
A Wasteful Death? Rethinking the Treatment of the Dead in the Late Ertebølle Period

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Abstract

The Late Ertebølle period (ca. 4800-4000 BC) is characterized by a general lack of burials. Only seven supposed burials are known from the South Scandinavian area, and six of these are skeletons found embedded in middens with a lack of grave goods. Their contexts and the lack of apparent care suggests that the midden skeletons cannot be classified as certain burials. Instead, they probably emphasize the absence of burials even more.

Focusing on the present skeletal remains and the absence of burials in the period, this paper seeks to challenge the traditional way of interpreting the treatment of the dead in the Late Ertebølle period, as well as to address the importance of the treatment of the dead for our understanding of this decisive period.

It is argued that a marked change in the treatment of the dead occurred around 4800 BC, shifting from the rich and diverse burial customs of the Late Kongemose period/Early Ertebølle period to practically the opposite in the Late Ertebølle period. The reasoning behind the shift is discussed in light of the societal changes that occurred at this time as a result of increasing contact with Neolithic groups. Furthermore, it is argued that the funerary customs continued for at least 200 years into the Neolithic, along with other societal elements, suggesting that the Early Neolithic 1A should be considered the ultimate stage of the Mesolithic in South Scandinavia.

Keywords: Kitchen midden skeletons, Late Ertebølle Culture, Burial customs, Funerary customs, Early Neolithic 1A, Absence, Neolithisation, South Scandinavia

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