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# Using Ethnography to focus our minds on the specifics of Mesolithic Archaeology, not to mask them

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## Abstract

Research into Mesolithic human-environment interactions have become increasingly relational in recent times; however, archaeologists are approaching this relationality in different ways. New theoretical paradigms, in particular Assemblage Theory/ New Materialism, de-centres the human, considering them within relational flat ontologies, where their relationship with nonhuman elements of the world are key to their understanding of the world. Ethnography presents an alternative route, offering rich narratives of the lives of contemporary hunter-gatherer groups within non-western relational ontologies. However, these alternative approaches are not interchangeable, and whilst scholars continue to be cautious about the applicability of ethnographic parallels within archaeological interpretations, we argue here that Ethnography offers a unique and vital route into understanding the material assemblages and lives of Mesolithic Hunter-Gatherers. Whilst new theoretical paradigms argue for recognising the inter-connected nature of elements of the world, it is not always clear how this concept may manifest, or be materially acknowledged by past human groups. Ethnographic accounts focus our minds on the ways in which ontological understandings and relationships are developed and maintained through practice, and how they are manifest in the material remains that are left behind. There are, of course, problems with applying direct ethnographic analogies, however, we argue that it is possible, and more useful, to consider broader patterns drawn from a wider review of ethnographic literature. In particular we will focus on ‘rules of practice’ as a concept, which the ethnographic record shows plays a significant role in shaping a wide range of practices and resultant material assemblages. This concept will be used to consider Mesolithic data in detail, to consider the sorts of assemblages specific tasks might be producing, and to identify the specifics of practice in the British and European Mesolithic across time and space. This approach uses ethnography as an inspiration to examine our Mesolithic assemblages in new ways, and not to layer over specific and unique Mesolithic practices with explanations taken directly from the ethnographic literature.

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