

200,000 fish bones suggest ancient Scandinavian people were more complex than thought

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Adam Boethius, doctoral student in Osteology at Lund University together with other archaeologists in Blekinge, Sweden (Adam is the fourth person from the left). Credit: Lund University

200,000 fish bones discovered in and around a pit in Sweden suggest that the people living in the area more than 9000 years ago were more settled and cultured than we previously thought. Research published in the *Journal of Archaeological Science* suggests people were storing large amounts of fermented food much earlier than experts thought.

The new paper reveals the earliest evidence of fermentation in Scandinavia, from the Early Mesolithic time period, about 9,200 years ago. The author of the study, from Lund University in Sweden, say the findings suggest that people who survived by foraging for food were actually more advanced than assumed.

The Mesolithic period, which spanned around 10,000-5,000 BC, marked the time before people started farming in Europe. At this time, researchers previously believed groups of people in Scandinavia caught fish from the sea, lakes and rivers and moved around following the sources of food they could find.

"This is a really exciting and surprising finding that gives us a completely new picture of how the group lived," said Adam Boethius, author of the study and historical osteology PhD student at Lund University in Sweden. "We'd never seen a site like this with so many well preserved fish bones, so it was amazing to find."

For the first time, the new research suggests the foraging people actually settled much earlier than previously thought. They stored huge amounts of fish in one place by fermenting them, suggesting the people had more advanced technology and a more sedentary life than we thought.

If the people were more sedentary, they would have been better able to develop culture. This, say the authors, makes the culture more comparable to the Neolithic people in the Middle East, who were traditionally thought to have settled much earlier than their northern

European counterparts.

Boethius and his colleagues had been excavating a site at Norje Sunnansund to rescue any artifacts from Mesolithic settlements before a road was built. As they started to dig, they found lots of fish bones, which indicated people had lived there. They then uncovered an elongated pit or gutter surrounded by small stake holes and completely filled with fish bones.

"It was really strange, and because of all the fish bones in the area we knew something was going on even before we found the feature," said Boethius. "At first we had no idea what it was so we rescued it from the area to investigate."

The excavation involved 16 archaeologists during five months. Boethius analyzed the feature and the contents and discovered the fish bones were from freshwater fish. He also showed the fish had been fermented - a skillful way of preserving food without using salt.

The amount of fish they found could have supported a large community of people. Given the amount and type of fish found at the site, Boethius believes freshwater sources played a more important role in the development of culture in the area than we thought. He is now working on further research to find out exactly what people were eating, and how this knowledge impacts our understanding of these ancient societies.

More information: Adam Boethius, Something rotten in Scandinavia: The world's earliest evidence of fermentation, *Journal of Archaeological Science* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jas.2016.01.008](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jas.2016.01.008)

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