

Invisible Activities

Early Neolithic House Remains in Western Östergötland

BY TOM CARLSSON & ANDREAS HENNIUS

Abstract

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Stone Age research traditionally has a strong association with studies of artefacts, while our knowledge of settlement structures and variations in the disposition of the landscape is still deficient. This is not just a question of resource utilization but also of the link between material culture and spatial disposition, both at the habitation site and in a broader mentally organized landscape. The article mainly discusses two newly discovered Stone Age settlement sites, Hulje and Abbetorp in western Östergötland. The sites have several points in common as regards their date and the type of remains, which include remains of several small houses. Unlike most excavated Stone Age sites, neither Abbetorp nor Hulje had any traditional find material. The remains of the houses and the absence of artefacts accentuates the question of the link between activities and material expressions.

*Tom Carlsson, Riksantikvarieämbetet, Järnvägsgatan 8, SE-582 22 Linköping, Sweden.
Andreas Henni, University of Göteborg, Sweden.*

Introduction

One of the paradoxes of rescue archaeology is that attempts to avoid certain ancient remains can lead to finds of other, unexpected ones. Excavations in Östergötland in connection with improvements to the infrastructure have yielded many surprising results. For example, several Stone Age sites have been excavated, providing a basis for new questions. The sites were discovered after large-scale stripping of the ground to excavate other types of remains. Stone Age sites are traditionally associated with large quantities of finds, but the sites in Östergötland were almost without finds. In this article, two of these sites will be studied, Abbetorp and Hulje in western Östergötland. The lack of finds is a problem for the interpretation of the sites, but it

also invites a broader discussion of spatial disposition and Early Neolithic settlement patterns.

Artefacts, spatial disposition, and world-view

People do not live in chaos. We organize the world around us according to a pattern that makes reality comprehensible. This pattern is expressed through the individual's actions within something that can usually be called a culture. The culture includes the assembled world-view: structures, traditions, actions and the results of actions, and so on. In prehistoric times, the world-view likewise consisted of an accumulated complex of correspondences and relations

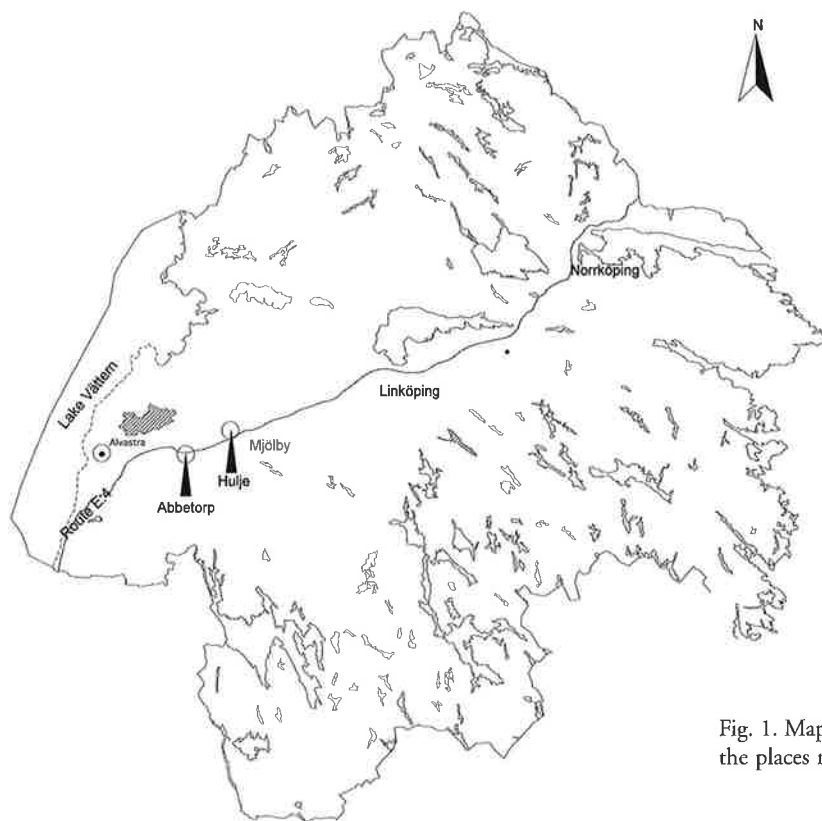


Fig. 1. Map of Östergötland showing the places mentioned in the text.

created by people's actions. Thus all expressions of material culture – houses, artefacts, pits, and so on – were components in this all-embracing structured world order. Each component reflected the whole without being hierarchically ordered – each one of them had something to say about the order of the world. The meaning of individual objects stands in a relationship to the cultural codes, which can be summed up in the now somewhat tired term *context*. Spatial disposition, the physical use of the environment, is part of the context. The landscape, space, was organized according to a network of activity components, in which hearths, knapping places, hunting places, and the like were assembled into a picture that depicted a “spatial story” of events and activities (Thomas 1993, p. 81). Everyday chores were planned and carried out according to this mental picture of how space was constructed. Every archaeological excavation thus

uncovers fragments of this assembled world-view, this context of meaning, hidden in seemingly disparate and unstructured remains. The houses discussed in the following text were part of such a social construction and organization of the landscape, where different activities were woven together in an overall context. The term “house” should not be regarded as traditional house-living in a modern sense but rather in an activity-related sense, with different house-structures fulfilling different social and cultural needs for the living people.

Material culture should be regarded as a factor actively working along with non-material cultural systems, the two standing in a reflexive relationship. Artefacts are therefore not just physical expressions of these systems. Material culture also has a broader meaning, which accentuates identity – one's own and others'. Meaning is bound to place and time and is thus

constantly changing in a continuous process. Both the presence and the absence of artefacts at a site are traces of deliberate actions, while simultaneously being traces of the use of the codes encapsulated in the artefacts. Function and cultural meaning are thus dependent on each other.

Local expressions within a region – two Early Neolithic sites in western Östergötland

Östergötland is a very interesting area for the Neolithic, with places such as Fagervik and the Säter sites, Alvastra pile dwelling, the battleaxe grave at Berg, and the northernmost megalithic grave in Sweden at Alvastra. It was noted early in the 20th century that the plains of western Östergötland appeared to be a central area in the Early Neolithic, with a large number of pointed axes and thin-butted axes (Nerman 1911). Several sites from this period have been revealed by stray finds on the shores of Lake Tåkern, for instance at Charlottenborg. Finds from the Funnel Beaker Culture also appear to be centred in this part of the province (Browall 1985). Several sites excavated in the 1990s have provided new information, not just about artefact composition but also about the internal organization and building tradition of the habitation sites. At Brunneby in north-west Östergötland, for example, a larger dwelling complex with a long-house and several smaller hut-like structures from the Early Neolithic were excavated (Larsson 1994). A similar building was also excavated beside the River Stångån in Linköping. The house was dated by ¹⁴C to the Late Neolithic, the finds seemed to belong to the Battleaxe culture (Hedvall 1996).

The two sites to be described here lie in the flat, open arable landscape that characterizes western Östergötland. The areas lie in the transitional zone between the fully tilled land of western Östergötland and the forested southern area (Fig. 1).

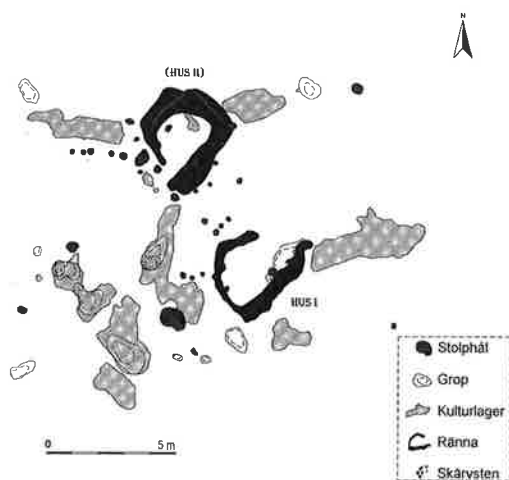


Fig. 2. The house remains at Abbetorp.

Abbetorp

The excavated area in Abbetorp consisted of approximately 12,500 m², and the excavation focused mainly on remains of a workshop character from the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. Very few Stone Age artefacts were found, but the remains of two Early Neolithic houses were discovered. These were located on a natural terrace measuring about 30 by 45 m at a height of about 119 m above sea level, west of what was probably once a brook or a larger body of water. The houses were covered with a layer of sand about 0.05 m thick and were only partly visible after the ground had been stripped by a machine. The layer of sand meant that any finds associated with the house remains were not disturbed by later activities (Pettersson *et al.* in prep.).

House remain I consisted of a D-shaped wall trench about 2.5 x 2.8 m with the opening facing north-east. The southern part of the trench was deeper, containing a large quantity of charcoal and fire-cracked stones. In the wall trench and close to the house there were several post-holes which are in all probability associated with the structure (Fig. 2).

House II was located only about 2.5 m north-west of house I and had its opening facing west. It measured about 2.5 x 2.5 m. The houses show great similarity in size and structure, but house II was better preserved. The central wall trench was surrounded by several thin occupation layers. Here too the southern part was deeper, containing soot, charcoal, and fire-cracked stone. In the wall trench and beside the house there were post-holes which are in all probability associated with the structure (Fig. 2).

As yet there is only one analysed charcoal sample from these house remains. This ^{14}C -date of charcoal taken from the central wall trench in house II places the house in the Early Neolithic (3762–3644 BC, 1 sigma calibration, Ua-8746). The very similar appearance and structure of the houses makes it likely that they are contemporary, but it is impossible to say whether they existed at the same time. There are further two ^{14}C dates from the excavated area which indicate Early Neolithic activity in the area. The samples together give a date around 3900–3500 BC.

Hulje

The excavation was carried out on a relatively prominent plateau about 120 m above sea level, and comprised a village-like settlement complex and a children's cemetery from the Roman Iron Age. The excavated area covered about 10,000 m². During the Stone Age this ridge must have been located close to the wetland as it was then. A more detailed description can be found in Swedish in the excavation report (Carlsson *et al.* 1996).

Stone Age activities were suggested by two axe fragments of a Middle Neolithic character, but chiefly by the documentation of at least three semicircular house structures. Only one of these could be safely dated by ^{14}C . The result showed that the structure was used c. 3600 BC (3620–3575, 1 sigma calibration, 4,720 ± 50 BP, Beta 84381). A further two dates from the excavation area suggest human presence in the Early and Middle Neolithic (Carlsson *et al.* 1996, p. 18).

The best-preserved house consisted of a sooty, almost D-shaped wall trench with post-holes. Close by there were several post-holes, but these were not thought to belong to the structure. The opening faced the south-east. The house measured about 4.0 x 4.0 m with an internal area of approximately 14 m². In the south of the trench there was a hearth pit with fire-cracked stones and a great deal of charcoal and soot. The location of the hearth pit may seem bewildering, but the hearth probably lay in the prolongation of the wall trench, outside the actual hut. Charcoal from the hearth pit was used for ^{14}C dating. The continuation of the trench, outside the hearth, was lined with small stones. A small fragment of an unidentified burnt bone was found in the hearth. A piece of quartz debitage was found in the western part of the trench, but otherwise there were no finds which could be associated with the time when the house was used (Carlsson *et al.* 1996, p. 20) (Fig. 3).

Houses, huts, or tree-falls?

There do not appear to be any clear definitions of what is a house and what is a hut. If we compare the structures in Abbetorp and Hulje with those at Brunneby in Östergötland and Frotorp in Närke, interesting light is shed on this discussion (Biwall *et al.* 1997, p. 285). In this article, however, we have chosen to regard the structures in Abbetorp and Hulje as remains of houses. Many natural processes can give rise to remains similar to those described here. Newell (1981) has claimed that as many as 60 per cent of the Mesolithic huts recorded in Europe are really tree-fall features. The houses (or huts) in Abbetorp and Hulje fall within the size range that Newell states as critical for tree-falls. Newell's thesis, however, is partly based on arguing in circles, as pointed out by Thorsberg (1984, p. 30) and others. If one uses Hans Göthberg's criteria for classifying remains of houses or huts, that the structure must have a distinct shape and that post-holes or other remains of roofs or walls must have been found, then it is very easy to

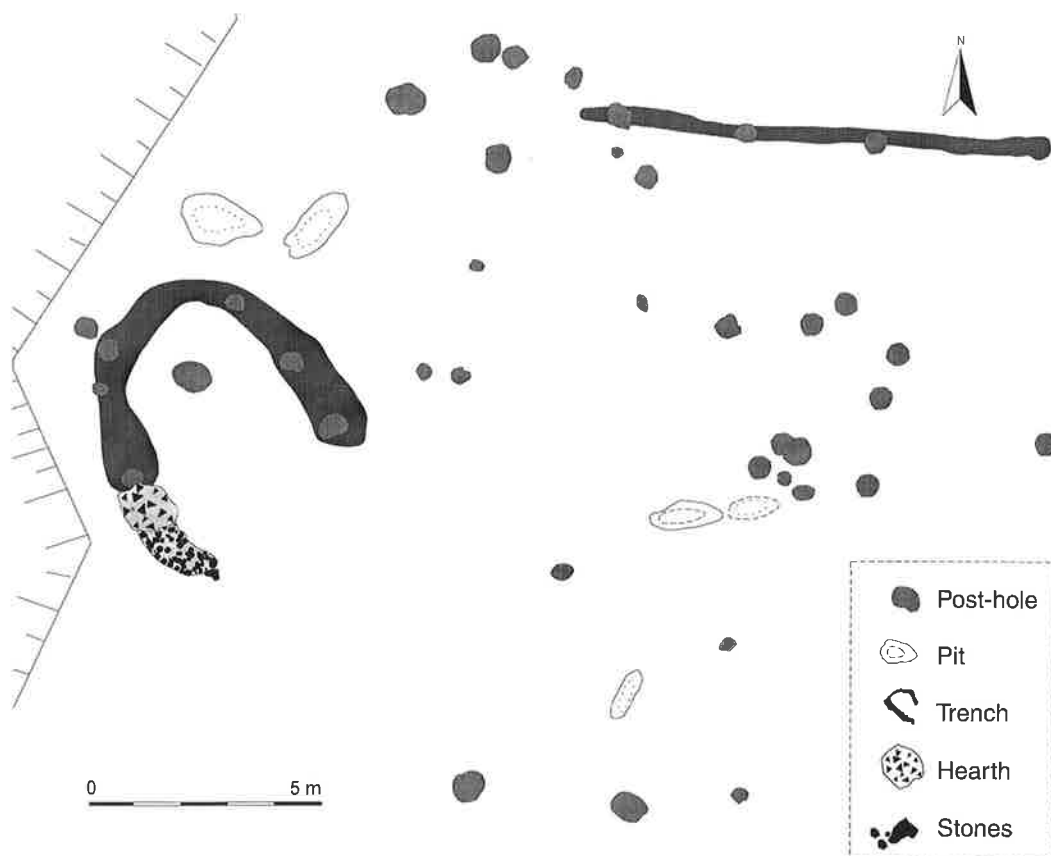


Fig. 3. The house remains at Hulje.

argue that the remains in Hulje and Abbetorp represent houses (Göthberg 1995, p. 67). In any case, the remains do not show the characteristic signs that arise when a tree is blown down (Langohr 1993, p. 44; Crombé 1993, p. 53). They do not have sunken floors, the wall trenches are very distinct and homogeneous and have post-holes attached to them. The similarity between the structures at the two sites and the contemporaneity shown by the ^{14}C dates support the interpretation of the remains as houses.

Material culture and the creation of mentally organized space

There is a deeply rooted picture of the settlement pattern during the Neolithic. Torsten Madsen (1982, pp. 201 ff.) divides sites from

the Funnel Beaker Culture in Jutland into three different categories: residential sites, catching sites, and central places. This model has also been frequently applied to Swedish conditions. It is problematic to interpret the house remains in this article as isolated hunting stations on the basis of Madsen's model. Nor can the remains be interpreted as belonging to permanent settlements because of the modest size of the houses and the sites. This once again illustrates the problem of using general models in an uncritical fashion. The houses described in this article are not unique remains; several similar structures and sites are known in Scandinavia. There has recently been an analysis of, among other things, the documented Early Neolithic houses and huts in southern and central Sweden (Biwall *et al.* 1997), and new finds have been discovered

since then, for instance in Glumslöv, Scania (Arthursson, pers. com.), and Skogsmossen, Västmanland (Hallgren *et al.* 1997)). These simple places, even though they contain few finds, have usually been interpreted as seasonally occupied hunting stations (Biwall *et al.* 1997, p. 294). The picture is probably more complicated than that. If one studies the sites individually, in their local contexts, the variations become clear and it is difficult to place the remains in any overall model. Interpretations of the activities at the houses should not be rigidly locked. To be able to discuss variations and a more pluralistic use of the landscape in the Early Neolithic, one must also open the interpretative framework to broader perspectives.

Stone Age archaeology has traditionally studied areas where traces of human activity can be demonstrated in the form of material culture. When registering settlement sites, archaeologists often proceed from tools and debitage found on the surface, and the same criteria are used for excavations. Preserved structural remains, on the other hand, are less common. The above models of settlement patterns in the Stone Age have been constructed on these grounds. The link between habitation structure and material culture, however, is often defective, and this also applies to our knowledge of the internal structure of the settlement sites and the broader disposition of the landscape. In "new archaeology" the material remains represented the structure of an entire cultural system (Binford 1962, pp. 217 f.). The absence of artefacts at the Stone Age sites of Hulje and Abbetorp makes it difficult to interpret what the remains represent, but it also opens up discussions of a broader perspective on local and regional variations in Early Neolithic settlement patterns and on the function of the houses. The occurrence of material culture at a site, like its absence, is a trace of deliberate actions in which material culture cannot be distinguished from economic, ideological, or functional aspects of society. It does not seem likely that Stone Age people spent all their time making stone tools, and there are also

numerous examples to show that the material they worked has only been preserved under exceptional conditions. The problem with the great faith in knapped stone remains can be elucidated by the studies carried out at Rømyr II, a Preboreal settlement site in Norway. A great deal of the knowledge of the Early Mesolithic in Norway is based on material from this site. By refitting the stone it was concluded that site was visited during a very short time, probably just a few days, by a small group of people, two of whom knapped stone tools (Skar & Coulson 1985, p. 181).

The sites at Abbetorp and Hulje cannot be placed in any model for settlement patterns in the Early Neolithic. The problem is further complicated by ethnographic studies showing highly varied uses for small houses of this type. These ethnographic examples prove nothing, but they can give us ideas which may make it easier to interpret the house remains in Östergötland. For example, Kristian Kristiansen describes the Iban of south-east Asia, who have huts close to their fields which are periodically used during seed-time and harvest and when burning new fields in preparation for cultivation. It is not considered suitable to live in the traditional long-houses at these times (Kristiansen & Hedeager 1988, p. 56). There are also numerous examples of buildings associated with cultural conceptions, being used for weddings, childbirth, menstruating women, gender-related activities, and so on (Mead 1965; Shostak 1981; Kulick 1987). Hallgren likewise takes a social and cultural approach when discussing a suggested interpretation of the Late Mesolithic and Early Neolithic remains at Pärängsberget. The point of departure is the find of a combined rubbing stone and grindstone in a house, suitable for two activities that are traditionally regarded as gender-related: female grinding of grain and male sharpening of axes. Hallgren nevertheless interprets Pärängsberget as a site where women from a nearby permanent settlement spent the summer to collect vegetables and hunt small game, while making the tools required

for these activities (Hallgren 1996, p. 11 f.).

Some of the problems in Stone Age archaeology are the traditional image of the period as rich in finds and the small excavation areas which only capture activities that leave a lot of finds. The Hagtorp excavation, covering 232 m², for example, was the biggest excavated Mesolithic site in east central Sweden until the mid 1980s (Lindgren 1996, p. 31). It goes without saying that the Abbetorp and Hulje excavations, covering about 10,000–12,000 m², give a much greater potential to discover a more varied habitation structure.

The building of a house is undoubtedly a result of a very deliberate and important act which may be seen as a stage in the creation and structuring of a mental landscape which abolished the natural chaos. The houses at Abbetorp and Hulje functioned as components in the structured reality in which Early Neolithic people lived. They were part of the spatial disposition, belonging to a spatial history in which different activities were carried out at different places in the landscape, presumably also by different people. All physical remains, including houses, represent an activity which stands in relation to other activities. At many Stone Age sites there is noticeable structuring with separate activity areas, visible above all as knapping places for different kinds of stone. The link between material culture and organized space is made visible between the separate activity areas. At Abbetorp and Hulje there is nothing to suggest any working of flint or quartz, neither at the houses nor in the vicinity. Nor was any pottery associated with this phase of the Stone Age found. This shows clearly that a Stone Age site should not be regarded as being confined to the area around the stone-working place, the dwelling house, or the long-house; it may cover a much wider geographical area.

The invisible activities performed in and beside the houses at Abbetorp and Hulje represent activities which did not leave any visible traces other than the remains of the actual house structures. It is impossible to interpret these

activities on the basis of the finds. The communicative links between the invisible activities and the cultural codes for the Abbetorp and Hulje houses were nevertheless clear to the people who occupied these sites in the Early Neolithic.

In 1998 one more Early Neolithic site, similar to Abbetorp and Hulje, has been excavated in Bäckaskog, very close to Abbetorp (Larsson & Molin, pers. com.). In several other excavations in the area Early Neolithic activities are documented too. By interpretation of the disparate Early Neolithic footprints in this area we may in the future find a pattern for the everyday chores of the people living in this specific time and space. To be able to do this we need to consider all the empirical material and not just sites with large amount of finds or house remains in the area. To be able to interpret, we must have broader interpretative frameworks and not let ourselves be steered by inculcated research traditions. This applies both to the relevance of material culture and to settlement patterns in the Neolithic. We are not looking for a new model to replace an old one but seek the way people in *this* area organized their activities, whether physically represented or invisible...

Personal communications

- M. Artursson, Riksantikvarieämbetet, Avdelningen för arkeologiska undersökningar, UV Syd.
M. Larsson & F. Molin, Riksantikvarieämbetet, Avdelningen för arkeologiska undersökningar, UV Öst.

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