

Sunken Floor Houses of the Funnel Beaker Culture

A Methodological Problem

BY CLAES HADEVIK

Abstract

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Our knowledge of Funnel Beaker culture dwellings has improved considerably over the past few decades, but the number of documented dwellings is still small compared to the number of sites where remains of other types of settlements have been found. It is a well-known fact that lesser cultural layers may prove to be sunken floor dwellings. This article focuses on those larger cultural layers that are often discovered during archaeological excavations, which include features that suggest some form of dwelling. However, it is not always certain that excavations made in conjunction with development schemes can be investigated to an extent that allows archaeologists to document, with any degree of certainty, what these features in fact are representative of. I will here present and discuss several examples from the area around the city of Malmö in southern Sweden and explore some of the problems associated with the investigation and interpretation of this type of archaeological feature.

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Introduction

The following excerpt from Malmö Heritage at the Malmö Museums archaeological research programme gives an idea of our current knowledge of dwellings and the inner structure of Funnel Beaker culture settlements: “Knowledge of conditions during the Early and Middle Neolithic period is still very limited. This is also true for the rest of South Scandinavia. Major basic research remains to be done, especially in terms of improving the methods used for charting, understanding and interpreting historical evidence” (Rudebeck et al. 2001, p. 65). In an attempt to improve our knowledge and understanding of the characteristics of the Funnel Beaker culture, especially the dwellings, I will focus on cultural

layers since they have occasionally proved to contain buildings or huts. Cultural layers found on development sites are problematic since a full archaeological excavation is a major investment. However, these are often described as unproblematic and merely referred to as “cultural layers”, i.e. some kind of undefined area of activity that is only investigated extensively for the purpose of finding material that can be dated. Naturally, a cultural layer always represents a specific feature, although not necessarily an abandoned dwelling. One good example of a major cultural layer that may contain house remains is Dagstorp 21, which was discovered along the Väst kustbanan railway, and where several buildings and huts from the Early and Middle Neolithic periods were discovered underneath a major cul-

tural layer (Andersson 2004). Buildings with completely or partially sunken floors have traditionally been associated with the Late Neolithic period (e.g. Sarauw 2007). Convincing examples of this type of Early Neolithic feature have recently been presented (Andersson et al. 2006). During a recent excavation at Hyllie 7:4, near Malmö, a layer interpreted as the remains of a sunken house from the Early Neolithic period was discovered (Hadevik 2009a). Similar remains have previously been found at Riseberga Öst near Malmö (Friman et al, in press) and Burlöv 20B (Friman 2005). These remains are presented in this article, which concludes with a discussion of the methodological and interpretational problems associated with the examination of archaeological remains of this type (fig. 1).

The buildings and dwellings associated with the Funnel Beaker culture have long presented a challenge to archaeologists. The following was noted after the remains of a D-shaped hut were found at Hanstedgaard in Denmark in 1984: “The truth probably is that they lived in small irregular huts [...] and the reason why we do not find them in the settlements we excavate is either that the faint traces of their walls are overlooked, or, more often, that they have been destroyed by ploughing before excavation” (Eriksen & Madsen 1984, p. 81). In the work quoted above, the only convincing dwelling remains were considered to be round or D-shaped huts. Conditions in Sweden were very similar during this period. Mats Larsson (1984) only mentions sunken-floor-type constructions in his work

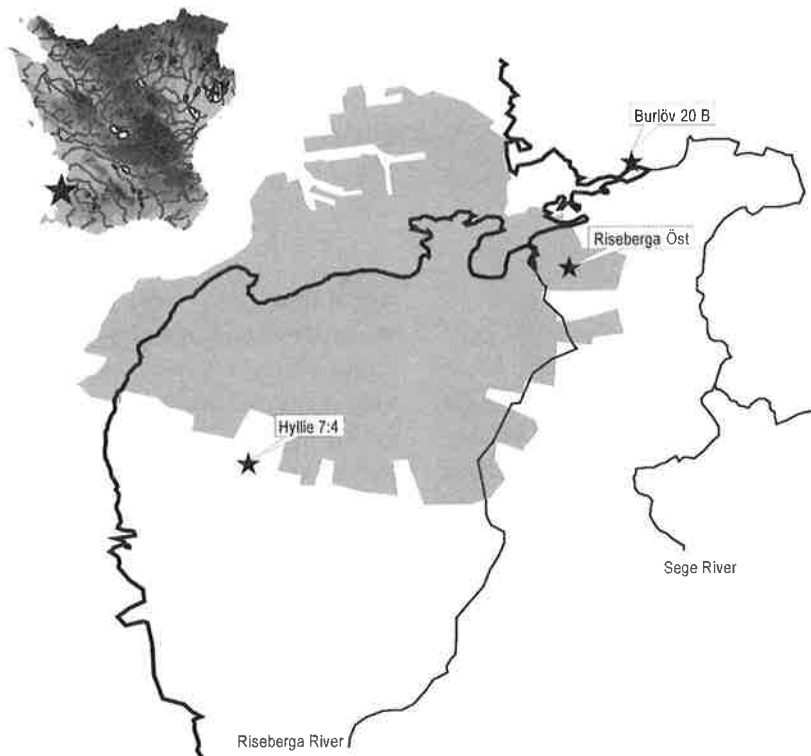


Fig. 1. Shown above are the excavation sites near Malmö, the highest shoreline (approx. 4000 BC) and Greater Malmö. In the upper left-hand corner is a topographical map of Scania. Map used: © Malmö Stadsbyggnadskontor.

on the Early Neolithic period in south-west Scania. After the discovery of the “Mossby” house in Scania (Larsson 1992) and similar structures in Denmark (Buus Eriksen 1992) it has become clear, however, that the two-aisled long-house was one house type that was used as early as the Early Neolithic period. It is also generally accepted that long-houses are not the only type of dwelling. In a compilation of Early and Middle Neolithic buildings from the Funnel Beaker culture of southern Sweden, Mats Larsson (1995) identifies three distinct types: two-aisled long-houses, features that resemble sunken floor dwellings and D-shaped or small, rounded buildings. All these were free-standing. A later compilation (Artursson et al. 2003) describes a more detailed grouping of different types of two-aisled structures: houses with rounded gables and straight or convex walls, trapezoidal and rectangular buildings, with or without wall trenches. The authors also distinguish houses from huts by defining huts as buildings without roof-supporting posts. The huts are then subdivided into three distinct types: round or oval structures; structures that are U-shaped, horseshoe-shaped or D-shaped and structures that are rectangular or trapezoidal.

Only a small number of the houses and huts that were discovered near Malmö have been included in the above-mentioned works since most of them had not been published when these compilations were made. In a previous publication (2009b) I presented a compilation of the above-mentioned and other types of structure found near Malmö, and was able to establish that most of the known building types were also represented there. Even though the number of buildings has increased markedly from the 1990s onwards, it is small in comparison with the number of sites where other types of remains from the same period have been found, and many of the features that have been interpreted as buildings – both in the Malmö area and elsewhere – are not

always entirely convincing in terms of construction type or finds that can be used as a basis for dating. The Funnel Beaker culture dwellings have therefore been hard to identify. However, with a somewhat different approach and improved investigation methods I hope to be able to demonstrate below that relatively frequently occurring culture layers may contribute to an increased understanding of Early and Middle Neolithic building practices.

Hyllie 7:4

Remains from settlements dating from the Early Neolithic period up to and including the Roman Iron Age were found at Hyllie 7:4 (part of RAÄ no. 109:1 Bunkeflo parish) (Hadevik 2009a). The feature in question (A2) appeared after the removal of top soil as a 16.4 × 6.6 m irregularly shaped, dark-coloured area with stones, knapped flint and potsherds visible on the surface (fig. 2). A modern electric cable trench runs lengthwise through the entire site. Between the southernmost point and the rest of the site was a narrow area that appeared to contain material worth investigating. It was therefore divided into two lots, one to the south (A2284) and one to the north (A2347). The deepest layers were found in the centre, where they were around 0.15 m thick, but there were layers up to 0.3 m in the south lot. The peripheral layers were considerably shallower, however. A large pit (A13911) was found during excavation of the north lot, and sooty residue in the south (A11121). Four post-holes were found after the excavation was completed and the overburden removed by means of a mechanical digger (A11087, A12576, A14285, A14828).

After the investigation was completed, A2284 turned out to be a 5.6 × 4.6 m depression with clearly defined steep sides. The depth varied, but large areas were between 0.2 and 0.3 m deep. The fill was fairly homoge-

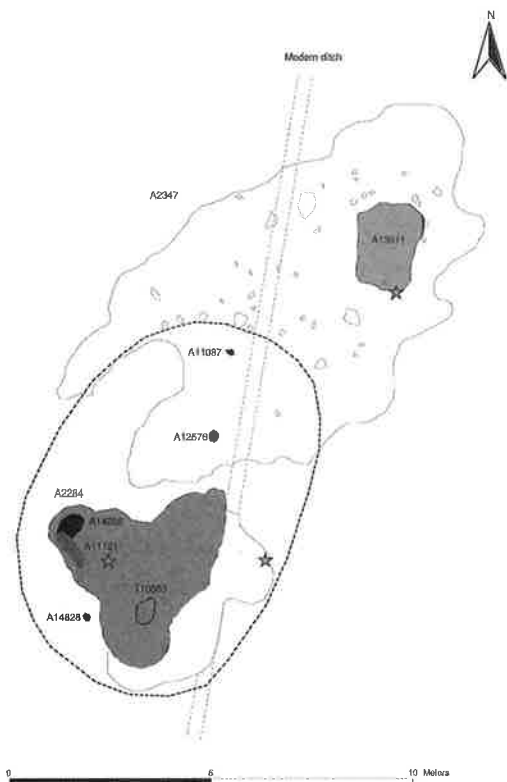


Fig. 2. Hyllie 7:4, A2. The dotted line refers to the approximate extension of building remains. Light grey area indicates sunken floor feature. Stars indicate a major accumulation of potsherds. Note that not all the objects have been found at the same stratigraphic level (see text).

neous, including some traces of soot, charcoal and fired stones. A large rock (T10883) was found at the centre of the south lot. The surface had been worked and may have been used as some form of work surface. The fill around the rock and the area to the southeast contained a great deal more soot and charcoal than the rest. A clay disc fragment was found near the base of the rock. Apart from this, potsherds (2.9 kg), flint (1.8 kg), a small amount of fired clay and a burnishing stone made from rock were found. The bulk of the potsherds consisted of big fragments of a large Funnel Beaker decorated with a row

of vertical line impressions around the rim. Some vessels were plain or decorated with cord ornamentation. The flints included few tools, mainly scrapers. The rest of the material mainly consisted of burned moraine flint and chippings as well as a small number of cores. Soil samples were taken from all contexts. The archaeobotanical material is small, however. One wheat kernel (*Triticum aestivum/compactum*), two grain fragments, one wild buckwheat (*Fallopia convolvulus*) seed and one hazelnut (*Corylus avellana*) shell were found in A2284. One hazelnut shell was also found in A13911. The wheat kernel was radiocarbon-dated and found to belong to the Early Neolithic period (4835 ± 40 BP, Ua-37379). There is good reason to assume that the rest of the finds are from the same period.

The northern part, A2347, measured 11.6 × 6.6 m. The fill was similar to that found in A2284. The layer was shallower, flatter and not dug out. The finds were the same, but with fewer potsherds (0.6 kg) and considerably more burned flint. The potsherds are all in the form of small vessel fragments with cord, twisted cord and line decor on the body, small finger impressions along the rim, plain vessels and clay discs. The flint material (5.5 kg) included a few scrapers and cores as well as chippings and, above all, burnt flint (4 kg).

During examination of A2347 a large pit measuring 2.3 × 1.6 m, A13911 was found in the north of the excavation unit. It was in the form of a 0.6 m deep, bowl-shaped depression. There was considerably more soot in the fill than in the surrounding layer. However, no fire appears to have been made in the pit itself. The finds were closely similar to those made in A2347. Due to the similarity of the finds and the fact that the pit did not become visible directly when the earth was removed, the pit was interpreted to have been made during roughly the same period as the rest of the layer. It was interpreted as a flint, stone and clay extraction pit.

Three of the post-holes were very similar, with a diameter of approximately 0.2 m, a depth of 0.2–0.3 m and a clearly pointed profile. The fourth, A14285, was considerably larger (diameter approx. 0.5 m and 0.3 m deep) with a clearly visible stone lining. The three pointed post-holes are located, if not in a straight line, at least along the alignment of the structure, which does not, however, appear to be a regular two-aisled building.

A2284 was interpreted as a simple sunken floor structure. The finds in this unit are typical of activities such as cooking, food preparation and storage. The south section of A2347 appears to have been “tidied”, and may represent the north end of the building. North of post-hole A11087 is a feature that could be interpreted as a well-defined boundary (inside/outside) facing an area with a large accumulation of stones around pit A13911. This is also where most of the burned flint was found (fig. 3). According to this scenario, this section may exemplify an activity and dumping ground next to the building itself.

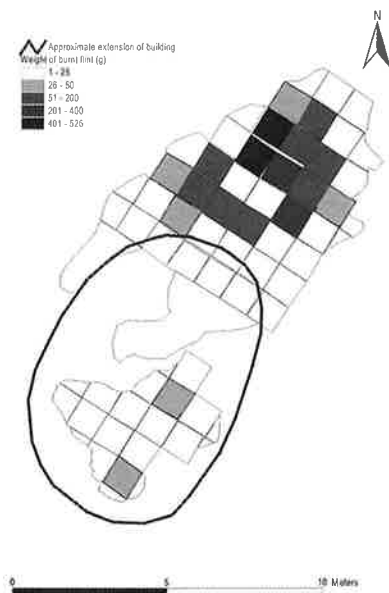


Fig. 3. Hyllie 7:4, A2 with proposed extension of building including excavation units and burnt flint remains within these.

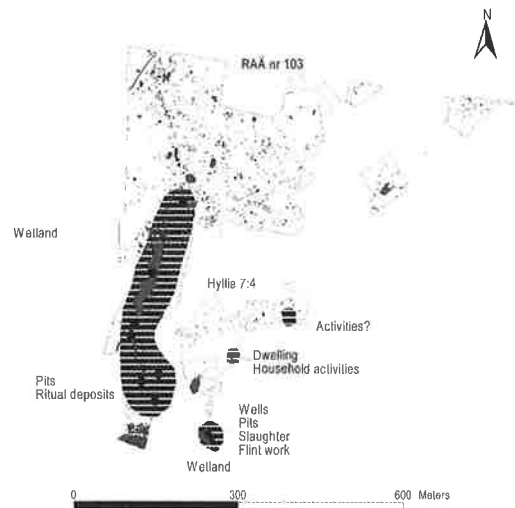


Fig. 4. Hyllie 7:4 and RAÄ no. 103 Bunkeflo parish. Remains attributed to the end of the Early Neolithic period.

The excavation site was located on level farmland sloping down towards a former wetland to the west and south. All features were found within the boundaries of Hyllie 7:4 near the southern perimeter of the wetland and were in the form of several large depressions, either wells or excavation pits (fig. 4). The material found in these also gave evidence of activities such as flint knapping and slaughter of domesticated animals and red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) close by. In the adjacent investigated area to the west (part of RAÄ no. 103 Bunkeflo parish) features attributed to the same period in the form of six pits, two of which were interpreted as ritual vessel deposits, had been found previously. A thin-butted flint axe, possibly a ritual burial artefact, was found near the western perimeter of the wetland (Hadevik et al. 2006).

These remains have been interpreted to represent a more permanent settlement occupied for only a short period of time. Judging by the radiometric dating this may have taken place around 3600 BC. Distributed over an area of at least 70,000 m² were a simple

dwelling with surrounding activity area, more peripheral excavation and activity areas and a number of individual ritual deposits, which were found near the western perimeter of the wetland (fig. 4).

Riseberga Öst

The archaeological excavation Riseberga Öst was conducted on a piece of flat farmland in an otherwise undulating landscape. The remains were representative of settlement activities from the Mesolithic period to the Early Iron Age. An up to 30 m long and 10 m wide, irregular dark colouring (A1) was found here. Eighteen 2 × 2 metre grid squares were examined (Friman et al., in press; Malmö Museer archives). In the south of the site, a superficial, elongated accumulation of

large and small stones were placed across the length of the dark coloured feature. In cross-section the feature seemed to be a shallow pit with a relatively level floor. The central parts were 0.4–0.5 m deep. The fill was, in general terms, divided into two layers of which the bottom layer contained considerably more soot than the top layer. To the north, the sooty layer covered a larger area than the top layer. The exact dimensions were never established, however. An approximately 14 m long and up to 2 m wide elongated, narrow concentration of burnt clay and charcoal was discovered in the sooty layer. Two large post-holes were found on the bottom of the centre of the feature (fig. 5), which was interpreted as the burnt remains of a daubed structure. The finds from this feature were extensive, consisting of a significant amount of flint (61.7 kg), potsherds (17.6 kg), daub (4.8 kg),

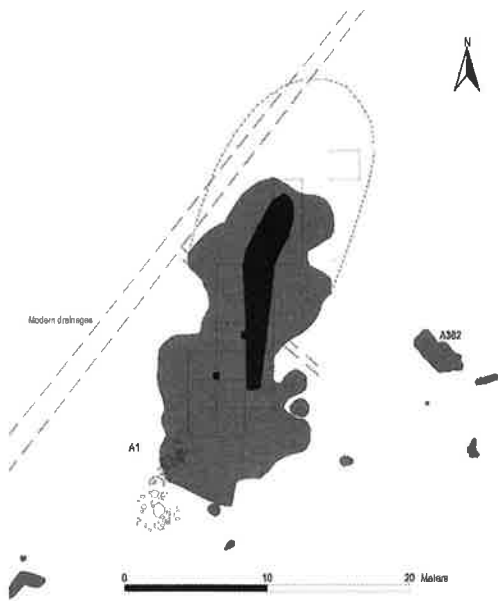


Fig. 5. Riseberga Öst. A1 with the excavated units (grid squares), stone feature, post-holes and approximate extension of the concentration of charcoal, soot and daub (dark colour). The northern boundary of the feature is unclear (dotted line). Please note that not all the objects were found in the same stratigraphic levels (see text).

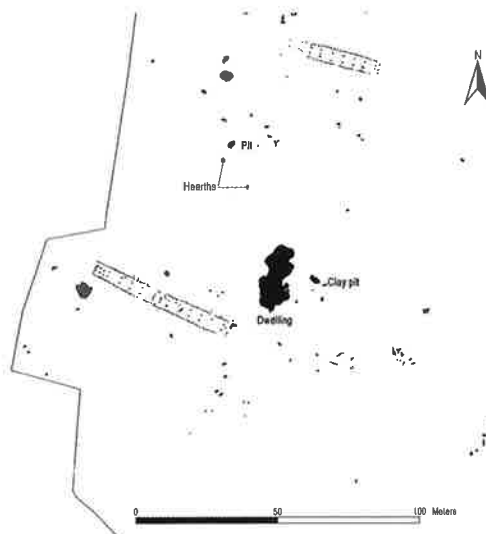


Fig. 6. Riseberga Öst. Part of the excavated area with interpretations of finds dating from the transition between the Early and Middle Neolithic periods.

a large whetstone fragment and animal bones (2.2 kg). The flint material is primarily characterized by large amounts of large knapped scrapers (168 pieces), but there are also other types of tools such as knives, drills, transverse points, sharpened chisels and fragments of sharpened axes. The chippings were mainly from the production of larger knapped tools. The potsherds derived from a minimum of 28 vessels including collared flasks. An overview of the animal bones has shown that they came from cattle (*Bos taurus*), pigs (*Sus scrofa*/domesticus), sheep/goats (*Ovis aries*/*Capra hircus*) and deer (*Capreolus capreolus*). With the exception of the daub, the largest concentrations of which were found in the bottom layer, the material found in the two layers were very similar. The pottery dates this feature to the transition between the Early and the Middle Neolithic periods, approximately 3300 BC.

A large pit, believed to have been used for clay extraction, was found near the feature (A382). The remains that were found here were similar to those found in A1, including flint scrapers, potsherds, animal bones and, above all, significant amounts of daub fragments (3.1 kg). A few more pits and hearths found on this excavation site may also be attributed to the same period (fig. 6).

Burlöv 20B

During the archaeological excavation of Burlöv 20B, an asymmetrical, dark coloured area measuring 17 × 6 m was discovered on a sandy hillock surrounded by wetland layers (A300). In this area 18 grid squares measuring 1 square metre each were subjected to closer examination (Friman 2005). There were some rocks visible on the surface in the south-west of the site, and a substantial accumulation of small stones was found during excavation (fig. 7). The investigated area is otherwise described as low in rocks, which means that the stones

must have been brought there. There was a marked concentration of burnt clay (2 kg) in the northern end. Much of the burnt clay showed clear traces of straw and was therefore assumed to be daub. Less material was found here than in the southern section, but there was still a large amount of smaller stones. The fill in this layer was reasonably homogeneous and basically consisted of one single layer up to 0.4 m thick. The circumstances did not permit closer investigation of this feature, and therefore there was no deliberate search for post-holes.

The potsherds (14 kg) mainly derived from Funnel Beakers, usually decorated with vertical lines on the body. The material also includes a large collared flask fragment as well as a few clay disc fragments. The flint (23 kg) mostly consists of chippings, but also of various types of tools, mainly scrapers (38 pieces). The animal bone material (1 kg) mainly consisted of bones from cattle and pigs, but there is also the odd bone from sheep/goat and deer, many of them burnt. No archaeobotanical material was found in the collected soil samples. A tooth from a sheep/goat was carbon-dated and determined to belong to the Middle Neolithic period (4355 ± 75 BP, Ua-14219).

The feature was interpreted to represent a culture layer in which soot, charcoal and burned clay with straw indentations indicated a burned-down wattle-and-daub wall belonging to a building. Judging by the potsherds found at the site it was dated to Middle Neolithic A, period 1, approximately 3200 BC. It was also surrounded by peaty layers in one of which there was also a small pit (Fig. 8). The layers were not thoroughly investigated, but in the west potsherds and other material were found. These were typologically dated to the early Middle Neolithic period A, i.e. the same period as the larger culture layer. The layers were determined to be deposits. Another two culture layers were found east of the fea-

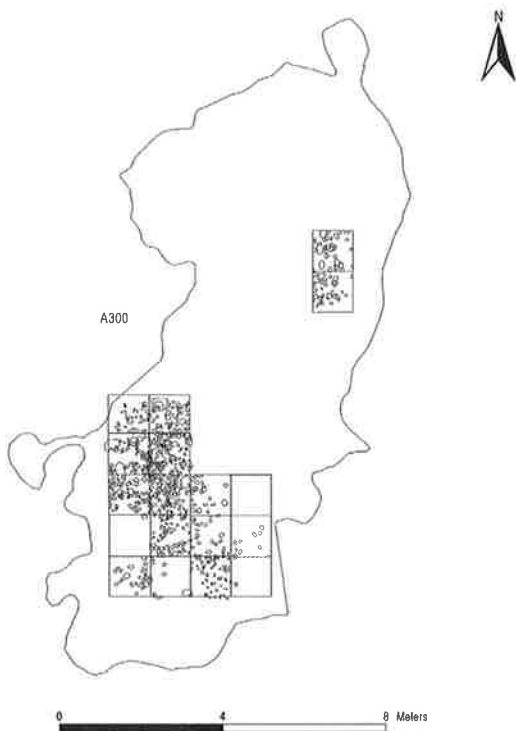


Fig. 7. Burlöv 20B. A300 with excavated units and the distribution of rocks and stones within them.

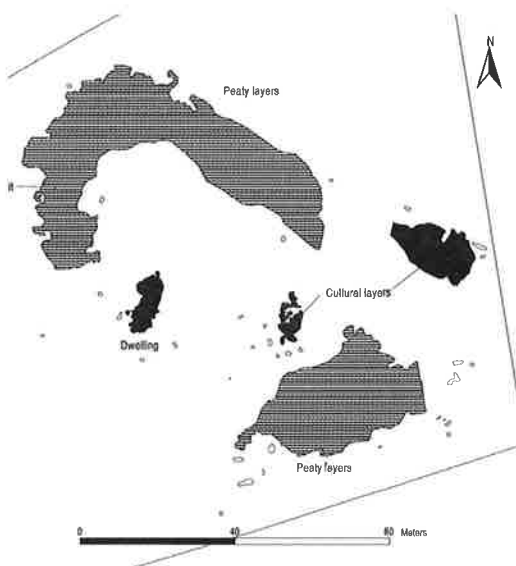


Fig. 8. Burlöv 20B. Part of the excavated area including interpretations of the Middle Neolithic remains.

ture designated as A300. These were closely examined and were found to contain small amounts of material indicating that it may be contemporary with A300.

Discussion

When interpreting these features we must ask ourselves why houses with completely or semi-sunken floors were built. It has been suggested for buildings from the Late Neolithic that the practice required less timber and enhanced ventilation, thus making the buildings cooler inside (Sarauw 2007, p. 11). One additional positive side effect may also be that digging into the ground allows you to collect raw materials in the form of surface stones, flint, and, occasionally, moraine clay that would, for example, be used as daubing material. Soil samples from Late Neolithic dwellings show that the sunken areas were not used for stabling domestic animals, but rather for sleeping or eating, or as workshops or storage space. The interpretation is supported by the fact that hearths, when they exist, are often found in or near the sunken area (Sarauw 2007, pp. 10 f.). It is reasonable to assume that this interpretation of Late Neolithic buildings must also apply to those of the Early and Middle Neolithic periods.

Another important question that should be asked is what these features represent if they are not buildings. One alternative interpretation could be that they are clay or stone pits, or that they simply are objects and debris deposited in natural depressions in the landscape, areas of activity without superstructures. We also need to be aware of the problems of representation. These finds are representative of many different activities and events, some of which may well have taken place after the primary activities were abandoned (Sarauw 2007, p. 12 and works cited there).

The archaeological remains presented in

this article are fairly diverse in character. The excavation at Hyllie 7:4 came up with considerably fewer finds than the other two, despite the fact that this site, unlike the others, was thoroughly examined. This may be explained by the fact that it was abandoned, as it were, in an orderly fashion. Structural components may have been dismantled for later use at another location, and only a small number of objects and semi-finished objects were left behind. The other two structures seem to have burnt or been burnt down and objects were either deliberately or involuntarily left behind. It cannot be ruled out, however, that some of the objects or debris in these locations may have been deposited later. The strongest indication in support of the theory that the remains discovered at Riseberga Öst and Burlöv 20B are buildings is the abundance of daub, which must necessarily come from a building on this particular site. As to Riseberga Öst and Hyllie 7:4, the post-holes strongly indicate that there was once a building on this site. The lack of significant amounts of daub at Hyllie 7:4 should not be taken as evidence against this fact. The reason may simply be either that the building was not covered in daub or that it was not destroyed by fire. The most serious problem with the remains at Riseberga Öst and Burlöv 20B is that they have not been investigated as thoroughly as could be desired, and that the basis for making reliable interpretations is therefore lacking. Naturally, it would have been better if smaller excavation units could have been examined in order to determine the distribution of the different find categories, which would either support or eliminate various interpretations. Complete removal of the fill would also have made it possible to come across hearth remains or construction details such as post-holes.

The Hyllie 7:4 feature, on the other hand, is proof of the fact that even if this type of site were thoroughly investigated, it would not necessarily mean that we would be able to

find material on which to base a comprehensive interpretation of construction types and functions. It remains clear, however, that if only partly examined, the material on which to base a more detailed interpretation is not sufficient, and without it we cannot gain new knowledge. If there is going to be any point in even beginning to investigate this type of feature, we need to be well aware from the start that it may represent a complex structure, for example a building, and that the most suitable excavation and documentation methods need to be assessed. This means that the *single context method*, which is common for excavations of medieval remains (see e.g. Larsson 2000) could be very useful also for the investigation of complex prehistoric remains.

One recurring feature found in Funnel Beaker culture settlements, at least in the Malmö area, is that few or no contemporaneous features are found in the immediate vicinity of the dwellings (Hadevik 2009b). The remains discovered at Hyllie also clearly prove that the different activities may be scattered over a very large area (fig. 4), which raises another methodological dilemma, i.e. determining how large an area on a construction site is to be excavated. Clearly, the removal of overburden should be as extensive as possible, allowing for a thorough investigation of settlement activities. This may, however, be hard to justify, especially in areas where there is little development. The cost of removing the earth, however, is only a small part of the total excavation cost, less than fifteen per cent for major excavations (compare e.g. Hadevik 2009a). The necessary savings should instead be made at the prioritization stage.

Complete investigations of major culture layers, extensive removal of earth and scientific analyses are expensive and demanding. Archaeologists operating on construction sites must become better at revealing and interpreting archaeological remains, which in turn requires improved methods and carefully con-

sidered prioritizations at the planning stage. It also requires that the county administrative boards realize the scientific importance of these investigations and analyses and that they are willing to bear the higher cost.

My aim with this article is to encourage closer investigation of culture layers that at the outset appear to be Neolithic in origin by means of analytical tools including archaeobotany, environmental archaeology, osteology, analyses of potsherds and radiometric analyses. This procedure is essential in order to gain the kind of new knowledge that is outlined in the archaeological institutions' scientific programmes and required by the county administrative boards. Detailed investigation requires more substantial development funding, which needs to be outlined in detail to county administrative boards and developers. Justifying the higher costs for excavating building remains could be a great deal easier than justifying excavation of more anonymous culture layers, and I hope I have been successful in conveying the fact that Early and Middle Neolithic culture layers in some cases may represent dwellings or other types of structures.

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Archives

Malmö Museer, S05:039 (Riseberga Öst, MHM 7204).

English translation:
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