



## Book reviews - Buchbesprechungen

### Working at the Sharp End: From Bone and Antler to Early Mesolithic Life in Northern Europe

**Untersuchungen und Materialien zur Steinzeit in Schleswig-Holstein und im Ostseeraum, vol. 10, edited by Daniel Groß, Harald Lübke, John Meadows and Detlef Jantzen, Kiel, Wachholtz Verlag GmbH, 2020, 408 pages, 59.00 €, ISBN 978-3-529-01861-9**

reviewed by

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This book, also available in an open-access electronic format, is a welcome addition to an ever-growing body of work that deals with osseous technology in prehistory. While its research history is as long as that of lithic technology, studies of osseous artifacts have faced greater challenges mostly due to their preservation, which partially explains researchers' tendency in the past to focus on relatively durable materials in the archaeological record. This book takes on the challenge by guiding the readers through the rich record of bone and antler artifacts in the Mesolithic cultures from northern Europe.

Stemming from a workshop in Schleswig (Germany) in 2016, the book takes us initially to key sites in northern Germany and expands gradually into the neighboring areas, ultimately ending up in the Urals and the UK. This kind of structure in an edited volume is not uncommon, and yet it is satisfying to get a sense of travelling from one region to the next, gaining local knowledge and ultimately finishing with a broader understanding of the Early and Late Mesolithic cultures through the lens of osseous artifacts.

The book opens with a detailed introduction to one of the key Mesolithic sites, Hohen Viecheln 1, excavated in 1952-1955 by the German Academy of Sciences. E. Schuldt was on ground to lead the excavations that resulted in over 16,000 finds out of which >300 were bone points (1961). Several chapters are dedicated to this assemblage and other osseous artifacts of this site. Groß and colleagues start by delving into the stratigraphic contexts and research history and pose two key research questions: How can we understand the variability of the barbed points? Also what are the chronological contexts of the bone artifacts? The authors explore these questions in a detailed manner and highlight the diverse nature of the bone points with different barbed and notched

patterns (for a visual summary of different types refer to figure 1.18 and 1.19). Then, they tie these observations to the well-known typologies, namely Duvensee-type and Pritzerb-type. The authors also undertake direct dating of bone artifacts, which is supplemented by spatial information and discussion on the techniques that were involved in the sampling strategy and measurement (with complementary data in chapter 2 by Meadows and colleagues). The results suggest that Duvensee-type points existed for most of the Boreal period (8,441-8,278 calBC. to 7,732-7,583 calBC).

In chapter 3, David studies the same assemblage to explore the chaîne opératoire and processes involved in the production of osseous hunting and fishing tools. The author puts her observations of the technical methods in a broader geographical context, comparing her results to other assemblages in the Maglemosian culture to discuss overarching patterns of osseous production. She argues that the Mesolithic craftspeople employed similar artifact designs, a tradition that lasted over two millennia.

The detailed study from this key site lies the foundation and provides impetus to look further into neighboring regions. Chapters 4 and 5 both discuss artifacts from Hohen Viecheln that show potential cultural links to other sites. In the former, Wild discusses antler headdresses mostly in terms of their identification and definition, drawing on interesting parallels with those that are recovered at other notable Mesolithic sites (e.g. Star Carr). In the latter, Brinch Petersen focuses on the decorative nature of the mattock heads that manifest in forms of geometric patterns. Similar artifacts are found in Zealand, Denmark which leads the author to hypothesize that there were regular movements of people between these two regions. This chapter also presents interesting points of discussion on the nature of Maglemosian art. In chapter 8, Schmölcke discusses hunting patterns based on the animal remains from another important Mesolithic site, Friesack 4. This paper reminds us of the importance of looking at multiple lines of evidence to reconstruct the past lifeways of hunter-gatherer-fishers.

In chapter 6, Gramsch discusses a general role that osseous artifacts played in the Mesolithic technology and lifeways and at the same time reminds us of how much material is potentially missing from the record. In chapter 7, Hartz and colleagues take on an approach similar to Groß and colleagues to study chronological patterns and morphological variability of barbed points on an inter-site level, incorporating 30 sites with direct dating from twelve artifacts. The authors'

approach is justified because many artifacts are single finds that lack stratigraphic contexts. This is a nice complementary piece to chapter 1, demonstrating how bone points can be studied on a regional scale with a comparable approach to a single site like Hohen Viecheln. There is also an interesting suggestion that harpoons were used for hunting beavers, an idea which is revisited by other authors. Chapter 16 by Amkreutz & Spithoven also deals with materials which are out of context from the coastal beaches in the Netherlands. Some have excellent preservations with tar residue at the proximal base, a cautionary note on how artifacts can provide valuable information even when they are recovered out of context. While taphonomic bias remains to be an archaeological reality even in the Mesolithic period, these finds do give us a look into how the landscape was settled and what still remains to be uncovered.

We then move to Scandinavia where contributions show a large geographical range of Mesolithic osseous artifacts including barbed points and harpoons. In chapter 9, Larsson and colleagues describe finds that range from arrowheads, leister points (fish-spears) to slotted points in the bogs of southern Sweden. In the following chapter, Gummesson & Molin seek to define and classify barbed points, which vary in form and size from east-central Sweden. This chapter highlights the challenges encountered by archaeologists to explain artifact variability and create analytical categories, which are meaningful and useful for comparison. In chapter 11, Robson & Richtie review fishing in Scandinavia from a holistic perspective, drawing on multiple lines of evidence to discuss fish exploitation and consumption from technology to stable isotopic data from human remains.

Further to the East, we begin by visiting the Latvian sites. In chapter 12, Zagorska describes the osseous assemblages of Zvejnieki II, which show cultural parallels to that of other Mesolithic sites to the East. We must take note of exceptional assemblages, namely from several bogs of the Volga-Olga region as well as Zamostje. The examples from the Volga-Olga region described by Zhilin in chapter 13 reveal different barbed points present in the assemblages. The author suggests that there are standardized forms of different barbed points, ranging in size from small arrowheads to large spearheads. He also mentions a few but important examples of tools recovered with fauna including fish and mammals. Since evidence for direct associations of tool types and prey types are rare in the archaeological record, they provide key insights into the relationship between artifacts and hunting strategies, which align with the goal of the book. Lozovskaya & Lozovski follow by providing a glimpse into the rich organic material culture at Zamostje 2 with a special focus on bone points. In this contribution, we also see temporal changes in the forms of bone points from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic. In chapter 15, Savchenko explores the

Urals, the easternmost region covered in this book, to highlight the significance of osseous arrowheads in lieu of lithic projectiles. The author also touches on finds from different geographical contexts, some from peat bogs and some from caves, further complicating our understanding of the Mesolithic osseous material culture.

We finish the book by visiting Star Carr and some of the recent developments in the on-going research. Taylor and colleagues' chapter presents what some of the recent excavations revealed, including wooden platforms and house structures. Elliot and colleagues discuss the bone and antler assemblages and highlight the worked antlers with a special mention of the headdresses/frontlets, a common thread that links the site to Hohen Viecheln. These chapters are a nice reminder that despite its location relative to northern Germany, they reveal interesting cultural ties between the sites as we see emerging patterns in the production of osseous artifacts that tie all these cultures together.

In particular, barbed points were one of the key components for many north European Mesolithic cultures that were closely linked to the subsistence strategies and lifeways of the people. By covering large geographical grounds, this book offers interesting insights into different ways to study and interpret these common projectile artifacts. If we were to put an alternative title to this book, I would suggest something like 'The Tales of Barbed Points' because it was the artifact type that dominated most of the discussions in the book. This is also reflected in multiple renditions of artifacts in drawings and photographs, some of which are as extensive and detailed as a catalogue. This is a must-read book for anybody who wants to explore the Mesolithic osseous material culture, specifically of the bone points which played an important role in the cultural practices of this period, namely the hunting and fishing of animals.

Despite all the praise it is worthy of, I note some shortfalls. For one, some background information on the Mesolithic cultures of northern Europe at the beginning would have been useful. The absence of such introductory text may be justified for most Mesolithic scholars, but books are great avenues with which to reach a broader audience and pull new interests into the subject. It would also be nice to end with conclusive remarks so that editors and readers can look back on what the authors addressed, summarize the findings, explain some of the overarching interpretations and importantly remark on where the differences lie and what lies ahead in the future. It lacked the ending that one expects from an edited volume whose goal was to bring ideas together. Similarly, the book could have benefited from exchanges among authors. I can imagine how each contribution has set out to address this overarching theme from diverse approaches and methods, which is commendable and perhaps it is inevitable that differences and disagreements exist. This is also acknowledged by the editors.

Still, workshops usually provide ample opportunities and rooms for these dialogues to occur. I wondered: when these authors listened to contributions from each other, would they not be delighted to see all the parallels and differences and be inclined to discuss them? Perhaps these dialogues took place but did not materialize in a written form, which is a pity, because they also may have offered ample ideas for a conclusive chapter at the end.

Beside these points, I appreciated the content and scope of the book. More contributions on the osseous industry in prehistory can only be an asset to the

subject and the researchers working in this field. I also want to laud the editors' effort in putting this book together and making it accessible in an open-access format. Knowledge is there to be shared and we can only be encouraged to see this happen and work for a great book like this.

#### Literature cited

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