone Age was not similar to the south Scandinavian "Megalithic culture", the archaeological material from the two areas indicated high levels of interactions. Neither Denmark nor Southern Sweden was in any way superior to us (Gjessing 1945:7). Summing up we can say that in the period before the second world war the areas in middle and North-western Norway with many and varied types of slate artefacts were interpreted within a Southern Norwegian interpretative framework. Therefore it is possible to find a research continuity from the cultural evolutionists, to the culture-historical approach. We find it in the concept of a one culture-creating past, with Norwegians as the creators, where all important cultural developments had their origin in the south, from where they spread north. These studies were founded on typological and chronological considerations, and migration and diffusion were discussed on the basis of typological studies. However different from the culture-historical approach was a more adaptive concept of culture. A concept which made it possible to explain the slate material within a Norwegian cultural frame.

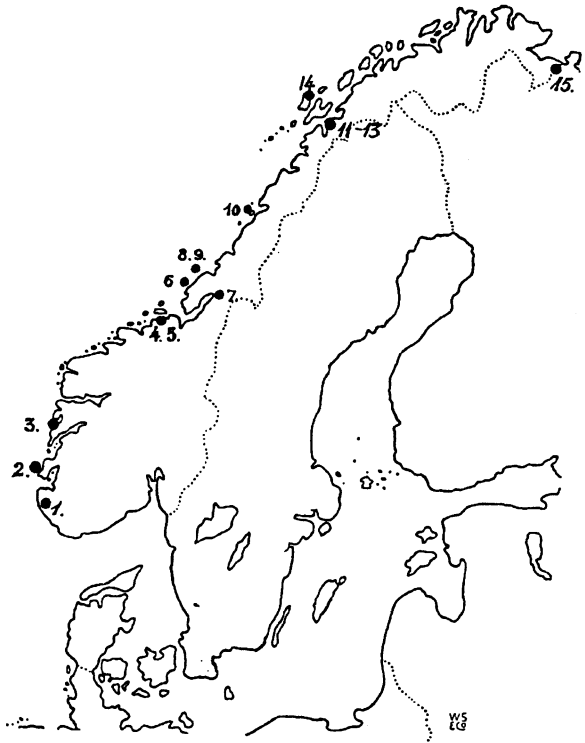


Fig. 1. The distribution of sites with slate artefacts in Norway in 1909 (adapted from Brøgger 1909:)

The theory of the Circumpolar Stone Age

During World War II, Guttorm Gjessing attacked several presumptions of the older generation's view of the relationship between the use of slate and Younger Stone Age. He criticized many of the fundamental views upon which the culture-historical explanatory model was based. Gjessing resented the presumption of cultural streams having south-north directions and the projection of modern borders onto prehistoric cultures (Gjessing 1945:3). The political background in the 30's and the 40's may have been important factors leading to these attacks; Nazi-Germany used archaeology and archaeological records to legitimate their expansion-policy. In addition, through typological and chronological studies of slate artefacts in Norway he showed that the assumption that slate was a substitute for flint as raw material was incorrect. Slate in Southern Norway was mainly used for projectile points, while in middle and Northern Norway it had a variety of uses. In addition, Gjessing proved that other categories of artefacts such as axes and rock carvings had characteristics different from those further south (Gjessing 1945:214ff).

Inspired by American ethnography and anthropology Gjessing described cultures in their ecological context. This led him to put forward the theory of the Circumpolar Stone Age, where the ecological conditions favoured specialized hunter-gatherer societies with a maritime Arctic adaptation in particular (Gjessing 1941,

1942, 1945). In this perspective, artefacts made of slate were thought to be highly suitable in circumpolar areas, as indicated by analogies to various Eskimo groups. Gjessing meant that the characteristic cultural forms of the Circumpolar Stone Age developed somewhere in Northern Europe, and spread by a combination of diffusion and population movements throughout the whole circumpolar coast region (Fitzhugh 1975a:3). The boundary in Norway between the "real slate culture" and south Norwegian hunter/gatherer societies was according to Gjessing situated between the districts of Romsdalen and Sunnmøre in northern part of Western Norway (Gjessing 1945:327). The artefacts and rock carvings characteristic to the slate cultures were rarely found south of Romsdalen (Fig. 2).

Gjessing's theory implied the existence of several culture groups with different kinds of adaptation in the Norwegian Stone Age. However, he did not manage to free himself from some of the presumptions of earlier

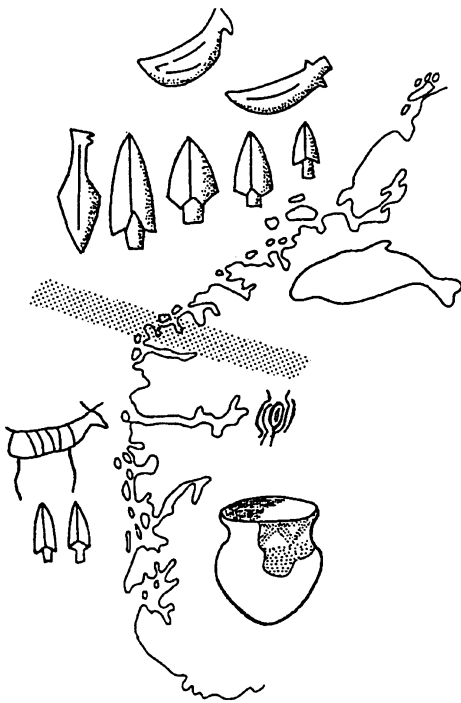


Fig. 2. The boundary between the northern "real slate culture" and south Norwegian hunter/gatherer societies (also published in Ramstad 1996:9, drawing E. M. M. Hoff)

traditions concerning the use of slate. In fact he places himself in a tradition where eastern and northern cultures were viewed as “stagnated and conservative”. The background for this view must be seen in light of Gjessing’s suggested cultural conservatism in the north and in the east. The climatic and the ecological setting did not provide the same development potential as it did further south, “the very minds” of the Arctic people had a peculiar way about them (Olsen 1991:84). The similarity between Gjessing’s interpretation and those of earlier archaeologists was thereby the idea that the groups in the north had little influence on cultural development in the south. The southern groups were interpreted as following local and south Scandinavian cultural traditions within an European cultural horizon. At the same time he thought that the northern groups had: extremely conservative traditions, isolated from Neolithic and other innovative developments to the south, and many of the adaptive traits in question seemed to be traceable from Mesolithic cultures of Northern Europe to contemporary ethnographic peoples (Fitzhugh 1975a:3).

Gjessing was one of the most influential post war Stone Age archaeologists in Norway, and many of his ideas became widely accepted (cf. Hinsch 1948).

Local evolution, adaptation, technology and the use of slate

From the 1960’s, the relationship between Neolithic groups in Southern Norway and the groups using more slate in middle and Northern Norway was no longer debated to the same degree as earlier (Søborg 1986:20ff). The main tendency was rather a focus on material culture without drawing analogies to any particular races or ethnic groups. This was now reckoned as both speculative and politically unfortunate due to the experience with the use of the cultural concept in a nationalistic and political connection during the 30’s and the 40’s. The focus was put on humans as participants in an ecosystem, and the adaptation to this environment. Accordingly, migration and diffusion as models for explanation were rejected, since they could not be proven on an adequate basis. Cultural development and variation were explained within the framework of adaptation. Thus development could occur independently in different places because of differences in adaptation and ecology. Archaeologist in Norway therefore put their minds to local chronologies and the autonomous development from Mesolithic to the Neolithic in a particular region.

Following this “processual program” the area Gjessing interpreted as a boundary between slate groups and southern hunter-gatherers was seldom discussed (Gjessing 1975:70). Rather than speaking of cultures, and ethnic groups, the term the slate techno complex was introduced. It was supposed to cover the various groups that made use of slate, though with different local characters, and tool kits (Hagen 1983:140ff). The term was further defined from a purely artifactual basis without considering the content of prehistoric cultural meaning. The differences in distribution and variation of slate artefacts were mainly ascribed to ecological factors (Fitzhugh 1975b, Søborg 1986). The basis for these interpretations were technological considerations, and typological and chronological studies with a reliance on quantitatively more “objective” criteria (Lindblom 1980, Løvset, 1980, Nærøy 1987, Søborg 1986).

The use of slate as a raw material for the production of arrowheads, from the beginning of the Neolithic in Southern Norway, south of the Sunnmøre area, was thereby considered as a technological aspect of a larger cultural tradition (Søborg 1986:22). It was agreed upon that north of the Sunnmøre, in middle and North Norway, the rich slate industries were the result of a more specialized maritime adaptation (Broadbent 1982, Fitzhugh 1975b, Søborg 1986, Engelstad 1985). This was supported by the experimental use of slate knives, and cross cultural studies of Arctic maritime hunter/gatherers. However, the integration of slate projectiles into the tool industry by the Middle Neolithic in South Norway, seemingly without any significant economic adjustment, was not a subject for debate. At the same time ground flint axes and pottery were considered to be important aspects of the South Norwegian tool kits. Even though few such were found in the Western Norway, south of Stad, they were considered to be important in the explanation of the mechanisms behind cultural change (Hagen 1983, Magnus & Myhre 1986).

The Younger Stone Age north of the Stad area was still defined by the south Scandinavian, or south Norwegian perspectives. Impulses coming from northern hunter-gatherer groups were not regarded as important in relation to local development during the Neolithic in Southern Norway. The manufacture of slate projectiles was in this perspective regarded simply as a technological loan, while a relative few single artefact types associated with agriculture or farming groups further south, became important reflections of the mechanisms behind cultural change.

Ethnicity as a interpretative framework

From the beginning of the 1980's, there has been an increased focus on questions concerning ethnicity and the meaning of archaeological material, at the expense of the more objective and ecological view. Ethnicity is regarded as a fruitful model for interpretations of prehistoric social processes, but the objective of relating it to modern ethnic groups is missing (Olsen 1985:26). Anthropological definitions of ethnicity have in many ways altered archaeological debate concerning ethnicity. As a result of new trends in anthropology, identity is viewed as an important aspect of this. Fredrik Barth claims that the fundamental criteria for an ethnic group is the members' shared status as determined by themselves and by others. It is not a question of whether or not they share the same set of cultural features (Barth 1969:10ff). Ethnicity is a form of social organisation that depends on interaction between groups. This means that "inter group interaction, and not isolation, as often argued, is the keyword for the understanding of ethnic group formations and maintenance" (Olsen 1985:30). Contact creates oppositions – a dichotomy between us and them. In such a perspective, the border, where ethnic communications are in operation, become especially interesting. Those signals which define the different groups, and thereby demark the border, are not the sum of all recognisable culture products. Instead it is the use of chosen symbols or signals that marks the border. Bjørnar Olsen provides the following comment regarding the archaeological implications of this perspective:

...archaeologists have been too little aware of the fact that ethnic idioms, that is symbols which actors use to show ethnic identity, often have a very situational character, and are likely to change in form of meaning due to changes in the context in which they occur.

Considering this, the common strategy of establishing stable and objective repertoires of ethnic 'indicators', seems unfruitful. Instead attention has to be paid to the prehistoric interactional processes which leads to ethnic categorising (Olsen 1985:30).

Perhaps an approach incorporating ethnicity as an active component of prehistoric change and communication could stimulate new research on the intercourse between northern and southern hunter-gatherers in the Neolithic of Norway (e.g. Ramstad 1996). Such new research would have its foundation in the meaningfulness of the archaeological material as opposed to traditions which view artefacts as a response to the adaptation to a particular ecological condition or environment.

Conclusions/final remarks

I have argued that the history of Norwegian archaeological thought has been the bearer of different concepts regarding north and south Scandinavian Neolithic groups. These differences are closely related to contemporary theoretical directions, and changing political and ideological situations in Northern Europe, from 1865 to the present day. Despite this, underlying the different interpretations it was possible to identify a common theme. The differences between the hunter-gatherers to the south and north of the Stad area are mainly defined by a southern point of view. Despite the fact that slate as raw material for arrowheads was in use in the Middle Neolithic in Western Norway, along with other cultural characteristics quite clearly stemming from the north, this has not been regarded in the same way as archaeological material which showed a connection to south Scandinavian agricultural groups. The latter has been interpreted in terms of a cultural or ideological relationship or even used in terms of explanations of changes in the western Norwegian archaeological material, while the former is looked upon more as loan of technology. This must be considered against the background of the close economic, political and cultural relationship between Norway and Western Europe through the last 150 years. A background which has made it difficult for archaeologist to interpret the spread of ideas going from the north to the south within the frame of cultural changes. In the latter part of this paper I have argued that the questions regarding ethnicity and borders are important in the explanation of cultural processes in the past, this based on a foundation of the meaningfulness of the archaeological material as opposed to artefacts as merely means to adapt to an environment.

Aknowledgments

I am grateful to Tarral Zhal Jensen, Trond Klungseth Løvdøen, Morten Kutschera, and David Simpson, for reading earlier drafts of this paper, helping me correct the language, and presenting inspiring comments.

References

- Barth, F. 1969 *Ethnic groups and boundaries. The social organization of culture difference*. Bergen.
- Bjørn A. 1921. Træk av Sundmøres stenalder. *Bergen Museums Aarbok 1919-20*. No 3, 1-85. Bergen: Historisk-antikvarisk række
- Broadbent, N. 1982. *Skelleftebygdens historia. Del 3. den förhistoriska utvecklingen under 7000 år*. Skelleftå kommun.
- Brøgger, A.W. 1925. *Det norske folk i oldtiden*. Institutt for sammenlignende kulturforskning. Serie A: Forelesninger. Oslo.
- Engelstad, E. 1985. The late Stone Age of Arctic Norway: A Review. *Arctic Anthropology* Vol 22. No 1 1985. University of Wisconsin.
- Fitzhugh, W. 1975a. Introduction. In *Prehistoric Maritime Adaptions of the Circumpolar Zone*, 1-18. Fitzhugh W. ed., World Anthropology, The Hauge, Paris.
- Fitzhugh, W. 1975b. A Comparative Approach to Northern Maritime Adaptions. In *Prehistoric Maritime Adaptions of the Circumpolar Zone*., 339-386. Fitzhugh W. ed, World Anthropology, The Hauge, Paris.
- Furset, O. J. 1994. *Arktisk steinalder og etnisitet. En forskningshistorisk analyse*. Unpublished Hovedfagsoppgave in archaeology. Tromsø: University of Tromsø.
- Gjessing, G. 1941, *Fangstfolk. Et streiftog gjennom nordnorsk førhistorie*. Oslo.
- Gjessing, G. 1942. *Yngre Steinalder i Nord-Norge*. Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning, serie B. XXXIX, Oslo.
- Gjessing, G. 1945. *Norges Steinalder*. Oslo.
- Gjessing, G. 1975. Nye signal i arkeologien. *Arkeologiske Skrifter*. No. 2, 49-71. Bergen: Historisk Museum, Universitetet i Bergen.
- Gjessing, H. 1920. *Rogalands stenalder*. Stavanger: Stavanger museum.
- Gustafson, G. 1906. *Norges Oldtid. Mindesmærker og oldsager*. Kristiania
- Hagen, A. 1983. *Norges Oldtid*. Oslo.
- Helliksen, W. 1993 Typologi-kultur-kulturtypologi. Belyst med utgangspunkt i diskusjonen om "Den arktiske stenalder i Norge" 1909-30. *Viking*. Bind LVI, 23-36. Oslo: Norsk arkeologisk selskap.
- Lindblom, I. 1980. *Slipte spisser av bergart i Rogaland. Funnspredning og mulige årsaker til denne*. AmS Varia No. 9. Stavanger: Arkeologisk museum in Stavanger.
- Løvset, A. 1980. Om skjefting og bruk av skiferspisser i sydøstnorsk subneolithicum. *Festskrift til Sverre Marstrander på 70 -årsdagen*., 49-52. Universitetets Oldsaksamlings Skrifter Ny rekke No. 3. Oslo:
- Magnus, B & Myhre B, 1986. *Norges historie. Bind 1. Forhistorien. Fra jeger til høvdingesamfunn*. Oslo
- Nærøy, A. J. 1987. *Redskapstradisjon i Hordaland fra 550 til 4000 før nåtid -en lokalkronologisk studie*. Unpublished hovedfagsoppppgave in archaeology. Bergen, University of Bergen.
- Olsen, B. 1985. Arkeologi og etnisitet; et teoretisk og empirisk bidrag, in *Arkeologi og etnisitet*, AmS Varia No. 15, 25-31. Stavanger Arkeologisk Museum i Stavanger.
- Olsen, B. 1991. Kjelmøyfunnenes (virknings) historie og arkeologi. *Viking*. Bind LIV, 65-87. Oslo: Norsk arkeologisk selskap.
- Rygh, O. 1885. *Norske Oldsager. Ordnete og forklarende*. Christiania
- Shanks, M. & Tilley, C. 1987. *Social Theory and Archaeology*. Cambridge; Polity Press.

- Shetelig, H. 1922. *Primitive tider i Norge. En oversigt over stenalderen*. Bergen.
- Storli, I. 1993. Fra "kultur" til "natur". Om konstitueringa av den "arktiske" steinalderen. *Viking*. Bind LVI, 7-22. Oslo: Norsk arkeologisk selskap.
- Søborg, H. C. 1986. *Skiferkniver sør for polarsirkelen i Norge -en analyse av attributter, typer og geografisk fordeling med bakgrunn i det fennoskandinaviske skiferkompleks*: Unpublished magistergradsoppgave in archeology, Bergen: Univesity of Bergen.
- Trigger, B. 1989. *A history of archaeological thought*. Cambridge.

Kultūriniai ir teritoriniai vakarinių Norvegijos krantų neolito regionai – dabarties ar praeities interpretacija?

MORTEN RAMSTAD

Santrauka

Šis darbas nagrinėja problemą, kaip Norvegijos archeologai per paskutiniuosius 150 metų aiškino kultūrinės ribas tarp šiaurės ir pietų Skandinavijos visuomenių neolito laikotarpiu. Pagrindiniai diskusijos klausimai susiję su skalūno dirbinių paplitimu bei įvairove.

Skirtingos istorinės ir politinės sąlygos lėmė tai, kad apie minėtas kultūrinės ribas bei tų kultūrų turinį susiformavo įvairios nuomonės. Tuo noriu pasakyti, kad įvairūs archeologiniai rėmai atspindi istorines, politines ir ideologines Norvegijos sąlygas per pastaruosius 150 metų. Turėdami tokį išėjimą tašką archeologinės minties istorijoje, galime geriau suvokti savo pačių idėjas. Kartu galime geriau suprasti Norvegijos archeologijos tradicijas nuo XIX a. 6-ojo dešimtmečio vidurio iki šių dienų. Jau pati kultūros koncepcija vaidina labai svarbų vaidmenį archeologijoje. Be to, minėtasis požiūris leidžia suprasti, kad mūsų mokslą keičia ne tiek nauja empirinė medžiaga, kiek nauji teoriniai požiūriai, nauja intelektualinė aplinka ir apskritai visuomenė.

Morten Ramstad
Department of Archaeology, University of Bergen
Haakon Sheteligsgt. 10,
1007 Bergen, Norway