
Learning about Mesolithic societies through disasters

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Abstract

This paper takes a project in its initial phase: LAST – Life after the Storegga tsunami, as its point of departure. LAST explores the life worlds of hunter-gatherer-fishers after the Storegga tsunami hit the coast of western Norway and northeastern Scotland 8200 years ago. Whereas earlier research on this tsunami has pivoted around the identification of the tsunami's date, geographical range and physical impact, our project will emphasise its potential social impacts. Where this has been studied, the tsunami has been considered a disaster for the coastal communities, or as augmenting the effects of the 8.2 ka cold event causing a population decline. In these views are certain presumptions about the existing Mesolithic coastal societies as vulnerable or lacking strategies enabling people to reorganize and rebound when facing dramatic events. This contrasts another presumption of hunter-gatherer fisher societies, one where these are considered as well equipped for adaptation and change. To some, the tsunami would certainly have been deadly and disastrous, yet for others perhaps it was only a reminder of the hazards of living by the sea. Hence, we should expect a multitude of responses. These responses inform on the organisation and capacities of Mesolithic societies. Persistent knowledge transmission in for example lithic technology, landscape use or settlement patterns before and after the event are indications of the capabilities of the existing societies. Alternatively, if the Storegga tsunami led to a noticeable disruption of the historical contingency, it may have opened the societies up for change, introducing new practices or intensifying old ones.

In anthropological studies, one perceives current hazards and disasters as challenges to social structures and organization, potentially bringing about systemic adaptation to sustain stability and viable lifeways (Oliver-Smith 1996). By applying a similar holistic, developmental and comparative perspective, the Storegga tsunami can function as a reflector of fundamental features of Mesolithic societies. In this way, the project will aim to combine anthropology and archaeology to invoke new knowledge of the hunter-gatherer-fisher societies.

Keywords: Disaster, hazard, capacities, hunter, gatherer, fisher societies, anthropology

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