

Things and Patterns – from Pyramiden to Patagonia

Festschrift in honor of Professor
Hein Bjartmann Bjerck

Birgitte Skar, Heidi Breivik og Martin Callanan (red.)



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What's the Point of all the Points?

Thoughts on the use of Bow and Arrow in Early
Mesolithic Coastal Norway

Leif Inge Åstveit

ABSTRACT

Site distribution maps from Norway indicate that settlements predominantly existed along the outer coast during the Early Mesolithic (EM) 9,500–8,000 BC. The prevailing theory suggests that these communities largely subsisted on marine mammals, primarily seals. Among the most common artifacts found at EM sites are single-edge points and simple microliths made of flint, which indicate the central role of bows and arrows in this society. However, both historical and ethnographic sources clearly suggest that bows and arrows are ineffective tools for seal hunting. This article thus emphasizes that the EM economy may have been far more multifaceted and less specialized than the narrative conveyed by distribution maps of site locations. Furthermore, bows and arrows, in addition to being important hunting tools, are believed to have held a deeper cultural significance, perhaps harking back to the Late Paleolithic deep history when terrestrial game played a substantial role.

Introduction

In his comprehensive work *The Stone Age in Norway*, Gutorm Gjessing (1945) stated that it was “the seal, first and foremost” that was the decisive factor for the colonization of Norway during the Early Mesolithic (EM, 9,500–8,000 cal BP). In addition to seal hunting, or perhaps as a consequence of it, Gjessing envisioned a process whereby the colonizers became increasingly skilled at navigating the rough and challenging waters. This maritime learning process ultimately enabled the utilization of the entire Norwegian coast, turning the demanding pursuit of marine mammals in the open seas into reality. According to Gjessing, this was a point of no return: “...it gradually became clear that marine hunting would forever be vital to them” (1945, 52). This aligns well with Hein Bjerck’s observation that “...environmental information and site locations indicate that pinnipeds (more than fish and bivalves) were the primary targets in the colonizer’s subsistence” (Bjerck et al. 2016:56) and that “the need for more reliable supplies of seal may serve as a ‘pull factor’ towards the development of marine relations, facilitating hunting in the open sea” (Bjerck 2009:20). Within these contexts, marine mammals fulfilled fundamental economic roles in society: they provided food, bone tools, clothing, hide for building boats and tents, and

blubber as fuel for the fireplace. In the most extreme maritime models, residential sites on land are viewed as random landing spots for a maritime population predominantly residing at sea (Bjerck 2008) on boats defined as “well-organized kill sites” (Bjerck 1989). When examining the numerous distribution maps at different geographical levels presented for the EM (e.g., Breivik 2014, Åstveit 2014, Glørstad 2013, Bang-Andersen 2018, Breivik and Bjerck 2018), it becomes increasingly evident that the arguments of both Gjessing and Bjerck may indeed have considerable validity. However, might we be somewhat misled by these unambiguous distribution maps? Delving deeper into Bjerck’s quote, he specifically highlights two elements: environment and site location. But what about the archaeological artifacts themselves, the things found at the sites? To what extent do they support the one-sided maritime perspective?

The EM is characterized by the near-total absence of organic remains, and from the coastal sites of Southern Norway, almost no reliable radiocarbon datings exist. Consequently, lithics play a particularly important chronological role, and projectiles are one of the most common artifacts and one of the typological backbones when it comes to age determination in the EM.

But how does the practical use of bow and arrow align with the picture outlined by Gjessing and Bjerck? Without anticipating my own conclusions, I believe that the extensive use of bow and arrow is inconsistent with a strictly maritime economy. Thus, the premise of this paper can be encapsulated by a simple question: Why did the bow and arrow continue to maintain a significant role even after the Paleolithic Ahrensburg culture underwent a “maritime turn” in the Early Mesolithic approximately 11,000 to 12,000 years ago?

There are clearly no straightforward answers or single factors that can adequately resolve this question; however, in an attempt to reach at least a semblance of an answer, I believe it is essential to consider the influences shaping various aspects of current research. This includes how we utilize the sources available to us, how objects and material culture at a macro level become integral to the interpretative process, and, finally, a few personal, highly subjective reflections on my perception of these remains.

Things, time, space and the tyranny of distribution maps

In Norway, there is a common saying amongst craftspeople that “Having the right tool is half the job”. This recognizes the important role of things in ensuring an acceptable outcome of a specific task. Yet, in our daily practices, we primarily acknowledge our material surroundings before and during the execution of the task. After the job is done, I believe we all tend to forget these helpers made of wood, steel or plastic. After all, it was I who laid the floor in the room (not in close collaboration with the circular saw and nail gun) or repaired the car (not with the help of countless wrenches, specialized tools, and a headlamp).

As archaeologists, we always arrive on the scene after the action has taken place, whether it is ten minutes later for the contemporary archaeologist or 11,000 years later for those studying the Stone Age. Perhaps this is why we tend to undervalue the importance of things and are always searching for something “more” than an understanding of the objects themselves. This is certainly not a call to return to typological and chronological studies whose sole purpose is to ascertain that a given artifact type may be 50 years younger/older than initially thought. Nonetheless, I believe we often miss the fact that these objects were once the “right tool” and hence “half the job,” specifically crafted to accomplish one or more tasks. As Bjerck (2022:28)

rightly points out: “The imperative question is not what things are, but what things do.”

Since human actions are always tied to specific places in the world, and because we tend to value actions over objects, the geographic location is often regarded as more important than the actual find itself. And even though this location may have held no significance for the action that occurred here (vast portions of our daily lives are filled with small and large actions that seemingly occur in random places), the phrase “an action has taken place” somehow suggests an equivalence between place and action. And, as is familiar to all archaeologists: Repeated actions at the same spot create a pattern, stressing the importance of the place as one that is significant, perhaps crucial, for the action itself (e.g., Bradley 2000). These spatial patterns, which in our practice manifest themselves through distribution maps and distribution analyses, acquire critical importance for our understanding of prehistory, and today these analyses have become increasingly refined through advanced GIS calculations. The material “evidence” that human action has occurred at a specific location seems, in many cases, to be attributed greater significance than the desire for a deeper understanding of the action itself and thus the role of the things that remain on the site. A dot on a distribution map, bearing a specific signature, represents something definitive and indisputable, often perceived as a stronger argument than subjective drawings, photographs, and morphological analyses of the central character in the narrative: the thing itself.

Although we assign roles to the things, the tasks we expect them to solve for us are often rather simplistic: their age and ability to prove that humans were present at this site for a shorter or longer duration 11,500 years ago. And since the economic dimensions of society are nearly predetermined based on location, these objects are further reduced to chronological/typological markers, rather than being evaluated for their utility. *What* is found seems to hold subordinate importance to *where*. What the things were actually engaged in, and the role they played during this stay, remain elusive. Nevertheless, the dot on the map proves that they were here and perhaps returned repeatedly. This relationship between time, things, and space is, however, far from straightforward. Distribution maps must necessarily rely on a simplification of available data, but if used uncritically, this can lead to a form of circular reasoning where the overarching occurrence of sites reinforces a hypothesis concerning maritime connections, which in turn becomes the starting point for interpreting the

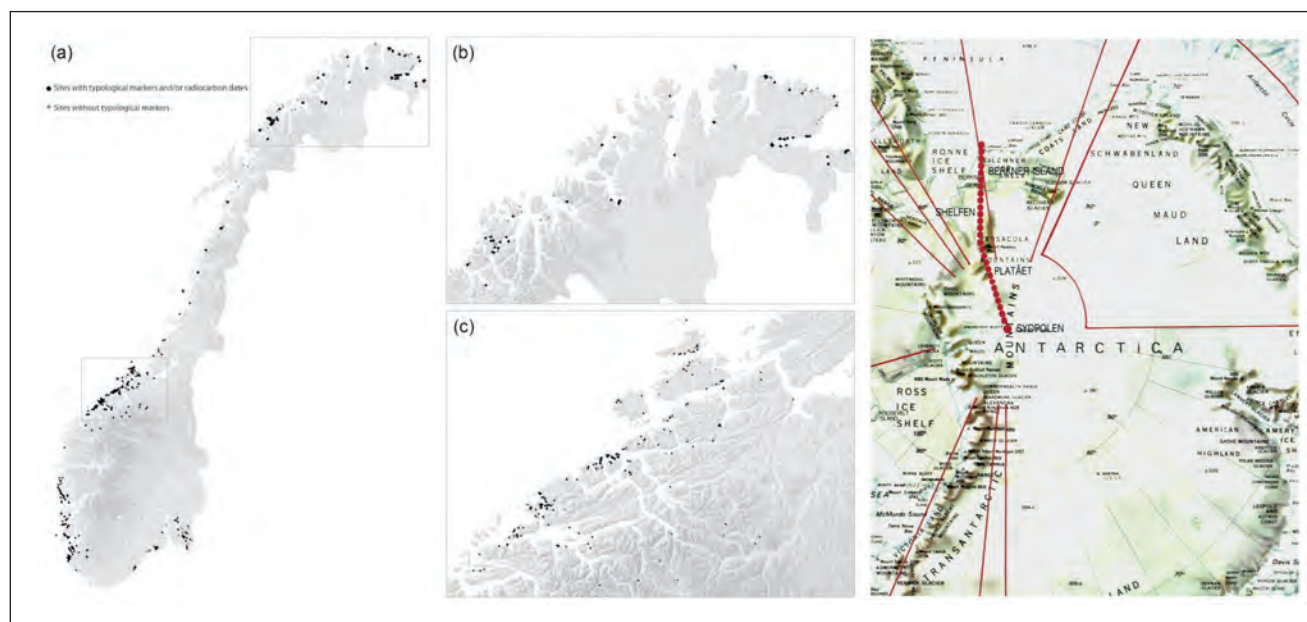


Figure 1. Dots on a map. Left: the most comprehensive distribution map of EM sites in Norway (Breivik 2014). Right: the dotted red line of the explorer Erling Kagge's solo expedition to the South Pole (from Kagge 1993).

functions and tasks of these items—in our case, marine hunting. In other words, the premise becomes part of the argument and vice versa.

Primarily based on geographic contexts, the EM yields unequivocal traces of highly specialized marine/maritime groups, even though the materials per se do not inherently indicate this kind of adaptation. This favoring of context and distribution patterns over the intrinsic communicative power of the things feels somehow paradoxical for a discipline that is (or should be) primarily preoccupied with material culture, and where central works have been written on the crucial significance of things in prehistory as well as in the present.

For is not Bjørnar Olsen's critique, launched over 20 years ago (2003) regarding how we overlook the significance of objects in "important" historical events—such as the explorer Erling Kagge's (1993) lonely trip to the South Pole (Fig. 1)—also applicable to certain other aspects of our archaeological practice? At least I believe we should approach these indisputable distribution maps more critically and never forget that the map is not the territory.

Things, tools and instruments

The material remains from the EM consist almost exclusively of lithics such as flint, chert, quartz, and quartzite. These remains can be categorized into relatively few formal tool types, such as knives, retouched blades, scrapers, core and flake axes, and projectiles.

Additionally, there are numerous informal, or expedient, tools whose role and purpose will not be discussed further here (Callanan 2007).

The limited range of tool types gives the material from this period a somewhat cleaner and more organized appearance than the more "chaotic" lithic situation observed in the later stages of the Stone Age. The majority of the lithic material can be interpreted as implements for manufacturing, which means their role has mainly, if not exclusively, been to produce other equipment made from softer materials such as bone, wood, or hide. In this paper, this group of implements is simply referred to as *tools* and, given the complete absence of preserved organic material from this period, tools inevitably become "the voices of bygone times," conveying the silent history of harpoons, clubs, clothes, tents and boats.

In this perspective tools are designed to address a wide array of tasks at the site, also exhibiting a flexibility that allows them to adapt to uses not necessarily intended at the time of their creation. A burin is categorized purely as a production tool, as is a scraper. Conversely, a knife may serve to smooth a shaft for an arrow or to create intricate ornamentation on a bone harpoon, but it can also have a more "direct" task such as gutting a fish or skinning a seal. A flake axe is well-suited for scraping hides, sharpening spearheads made of antler, or splitting bones for future tools, but it can also be wielded directly as a weapon to strike something (or someone) fatally.

In this discussion, I use the term *instruments* to describe remains which have a somewhat more targeted task. While tools exist in a state of dependence on other tools and derive their significance from their relationships within complex networks, instruments often lead a more autonomous existence—not in the sense that they are divorced from the network that integrates all items at the site, but rather that they occupy a peripheral position within it. I contend that if we are to take these items seriously, we must also evaluate them on their own merits, not merely as a cog in a wheel, because objects exhibit varying degrees of autonomy.

An arrow resting on the bowstring is about to fulfil its intended purpose. It undoubtedly has a backstory: its tip is crafted from a flint nodule collected on the beach and subsequently shaped into an appropriate core for knapping; the shaft is smoothed with a burin; the goose feathers which give the arrow direction are adapted using a flake knife; the lashing is made from dried sinews; and so on. This arrow also holds a “future,” where parts of its forthcoming prey will be transformed into new tools. Yet simultaneously, the arrowheads are crafted with a specific purpose in mind: to be fitted onto a shaft and then brought to the preferred hunting ground for the act of shooting at a target. I find it both constructive and interesting to believe that while the task and narrative of the projectile point, as an instrument, conclude the moment the arrow leaves the string, its memory endures. The arrows thus occupy, I believe, one of the most autonomous and targeted positions among EM artifacts. It is difficult to see that they had more than one specific task to solve. This is probably also why projectiles have often ended up as being considered “self-evident” in their use, as stated by Stevens and Coddling (2009:20) in relation to their work on bifacial arrowheads from California:

While most other artifact categories are now routinely placed in morphological rather than functional classes, “projectile points” are a holdover from an earlier time. It could be that we are more certain about the function of projectiles than about “scrapers” or “knives.” On the other hand, maybe it is just a convenient, although potentially misleading, label reflecting the fact that along the central coast and in other regions of California, archaeologists value bifacial points for their chronological rather than functional implications.

Bow and arrow: advantages and limitations

The bow and arrow is undoubtedly among the most significant inventions in the annals of human history. Archery has been an important foundation for great conquests and huge empires, yet the introduction of the bow and arrow has also been regarded as having important sociopolitical consequences on a more local scale, such as increased levels of conflict, social instability, hierarchization, and sedentism (e.g., Kennett et al. 2013, Angelbeck and Cameron 2014).

But what are the functional pros and cons of this weapon? The bow and arrow’s most apparent strength is precision and the ability to hit a small target from a considerable distance. And while an arrow can be released from cover without the prey fully identifying its origin, a spear or atlatl requires more space, typically necessitating a standing position, which is far from ideal during still hunting or stalking, for instance. Another significant advantage of the bow is the number of shots and rate of fire. While a skilled archer can maintain a high rate of fire and deliver 8–10 arrows into a herd of reindeer in a brief time span, a spear gives one or maybe two opportunities. This fact has also been used to argue that the bow and arrow is an individualistic form of hunting, while spears and atlatls require greater collective cooperation (a theory that has also faced criticism: e.g., Cattelain 1997). A final consideration is that mastering a bow and arrow sufficiently for practical use is relatively straightforward; the learning curve is significantly steeper for mastering an atlatl than for a bow. However, while accuracy against smaller targets is advantageous, a lightweight arrow does not possess the same penetrating power as a spear. During hunting the prey will typically continue to move a significant distance after the initial arrow strike, which necessitates pursuit on foot or with dogs to make another shot or to dispatch the animal in another way. Furthermore, attaching a rope or line to these arrows to secure the catch would compromise their force and accuracy. As a result, a bow does not offer a much greater shooting range than a spear or an atlatl when hunting large mammals (Cattelain 1997:231).

EM projectiles are technologically linked to the Ahrensburg culture, currently recognized as the oldest directly dated evidence of bows and arrows worldwide¹ (Meadows et al. 2018) although it is widely recognized that the use of bow and arrow predates this by a considerable margin (e.g., Metz et al. 2023). The

1 In this paper all EM arrowheads are interpreted as being lashed to an arrow shaft and shot with a bow. I am thus not debating whether the projectiles could have been used as darts with an atlatl or other types of spears (see e.g., Erlandsson, Watts, and Jew 2014).

EM projectiles are produced within a relatively fixed technological scheme, albeit exhibiting considerable variation in size and width. Few other lithic remains from the EM seem to be so technologically uniform as the projectiles, and it is rare to find unequivocal evidence of “unintentional” projectile production. This may certainly be attributed to the simple fact that they were designed to fit onto an arrow shaft, yet the process is highly repetitive and regular, conveying an impression that the intention right from the beginning of the knapping process was to produce precisely these projectiles. It is also uncommon to observe that these arrow heads have been reused in other tools: in most cases the projectiles were discarded once they had fulfilled their purpose. Thus, the projectiles indicate a specific use that I believe can be identified. So, apart from being “...a flexible tool technology, where blades of suitable sizes and properties were worked into projectiles that were then used for prey of different sizes and anatomies” (Breivik and Callanan 2016:589), what was the point of all the points?

The bow and arrow in the ethnographic record

To illuminate the period and fill the gaps left by absent organic material in the EM, parallels are often drawn from ethnographic sources and comparative archaeological materials. Hunter gatherer societies from polar environments are frequently used as role models (Bjerck 1989, Bjerck 2008, Bang-Andersen 2003, Bang-Andersen 2012). But what do ethnographic sources and comparative archaeological materials convey about various types of hunting and hunting tools in these Arctic environments? If we examine specialized marine hunting cultures based on marine mammals, the bow and arrow plays a subordinate role, being exclusively associated with terrestrial hunting. As emphasized by Kaj Birket-Smit’s (1918:3) ethnographic observations: “Formerly it [the bow and arrow] was used for the hunting of all kinds of land animals, from hare and ptarmigan to big game such as bear and musk ox, being chiefly employed, however, in the pursuit of reindeer—not from any particular suitability to this branch of the chase, as opposed to others, but because reindeer hunting forms, together with salmon fishing, the typical summer occupation of the Eskimo”. As stated by Churchill (1993:21): “Several dedicated marine-hunting atlatl users, such as the Aleuts (Veniaminov 1840, Shade 1949, Antropova 1964) and Koniags (Clark 1974) of southwestern

Alaska, employed other technologies, such as bows and arrows, but only when hunting medium to large terrestrial game.”

But why is the bow and arrow considered less suitable for marine hunting? As previously indicated, the initial shot with an arrow would seldom be immediately fatal; thus, a seal would likely succeed in escaping whether it was approached in open waters, on a reef, or at the ice edge. Furthermore, sealskin is exceptionally tough, and the seal is covered in substantial layers of blubber, making it even more challenging for a lightweight arrow to penetrate any vital organs. The distance necessary for a lethal shot at a seal would likely need to be significantly shorter than that required for hunting animals such as deer. This may also explain why seal hunting has historically never been classified as traditional “hunting” per se but has rather been designated with its very own verb in English: ‘sealing’ (*Norwegian: selfangst*). This method of capture involved close-range implements, such as a club, hakapik, or spear with a barbed head connected to a rope. These conclusions are well-supported by comparative ethnographic evidence (e.g., Petersen 1986, Porsild 1915), and I therefore disagree with Bjerck’s (2021:51) assertion that “seals on the ice could be hunted with similar methods and equipment as terrestrial animals.” Consequently, I contend that the prominent role of the bow and arrow in EM society contradicts the theory that this group had a mono-economy predominantly focused on seal hunting.

Is it conceivable that the very invention of the bow and arrow was so ingenious that it became impossible to discard once it had become part of the standard equipment? This may indeed be one of several reasons for the continued use of bow and arrow after the maritime transition. However, there are archaeological examples indicating that bows and arrows do actually disappear from the material culture when economic conditions change, such as precisely during the transition from terrestrial to marine hunting (Maschner and Mason 2013:136):

When the pre-Dorset tradition evolved out of the ASTt (Arctic Small Tool Tradition) in the eastern Arctic, the bow may possibly have been present, as there is a continuation of some microlithic end-blades, but by Dorset times, 2,500 years ago, the bow was gone from the eastern Canadian Arctic and Greenland as well. As in Alaska, this was a transition to a sea mammal-based economy.

The process of crafting arrow shafts and bows with simple tools must have been laborious, so why cling to equipment that had limited practical value? And what material were the bows actually made from? The purportedly treeless landscapes of the EM have been emphasized by several people, and if that were indeed the case, one would be reliant on driftwood, bone, and leather. The solution for the Inuit was to make small bows of approximately one meter in length, made from various raw materials. An essential component used to reinforce these bows was skin, which was stitched around the bow while wet; as it dried and contracted, it provided the necessary elasticity and strength. Such bows perform well in a dry Arctic climate, yet they have been found to be relatively useless when exposed to moisture (Porsild 1915), which would likely have been a frequent occurrence while kayaking along the Norwegian coast during the EM.

If one were to examine further what marine specialists, such as the Inuit, actually used these bows for, two recurring themes emerge: the hunting of terrestrial animals, primarily reindeer; and as weapons in conflicts and warfare (Maschner and Mason 2013). There are few indications that the bows were ever actively employed from boats or at sea.

In spite of this, it is beyond doubt that the bow and arrow existed in a marine environment during the EM period. However, in a parallel to the practices observed among the Inuit people, hunting with bow and arrow may have been primarily reserved for the land-based aspects of the maritime economy. This suggests that the hunting of terrestrial mammals could have been a central reason for the bow's sustained use over 1,500 years within the EM, a fact that also challenges the often inadequately problematized environmental analysis of fauna and flora during this period. Nevertheless, could there also be equally significant cultural explanations?

When examining the later phases of the Stone Age, the preserved bone materials provide compelling evidence that terrestrial mammals played a pivotal economic role, serving both as a food source and as raw materials for producing implements such as fishhooks and harpoons, and for hide clothing. Additionally, rock art offers insights into the cosmological importance of these animals, as well as illustrating the magical beliefs connected to the act of hunting and hunting strategies. Therefore, these projectiles also represent multiple layers of meaning that cannot be adequately understood or presented merely as dots on a distribution map.

Like Meeting an Old Friend

If there was a way to find out, I would not be surprised if the Stoneagers had talked about these things as their active co-players – what they could do – as opposed to common archaeological focus on inactive morphology – what they are (Bjerck 2022:136–137).

The claim that “things remember” is a concept I have reflected on extensively since Hein Bjerck published his book *Archaeology at Home* (Bjerck 2022). Initially, I found the statement close to absurd: Objects do not possess a mind, let alone free will. However, I have come to believe that there is a significant essence of truth in his assertion. Objects carry traces of human interaction and embody the experiences (and memories) of the contexts in which they were created and used. This perspective has profoundly influenced my understanding of projectiles and their role in human history over the course of the thirty years these arrowheads have accompanied me during my fieldwork. I have regularly come upon them under remarkably diverse conditions—on the most remote small islands facing the open sea, within sheltered archipelagoes, and in rugged high mountain terrain at elevations of 1,000 meters. I have found them *in situ* in 11,000-year-old fireplaces, discovered them while sieving, and meticulously scrutinized and recorded them. I have photographed them under varying light conditions and angles in an attempt to capture their character, essence and beauty. Some arrowheads seemed unused and still so razor-sharp that they could have been crafted merely ten minutes before I was lucky enough to find them. Others show clear signs of being 11,000 years old: broken, burned, worn, and frost-shattered. In fortunate instances, I have managed to retrace the arrowheads' creation stories through refitting studies, providing exclusive insights into their past—into the events that transpired just moments before each one was brought to life. I cannot claim that I have always engaged in deep reflection during these encounters: I too have been part of a scholarly community that primarily utilizes these points as chronological and typological markers, which first and foremost serve to confirm the age of the findings (and thus of new dots on the map). Nonetheless, there is no denying that these encounters have left a lasting impression on me—consciously or unconsciously—as time goes by. Perhaps this growing awareness reflects me getting older: my own coming of age.

In 2017, I was interviewed by the author and journalist Anders Todal on his book regarding the evolution of fisheries along the Norwegian coast (Todal 2018). We met in the field on a rainy day while I was leading a large excavation at Bildøy, just west of the city of Bergen. The meeting was well-planned, and on that day, it just so happened that we were excavating an EM site, and we had already found several arrowheads. Todal stood out as one of those journalists you occasionally meet—well-prepared, genuinely curious, and engaged—which allowed our conversation to flow effortlessly. The interview began in a conventional manner, with me explaining our activities and what we had discovered so far. Having given numerous interviews in the preceding months, my responses had become somewhat routine: “They lived by the tidal current due to the exceptionally resource-rich conditions here...”; “There is far better shelter in the inner archipelago than further out...”; “Changes over time can be observed in the material culture”; and so forth. However, Todal did not seem particularly satisfied with these standardized, and I must admit, rather boring answers; he wanted to know what it was genuinely like to find these items. Consequently, I was compelled into a state of “self-reflection” and had to dig a little deeper. Even though I perceived his upcoming book as being primarily factual, I also recognized clear elements of literary prose in his project. This somehow allowed me to respond more freely, and the most encompassing description I could offer on that rain-soaked day in the field was that finding these arrowheads felt akin to encountering, or being reunited, with an old friend (Todal 2018:331). This was a friend I had met across vastly different locations, under a wide range of weather conditions, and not least, in varying personal states of mind. Some of our encounters had been fleeting, such as during visits to other excavations, while others were more profound, almost intimate, particularly when the day’s finds were retrieved in the evening at an isolated cabin in the mountains, studied, analyzed, and admired. Although I did not engage in verbal conversations with these arrowheads (at least not when colleagues were present in the same room...), exclamations like “this arrowhead is like a piece of fine art!” often escaped my lips. I would therefore to a certain extent assert that dialogues with these objects frequently emerged, and I thus believe I understand what Bjerck is referring to in the quote cited above.

Without asserting that this is the sole explanation for the arrowheads, perhaps it captures some aspects of their significance. After all, are not “an old friend” and “standard equipment” two facets of the same concept?

Perhaps it was precisely for this reason that these points transitioned from reindeer hunting on the tundra of northern Germany to the coast of Sweden and then further along the Norwegian coast—almost akin to family members. People in the EM might have felt bereft without their bows and arrows at their side, even if their economic significance were limited. These arrows were both bearers of continuity and a long history as well as snapshots of moments and ephemeral memories. Through the unique crafting process, the points embodied a tradition, yet this was a tradition that required significant investment. One aspect encompasses the time and skill needed to search for flint nodules, prepare them into usable cores, perform the knapping process, and achieve the final shape to fit the arrow shafts. Additionally, making the bow would have required considerable labor to find suitable raw materials and meticulous craftsmanship. Despite the uniform manufacturing techniques, there are never two completely identical arrowheads. Small mistakes and irregularities emerged during production. For instance, a somewhat too shallow retouch on a robust blade using the micro burin technique might have led to an unfortunate snap, resulting in a slightly blunt point, along with a lithic remnant that we would likely catalogue as a “micro burin with a failed break” (code 02.11.4 in our local cataloging system). This encapsulates a momentary story. Alternatively, a damaged arrowhead could stem from a previous miss, perhaps as a result of a dramatic hunting event or warfare, or it could be the valuable memory from something as harmless as a shooting contest among friends.

As I find myself in the fortunate position of being part of a small team that hunts wild reindeer each autumn, I frequently utilize equipment crafted for taking down large terrestrial game. This action inevitably prompts me to reflect on my own relationship with similar instruments in the present. In our team we have the additional fortune that one of our members is a butcher by profession. Thus, there is no doubt as to who takes the lead after the reindeer has been shot. As he skillfully handles sharp knives and a saw, meticulously cutting the game into its respective parts, he always looks for the bullet that felled the animal (Fig. 2). In some cases, this bullet is lost, but often it remains lodged within the meat. Over the years, he has amassed a large collection of such bullets to put on display. All summer, as we wait for the 20th of August when the hunting season begins, we will frequently and longingly glance at the bullets and think back on previous trips, because each of them carries its own narrative and retells a story. Not

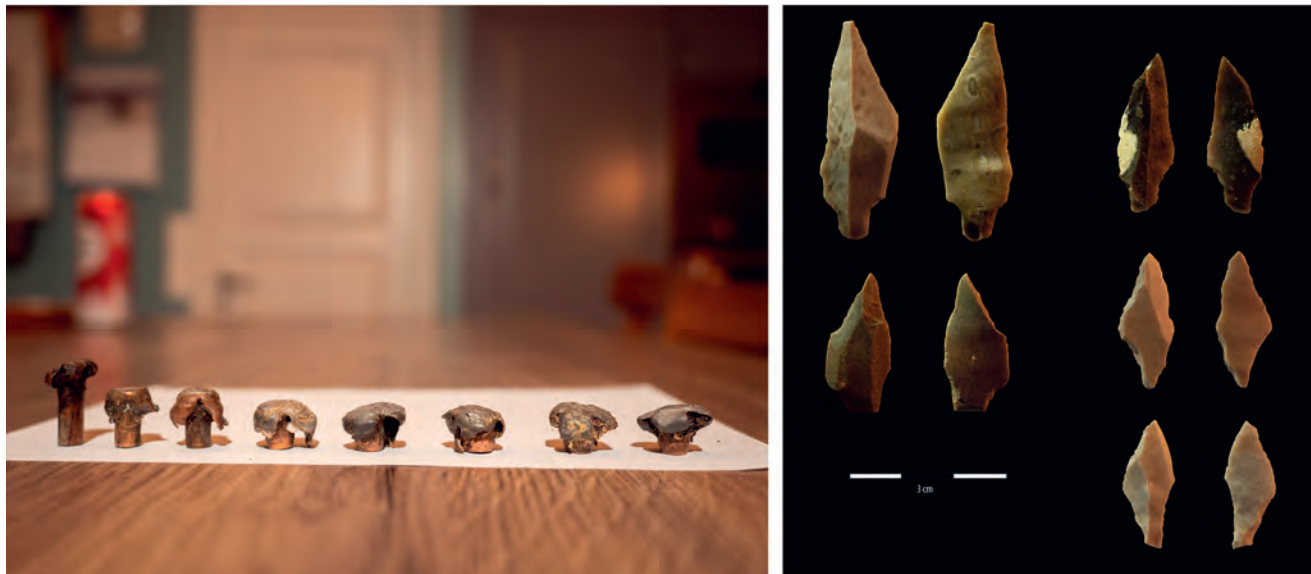


Figure 2. “Things retain memories of events, are fossils from realities that time left behind” (Bjerck 2021:29). Left: bullets, each telling the story of having taken down a reindeer. Right: projectiles on display; Early Mesolithic arrowheads from Bømlo, Western Norway made for shooting...? Photo: L. I. Åstveit

merely the technical and ballistic facts, such as range, impact energy, trajectory, and bullet expansion, but also much of the story of the hunt is encapsulated within these bullets. Everything from objective circumstances such as where the animal was shot, at what range, the weather and temperature, and the sex, age, and weight of the animal, to subjective memories and personal experiences like the gradient and distance we had to carry the heavy meat haul back home, a buck with an unusual antler formation, a doe that had been severely attacked by warble flies, an unusually large calf, other hunters we met, whether we were inspected by the game warden or not, the left boot that was letting in water, blisters, the hangover from the night before, and the sheer exhaustion we felt when, with our headlamps lit, we finally returned to the cabin long after nightfall. In short, these bullets are imbued with so much information and so many narratives, and while it is we who do the recalling, they are in a sense the storytellers: without these bullets, there would be a different narrative and, I believe, a far less interesting one.

So, what's the point of all the points?

Projectiles are among the most common artifacts we find at Early Mesolithic sites. While tools made of organic materials which have now vanished likely constituted the largest and most significant portion of the toolkit, there is little doubt that bows and arrows were regarded as important during this period. Given that this instrument is ill-suited for marine hunting,

I believe there is little doubt that terrestrial prey were also of considerable importance at this time. This has been implicitly suggested by others (e.g., Bang-Andersen 2003), but I think it is a fair interpretation that the economy in the Early Mesolithic may have been far more multifaceted than the narrative created by distribution maps of site locations. However, even though I express mild criticism of distribution maps, it is absolutely not a call to cease their creation or to suggest they lack validity. Rather, it is an invitation to critically assess the type of information that can be derived from these maps, especially concerning the economic and practical implications drawn from such foundations. In my opinion, these maps provide more of an overview than insight.

As a keeper of tradition and storyteller, I believe that the bow and arrow likely held deeper meanings beyond mere economic value. The arts of striking flint, maintained over 1,200 to 1,500 years during the EM, and crafting bows and arrow shafts, are cultural elements and skills that hark back to the period long before the maritime shift 11,000 years ago. Although new methodological approaches (e.g., isotopic analysis and aDNA) may provide us with fresh insights into this period in the future, I doubt we should expect transformative insights based solely on this data. I am therefore convinced that it is equally important to problematize and theorize about the material, and I believe that contemporary archaeology, which takes the things seriously (Bjerck 2022), will pave the way for intriguing theories and interpretations in the future.

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