



Revisiting Mesolithic Cultures of Europe and South West Asia

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The term Mesolithic is derived from two Greek words mesos and lithos meaning middle stone age. The Mesolithic period is considered as a transitional phase between Palaeolithic and Neolithic period. Mesolithic Period commenced with the beginning of Holocene Epoch. Holocene epoch is characterized by the end of ice age and commencement of global warming in the initial phase. The environmental changes not only enhanced the quantity and availability of food resources but also led to the increase in population. The retreating of ice-sheets opened up new territories for human settlements during Mesolithic period. Due to rise in water level, the human habitations augmented near seas, rivers and lakes.

Mesolithic period is marked by the use of microliths which is derived from two Greek words micros meaning small and lithos meaning stone. These microliths were in form of geometric designs like triangles, lunates, trapeziums, etc. According to Brian M. Fagan, Mesolithic period is known for the age of intensification and complexity.ⁱ The intensification of hunting and food gathering was quiet evident in Mesolithic period. This intensification was marked by two significant technological charges.ⁱⁱ Firstly, the stone tools and artifacts along with the tools made up of antler, bone and wood became smaller. Secondly, development of more systematic and very specialized hunting equipments as well as food-processing implements.ⁱⁱⁱ

Besides, Mesolithic period is characterized by growing complexity. This complexity was seen not only in subsistence pattern but also in social organization.

The increase in the availability of vast food resources in the form of aquatic and marine animals like different varieties of fisher-cod, sardines and eel, whales, seals, etc., wild varieties of wheat and barley, acorns, hazelnuts, almonds, pistachio led to the rise of population. Furthermore, we can witness that the people started living in permanent and semi permanent settlements due to regular supply of food. Nevertheless, the Mesolithic economy became more diverse because it was not only based on hunting and food gathering but fishing and fowling provided an extra leverage. It is very interesting to note that a system of storage and preservation due to more diversified food resources developed.^{iv} In addition to this division of labour on the basis of sex, age and activity became a significant aspect of Mesolithic society.^v

The retreating of ice sheets due to rise in temperature opened up new regions for human settlements in the northern parts of the British Isles and Scandinavia.^{vi} Star Carr was an important site where Grahame Clark has done extensive research. This site is situated in northern England. Clark dates this settlement from middle of the eighth millennium B.C.E.^{vii} Grahame Clark published 'Excavations of Star Carr' in 1954.^{viii} Paul Mellars and Petra Dark dates this settlement between 8700 and 8400 B.C.E. According to Clark, Star Carr was mainly inhabited in winters. The Mesolithic period in Europe was a period of dynamic change and innovation rather than a time of culture degradation.^{ix} V. Gordon Childe divided Mesolithic Age of Europe into three phases. Phase I is characterized only by summer camps of reindeer hunters. Phase II is known for temporary summer encampments where humans were not only indulged in hunting and food gathering but also in fishing and fowling. Lastly, in Phase III, some groups maintained semi-nomadic life but some societies were leading a sedentary life style.^x

In Scandinavian region, three important Mesolithic cultures developed particularly in Denmark. These three cultures were the Maglemosean Culture (7500-5700 B.C.E.), the Kongemosean Culture (5900-4600 B.C.E.) and the Ertebolle Culture (4600-3200 B.C.E.). Fosna and Komsa are the two significant Mesolithic culture of Norway. In early mesolithic or Maglemosean period, settlements were seasonal encampments on inland lakes and river valleys.

The middle Mesolithic or Kongemosean period is known for more sedentary settlements. The Late Mesolithic or Ertebolle period is characterized by different types of settlement – (i) Coastal Settlements having both marine and terrestrial fauna, (ii) seasonal coastal sites which were smaller in area known for deep-water fishing, sealing and fowling, (iii) inland trapping stations and (iv) inland lakeside settlements.^{xi}

Mesolithic people in Scandinavian region used fish hooks and nets for the first time. The fish hooks were generally made up of stone. Besides, leister prongs, fish traps, weirs, dugout canoes and paddles were used. In one of the paddles, a heart-shaped blade can also be seen which provides the first evidence in Europe for the decoration of wooden objects.^{xii} The bow and arrow were the main weapons.^{xiii}

Ulkestrup site in Denmark was the most important settlement of the Maglemosean culture, where people lived in large huts with bark and wooden floors. The people used bone and antler-barbed points for fishing.^{xiv} The Maglemosean people hunted red deer, wild ox, pig and elk. The use of wild hazelnut was also an important aspect of this culture. the stylized anthropomorphic representation on artifacts was an important facet of Maglemosean Art.

The Kongemosean people usually inhabited the Baltic sea region where both the marine and terrestrial resources like fish, seals, deer, elk and boars were used by the people. The Ertebolle period marks the culmination of diverse trends in the Mesolithic of southern Scandinavia.^{xv} Aggersund, Vedbaek Bogebakken and Ertebolle were the important sites of this culture. The Ertebolle people used flint blades and axes, wood, bone and antler tools. Ceramics were also used by the inhabitants of Ertebolle Culture. The size of the dugout canoes reached upto 10 m during the Ertebolle period. Cemeteries of Vedbaek Bogebakken in northeastern Zealand in Denmark posited an interesting picture of ritual complexity, conflict and warfare. The graves of at least 22 individuals of both sexes and different ages were unearthed in 1975. While the elderly people were buried with red deer antlers, adult males were buried with flint blades and knives. In the female graves, jewelry of shell and animal teeth was found. Interestingly, in one of the graves, a newborn infant was found buried on the wing of a swan next to his mother which clearly represented an emotional mother child bond. Besides infant was buried with flint

blade.^{xvi} The simultaneous burial of three individuals in a single grave where a projectile is pierced through the ribs of an adult male along with a female and a child clearly shows the evidence of violent death. The inter group conflict was intermittent. The fossils unearthed from the graves depicts that skeletons of the Mesolithic people were strong having very minimal symptom of disease or undernourishment. The enormous arrangement of cemeteries near the sites was an explicit indication of sedentism.

In most of the Mesolithic cultures of Europe, accumulation of shells was the testimony to the fact of economic collection.^{xvii} The sharing of artifacts along with cultural traits was an important aspect of Mesolithic period in Europe. Teeth pendants of elk and aurochs were found in the cemetery at Vedbaek where these two species became extinct. The potteries of Ertebolle culture were evidence of their contact with Neolithic people to the south. The shaft hole axes which were manufactured by central European Neolithic people was found in late Mesolithic sites of Denmark and southern Sweden.

There were two significant Mesolithic cultures in South West Asia – (i) Kebaran (13000-11000 B.C.E.) and (ii) Natufian (11000-8500 B.C.E.). The most important settlement of Kebaran culture is Kebara cave in the Jordan Valley. The Kebaran people were predominantly hunters and food gatherers but they were using microliths of different geometrics designs. The Natufian culture is named after the site of Wadi en-Natuf situated in the Jordan Valley. The other sites of this culture were caves of el-Wad and Shuqba and open encampments of Eynam and Nahal Oren. The Natufian culture was more complex. There were two layers of Natufian culture. Natufian I and Natufian II. They used diversified dietary resources. They were involved in hunting and food foraging. They began exploiting wild varieties of emmer, wheat and barley along with acorns, almond and pistachio.

The Natufians incorporated specialized plant-processing implements like stone pestles, mortars, grinding slabs, querns and bone sickle with stone flint blades. In addition to this, the Natufians were using knife blades and lunates. The Natufians hunted fallow deer, cattle, swine, gazelle and goat. The Natufian graves provide a glimpse of social complexity as few graves were found with dentalium shell.

The Mesolithic Period can be seen as an epochal phase between late Palaeolithic and Neolithic period. It is marked by domestication of animals. Dog was the first animal which was domesticated. The importance of domestication of dogs lies in the fact that 8 dog graves were unearthed from Skateholm a Mesolithic settlement in southern Sweden. The Mesolithic people laid the foundation on which Neolithic culture flourished. The transition of Mesolithic Natufia to Neolithic Jericho is a case in point. The development of Mesolithic period in Europe and South West Asia, was manifestation of a large ecological landscape which decided the future course of human history.

References:

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- ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 196.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*
- ^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 207
- ^v *Ibid.*
- ^{vi} Clark, Grahame, *World Prehistory*, Third Edition, Cambridge University Press, London, 1977, pp. 111-113.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 113.
- ^{viii} Fagan, Brian M., *op. cit.*, p. 202.
- ^{ix} Price, T. Douglas, *The Mesolithic of Northern Europe*, Annual Review of Anthropology, Vol. 20 (1991), p. 211.
- ^x Childe, V. Gordon, *Social Evolution*, First Indian Edition, Aakar Books, Delhi, 2017, p. 81.
- ^{xi} Price, T. Douglas, *op. cit.*, p. 220.
- ^{xii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xiii} Clark, Grahame, *op. cit.*, p. 113.
- ^{xiv} Fagan, Brian M., *op. cit.*, p. 204.
- ^{xv} Price, T. Douglas, *op. cit.*, p. 221.
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 223.
- ^{xvii} Childe, V. Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 79.