



Book Reviews

MÅLSNES 1: AN EARLY POST-GLACIAL COASTAL SITE IN NORTHERN NORWAY, BY H.P. BLANKHOLM

Oxford, Oxbow Books 2008. 108pp, 76 b&w figs, 21 tables. ISBN 978-1-84217-343-5 hb (£35)

This slim volume reviews the results of excavations of an Early Mesolithic site at Målsnes 1, located near Tromsø in Malangen Fjord, Northern Norway. The site was located and excavated as part of a large scale fieldwork project coordinated by H.P. Blankholm, *The Stone Age in southern and middle Troms county in its northern Fennoscandinavian Context* which began in 1998 and aimed to deal with an area of Northern Scandinavia whose early settlement was poorly understood. Survey and excavation has been carried out in the region since, and Målsnes 1 is considered a key site. One of the aims of the book is to introduce the site, and the region, to an audience who don't read Scandinavian languages. The site is argued to have been occupied at c. 9500 BP (uncal) based on a combination sea level curves for the region and typology: C14 dates from the site being Viking or more recent in age. At this time, Målsnes 1 was located on an island just off the mainland, at an ecotone in a rich maritime environment. Blankholm's volume reviews the results of the excavation, placing these in broader context. The emphasis throughout is on lithics which are discussed in great detail. The assemblage of 9138 lithics are argued to have been deposited on a sparsely vegetated, stony surface, and some stones ('sitting stones') may have served as focal points for activity. The lithics are discussed in terms of raw materials, typology and spatial variation. Given that the Typology chapter alone (Chapter 6) is 34 pages from the total of 108 this is not a book for those without an interest in stone!

The Målsnes assemblage utilised a variety of fairly poorly understood raw materials, with '21 categories of chert, chert-like, massive quartzites, fine-grained quartzites, quartzites and quartzes' (p19) defined and the distribution of each material across site outlined and further variation noted. Some 'types' appear within a given piece (p34), and one can't help the feeling that much more work on materials and sources is required to show the benefit of this level of distinction. Some types are imported, for example some Black Chert from Alta in Finnmark, 200 km away which appears to have been used intensively for particular purposes, such as the production of elongated narrow blanks for point production and other tools. More generally, however, and despite the range of materials there is little sense of different core technologies for different materials (p46). The high level of different raw materials, common on sites in this region, has been associated with the arrival of pioneer settlers who test and try all the materials available to them. Blankholm prefers to understand the variation in terms of the structure of the lithic technology in terms of curation/expediency (p34-35). Given the limits of our knowledge of the distribution of these raw materials as well as chronological variation in their utilisation it is difficult to assess these arguments.

Blankholm is very aware of the limits of his interpretations, in particular where no use-wear or detailed chaîne opératoire analysis (including refitting) has been carried out. Whilst this caution is appropriate, it sometimes leaves the reader feeling that the presentation of data is outrunning the sense of what it all means. At times however, the detail is worked through to very good effect: the spatial analysis of the lithics, for example, discusses the problems caused by the fact that main ethno-archaeological models available for the organisation of space always focus on activity around hearths whereas Målsnes 1 does not have any. The resulting spatial analyses pick apart these areas and identify five main areas which vary slightly in terms of content, although all are aged to be multipurpose activity zones. Blankholm identifies separate knapping events within these zones, and argues for the same knapper moving between different areas in some instances (p67). The nature and detail of these spatial analyses is unusual in Britain and Ireland, although an emphasis on the small scale and intimate is an increasing theme.

From the detail of the site Blankholm proposes a general model for how this location fits into wider patterns of settlement. 'Admittedly there are many 'ifs' and 'buts' involved with this line of circumstantial evidence and argument. However for the present Målsnes 1 may be interpreted to suggest a comparatively small, temporary, but broadly oriented exploitation site primarily geared towards fishing and hunting marine mammals, and probably used some time between late spring and early autumn.' (93-94). This interpretation is mainly based on broad ecological and seasonal models of the early Holocene landscape, set alongside the seemingly non-specialist character of the lithic assemblages. The discussion of supposed settlement systems of the region is interesting, not least in the ways that the detail of the varied models that have been proposed over the years seem to far outstrip the available data. Blankholm argues that the limited data 'should not be a hindrance for productive speculation and preliminary modelling' (p95), but in such cases there is a real danger that the models will dominate the archaeology, and that the specific will be lost to the general. More recent accounts of the British Mesolithic are more critical about the use of broadly ethnographically derived seasonal and subsistence based models (Spikins 2000).

As noted above, Blankholm's survey work in this landscape aims to address a 'neglected' area. However, aspects of the archaeology of Northern Scandinavia have been widely discussed: to take one example, Bjerck's arguments for

rapid maritime colonisation of the extreme North of Scandinavia have been influential (eg, 1995). Blankholm is critical of Bjerck's model, suggesting that source criticism of dates and further consideration of alternative routes for colonisation and contact are required. Blankholm is at pains to emphasize complexity: that broad pattern similarities work at the largest of scales but break down as we consider regions and sub-regions; that 'two-way or multi-way contact or movement' was possible and should form a focus of our analysis. In this there are resonances with other discussions of so-called 'out of the way' places within the Scandinavian Mesolithic, as for example with Östergötland which is reconfigured as a place of contact and active creation of new identities (Gruber 2005).

The book is generally well produced. Some minor editorial errors have crept in; in particular it seems that a 'find and replace' on n-s/N-S and e-w/E-W has led to some unusual formations. Some of the line drawings are a little pixilated, and scales and North arrows are sometimes absent. Given that the aim of the book was to introduce the area to those not familiar with it, more use of plates of the landscape would have helped, even accepting that sea levels have changed.

Blankholm's excavations at Målsnes 1 focused on a site of comparatively limited data, and through careful analysis have provided detailed reconstructions of the spatial structure to activity over a (presumably, but actually undefined) short period of time. This detail is, unfortunately, a little lost as soon as we move to the broader scale: with the result that the very interesting contextual discussions feel somewhat disengaged from the specifics of the site. Ironically, it may be these sections that non-Scandinavian readers find most immediately helpful, serving as they do, as an interesting introduction to the literature for this area.

References

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