
Fishing during the Late Mesolithic Ertebølle Culture – an Experimental Approach to the Use of Fishhooks

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Résumé

The great conditions of preservation for organic material on Ertebølle coastal settlements (5400-3950 cal BC) have enabled the conservation of wooden artefacts such as log boats, leisters and fish traps, showing the complexity and diversity of fishing practices during the south Scandinavian Late Mesolithic. Bone fishhooks also form an integral part of the fishing activities, but they have sometimes been considered less important in the economy than the rest of the fishing tackle. However, besides a preserved piece of line on one fishhook, little is known about the implements, techniques and gestures involved in the use of the different Ertebølle fishhook types. Being an implement that often necessitates an actor and therefore an array of individual skills and techniques, the tangible and intangible aspects that surround the use of fishhooks in the Ertebølle culture are worth investigating.

This communication presents the results of preliminary archaeological experiments carried out during the summer of 2019. Replicas of fishhooks from selected Ertebølle sites were produced and tested in different fishing contexts. The techniques tested were adapted from universal modern and ethnographic techniques, in order to try to understand how the fishhooks may have functioned, which techniques worked best and whether they were adapted for active or passive fishing. Therefore, cooperation with modern fishermen was decisive for the success of the experiments.

Modern and ethnographic examples of angling show how fishhooks can be embedded in social beliefs, skills and transmission of knowledge through generations. More than only being a test of fishhook efficiency, the experiments provided new thoughts towards a social understanding of techniques and artefacts within Mesolithic communities, as well as creating a bridge between ancient times and modern populations through technical skills, showing that archaeology is also relevant for the public outside of museums.

Mots-Clés: Late Mesolithic, Ertebølle culture, bone fishhooks, fishing techniques, experimental archaeology

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