

A Neolithic corridor between East and West

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Abstract

The discovery of an amber bead and an unusual type of slate knife at a site near Tromsø, Norway instigated reflection upon inter-regional mobility and possible travel routes in northern Fennoscandia. In combination with finds near Kilpisjärvi, Finland, these early Neolithic objects found far from their main distribution area allow us to suggest that the Torne River and its connected waterways provided a corridor for contact between the Atlantic coast and the Bothnian coast.

Keywords: amber, slate knives, Comb Ware, travel routes.

1.1 Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that during the Neolithic or Late Stone Age, ca. 5000–1800 calBC, the communities in northern Fennoscandia were at least semi-sedentary. The distribution of specific types of artefacts and variations in dwelling structures and rock art motives also suggest a certain degree of regionalization. On the other hand, the spread of technologies such as pottery and ground slate, and of exotic items and raw materials, notably amber and copper, demonstrate interregional contact and interaction. Rare and exotic items have always received much (and arguably sometimes undeserved) attention in archaeology, risking to turn the general attention away from the larger material trends. However, objects of non-local origin have the potential to point to connections with other regions, relations that can otherwise be unidentifiable in the archaeological record. Exotic items can help identify contact spheres and specific routes of travel, for people and objects, at given times in prehistory. Here we present a few recent examples of finds from the north Atlantic coast and adjacent Finnish highland, occurring far away from their main distribution areas. We use them to suggest a geographical corridor for contact between east and west.

1.2 Unexpected finds

Extensive excavations were recently conducted at Tønsnes, Tromsø municipality, in advance of establishing a new industrial harbour (Gjerde & Hole 2013; Nergaard 2016; Skandfer 2010). This



Figure 1.1. Slate knife Ts12249.28. Photo R. Skjørten-Hansen, Arctic University Museum.

promontory in the sound just north of Tromsø was settled extensively from the Early Mesolithic into modern times.

In an area where all other finds date to the early and middle Mesolithic two unexpected finds were recovered: a beautiful slate knife (Fig.1.1) and an amber pendant (Fig. 1.2). A slate knife in several pieces (Ts12249.28) was found when cleaning a section of the surface after the machine had deturfed the larger area in 2011 (Gjerde & Hole 2013: Fig. 182). The doubled edged knife is nearly straight and made of red slate with a yellowish tip. The blade is clearly distinguished from the handle by two angular shoulders, one on each side. Both the blade and the handle are faceted, the latter less markedly. The blade is 13.2 cm long and 2.8 cm wide at the transition to the handle, and the handle 8,6 cm long. Now in four main fragments, the tip of the blade and end of the handle missing, it would originally have been slightly longer than the present 21.8 cm. The knife may be assumed to have been deposited complete and damaged during the deturfing.

In 2014, an amber pendant (Ts14283) was found on the 2011 deturfed surface together with remains of the removed topsoil (Damm 2014b). An area of 2 x 2 m surrounding the pendant was excavated, but no further finds or structures were discovered. While it may have been moved from its original location, this was likely not far away. The pendant has irregular shape, with maximum length and width measuring 3.3 x 1.9 cm. The diameter of the hole is 0.35 cm.

During the same years, 2010–2013, another site with unexpected finds was discovered and excavated at Juovvagielas by the Alajärvi and Kilpisjärvi Lakes in Finland, close to the present Finnish-Norwegian border and ca. 100 km directly southeast of Tønsnes (Fig. 1.3). Here, sherds from three vessels of Säräisniemi-1 pottery were found, making the site the northwestern-most known with this northern variant of the large Comb Ware complex (Viljanmaa 2016). Associated finds were a couple of pieces of pumice with wear-marks, a



Figure 1.2. Amber pendant Ts14283. Photo J. Dammann, Arctic University Museum.

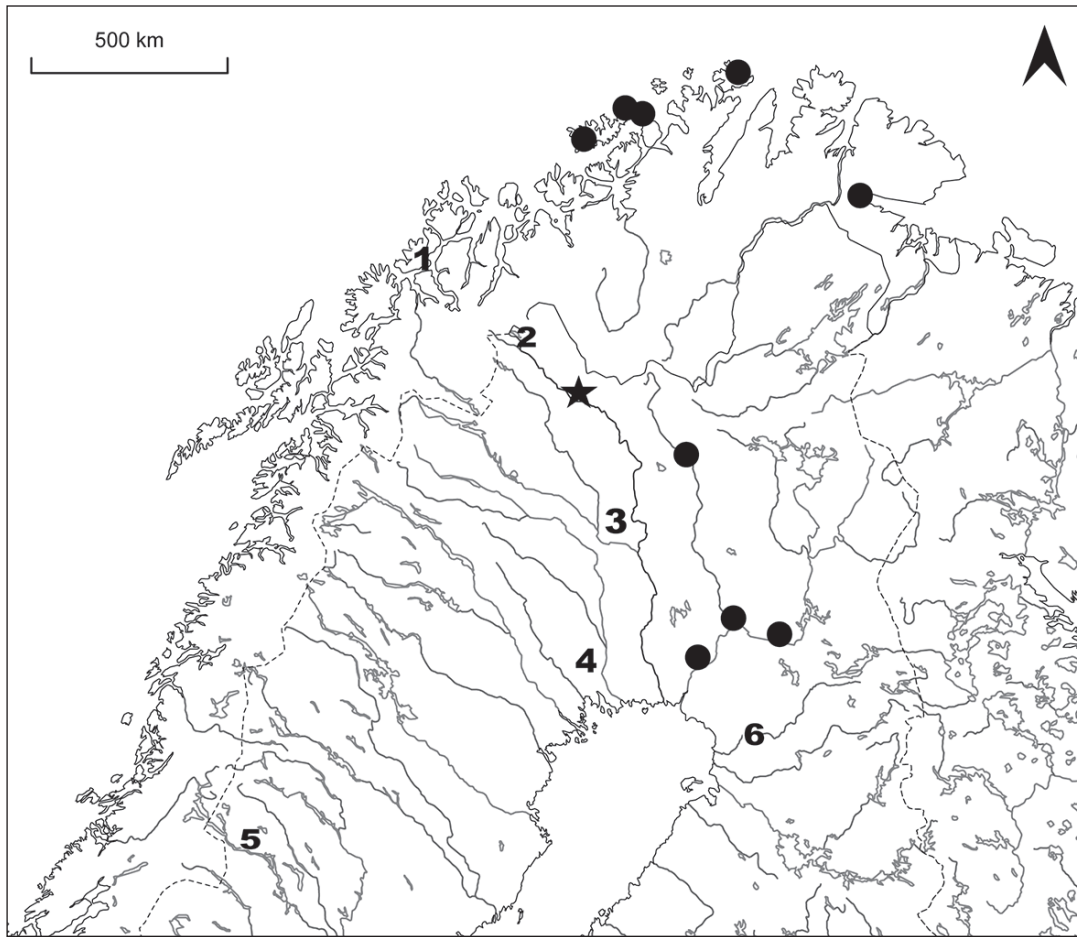


Figure 1.3. Key place names. 1 – Tønsnes. 2 – Juovvagielas. 3 – Pajala. 4 – Lillberget. 5 – Ströms Vattufall. 6 – Sites at river Iijoki. Star – Maunu. Dots – Other find spots for amber items north of river Iijoki. Map C. Damm.

small, single-edged ground slate knife, edge-retouched slate implements including points resembling so-called Slettnes-points, projectile points and scrapers in quartzite, chert and some quartz, flakes of all four lithic materials and a marine shell in poor find association. Burnt bones includes reindeer, birds and fish, and a beaver tooth. There were multiple other undated Stone Age sites identified in the vicinity.

1.3 Chronology and area of origin

Neither the slate knife nor the amber pendant at Tønsnes were found *in situ*. The distance between their find spots is more than 30 m, which may suggest that they were not deposited together. As they were both found out of context they can only be dated through typology and comparisons with dated finds elsewhere.

Slate knives are made from ca. 5000 BC into the last millennium BC. The slate knives with angular shoulders are generally dated to the 4th millennium BC, although a few specimens may be earlier (Hallgren pers.com).

While slate knives are very common in central and northern Norway (Søborg 1988), this particular type is unusual along the northern parts of the coast. The slender knives with shoulders are typically associated with central northern Sweden, where some of them have two “ears” at the top of the handle. Some such knives are, however, found on the coast of central Norway (Hallgren forthcoming).

Amber pendants and beads are also rare in northern Norway and must ultimately derive from Latvia or Lithuania in the Baltic. They are however quite common in Finland including Ostrobothnia, where more than 200 objects and fragment are found at sites on the River Iijoki (Núñez & Franzén 2011). In Finland, the earliest amber beads and pendants are associated with Typical Comb Ware and date from ca. 4100 BC onwards. In Ostrobothnia, they appear to be more numerous in the middle of the 4th millennium BC (Núñez & Franzén 2011). Amber beads are known from a few other contexts in northern Norway besides Tønsnes (Fig. 1.3). These are predominantly dated to the first half of the 4th millennium BC (Ramstad 2006), contemporary with the first phase of amber in Finland.

The pottery at Juovvagielas in north Finland belongs to the Sär-1 type. The site is seen as single-phased, and food crust from the pottery is radiocarbon dated to 4725–4595 calBC (Hela 2810) (Viljanmaa 2016). The date corresponds to the mid-range age determination of the northern Säräisniemi-1 variant in Finland and its wider-determined counterparts in Norway (Skandfer 2009; Torvinen 2000), and also to the use-phase of Slettnes-type retouched slate points (Hesjedal et al. 1996). Säräisniemi-1 is found almost exclusively east of the head of the Bothnian Bay up to Varang-erfjord in Norway (Skandfer 2003).

1.4 Travel routes: a corridor between east and west?

Both the slate knife and the amber pendant at Tønsnes are evidence of far-reaching contacts, and there were no other such items found during the extensive excavations. The question is along which route did they get to Tønsnes?

In Stone Age northern Fennoscandia longer journeys may have been undertaken on foot or skis, but the many boats on contemporary rock art as well as the close association between the distribution of settlements and either coast or waterways indicate that boat travel was a key means of transportation.

With a higher coastline at the head of the Bothnian Bay (65–60 m.a.s.l. in the 5th to 4th millennia BC) the lower parts of many of the northern river valleys were deep and sometimes rather broad inlets that were probably attractive for providing access to a diversity of marine, riverine and terrestrial resources. From here, the river systems facilitated travel further inland. The Torne River system provided one such route from the Bothnian Bay towards the northwest.

It is in this geographical setting we should understand the Juovvagielas Sär-1 site near Kilpisjärvi. The spatio-temporal distribution of the northern Säräisniemi-1 variant clearly relates to water systems and watersheds (Skandfer 2003). Travelling west along the northern coast of the Bothnian bay, people would explore resource-rich inlets and river systems. One of the few other early pottery sites west of the Torne River mouth, Lillberget by Kalix River, was at the time of use, some hundred years after the settlement at Juovvagielas, located in such a rather wide inlet (Färjare 2000). This suggests that travelling routes followed the coast and led into inlets. From here, inland water systems provided natural corridors into the forest towards the highland. Journeys could be made by boat during summer or perhaps even more easily on ice during winter. In the higher and less forested areas, moraine ridges along the rivers could have been favored travel routes (Skandfer et al. 2022).

The river system north of the lower Torne River mainly runs in rather gentle landscapes without major waterfalls to discourage further advance. Once at Lake Kilpisjärvi one encounters mountains, but this is one of the areas where traversing to the fjords and sounds on the Atlantic side is a relatively short and easy journey. Juovvagielas is situated here, by a large lake in a major water system, in the highland between the Bothnian and Atlantic coasts. Several items, including two pieces of pumice, demonstrate that people made the trip further west.

A similar combination of extensive waterways and easily traversed highland is found in central northern Sweden and central Norway in association with the slate knives. Hallgren suggests that communities of hunter-gatherers on both sides of the Scandes mountain range exploited the same sources at Ströms Vattudal in northwestern Jämtland (Fig. 1.3) and adjacent areas (Hallgren forthcoming). However, the two regions produced slightly different finished knives, one with angular shoulders like the knife from Tønsnes (found mainly in central northern Sweden), the other with protruding knobs separating handle from blade (mainly from the coast of central Norway). On the Swedish side settlements are linked to the larger river systems as argued by Lundberg (1997). Ströms Vattudal is included in one of her largest regional bands, linked also to the Ångerman River. Knives with shoulders have been found at Nämforsen, the main rock art location on this river (Käck 2001: 31), which was at the head of a deep inlet at the end of the 5th millennium BC. This emphasizes how in these forested areas waterways were key travel routes that facilitated navigation whether in boat or by foot.

First produced from slate extracted far inland the knives would be carried down the water systems to the coastal area. Boat travel along the western side of the Bothnian coast was significant for contacts between coastal settlements and perhaps to travel from one river system to another. This is indicated in the distribution of artefacts such as T-shaped items and animal headed daggers (Damm 2014a).

Another knife with angular shoulders was discovered far from its central northern Sweden core area in Pajala (Hallgren forthcoming and pers.com.) on the Torne River at the confluence with the rivers from northwesternmost Finland, providing a link all the way up to the Lake Kilpisjärvi drainage system. A likely transport route for this knife is therefore up along the Bothian coast and then inland along the river systems.

For the amber, Núñez & Franzén (2011) suggests three different main routes from the production sites in Latvia and Lithuania to Ostrobothnia. One possible route follows the coast all the way from the Baltic up along the Finnish coast, while two others use inland routes in the Baltic countries and possibly Karelia combined with inland water systems in Finland. Abstaining from evaluating these suggestions, we focus on routes further north. In these northern regions the amber is found either at coastal sites such as at Yli-Ii and Lillberget or further up along rivers, such as at sites near Rovaniemi and all the way up to Kittilä along the connected water system. Again, the water routes, whether coastal or riverine, play a major role in the distribution.

The importance of this is emphasized by watersheds often marking the boundaries of areas exploited (Skandfer 2003: 376–79). People appear to have avoided crossing watersheds, typically located in mountain regions. However, the landscape between the upper parts of the Torne River system and Lake Kilpisjärvi is in itself unusual. Several water systems spring from the vicinity of Maunu, close to Karesuanto (Fig. 1.3). From here, the quite open landscape with smaller streams connects to Torne River to the southeast, to Lake Kilpisjärvi and the Atlantic coast to the northwest, and also north to the Reisa River, which provides access to the region north and east of the Lyngen Alps in northern Troms. In other words, the route from the Torne River mouth northwest to Kilpisjärvi and on to the Atlantic coast provided a natural corridor between east and west. Several exotic – i.e. non-local – objects suggest that it was commuted during the 5th and 4th millennia BC.

1.5 Mobility of people and objects

The regional rather than interregional distributions of many distinct artefact types, ornamentation styles and rock art motives in northern Fennoscandia in the Neolithic or Late Stone Age indicate that most interaction took place within more limited geographical areas. However, the two exotic objects at Tønsnes were found far from their places of origin and the pottery at Juovvagielas is similarly found far west of the Sär-1 main distribution area. Rather than expect all interaction and mobility in the Neolithic to follow one scheme, we suggest that even the few finds dealt with here may represent several different types of traveling and meeting events.

At Juovvagielas the Säräisniemi-1 pottery was found together with pumice with wear-marks, so-called Slettnes edge-retouched slate points, a substantial slate inventory including a slate knife, and a marine shell. All these point to contact towards the north Atlantic coast. However, based on the general spatio-temporally restricted use of Säräisniemi-1 pottery, we regard the presence of pottery as a decisive marker of the people dwelling at Juovvagielas around 4700–4600 BC as being hunter-fisher travellers from the east, perhaps exploring new territory.

The slate knife and the amber pendant at Tønsnes could be contemporary, but they derive from two different areas, and are not associated with other finds. Therefore, their presence does not appear to be the result of exploration or relocation by just one group of travellers. Instead, it seems that they are examples of single objects having been moved long distances in two different events, suggesting that if long-distance travel was perhaps not a regular practice, it was not uncommon either. Travellers may not have covered the entire distance to the place of production, but journeys along the more than 400 km long corridor between the Bothnian Bay and the Atlantic coast were undertaken.

The dated amber finds in northern Norway all seem to be from a very early phase of the wider distribution of amber from the Baltic. They may therefore possibly not reflect long distance interaction over a longer period, but could, as suggested by Ramstad (2006), originally have been a few sets of stringed pendants and beads. Later they could have been split into individual pieces and passed on within the coastal communities in Norway. These would at the time have been uncommon and exotic also in Finland. Núñez and Franzén (2011) suggest that the large quantity of amber at River Iijoki indicates that people here controlled the distribution of exotic, long-distance goods. As the amber in northern Finland is mostly found in dwellings rather than in graves, Vaneeckhout (2010) has interpreted the distribution of finds as an indication of House societies, where social inequality and competition allowed some social Houses to become powerful through long-distance exchange networks. Could the amber beads in coastal northern Norway represent the first gifts in new exchange partnerships between such Houses in Ostrobothnia and prominent households or communities on the Atlantic coast?

Throughout the Late Stone Age slate knives were plentiful in northern Norway. Neither the material nor the knife as such would therefore have been particularly exotic in that region, although few knives display the same level of craftsmanship and refinement as the knife at Tønsnes. In a Swedish context these knives, often produced from slate with stripes or dots, stand out. Red slate was less readily available in northern Sweden and the production of more exquisite red slate knives resulted in several distinct types such as those with angular shoulders, knobs or elk heads. While there is little indication of any strong social inequality in the communities in central northern Sweden in the 4th millennium BC it is possible that such knives were associated with status of some social, economic or ritual kind. The knife at Tønsnes may therefore have travelled there, either with persons of some status displaying this through the knife or meant as a prestigious gift.

1.6 The Torne River corridor

The considerations above argue for the Torne River and connected waterways as a corridor between communities around the Bothnian Bay and those on the coast of northern Norway. That both the slate knife and the amber pendant found at Tønsnes should have been transported, first along the Bothnian coast and then up the Torne River via Kilpisjärvi to the Atlantic coast, is supported by evidence from the distribution of other knives and amber objects, but not least by the find of a similar knife in Pajala and the Sär-1 site at Juovvagielas. These few but unexpected finds are evidence that this corridor was commuted at least in the 5th and 4th millennium BC. We must assume that it was used both earlier and later. The corridor offered possibilities for both exploratory journeys to unknown areas and for contact between small-scale hunter-gatherer communities settled on either side of the Scandes mountain range. More investigations along the potential water ways and moraine ridge travelling routes are needed to gain better insight into the characteristics and temporal dynamics of this journeying.

Acknowledgements

Sami Viljanmaa and Fredrik Hallgren very kindly provided information on the Juovvagielas site and the slate knives respectively, for which we are very grateful.

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