Island settlements and the use of space: Maritime hunter-fishers through 11,000 years at Melkøya, Arctic Norway

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The Melkøya project is an interdisciplinary project based on archaeological excavations on the island of Melkøya, Arctic Norway. Large-scale excavations were conducted in 2001 and 2002. Completion of the project will be in 2006.

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 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 Skarsfjorden, at 70°, 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 a few beaches on the more sheltered south side of the island, the coastline consists of sheer cliffs. The climate is oceanic; the sea never freezes and the annual median temperature is +2°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 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 plant production which attracts large numbers of fish, marine birds and sea mammals making them one of the most optimal coastal biotopes for marine exploitation.

Research strategy and results

The whole island was intensively surveyed and tested. 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: Normaunsvika, Kittåen and Sundljøer, 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 of the settlement areas (Ramstad, Hesjedal and Niemi 2003).

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).

Conclusion

- The results from the project have generated new perspectives giving a unique and detailed picture of the use and reuse 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 choice 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 landscapes, 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.

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

LITERATURE


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