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COMMENT

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Fires and Seeds. Considerations for a decolonized Mesolithic archaeology

Liv Nilsson Stutz

The world is on fire, and European archaeologists are starting to feel the heat. With the war in the Ukraine, the rise of polarizing politics and global authoritarianism, and the climate emergency pushing us closer to the tipping point of planetary destruction, we cannot help but to feel deeply affected. In the face of these challenges, we want to act, but what we do as archaeologists can sometimes seem trivial and insignificant. Even worse, a critical examination of our disciplinary history can lead us to conclude that we are complicit in the injustices and even partially responsible for the current situation.

The chasm between the social, cultural, and environmental crisis of our time, and the academy was masterfully depicted by Ryan Cecil Jobson in his essay *'The case for Letting Anthropology Burn: Sociocultural Anthropology in 2019'* (Jobson 2020) written in the aftermath of the 2019 AAA meetings in San Jose, California, which saw hundreds of anthropologists fly in to socialize and discuss issues like inequality and climate change in a city covered by the smoke from raging wildfires. The irony was not lost on anybody. In the essay Jobson framed the situation as an epistemic crisis of the discipline and called for it to abandon its liberal suppositions (Jobson 2020, p. 261). The response is characteristic for a trend in academia today to respond with socially conscious scholarship and attempts at tearing down what Jobson calls 'the fictive separation' of 'bourgeois academic work from the material histories of other fields that took shape alongside the formalization of the human sciences' (Jobson 2020, p. 261). In this discourse we often encounter an amalgam of intellectual thought that combines anti-racism, feminism, anti-capitalism, and post-colonial criticism, with calls to decolonize institutions of power. It is in this context that I view the piece by Warren and Elliot calling for us to decolonize the Mesolithic, and I welcome it. At the same time, I am also wary of the critique framed by Olúfémi O. Táíwò as 'elite capture,' referring to the phenomenon of how movements to decolonize, including discourses, resources and processes intended to empower the marginalized, often become appropriated by the privileged (Táíwò 2022).

I share the authors' commitment to a socially conscious archaeology. I agree that archaeology is political and should be engaged in the contemporary world, and I am pleased to see this issue explicitly brought into focus for the Mesolithic, which often has remained on the margins of these debates. I am disappointed that several of our colleagues felt strongly enough to reach out to express their discontent and discourage continued work in this area. I wish we had come farther – but at least this seems to have struck a nerve that I think we should continue to put pressure on. That being said, and in the spirit of exploratory

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dialogue, this piece also prompted me to ask questions.

To me, the biggest challenge with the argument is to think through how and to what extent the colonialism trope really is useful in the context of the Mesolithic. From the broadest perspective it makes sense. The authors make a strong case when they problematize the category 'hunter gatherer' at different levels. Historically, and in the colonial mindset, the category became equivalent to 'the simplest form' of human culture. In this perspective, hunters and gatherers were perceived as either doomed to erasure, or ripe for assimilation and education, a process that presumably would 'lift them up' towards 'civilization.' Both these approaches were deployed to legitimize settler colonialism on their lands. In the past, anthropology and archaeology also viewed hunter gatherers this way, placing them in a culture evolutionary framework. However, this understanding was abandoned as research came to focus on the diversity of possible social organizations that could be sustained by hunter gatherer subsistence strategies and culture. This realisation probably explains the fascination with 'complex' hunters and gatherers, which as the authors argue, left a lasting impression on Mesolithic archaeology, especially in the 1980s and 1990s. But while there is history here, I am not sure this mindset permeates the field of Mesolithic archaeology today. On the contrary, it seems like the researchers devoted to this period, long have reflected an opposite view, and emphasized cultural diversity and flexibility, while rejecting the culture evolution model. I also question the claim that European Mesolithic archaeology is dominated by an emphasis on 'complex' hunter gatherers. Earlier periods characterized by smaller groups of mobile people – like the Maglemose in Denmark and Scania, and the Pioneer period along the West coast of Sweden and Norway, are at least as iconic and tell stories of a broader range of hunter gatherer life ways. In addition, the fascination with complex hunter gatherers probably gained traction because archaeologists wanted to offer a counter narrative to the primitivism inherited from the colonial mindset and often imposed on the Mesolithic from the outside (media, popular culture, etc), so it seems a bit unfair to fault them for it.

While we may no longer view hunter gathers at the bottom of the cultural evolutionary ladder, the concept of a cohesive category has stuck. The authors make important points about how this affects our use of analogy. Their critique connects to broader issues within the decolonization debate about how the academy builds (or not) relationships with marginalized groups from which we simultaneously draw inspiration. As we pick and choose our ethnographic analogies, we continue to reproduce the idea of hunter gatherers as a single category. To add insult to injury, we use the culture, memories, and knowledge of these people without consent, and often without any cultural competence. I agree with the authors that this is a problem. However, while valuable, I do not see how approaches centring relational ontologies provide a real alternative. They still rely on ethnographic analogies selected to address issues that currently preoccupy Western intellectuals, still reduce hunter gatherers to a unique category, and still proceed without consent. And, just like the authors, I am not sure what our options are. The challenge of working with the Mesolithic is to make a human connection across millennia of disrupted human history. Our methods will always be imperfect – but we can all agree that they should not do harm. Personally, I believe that the archaeological past can be approached, not by taking categorization, othering and difference as a point of departure, but by looking for something relatable that can be gleaned from points of connection, for example through embodied

experience. Of course, there are holes in this process too.

The most pressing point for me as we explore the usefulness of a decolonization approach to the Mesolithic, is to address its blind spots and define its boundaries. Decolonization is systematically associated with Indigenous perspectives and rights. But how do we define indigeneity with regards to Mesolithic Europe? In Europe there are few hunter gatherers that can be traced to the Mesolithic and whose perspective we could defend and provide a space for in our work, even if we wanted to. At the same time there are other forms of power and subordination at work that we should probably consider.

One way to act as a socially responsible Mesolithic archaeologist may be to collaborate more with the farmers, hunters and fishers whose lands we survey and excavate for archaeological remains. Why are the men and women who know where the soil gets wet in the winter, how the river bends, and what flowers are first to bloom on the hillside, so absent in our discussion about decolonization? Where are the people who know how the deer behave in the woods, how to dig for clams, or how the migratory bird patterns may have changed with the climate change in recent years? Those people who know it in their bones, from their walks across the land, and their gaze through the window in the morning, holding a cup of coffee and contemplating their daily chores. Why are those non-academic people still absent in this quest for empowerment and equality? Does a non-academic voice and experience only matter if it is indigenous? Surely not. In addition, a socially sustainable academy should break down the privilege in our own back yards – our university spaces, where it is as important to recognize the humanity in a migrant worker cleaning our lecture halls as that of the hunter gatherer in sub-Saharan Africa from whom we draw inspiration when thinking about myth making or ritual trance in the stone age.

The world is on fire. But any scholar of hunters and gatherers knows that wildfires offer new beginnings. This is the time to sow the seeds for a new academy. We do not know exactly what it will look like, but I am looking forward to continuing this work together.

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