Conclusion

• The results from the project have generated new perspectives giving a unique and detailed picture of the use and re-use of one island through long periods of time and the ability to provide a complete picture of spatial and temporal transformations over entire settlement sequences.

• Today Melkøya may seem like an inhospitable and extreme location for Stone Age settlements. However, due to its privileged location the seasonal and spatial distribution of resources must have allowed for a variety of choices for the people living at Melkøya. The chronological variation of settlement data collected through the project highlights how the available food resources structured or constrained past settlements on the island, but did not determine them.

• The geography on small islands like Melkøya provides unique parameters influencing the structuring and use of space which differs from those found on larger landmasses, thus contributing to a more balanced picture of Stone Age settlements and structure types.

• A specialized maritime technology makes the sea an "efficient highway rather than a barrier". The rich and varied material demonstrates how the island has always been involved in networks stretching over large parts of Northern Scandinavia. Thus small islands can no longer be viewed as either marginal or isolated places for Stone Age societies, and this calls for a revised concept of "marginal locations" as integrated elements of complex and far-reaching networks.

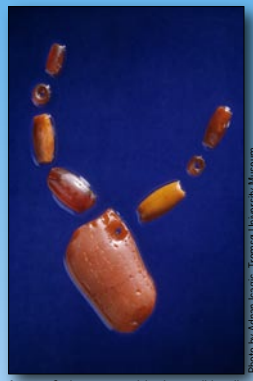

Photo by Adnan Icagic, Tromsø University Museum

Among finds recovered in the traditionally "neglected" areas, were 8 amber beads found in a small bedrock crevice some distance away from the nearest house site. The amber is identified as originating from the Baltic region proving the existence of networks connecting Melkøya to areas several thousand kilometres away (Ramstad 2003).

From the top to the bottom of Sundfjæra, all prehistoric periods from the start of Early Mesolithic to the Sámi Iron Age were documented. Treating Sundfjæra as a single settlement unit gives a unique diachronic picture of the way the landscape was utilized through time, thus permitting studies of stability and changes in the structuring of space over considerable time periods.

Project web page: http://www.uit.no/melkoya

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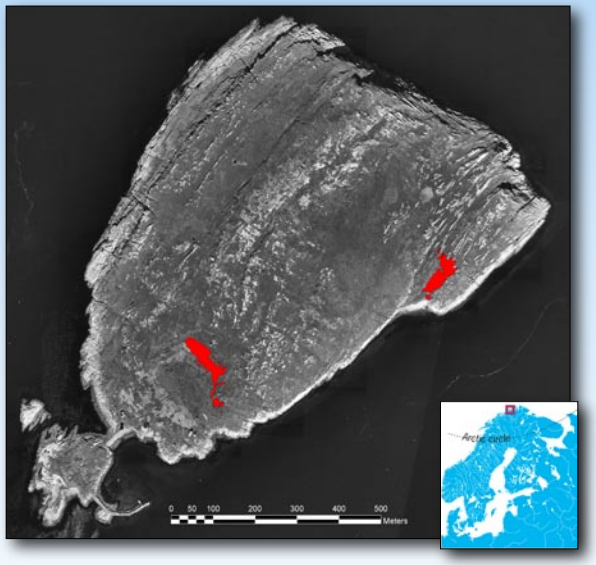
This project is financed by STATOIL

Photo by Adnan Icagic, Tromsø University Museum

Island settlements and the use of space

Maritime hunter-fishers through 11.000 years at Melkøya, Arctic Norway



Morten Ramstad and Anja Roth Niemi
Tromsø University Museum, Norway

Poster presented at Meso2005, Belfast

Island concept in Norwegian Stone Age Archaeology

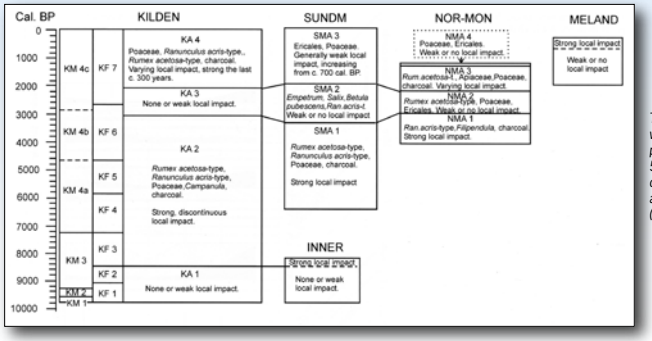
For more than 150 years the principal concepts and crucial debates of Norwegian Stone Age research have been founded upon data almost exclusively excavated from shorelines and larger islands in the Norwegian archipelago. This emphasis has unfortunately omitted the numerous smaller islands which dot the coastline. Either too small or too inhospitable and remote compared with areas considered most optimal for Stone Age settlements, small and exposed islands like Melkøya are traditionally viewed as marginal even for Stone Age economies. The inclusion of these "marginalized" areas of Norwegian Stone Age research would undoubtedly enhance our understanding of island communities. This bias has probably not only reduced the amount of alternative data but also limited our understanding of past settlements.

The project's main goal was to map, excavate and identify the function of as many of the prehistoric structures and associated features on the island as possible. By giving equal attention to multiple sets of data we hope to stimulate new and alternative perspectives on the organization and structuring of space at hunter-fisher settlements at one island through long periods of time.

Location and landscape

Melkøya is located in the strait of Sørøysundet, at 70º, 40` N in Finnmark, Arctic Norway. The island is less than 1 ha with a maximum elevation of 71 m a.s.l. With the exception of two cobble beaches on the more sheltered south side of the island, the coastline consists of shear cliffs. The climate is oceanic, the sea never freezes and the annual median temperature is + 2º C. The weather can be highly unpredictable with rough seas, windy conditions and frequent storms. Due to the location far above the Arctic Circle the people also had to cope with dramatic changes in an environment with two summer months of constant daylight, and an equally long period in winter when the sun does not rise above the horizon at all. For people living by and from the sea, such conditions clearly structured social life as well as resource exploitation, habitation and landscape.

Nevertheless, the excavations have documented considerable amounts of settlement data from all prehistoric periods. Apart from the successful cultural adaptation to these conditions one has to take into consideration that Melkøya is located in the middle of a strong tidal current channel. Such channels have a particularly high plankton production which attracts large numbers of fish, marine birds and sea mammals making them one of the most optimal coastal biotopes for marine exploitation.



To get a more viable picture of hunter-fisher's impact as well as natural changes on the local environment, extensive paleobotanical investigations were undertaken. Analyses of 5 peat cores combined with a number of in situ samples has created a more detailed picture of local vegetation types and anthropogenic impact extending back almost 10.000 years (fig. from Jensen fig. 12, 2004:282).

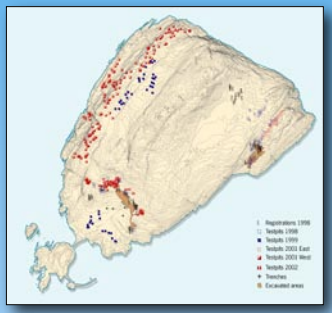
Research strategy and results

The whole island was intensively surveyed and test pitted. Mechanical surface stripping was used in order to explore as much as possible of the total extent of the past settlement areas.

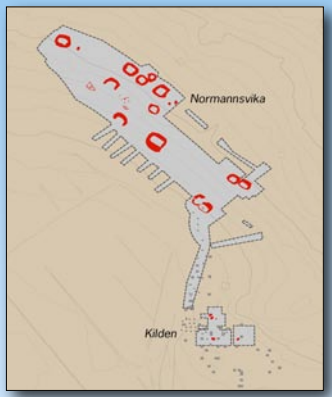
Sites were only identified in three areas around the two more sheltered beaches on the south side of the island: Normannsvika, Kilden and Sundfjæra, which chronologically cover the time period from the "initial pioneer phase" of the Early Stone Age (10 000 BP) to the Sámi Iron Age (1500 BP).

A large number of structures were identified from semi-subterranean houses, lighter dwelling types and tent rings, to a variety of hearths, cooking pits, storage pits, activity areas, dumping zones, middens and grave remains.

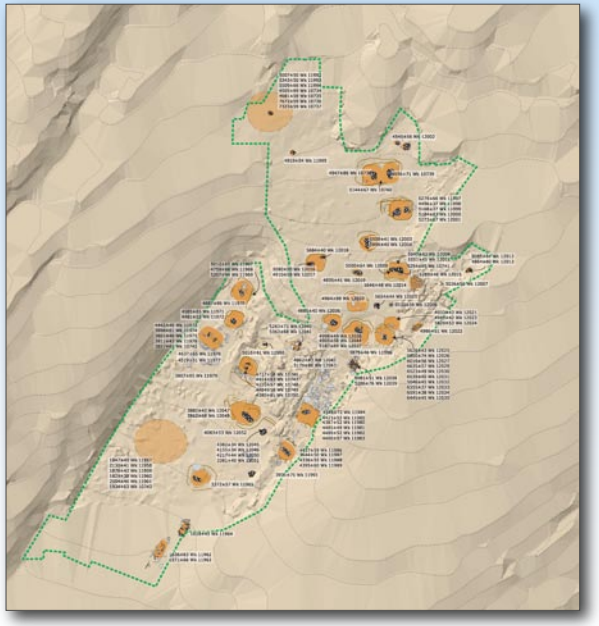
These traditional archaeological investigations were combined with extensive palaeobotanical investigations (Jensen 2004), chemical soil analyses (Linderholm 2003) and systematic investigations of traditionally "unpromising" parts the settlement areas (Ramstad, Hesjedal and Niemi 2005). The results clearly indicate that hunter-fisher settlements consisted of more than just dwellings and areas for tool production. This diverse data also raises important questions regarding traditional concepts of Stone Age settlements (Ramstad et.al. 2005).



Intense surveying and testpitting provided a complete picture of spatial and temporal transformations in the use of the island.



Normannsvika and Kilden with dwellings and assoiciated settlement features dating from 6000 BC to 1000 BC.



Combined with their limited size, the restricted number of settlement areas necessitated that landscape and micro-topography were used as an active component in the structuring the organization of space at the settlement areas. New house types were integrated with topographical features in a manner which contrasts with the traditionally more uniform pictures of Stone Age dwelling types and typology.