

# Gardening Life

Reconsidering the Early Neolithic of East Central Sweden

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## Abstract

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The objective of this paper is to present an understanding of the Early Neolithic of east central Sweden that does not take the concept of "Funnel Beaker Culture" as its point of departure. By beginning to consider the meaning of places rather than the contents of "cultures", new ways of understanding the Neolithic can be presented. Sites where Funnel Beaker pottery was used are argued to have been places ascribed specific cultural meanings during the Early Neolithic. The two concepts *gardens* and *beaches* are introduced in an attempt to construe places where funnel beakers were used in other ways than at settlements. Gardens and beaches are presented as contexts facilitating other ways of understanding place. Gardens, localized in inland areas, were places where cereals were cultivated and also places for episodic social gatherings during which cattle consumption appears to have been of great importance. Beaches are liminal zones in between land and sea, places beyond the world of the living where the dead were handled and sometimes deposited.

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## Introduction

What the past is understood to be has undergone profound changes for many archaeologists during the past decade, yet "Stone Age cultures" still seem to be viable concepts for many. Research into the Neolithic of east central Sweden, for example, is heavily dependent on the notions of the Funnel Beaker Culture, the Pitted Ware Culture and the Battle Axe Culture. In this paper I would like to present an account of the Early Neolithic in the area that does not take the presence of a Funnel Beaker Culture as its point of departure; other ways of making sense of the period will be presented instead. Even if the cultures are still at large, the kind of phenomenon they are understood to represent has changed

quite fundamentally. The present idea of what a Stone Age culture is does not correspond to what a culture was perceived as by earlier generations of archaeologists. Culture-historical approaches saw cultures as groups of people who handed down specific ways of life, customs and traits from one generation to the next. This traditional view of an archaeological culture has been successfully replaced by a processual archaeology that has chosen to separate a society's economic base from its cultural superstructure. The Neolithic cultures of east central Sweden, when considered by most research today, are simply nothing other than different superstructures founded upon separate modes of subsistence. The cultures have been successfully transformed into completely subsistence-based

phenomena. The geographical distribution of pottery types coincides well with the region's different ecological zones and the cultures have therefore continued to function as meaningful concepts. What we are dealing with are not traditional cultures, however, but the idea of societal systems adapted to environmental factors. Culture itself is understood to be "Man's extrasomatic means of adaptation" (cf. Damm 1991, pp. 13 f.). I have previously claimed that these cultures/societal adaptations need to be dissolved as they effectively constrict any possibility of establishing new ways of perceiving the Neolithic in the area (Gill 1998). The idea that different cultures based their living on different modes of subsistence is also becoming increasingly difficult to uphold as more and more shards of pottery turn up in the "wrong" places (cf. Strinnholm 2001, pp. 90 ff.).

In this attempt to reconsider the Early Neolithic of east central Sweden I will begin the account by addressing problems concerning subsistence and social organization. Two main ideas will be questioned. The first is that subsistence was wholly or partly based on agriculture and the second that settlement consisted of sedentary groups of farmers living on farmsteads for large parts of the year. Instead, it will be suggested that the archaeological record can be read as traces of a more mobile and mainly foraging way of life. Sites with pottery where farms are thought to have been found will be interpreted in other ways, as will the idea that beach-bound sites with pottery primarily functioned as sites for fishing and seal hunting.

The aim of this paper is to create an understanding of the Neolithic of east central Sweden not founded upon culture-historical or social systematic perspectives. Questioning the idea that places where pots were used once had main functions within subsistence systems is a first step towards this goal. By attempting to reconsider the significance of places where Funnel Beaker pottery was used, an alternative reading of the archaeological record can be presented instead.

## Recent research

Funnel Beaker pottery was used in two main kinds of location during the Early Neolithic. Beach-bound sites are found along the coast of the Littorina Sea, inland sites are often located on sandy plateaus and slopes, one or sometimes a couple of kilometres away from the coast. Some inland sites are also found in the interior of large islands in the archipelago (fig. 1). When sites with Funnel Beaker pottery were first identified they were understood as settlements belonging to a past population of farmers (Florin 1938, 1958). Traces of buildings on many of these sites have also been identified (Eriksson *et al.* 1994; Apel *et al.* 1997; Artursson 1997; Hallgren *et al.* 1997). The beach-bound sites have since then been interpreted as coastal fishing and hunting sites (Welinder 1982). Some of the coastal sites are also assumed to have functioned as places of aggregation where families of farmers living more or less permanently in the interior occasionally met up (Apel *et al.* 1995, pp. 94 f.; Hallgren 1998, pp. 65 ff, 2000, pp. 173 ff.) The presumed importance of agriculture in the region has also been questioned, however, and it has been suggested that the division of sites into agricultural sites and beach-bound hunting/fishing sites is superfluous. A population with a subsistence mainly based on the exploitation of marine resources is proposed to have shown an interest in farming and as a consequence having chosen to seek out settlement locations from where both an agricultural and a marine economy could be pursued simultaneously. Most of the inland sites in reality were situated quite close to the coast (Segerberg 1999, p. 199). It has also been suggested that the division of mainland sites and sites based along the coast and in the archipelago, not being different kinds of settlement belonging to a single "Funnel Beaker Culture", probably reflects a cultural divide between a mainland population of farmers and a mobile archipelago-based population (Åkerlund 2000, 2001).

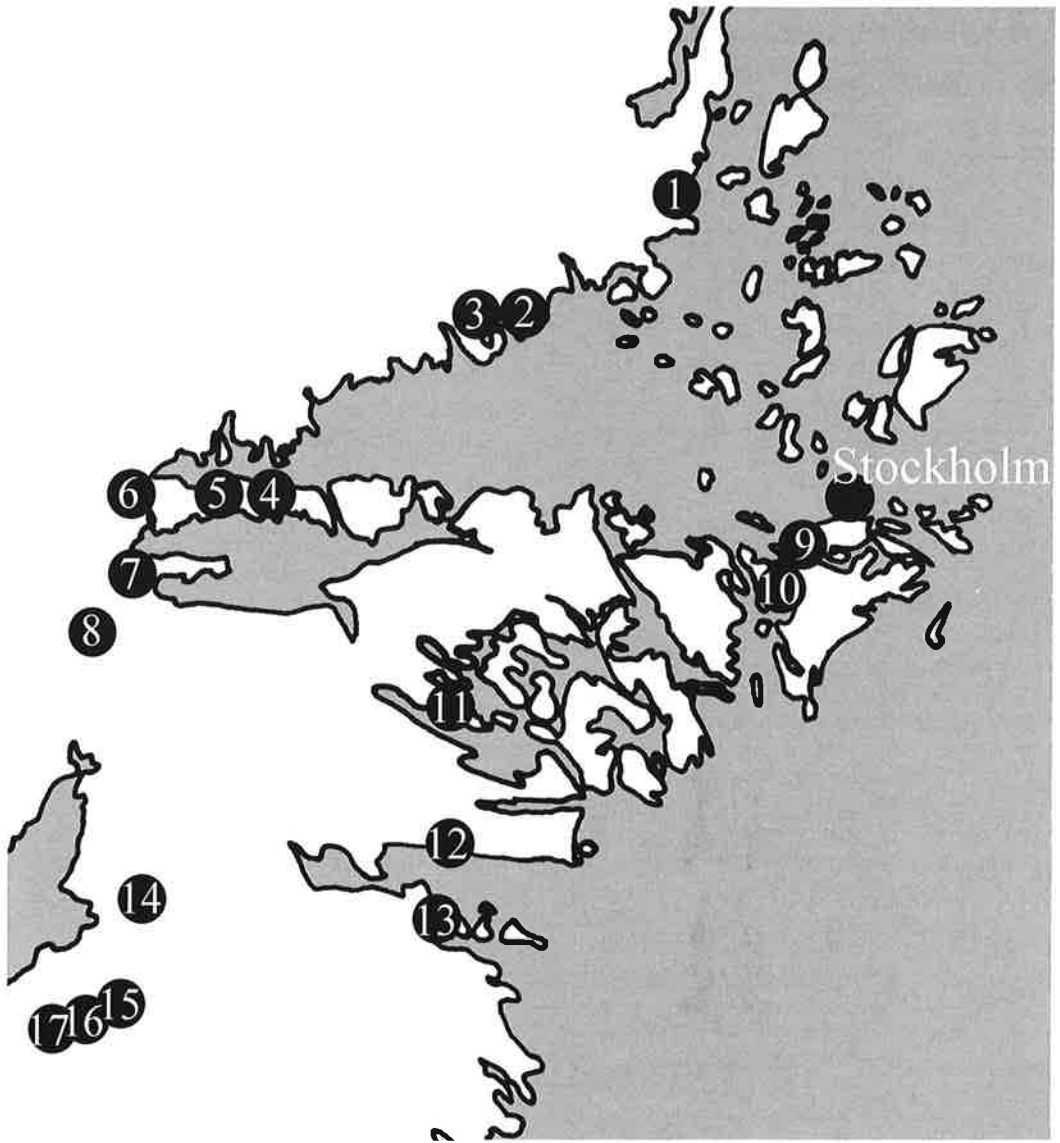


Fig. 1. Eastern central Sweden with an Early Neolithic coastline about 35 metres higher than today. Sites mentioned in the text. 1) Anneberg, 2) Bollbacken, 3) Fågelbacken, 4) Skogsmossen, 5) Skumparberget, 6) Hjulberga 1 & 2, 7) Bäcklunda Gärd, 8) Frotorp, 9) Häggsta, 10) Korsnäs, 11) Östra Vrå, 12) Fagervik, 13) Tåby, 14) Brunneby, 15) Hulje, 16) Abbetorp, 17) Bäckaskog.

What all these models have in common is the idea that sites with pottery were integral parts of Early Neolithic economic systems. Animal bones, microfossils, and spatial position are all understood to be reflections of subsistence strategies, parts of an Early Neolithic economic base. Material culture and phenomena that

cannot directly be understood as part of the base, such as architecture, social organization or pottery design, thus become part of a superstructure, the religious, cultural and political dimensions of society that can be perceived of as separate from the fundamental base of subsistence. This kind of base-

superstructure archaeology is unfortunate, though, as it gives the impression that economy is a phenomenon separable from the social, something essential to all societies that can be understood in itself, with its own universal rules and rationality. Possible reasons for historical change are thereby also reduced to questions of economic change. Why changes in subsistence came about, as a result of either external pressures to society or internal convulsions within, become explanations of why cultural groups, understood as societal adaptations, emerge or disappear.

The reasons why these two different kinds of site were situated where they were might however have had nothing to do with an area's carrying capacity or site catchment potential. The reasons why pots were used in certain places could primarily have been a social phenomenon and should therefore probably not automatically be subordinated to ecological considerations. As an alternative to these materialist approaches it has been suggested that "pottery sites" need to be construed in comparison to places like south Scandinavian earthen long mounds, causewayed enclosures and megaliths. Types of place completely absent in east central Sweden, sites with large amounts of Funnel Beaker pottery were probably not settlements and therefore need to be understood in other ways (Carlsson 1998, pp. 37 ff.).

In what follows I intend to examine these pottery sites closely. The agricultural sites situated inland will be labelled "gardens" and the shoreline sites "beaches". These labels, however, are not intended to function as new archaeological categories but as interpretations and I am therefore not going to define them. Material culture is signified in relation to a context: the context of "settlement" thus enabling certain kinds of signification, arguably "economic" in one way or another. By creating other contexts, in this case gardens and beaches, other ways of signifying the material culture found at these places can be presented, and other meanings can be construed instead. Pottery sites were ascribed culture-specific meaning during the Neolithic, a

meaning that simply should not be reduced to a question of adaptive function. Even though gardens and beaches should not be mistaken as past contexts in any way, they at least provide an opportunity to create new ways of understanding these places, understandings that hope to lie well clear of neo-evolutionist archaeological discourse. I will however begin this attempted re-interpretation, perhaps surprisingly, by considering questions of settlement and subsistence.

## Settlement and subsistence

Conditions at the sites of Brunneby, Bäckaskog and Tåby in Östergötland and at Bäcklunda Gård in Närke raise some questions concerning the notion that sites with large amounts of pottery were once the basic units of settlement in eastern Sweden. At these sites remnants of buildings of an Early Neolithic type were found in locations that were otherwise practically void of any Neolithic artefacts (fig. 2) (Larsson 1994; Molin *et al.* 1999; Hörfors 2001; Karlenby 2001; Karlenby & Knabe 2001). At Bleckenstads Gård in Östergötland another building found in similar material circumstances has also recently been uncovered (personal communication, Tom Carlsson, Riksantikvarieämbetet, 22 April 2002). It appears to be the case that buildings were not only raised on inland pottery sites but also in places where pottery was not routinely used to prepare food and where stone tools were not made. The traces of buildings in these places could very possibly indicate a way of life beyond the sites so far designated as major settlements. What these buildings suggest is a difference between sites that are highly visible in the archaeological record and sites that aren't, although buildings were erected in both kinds of location. The recent findings could be understood as indicating that buildings found on sites with pottery in east central Sweden were only minor parts of what once were much more widespread and diverse systems of settlement. Buildings found on sites with pottery should

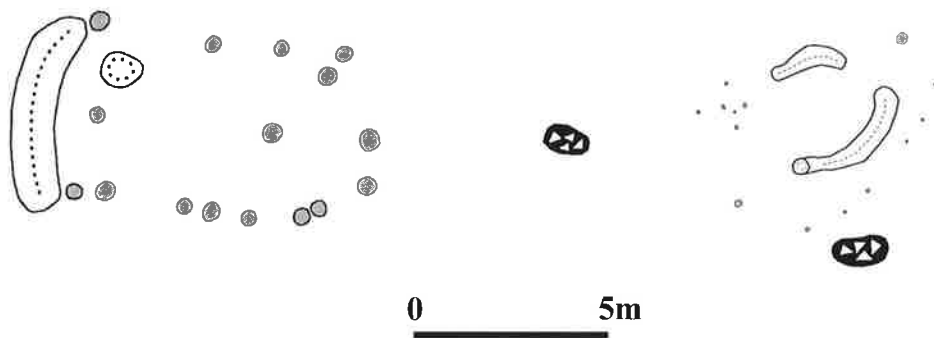


Fig. 2. On the left the remains of a building identified at Brunneby and on the right remains found at Bäckaskog. Pictures from M. Larsson 1994 and Molin *et al.* 1999.

therefore perhaps not be seen as the main units of settlement, since they probably only represent a limited part of a much larger totality.

Considering the lack of “agricultural” material culture at the sites of Brunneby, Bäckaskog and Bäcklunda Gård, there does not appear to be any real reason to connect the buildings to the practice of agriculture itself; it therefore also appears possible to question any idea that the buildings housed a sedentary group of farmers. Bäckaskog and Bäcklunda Gård have also been interpreted as temporary settlements used on a seasonal basis (Molin *et al.* 1999; Karlenby 2001). The lack of accumulated materials at Brunneby and Bleckenstads Gård could also perhaps be considered an indication that these sites were used in a similar fashion. Traces of buildings found on sites with pottery and sites without were in this scenario not so much sedentary homes around which people’s lives were centred, but rather minor parts of larger settlement systems where buildings in different locations were used at different times and probably also in different ways. Sites where pottery was used were one kind of place amongst many others. People were in this case not bound to a single place for most of the year but instead rather mobile, moving around between different

parts of the landscape during different seasons, settlement being mobile and flexible. Bleckenstads Gård was situated on the shore of the Littorina Sea; other sites of a temporary kind have been found on other beaches. They have been interpreted as foraging stations and usually consist of a couple of hearths and some quartz waste; no large buildings were found and neither was any pottery (e.g. Runesson 1994; Frykberg & Lindgren 1998). Mainland equivalents have been indicated at Hulje and Abbetorp in Östergötland, with <sup>14</sup>C dates and horseshoe-shaped pits indicating some kind of temporary Early Neolithic presence; hardly any Neolithic artefacts were found, though (Carlsson & Hennius 1998; Larsson 2001, pp. 52 ff.).

The presence of transient settlements of different types, spread out in both mainland and archipelago environments, suggests that settlement during large parts of the year was mobile and temporary. The small size of the temporarily used sites indicates that people could have been organized in smallish groups whilst staying both on the mainland and in coastal areas. I would like to suggest that we could be dealing with a situation where groups of people were spread out in constellations of various sizes moving from place to place on an annual basis.

Dispersing and fusing at different times and locations, leaving behind sites of different sizes and buildings of different types, with some places only used occasionally for shorter visits, others more often and for longer periods of time (cf. Thomas 1991, 1996; Whittle 1996; Carlsson & Hennius 1998; Edmonds 1999).

Attempting to reconsider the proposed settlement systems in east central Sweden by questioning the idea that inland pottery sites were the main units of settlement means that a re-evaluation of the significance of Early Neolithic agriculture is necessary. If we are indeed dealing with a mobile and flexible way of life, subsistence could very possibly have been based on the region's wild resources and people should consequently be labelled foragers rather than farmers. Indications of the importance of wild resources are also found on both inland and beach-bound sites with pottery (Welinder 1982; Kihlstedt *et al.* 1997, pp. 118 ff.).

It has been proposed that Mesolithic foragers could have actively controlled certain aspects of their subsistence. The broad-leaf forests of the late Atlantic were not pristine and untouched but utilized and manipulated. Clearings were opened creating favourable environments for the animal species and plants that were hunted and collected (Göransson 1995, pp. 59 ff.). The first farming in the region probably came about in the forest clearings created by the girdling of trees (Göransson 1995, p. 67). The introduction of cereals and domesticated animals seems, in fact, to have been rendered possible by the Mesolithic practice of creating forest clearings for reasons of procurement itself. I want to suggest that the introduction of domesticates into some of these clearings did not change the existing flexible settlement pattern. People did not suddenly settle down or begin living in a sedentary fashion in farms. Instead the new practice of agriculture was incorporated and fitted into an already existing mobile and dispersed way of life (cf. Thomas 1991; Hallgren 1996; Whittle 1996). Subsistence during the Early Neolithic could then have continued just

as before; traces of foraging are also found on every site with preserved fauna material in the region, but signs of agriculture are not. Some Mesolithic sites also show signs of reuse during the Early Neolithic in what amounts to a mobile population's repeated visits to the same places (e.g. Spång 1975; Hallgren *et al.* 1995; Olsson 1996).

The apparent importance of wild resources means that domesticates might not have been part of most people's everyday diet but instead special foods largely reserved for consumption on special occasions and at special places. Places where the presence of agriculture is evident should therefore perhaps not be understood as farms but rather as some kind of places where agricultural produce was manifested and put to use for mainly social reasons. Consequently it was also social needs, not economic ones, that determined how many animals were kept and how large the tended plots were, which means that Early Neolithic farming probably wasn't extensive at all but probably rather restricted. This could be one of the reasons why agriculture itself is so weakly indicated by pollen analysis (Segeberg 1999, pp. 156 ff.). Agriculture was simply not very important for subsistence. Places where Funnel Beaker pottery was used for the consumption of domesticates might thus have deviated from much of normal everyday life and could have been places around which mobility might have circulated. Groups of people gathered at these places and dispersed at certain points in time.

Polished flint axes in eastern central Sweden could very possibly indicate the presence of some kind of gift exchange networks in the past, connecting the area to southern Scandinavia. Groups of kin were perhaps deeply immersed in different kinds of social networks where the creation and maintenance of relations and alliances with other groups of people was of fundamental importance, marriage probably playing an important part in the creation of these bonds. It seems plausible to believe that both domesticated animals and cereals could

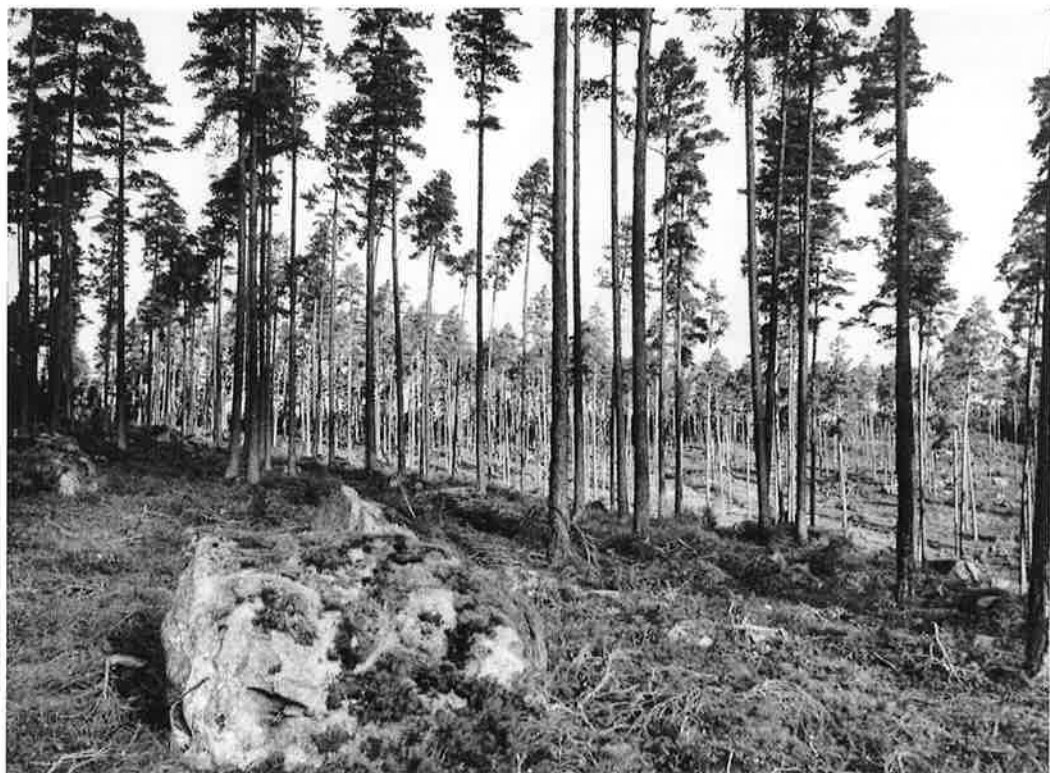


Fig. 3. Part of the extensive gardens at Östra Vrå covering the sandy slope of the Köping esker, today overgrown by fir trees. Photo: S. Florin ATA.

have been introduced from one from area to another as part of the creation and strengthening of social networks (cf. Jennbert 1984). Cattle, sheep and cereals were thus from their very first introduction social phenomena, and there does not appear to be any real reason to believe that they did not continue to be considered social resources for a long time after their introduction. Agricultural produce furthermore appears to have become considered an important social resource at just about the same time as pottery itself began to be used in east central Sweden, which must be more than a coincidence. Funnel Beaker pottery and agriculture therefore probably need to be perceived of as somehow conceptually connected. The connection between new foodstuffs and new ways of presenting and consuming food strongly suggests that the new foods were ascribed an explicit social significance.

Funnel Beaker pottery was mainly used in two different types of place. Pottery was used to present food on certain beaches and for the presentation of food at certain places in the broadleaf forests bearing strong associations to agriculture. These two types of place will here be labelled gardens and beaches.

## Gardens

Gardens are nearly always located on the light, sandy soils that have been pointed out as most suitable for cultivation considering the available technology. Hjulberga 1 and 2, for example, were carefully positioned below the gravelly summit of the Karlåsen esker but above the clay sediments found at the foot of the esker (Hulthén & Welinder 1981, p. 32). Gardens are also vast

and widespread places; the size of Skogsmossen in Västmanland, for example, is believed to be between 30,000 and 45,000 m<sup>2</sup>, which according to the excavator is quite normal for the type of site (Hallgren *et al.* 1997, p. 100). According to the register of ancient monuments, Östra Vrå in Södermanland stretches out over a 340,000 m<sup>2</sup> large part of the slope of Köping eskers, which probably makes it one of the largest gardens in the region (fig. 3). Different kinds of material culture, such as axe fragments, shards of pottery, flint tools, pits and post-holes are found spread out over these large areas in uneven concentrations, making gardens difficult to delimit, without any obvious beginnings or endings. These sites clearly stand out as very different kinds of places from the often small and “empty” settlements discussed above.

Considering the size of the gardens and their position on easily tilled soils, it appears possible to suggest the presence of a spatial connection between these areas and the areas under cultivation themselves in the past. Even though the gardens were probably used for many years, perhaps generations, before being abandoned, hardly any stratigraphic layers have been formed at all. Material seems to have been spread around horizontally instead, implying that the focal points for activities were regularly moved across the sandy slopes and plateaus. It has been suggested that cultivated plots in Östergötland could have been more or less permanent during the Neolithic (Göransson 1995, p. 80). Soils in southern Sweden were probably also possible to cultivate repeatedly for many years before a new area needed to be prepared, the main problem being probably not leaching but weeds (Engelmark 1992:371). Something similar could then tentatively be suggested for east central Sweden too. In prepared clearings, on the slopes of eskers, small-scale garden plots with different cereals and perhaps even tubers and legumes were tended. When a plot was considered to be exhausted, a new one in an adjacent area was created by girdling trees, at the same time moving the garden around the sandy plateau or slope.

Some of the post- and stake-holes found spread over the garden's sandy surfaces could then perhaps have been parts of fences and enclosures fencing off the plots under cultivation at any one time from the surrounding forest. The different pits and shards of pottery found spread around over the gardened areas are remnants of different actions that once took place in different individual plots themselves before the plot was eventually moved.

Quernstones are often found when gardens are excavated, indicating the processing of cereal grain at these sites, and at Östra Vrå, Hjulberga 1 and Skogsmossen <sup>14</sup>C-dated cereal grain itself has been noted (Lidström Holmberg 1998; Segerberg 1999, p. 161). These agricultural materials found in gardens should not be considered reflections of general subsistence strategies, but instead as specific signs of what was actually going on at these places, which appears to have been the production and consumption of agricultural produce. Gardens were places, then, where parts of a mobile and dispersed population could have converged and gathered at certain times. In this scenario, gardens represent not farmstead locations, but rather special places and occasions where agriculture was itself pursued and the social consumption of agricultural produce organized. The buildings erected in gardens could have been constructed to temporarily house the groups of people who tended the crops during the agricultural season, perhaps on behalf of a larger group of kin. If some groups, perhaps defined by gender or age, tended gardens, other groups could have been responsible for taking care of the domesticated animals. Cattle husbandry seems to have been a completely outdoor affair, with herds being driven from one pasture to another during the course of the year (Welinder 1998, p. 149). At some point in time heads of cattle were also pointed towards the gardens where they were slaughtered and eaten. Skumparberget is one of the few gardens in east central Sweden with recorded fauna material; 60% of the animal bones at the site were cattle bones, indicating the



great importance of cattle consumption in the gardens. A similar percentage could also apply at Skogsmossen where 64% of the fauna might be cattle bones, although unfortunately, there are some uncertainties about their exact identification (Hallgren *et al.* 1997, p. 94).

The goings on in gardens, where cattle and cultivated foodstuffs were eaten, were thus perhaps highly social affairs with people belonging to different groups of kin present. "Garden feasts" would have provided opportunities for making exchanges and negotiating marriages, for creating and strengthening bonds and alliances. Residues of burnt food on shards of pottery indicate that many of the funnel beakers found in gardens were used for the preparation of these meals. The use of pottery for eating probably was not very commonplace but rather unusual, marking these occasions as important, when people ate from pots, perhaps very differently from the way food was cooked in other contexts, where organic containers or other cooking techniques appear to have prevailed (cf. Thomas 1999, pp. 85 ff.).

The Funnel Beaker pottery used in gardens arguably indicates the maintenance of what probably could be called some kind of common values. It appears as if diverging traditions of Funnel Beaker decoration existed in different gardens. Both older and younger funnel beakers at Skogsmossen appear, for example, to have been decorated in similar fashions (Hallgren 2000, p. 182). The same situation also seems to be the case at Frotorp (Kihlstedt *et al.* 1997, pp. 115 f.). A certain tradition of style was apparently maintained in a garden for as long as it was in use (Hallgren 2000, p. 183). The seasonal movements from place to place in east central Sweden most probably entailed the use of well-known paths and tracks with recurring visits to well-known and named places of tradition like gardens and, as we shall see, beaches. Mobile societies like the one argued for here, which embrace routine movement from place to place, do not always understand the landscape they move around in as a territory that is theirs to be

held, with boundaries that have to be defended. Instead, an understanding of landscape that emphasizes the criss-crossing of paths and tracks and the patchwork of places and locales is stressed. A group's right to a path or place, then, was a question of tenure created by upholding a tradition of use. The rights to certain places and the tracks linking them can therefore have been maintained during the Neolithic by the traditions and customs of movement and the feelings thereby created. The physical traces of previous generations' use of the places visited, and the retelling of certain ancestral myths gave a sense of common origins which were important for the creation of a sense of community (Ingold 1986, pp. 101 ff.; Edmonds 1999, pp. 15 ff.). It seems possible to claim that each group of kin that cultivated a garden also legitimized their tenure over these places by upholding and reproducing their own specific place-bound traditions, with the same style of pottery decoration being handed down from one generation to the next. It appears possible to suggest that that we could be dealing with a situation where different kinship groups maintained their own separate gardens and herds of domesticated animals, groups perhaps also involved in some kind of social competitiveness, focused on the surpassing of each other by organizing luxurious feasts where the consumption of domestic produce was of central importance (cf. Tilley 1996, pp. 157 ff.). Tending a garden or a keeping a herd of cattle was thus an important source of group prestige.

Actions in gardens, not obeying any universal rationality, can only begin to be grasped by relating them to the meanings these places once were given. Gardens need to be construed as places once ascribed significance of a uniquely culture-specific kind. During the excavation at Skumparberget, 279 features were uncovered, many of them pits of different sizes (Apel *et al.* 1997, p. 6). Large numbers of similar pits were also identified at Skogsmossen (Hallgren *et al.* 1998). Pits have in fact been found in just about every excavated garden and are usually interpreted

as rubbish dumps in which farmstead settlers are presumed to have deposited their leftovers. Many of these pits are often more or less empty, which can be seen as an indication that they once mostly contained organic material. Instead of being recognized as rubbish dumps, pits could be interpreted as important aspects of garden feasts, perhaps as meals deposited and buried in gardens during or after periods of feasting. Buried parts of meals or parts of tools in these places might have been gifts of some kind presented to garden spirits, given for the sake of some kind of reciprocity. Gardens, being places where earth was manipulated and encouraged to sprout plants of different sorts, need to be understood as very special places indeed, perhaps connected to local concepts of fertility, growth and regeneration. Concepts and beliefs themselves structured the actions recorded archaeologically during the excavation of these sites.

Objects of different kinds found spread around gardens are often broken, burnt or sometimes deposited in pits (Artursson 1997, pp. 45 f.; Hallgren *et al.* 1997, pp. 84 ff.; Sundström & Apel 1998, pp. 170 f.). Many of the broken objects were probably worn out whilst tilling the earth, while other objects were not and seem to have been broken on purpose (Florin 1944, p. 40; Apel *et al.* 1997, p. 28). If gardens were places ascribed special meanings and if garden feasts and gardening were actions divided from much of everyday life, then objects that were used and foods that were eaten in a garden context could have acquired some kind of special significance. The breaking and burning of objects in these places could perhaps be understood in similar ways to how objects that have passed over from the secular to the sacred are understood (cf. Sherratt 1997, pp. 403 f.). Things and foods used in gardens were categorized in new ways, a consequence being that it could have become necessary to confine them within restricted spatial and temporal boundaries. The objects were simply not allowed to pass back into the “profane” sphere for reasons of cultural pollution. Gardens and garden feasts

were not only special places but also special times, controlled by the creation of temporal boundaries. Demarcating the beginnings and endings of “garden time” can have been achieved in many different ways, for instance by specific actions like the breakage, burning and burial of garden objects and meals, actions that at the same time were a way of making certain that the materials used and eaten when gardening or during garden feasts were not allowed to return to the mundane (Sherratt 1997, p. 404). The creation of Funnel Beaker pottery could be understood in a similar manner, with special pots being made exclusively for special occasions.

If gardens were places not only presumably associated with ideas of fertility, growth and reproduction but also with specific groups of kin, it seems as if the long-lived traditions upheld in them mean that they ought to have somehow become associated with the predecessors of these kin groups. Even so, gardens do not appear to have been considered suitable places for burying the dead and although many gardens have been excavated, there are few signs of burials (Kihlstedt *et al.* 1997, p. 118). “Equivalent” places with evidence of large-scale feasting in southern Scandinavia were by comparison clearly associated with the treatment of the dead. Earthen long mounds, suggested by Strassburg to have been created during *long feasts*, were probably intimately associated with the regeneration and reproduction of kinship-like social units (Strassburg 2000, pp. 373 ff.). The Stone Age world was rendered comprehensible by the remembrance of culture-specific knowledge about it, knowledge remembered and reproduced and by the citation and retelling of stories and myths (Ong 1990). Even though tales and stories about long mounds and long feasts could have been heard of and retold by people gathered in gardens, the building of long mounds was apparently not considered significant. Strassburg is one of many archaeologists to comment upon the similarities between continental LBK and post-LBK long-houses and Early Neolithic long mounds (e.g.

Midgley 1985; Hodder 1990, pp. 149 ff.; Whittle 1996, pp. 248 ff.; Bradley 1998, pp. 36 ff.). He has suggested that it was a belief in some kind of ancient long-house ancestors that rendered the building of long mounds meaningful (2000, pp. 362 ff.).

The reason why long mounds were not built in east central Sweden, then, can be understood as the consequence of a different historical situation. Long mounds were not built because ideas about long-house ancestors were simply not considered significant. The myths and tales of origin that were retold in east central Sweden were different from the ones retold and remembered in southern Scandinavia. People clearly must have explained their origins, where they came from, who they were, in a completely different manner, with stories and myths about other places and tales concerning other kinds of predecessors.

## Beaches

The use of Funnel Beaker pottery on certain beaches indicates that these, in a way comparable to gardens, were also important places of some special kind during the Early Neolithic. The beaches differ from the gardens in one major way, though: bones of domesticated animals are not usually found on them. Beaches with pottery have been interpreted as sites connected with the exploitation of wild resources, and ecological considerations are therefore believed to have determined their spatial positioning (Welinder 1982; Apel *et al.* 1995, pp. 87 ff.). As mentioned above, however, beach-bound sites without pottery have also been found and places with ceramics could therefore be considered divergent from what very well could be a pottery-free settlement norm. The beaches where pottery was used were probably important in other ways than entailed by their ecological position. A few examples of beaches where meals were cooked using Funnel Beaker pottery are Fagervik, Fågelbacken, Haggsta, Anneberg and Korsnäs

(Bagge 1938; Apel *et al.* 1995; Olsson 1996; Segerberg 1999; Olsson & Kihlstedt 2000). It is unfortunate that only a few Early Neolithic beaches have been investigated and that most of the excavations were of a limited character. Fågelbacken is the site most extensively investigated and has been interpreted as a gathering site where families from different mainland farmsteads met, utilizing the resources provided by the Littorina Sea. It has been suggested that people whilst gathered also seized the opportunity to handle some of the requirements of social life (Apel *et al.* 1995; Hallgren 1998). A major problem with the ecological explanation of Fågelbacken's geographical location is the fact that 95% of the preserved bones found on the beach are from humans. Subsistence subsequently seems to have been of minor importance and perhaps not the reason why people began to gather on the beach at all; instead Fågelbacken should perhaps be understood as a place primarily created for the handling of the dead. Animal bones and pottery found at the site could then be connected to the consumption of special meals, eaten as part of the burial-related ceremonies staged on the beach. A similar situation could also be the case at the other Early Neolithic beaches with pottery in the region. Deposited human bones have not yet been found at any of these sites, though a possible exception could be part of a burned rib found in a pit at Haggsta (Olsson 1996, p. 40). The presence of human bones on Middle Neolithic beaches is much more common, however. The handling of the dead on Middle Neolithic beaches like Fagervik, Korsnäs and Haggsta should be understood as continuations of Early Neolithic traditions probably somewhat similar to the practices uncovered at Fågelbacken. Human bones, possibly from the early middle Neolithic, found together with Pitted Ware pottery, has in fact also been found at Fågelbacken (Hallgren 2000b, pp. 25 f.).

Beaches can be understood as borderlands, places in between two different kinds of landscape, between land and sea (Helskog 1999).

Being either the one or the other, beaches could have been ascribed liminal qualities during the Neolithic. Beaches with pottery were perhaps considered to be places beyond the everyday world, borderlands in connection to other worlds and other dimensions (cf. Bradley 2000). As such, beaches could have been places well suited for handling the dead, the dead themselves being dangerous liminal beings, neither alive nor yet ancestors (cf. Parker Pearson 1999) (fig. 4.). The human bones found at Fågelbacken were cremated; at least 22 bodies or parts of 22 bodies were deposited on the beach. The bones were found in different pits and to some extent also spread out over the site. In some of the pits bones from different bodies were also mixed up with each other. The amounts of bone recovered from different pits also varied, indicating that

only certain selections of the cremated bodies were originally deposited (Lekberg 1997).

Dead human bodies are in many cultures perceived of as something unclean and highly dangerous, the bodies' soft flesh needing to be separated from the hard skeleton before becoming safe to handle (Parker Pearson 1999, pp. 21 ff.). At Fågelbacken burning seems to have been the main technique used for defleshing. No traces of any funeral pyres were found on the beach, though, indicating that early stages of the mortuary ceremonies could have been arranged at some other place. As part of a secondary ritual, perhaps at a much later point in time, parts of the cremated bodies were deposited on the Fågelbacken beach. The mixture of bones from different people means that burned bones and ashes could have been held on to, perhaps passed



Fig. 4. The beach at Häggsta. On the right the large rock outcrop of Häggstaberget is visible. The shoreline in the background is about 35 metres lower than it was during the Early Neolithic. The beach was used periodically from the Late Mesolithic until the Late Neolithic. Photograph from the excavation by P. Gustafsson. ATA.

around and circulated among the living for long periods of time whilst waiting for a suitable situation to arise before being deposited permanently (cf. Thomas 1999, pp. 136 ff.).

The deposition of human bones found on the Fågelbacken beach needs to be understood in relation to a local set of ancestral beliefs in east central Sweden. The fact that long mounds, like those found in south Scandinavia, were not built in the region indicates certain major differences in mortuary practice between these two areas. The importance of beaches as places for mortuary ceremonies during the Early Neolithic in east central Sweden could tentatively be considered in relation to interpretations of past beliefs concerning ancestral realms. Seals, for example, were important parts of the meals consumed on beaches. At Anneberg, a beach with exceptionally well preserved fauna material, seals were by far the most common mammal eaten (Segerberg 1999, p. 168). The consumption of seal flesh at times and places where parts of human bodies were passed over into ancestral worlds is something that probably needs to be understood as somehow connected. Seals are animals with a humanoid appearance; if seals were understood to be some kind of ancestral beings the importance of beaches as borderlands to ancestral worlds could perhaps be rendered meaningful, sandy beaches perhaps connected to myths of origin telling how society was created in a mythical past when the first seal came ashore on the primordial beach (cf. Bolin 1999, pp. 140 ff.). The respectful consumption of a seal-ancestor during mortuary ritual was perhaps somehow interlinked to the ancestral transformations processed at these places.

Funnel Beaker pottery was made and used in both south Scandinavia and east central Sweden during the Early Neolithic. This spatial distribution has been understood to indicate that, in some respect, we are dealing with a culturally homogeneous area, that is, culture understood as a group of people with shared values and beliefs or alternatively a group of people sharing a certain kind of subsistence,

determining their "social organization". The suggestion put forward here, that some of the myths of origin reproduced in east central Sweden probably differed quite considerably from tales retold in south Scandinavia, renders the idea that these two areas were culturally homogeneous severely problematic. In oral culture, as we are dealing with here, knowledge of the world, the gods and the supernatural is usually localized in and related to locally venerated places and phenomena (Hylland Eriksen 2000, pp. 230 f.).

The great probability that people from different local environments, e.g. east central Sweden and south Scandinavia, even though they shared the use of Funnel Beaker pottery probably did not share other highly important aspects of culture, such as understandings of ancestral origins, surely renders any usefulness of the concept "Funnel Beaker culture" redundant. Cultural understandings of the world were simply not the same in these two areas, and "culture" was thereby not the same either. This, however, does not mean that we should be trying to define Early Neolithic "local groups" or "regions" instead of "cultures". Culture, being a non-material phenomenon, is simply not readily delimitable physically and of course not transparently connected to the geographical distribution of certain artefacts or environments even at a local level. Perhaps the goal for an archaeology of the Early Neolithic, should not be the identification of "cultures" or "regions", but instead be aimed at attempting to interpret and understand localized ideas and meanings (cf. Thomas 1993, pp. 383 ff.).

## The end of gardening?

The abandonment of gardens at the end of the Early Neolithic marks the beginning of the early Middle Neolithic. This transition has been explained with reference to changes in subsistence strategies. Inland farming was given up in favour of hunting, fishing and collecting from coastal sites (Welinder 1980, pp. 161 f.). The argument

put forward here, that gardens were not phenomena directly connected to subsistence, means that the transition to the Middle Neolithic does not need to be considered as a period of subsistence restructuring but could just as well be understood as a period of subsistence continuity. Middle Neolithic settlements and camps are just as invisible as during the Early Neolithic, although the distribution of stray axes indicates that the interior areas were continually used (Carlsson 1987, 1991). These axes could have been used, just as before, to create clearings for both wild and domestic resources. Farming can very possibly have continued during the Middle Neolithic, as specialists on the subject of pollen analysis have argued (Göransson 1995). What changed at the Early Neolithic/early Middle Neolithic transition was, as at the beginning of the Neolithic, the social significance of domestic resources, the meanings ascribed to cattle, sheep and cereals. Perhaps agriculture even expanded, becoming more important economically and thereby rendering the meaning of existing gardening practices and feasts obsolete. As groups of people spread out over large areas and no longer chose to meet in the gardens for the consumption of farming produce eaten from funnel beakers, the social importance of garden feasts came to an end. Beaches became the only places where pots were used, and apparently the only places for social gatherings. Beaches, still important places of ancestral yore, became the "megaliths" of east central Sweden (Fig. 5.) The reason why cattle bones are hardly found on these early Middle Neolithic beaches has to do with cattle not having any significance in mortuary ritual, as they did not during the Early Neolithic either. The ancestral beliefs and actions connected to mortuary ritual were simply not connected to the consumption of domesticates. Other mammals, wild ones, continued to be given centre stage instead.

The social changes that resulted in the abandonment of garden feasts can perhaps be given perspective by considering some of the

changes going on in south Scandinavia at about the same time. At the onset of the early Middle Neolithic the tradition of building earthen long mounds was transformed into the creation of megaliths; one kind of ancestor-related project apparently changed into another. Causewayed enclosures, described as dominant places for large temporary gatherings, probably involving several clans or lineages, also began to be constructed. The presence of disarticulated human bones at enclosures indicate that these gatherings were probably connected to the goings on at megaliths (Andersen 1997, pp. 307 ff.). The deposition of axes and pottery in wetlands was also discontinued at about the same time. Pottery and axes, apparently becoming significant in new ways, began to be deposited in the ditches of causewayed enclosures and outside megalithic tombs instead (Karsten 1994; Koch 1998).

Contacts with ancestors and ultimately gods appear to have become negotiated and controlled by persons in leading positions within kinship groups and clans (cf. Barrett 1994). It has been suggested that the discontinuation of wetland deposits and the inception of depositing objects outside megaliths and at causewayed enclosures could indicate that gifts were no longer given in places directly associated with divine spirits but began to be offered to ancestors instead. Ancestors were utilized by the living as intermediaries to the gods (Tilley 1996, pp. 216 ff.; Nordquist 2001, pp. 143 f.). This change, then, appears to indicate that in southern Scandinavia structures of kinship began to be utilized in new ways during the early Middle Neolithic. Kinship was emphasized and used in innovative ways to create positions of power and leadership. Similar changes in how kinship was construed and used could perhaps also be considered in east central Sweden. The creation of power probably played an important part in Early Neolithic agricultural practices; power and social relations were what gardens and gardening presumably were all about. Gardens and probably also the deposition of pottery and polished axes in wet environments

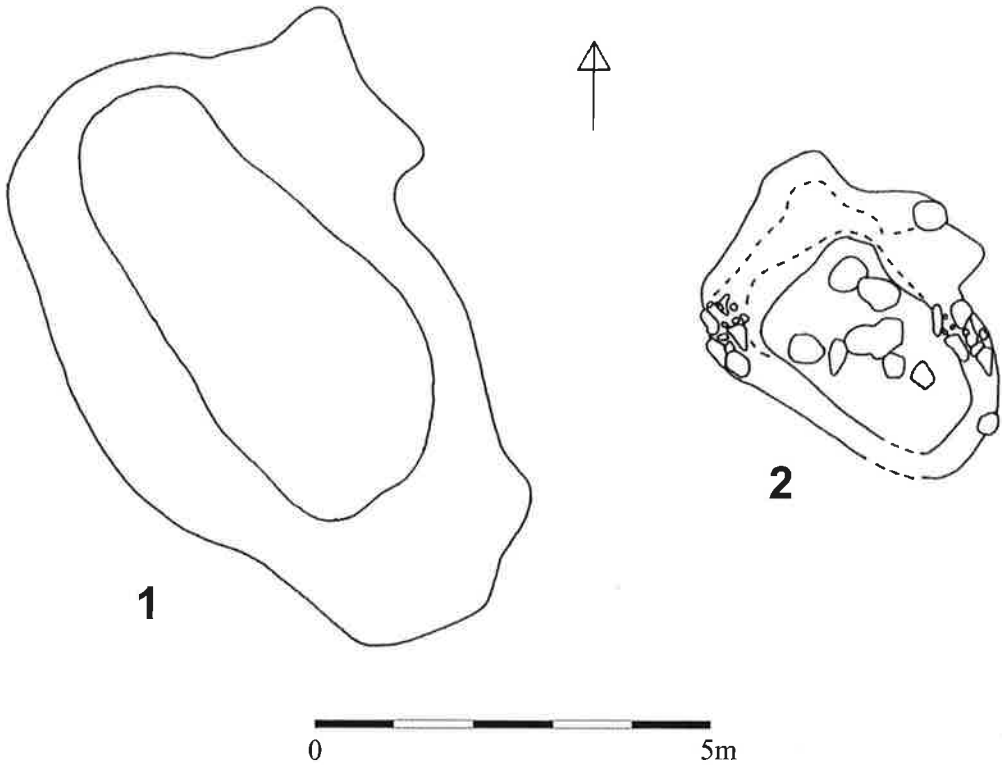


Fig. 5. Two wooden chambers probably used during some stage of mortuary rituals staged at the Middle Neolithic beaches of Häggsta in Södermanland (1) and Bollbacken in Västmanland (2). Fragments of burnt human bones were found in connection with both of the chambers as well as shards of Pitted Ware pots. The pictures from Artursson 1996 and Olsson 1999 have been slightly altered.

were abandoned at the onset of the early Middle Neolithic and, just as in southern Scandinavia, places where an ancestral presence was manifest were heavily emphasized instead. The changes in southern Scandinavia that represent new ways of understanding, interpreting and using ancestral forces locally appear to have been part of a much more widespread phenomenon with local equivalents in east central Sweden too. Social prestige was apparently no longer based on what could be given away to partners of alliance in the shape of reciprocating garden feasts and the exchange networks perhaps changed character as a result. Garden feasts were subsequently also abandoned in favour of some kind of presumably similar arrangements on the

beaches. Beaches were the places where ancestral communication and access to the dead was controllable. The decoration of funnel beakers, no longer connected to garden feasts and agriculture, also underwent changes, beakers now being exclusively used on beaches charged with new meanings fit for new worlds.

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