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Gender in Eastern Mesolithic Europe as Seen Through Grave Clusters

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1. **Introduction**

Gender inequality is recognized in many modern societies. The reasoning for mistreatment comes from religion, history, biology, and even theories about our evolutionary roots. There is much debate whether inequality started at some point in history or if it has simply been a consistent fact in human relationships from the beginning. Inequality is an elusive concept that can be anything from individuals having fewer resources and access to opportunities to systematic control over every aspect of a group's life. In this paper, I will comment on gender inequality in human history. Inequality based on sex is commonly considered biologically inevitable in all human history. In an attempt to question the validity of this claim, I will be looking at skeletal remains and material culture to explore gender relationships during the Mesolithic period in Europe. The Mesolithic precedes periods when gender inequality became more obvious. In preceding periods women are not allowed to participate in 'male' activities, are not included in, have little accessibility to power, and are defined more heavily based on their biological category of female (Cintas-Peña, 2019). Specifically, I will examine if there appears to be different treatment of individuals based on sex through the quality and quantity of grave goods, treatment of the body after death, and the marks on bones that indicate treatment of the body in life in Mesolithic grave clusters. On top of looking at inequality, I will attempt to explain what gender interactions may have looked like in early European humans. First, we will explore the Mesolithic and its relation to other periods. Then I will approach some complications and solutions to problems in current gender theory and finally apply these theories to four prominent Mesolithic burial sites.

2. **What is the European Mesolithic?**

When the Mesolithic is explained as a whole, it is assumed that there were many similarities between each foraging group, which forms over-generalizations. There is a lot of

diversity in ecology, technology, and social relations between these people. This section serves as a quick overview of the period to provide some context and summarize other areas of research that will be focused on in the main sections of this paper.

The Mesolithic is a period between the Paleolithic and the Neolithic between the years of approximately 10,000 and 5,000 BP (Lillie, 2015, p.47). Originally, it was thought of as a period without culture or complexity, but recently it has been discovered that this was a very important time with lots of change, development, and fluctuation. The glaciers began to recede at the beginning of the Mesolithic, making sea levels rise due to the warming climate. This exposed more territory than we have today because the rising sea levels had not covered a large portion of available land (Lillie, p.45). Due to the constant fluctuation of climate, there was a large variation in survival methods for humans. Some areas in the later part of the Mesolithic began to use controlled fires to influence the food resources of an area (Bogucki and Crabtree, 2004, p.145). However, the majority of humans were arboreal foragers, meaning they largely gathered, fished, and hunted for food and that they were largely mobile, changing locations at different times of the year. Roe deer, elk, red deer, wild boar, and in some places aurochs were the majority of land animals hunted (Lillie, 2015; Woodman, 2015; Larsson, 2017). Little is known about plant-based diets because organic foods are not well preserved over long periods. It is generally accepted that hazelnuts were a large part of the plant foods eaten (Woodman, 2015, p.44). In western areas such as present-day Ireland and England, it is suggested that bogs provided many resources such as reeds and other plant-based foods (Bogucki and Crabtree, 2004, p.149; Woodman, 2015, p.281). Locations closer to coastal regions or centered around lakes had a large portion of their diet dependent on different types of fish, eel, and clams (Lillie, 2015; Bogucki and Crabtree, 2004).

Along with the diversity of subsistence strategies came about new tools. A few examples are fishing nets, bows and arrows, axes, spears, and tar (Ibid.). Fishing nets were most likely largely used for fishing as well as spears and bows and arrows for fishing and small animals. Axes were used for larger animals such as boars which are understood because boar remains have large axe-shaped holes in their skulls (Lillie, 2015, p.205). Tar was used as an adhesive to connect microliths (chips off of larger stones) to reeds to create these new tools (Taylor, 2018, p.498). In the early Mesolithic, microliths were rhombic shaped and much more robust, but later on, they became smaller, narrower, and more trapezoidal (Warren, 2018, p.185). The tools from this era are particularly fascinating because they indicate a large explosion of technology that was not seen during the Paleolithic. These tools differed in many identifiable ways by region and required extensive knowledge of the environment providing evidence for the creation and manipulation of the surrounding flora and fauna.

Like the tools being used, the arboreal foragers' movement suggests they had extensive knowledge of different ecological systems. Some archaeologists argue that these locations were used for specific activities like arrow crafting (Lillie, 2015, p.104). It was originally assumed that location was incredibly important for arboreal foragers because they attempted to claim the land by burying their dead and creating markers. Location was doubly important because it provided a food source for foragers. However, Barry Taylor and Garaeme Warren argue it is more complicated than one location for one activity (2018). Each site appears to have many uses and can be visited more than once per year. In addition, a lot of evidence is ignored to fit the idea that land was important because of subsistence. Instead, it is both subsistence and a crossroads of cultural interaction of people, places, materials, and time (Taylor, 2018, p.496; Warren, 2018). It is an assumption to conclude that these foragers were claiming land like is so often done in

modern times, and instead, land use was at least partly controlled by cultural norms. Taylor further argues that to even call these people foragers or hunters and gatherers is limiting the possibilities for what these groups were doing (2018, p.497). Instead of assuming the migration patterns and areas occupied by ecological factors, it is important to allow the patterns of the people to show archaeologists how they are interacting with their environment.

While the subsistence strategies and tools are mostly uncontested, the use of the term Mesolithic and what defines the Mesolithic is complicated. Some argue that the end of the nomadic time and the start of agriculture as the main food source signaled the transition from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic. Others consider the reemergence of pottery as the beginning of the Neolithic while the start of the Mesolithic is the absence of pottery and other goods found in the Paleolithic (Jacobs, 1995, p.363; Schmidt and Voss, 2005, p.224). The name Mesolithic means the middle period making the Mesolithic defined by both Paleolithic and Neolithic. The name and connotation that the Mesolithic is barren come from the original thought that this era had little cultural significance or development. 'Culture' was thought to have started in the Neolithic because this period began to reflect our present-day culture more directly. It reflects our culture by having more instances of violence, art, increased social inequality based on social class, tribal identities, and sex, and along with this, more power dynamics that reflect systematic control (Schulting, 2006; Cintas-Peña, 2019). This set of qualities mirror our version of what it is to be human because it appears familiar. To put it simply, we often think we are violent, selfish, and hungry for control. The Mesolithic is so significant because it has few of these characteristics and creates the opportunity to provide a different version of, human behavior. Specifically, I am focusing on the gender relationships in the Mesolithic which are significant in their own right but also create a further distinction from the Neolithic which challenges the idea of systematic and

biologically ingrained inequality. Comparing the Neolithic and Mesolithic is relevant because each period has different rules for what qualifies as 'culture'. It is important to consider that we tend to prioritize times that reflect what is familiar and call it a time of culture instead of focusing on the interactions happening during a particular period like the Mesolithic.

Relationships between individuals during this period have been considered mostly egalitarian due to the relatively equitable distribution of grave goods. There are many instances and cultures where there may have been systems built on class or status. One suggestion based on ethnographies in other forager groups is that some status was gained through prestige instead of lineage status (Spikins, 2008). Prestige status could be gained through accelerating at a skill or activity. This kind of status is one where the 'leaders' have influence but do not command others. Commanding or lack of humility will often cause a leader to lose their influence and in severe cases be exiled from the group. This form of leadership was likely present in some places in Mesolithic Europe because very few or no children are buried with excessive grave goods. Children without extensive grave goods are indicative that you gain prestige as you age and excel but are not born with status (Renfrew and Bahn, 2018, p.157). In other groups, like Mesolithic Russia that seemed to have more of a class system with three separate classes with males, females, and children buried with more valuables (Jacobs, 1995). Some places appear to have spiritual leaders that have a different status but to what extent they had influence is up for debate. The age of an individual also decided some status within certain cultures. For example, at Vedbaek antlers were placed under many old adults' skulls which could be evidence of some kind of respect or status while other sites appear to value young adults slightly more (Albrethsen and Petersen, 1977; Bogucki, 2004).

Overall, this was a time of environmental, cultural, and technological fluctuation that these foragers were navigating just as humans do throughout history including in the modern world. The Mesolithic is an important transition in Europe and is often overlooked by archaeologists. The other reason this time is so significant is it appears to be the calm before the storm on the topic of gender inequality. The Mesolithic has been considered by most as egalitarian but is followed by the Neolithic where there are clear signs of gender being an important indicator of social status with strict gender rules and divisions. Before evaluating gender relations in the Mesolithic, it is necessary to explain the complexity of sex and gender and create a framework in which to explore ancient conceptions of gender.

3. **Dealing with the issues posed by sex and gender in Archaeology**

- Gender

I would like to preface this discussion by saying that sex and gender in itself is a complicated issue and in no way am I summarizing all theories here. I will attempt to summarize some aspects of current theory and give some suggestions for interacting with these concepts in specifically an anthropological and archaeological context. Historically, people have made the split along the lines of sex and gender, so it is necessary to engage with this distinction despite my apprehension to continue the division. No matter the conclusion, it is important to keep in mind that this issue is incredibly complicated.

As mentioned previously, our conceptions of human nature outlined individuals that wanted power, control and would take any opportunity to get more at the cost of another. Selfishness is a central part of our nature led many to accept that hierarchy was inevitable and factually part of human societies. Therefore, hierarchy based on sex was considered a biological fact that transcended time periods due to women being thought of as physically weaker and

subject to a reproduction strategy that left them open to exploitation (Joyce, 2008, p.18). Gender relationships were thought of simply as a power hierarchy where women were at the bottom and men were at the top controlling everything and protecting women within society (Ibid., p.19.). There were also no distinctions between sex as biological and gender so there was very little consideration for other conceptions of sex in practice. In addition, archeologists often automatically associated women with domestic labor and fertility or were more closely tied to nature, and men were thought to be the hunters that provided an important food source and participated in politics (Ibid., p.72). While this may be a true conception in some societies, it is not universal. Male's association to hunting leads to an artifact bias where more hunting artifacts and bones are preserved so the 'male' jobs are more readily accessible for interpretation. Thinking of women as physically weaker, only around to pop out babies, and without power as well as having less evidence for their activities left the female experience and contributions on the periphery or unexplored altogether.

A new wave of feminist and gender theory took the opportunity to press these preconceived ideas and began projects to locate 'women in history' (Ibid., p.39). Gender theory caused a new understanding that while sex may be biological, gender differs based on culture leaving more options open for women to be involved in society. This was an attempt to disprove that women were will-less bystanders under the control of men who did contribute to the making of history. Locating women in history was a good start in the progress of pushing gender relationships and questioning the presuppositions about women to the forefront of anthropology and archaeology. However, by looking for women in history there is another assumption that because of biological similarities there is a somewhat universal experience for women as women which will be discussed in more detail in the preceding section (Ibid., p.40).

A prominent archaeologist and social anthropologist Rosemary A. Joyce makes the argument that gender has not always been dualistic like that of the 20th-century Western world like many early archaeology and feminists theory would suggest. Many cultures present and past, have different conceptions for what it was to be female and male. The Greeks specifically thought that women were not their own sexual category, but instead were underdeveloped men (Joyce, 2008, p.52). Women, in this case, fell into a similar category as young men. The category of women is obsolete and two categories like that of the modern western world are not completely required or accurate for Greek culture. In other cultures, there are many versions of what it is to be male or female making two categories once again incorrect. In the instance of Native American groups, some men and women partake in typical labor of the opposite sex (Ibid., p.58). Based on a two-sex model, it would be very challenging to know how to categorize those who delineate from a typical gender role. She claims this should not be explored as males falling into a feminine category or females into the masculine but instead "in terms of a broader range of ways of acting as a sexed person" (Ibid., p.58). Sex as two binary categories is reductive and incorrect in a global and historical context. Thinking that there are only two sex categories restrains an archaeologist's and anthropologist's ability to understand and explain a culture.

In addition to a dualistic system, the emphasis put on 'male' and 'female' has not been a consistent and universal trend throughout time and location (Ibid., p.9). Both feminist and early archaeology theories claim that the biological sex of an individual is indicative of two categories. Even if there were two biological categories of male and female, this distinction may not have been recognized as significant in other times and places (Ibid., p.40). Instead, many societies may be differentiated based on class, age, ethnicity, etc., making gender or sexual differences a less prioritized distinction between people in a group. She brings up many examples but one that

I found helpful was that of the Tlatilco group. The group of individuals that contained the majority of grave goods was the young adults regardless of gender (Ibid., p.49). It is thought that young adults held significance and were important for survival because they served as a bridge between families through marriage and in their death, a tie would be lost. Other societies appear to have distinguished along the lines of sexuality and the Mayan society based on status through social class which made gender less important to a particular group of people (Ibid., p.68).[1] Different classes of people are drawn up in each society that are not the same as Western distinctions. In these cases, not all men and women can be compared because they may be a part of a more important distinction. For example, men and women in the upper-class groups are likely to lead totally different lives than their poorer counterparts and may even have separate ideas about women and men's roles (Ibid., p.75). The distinction along the lines of biological sex is not consistent and to assume this duality disregards that the society being analysed did not think of others as male or female but rather as family, poor, rich, old, young, talented, etc (Joyce, 2008; Schmidt and Voss, 2005). Look for women in the past is therefore not the best approach because it contributes to the dichotomy of male and female when sex may not have been an important division. In general, expecting divisions is also based on the previously mentioned argument that humans innately need, want and have hierarchies because humans are power hungry and selfish. There are many groups that do not appear to have much hierarchy or if they do it is not built from systematic control and violent exploitation but rather skill or prestige. To consider every society as susceptible to the same divisions and hierarchies, in general, is again reductive and based on an assumption about human nature.

[1] Sexuality and age are two very important aspects for breaking down preconceived ideas of gender but unfortunately based on time and space they will not be discussed to a great extent in this paper.

Along with questioning the emphasis placed on the duality of male and female and the accuracy in general, Joyce critiques the original archaeologist's idea that women are always associated with fertility and claims this concept should not be expected (Joyce, 2008, p.55). To conflate women and fertility is based on a concept of biological essentialism that claims women are automatically restricted and defined based on reproductive organs (Ibid., p.92). First, it excludes women who are not heterosexual, are infertile, postmenopausal, or have chosen or are required to abstain from sexual practices (Ibid., p.92). By excluding these women, we might miss important aspects of society like those of nuns in the Christian tradition. Not only will archaeologists exclude these examples but more importantly will omit other more significant parts of a female's life or culture (Ibid., p.8). Biological essentialism hinders the possibility of other concepts of fertility and could simplify how a society views women and child-rearing. Not to mention that there are cases in which societies have different conceptions of what reproductive sex and child-rearing looks like. Some places considered oral, anal sex, or communal sharing of semen as a means of reproductive sex in addition to that of vaginal sex (Ibid., p.91 and 108). There are also plenty of examples of sex not being reproductive but for pleasure, as can be seen in western culture and places like Egyptian civilizations or any place in which prostitution exists (Joyce, 2008, p.107; Sofaer, 2006, p.94). child-rearing, especially in foraging groups, was not solely one female's responsibility and not even just female but male as well (Hrdy, 2009). There are many different understandings of mating patterns, fertility, and child-rearing. Fertility should not define women or their life activities because this is not universally believed and reduces them to their biology.

While gender dualism and fertility are directly pertinent to archaeology, more specifically relevant is gender seen through grave goods. Gender is often associated with grave goods

because they are considered an avenue to understanding the past symbolically. However, grave goods can be difficult to interpret. The amount or rarity of grave goods may not be indicative that a particular individual had more status because the value placed on grave goods is known by the society and can be difficult to identify as an outsider (Joyce, 2008, p.75). Due to the Mesolithic being so long ago, there is also a bias in the objects that have been preserved as was already explained as problematic for exploring gender in archaeology. Animal bones and knives take much longer to decompose than certain clothing or plant-based products, often artifacts associated with women, making it nearly impossible to identify certain activities and significance of objects because they simply aren't present to be interpreted.[2] Similar to this, the type of objects buried with males and females (if there is a drastic difference) do not directly show where the society placed value. If women typically made clothing and were buried with sewing needles while men with knives, this does not mean that the activity of hunting or fighting was more valued than making clothing like the western gaze may assume (Ibid., p.80). In some instances, societies do appear to value someone who is valued more highly than others in their burial with drastically different grave goods. Say that this person is sexed as a female, this does not mean that as a group all females should be classed as above men and vice versa because the society may not have divided people along the lines of sex. This does not mean that exceptions, such as an individual having more influence, are not important in understanding a group (Ibid., p.75). Exceptions like a male being buried with typical female grave goods should not be discounted because that society may allow for more fluid gender identities (Ibid., p.73). A woman buried with swords or other fighting materials (if it has already been accepted that this is outside the norm) could suggest that there is less strict a code for gender or at the very least negotiation about gender roles because she has the ability to participate in the other activity

[2] These particular objects are mentioned because they are significant to the period I am examining.

(Ibid., p.76). Overall, interpreting grave goods in quality or quantity can be dangerous because it is based on the same assumption mentioned previously that there is always a hierarchy of some sort instead of other reasons for many grave goods. It is generally accepted that humans are selfish and increasingly likely to take advantage of others when the chance is presented, which I disagree is always the case. To assume these aspects of human nature is unfounded on the grounds that we cannot know the relevant cultural reasons for the inclusion of certain grave goods. While I will not be looking into these underlying assumptions in too much depth, they are important to keep in mind along with the uncertainty of interpretation of gender.

- Sex

The other part of this discussion is that of interpretation of sex as biological. There is little debate as to whether gender varies throughout culture but sex is considered as factually creating two categories of male or female. In other words, sex as body and gender as mind (Sofaer, 2006, p.51). The feminist movement continues this distinction by thinking of the construction of gender as culturally dependent and women as women based on biological similarities (Ibid., p.55). They are still considering sex as a fact that permeates universally. However, the biological body is not void of culture. The body is an ever-evolving living thing that changes based on the activities in which an individual partakes, what an individual eats, and how they view their body which are all examples of culturally constructed ideologies. The separation between mind and body is not validated in reality because these components of the human experience are in fact intertwined (Ibid., p.77). These ideas will be discussed in greater detail later but for now, it is necessary to explore the more non-negotiable biological differences between men and women.

It is not deniable that there are biological differences between men and women and different reproductive methods but they may not be so clearly defined or consistent universally. In a lot of instances, women are associated with XX chromosomes and men with XY. Joanna R. Sofaer and Joyce argue that there are exceptions to this claim such as XXY (Sofaer, 2006, p.27; Joyce, 2008, p.43). While these examples are statistically less common than XX or XY, they still exist commonly enough that it is likely that almost every society has a large population to have a couple of occurrences or more of these different biological bodies (Joyce, 2008, p.44). The other argument for the two sexes is different hormone levels but these fluctuate throughout an individual's life and run along a continuum.

Other biological and physical components of gender are bone structure and body parts resembling male or female. These include genitalia, pelvic and skull shape as well as body size (Sofaer, 2006, p.91). Sofaer continues to argue through bone analysis that males and females fall all along a spectrum for each physical aspect (Ibid., p.92). This changes by society that you look at so there is no universal female or male physical body to the point that archaeologists have misidentified certain places as all male or all female. They needed to change the scale to fit the context being observed.

Sofaer discussed the possibility that female and male characteristics shift along a continuum over time through hormonal changes but -like mentioned before- also the work and activities done by each individual. For example, if one individual does hard labor or repetitive labor, their bones compensate for this type of work (Ibid., p.95). Archaeologists are now looking into what repetitive activities cause certain bone structures. If female-oriented work was grinding corn repeatedly then this shows up in the bones of an individual (Ibid., p.95). Bone analysis can also show when men and women are completing the same type of work. Archaeologists can

sometimes identify the sex of an individual and equate all that is around them to their sex because it appears to be the only thing that we know (Ibid., p.33). However, identifying people by biological differences tells archaeologists nothing about what the people did, cared about, or how they interacted with one another (Ibid., p.97). Observing bone wear and tear shows more about what people did and can even present gendered roles in a society, the lack thereof, or mixture through the activities completed by males and females (Ibid., p.98). What people did creates, solidifies, and restructures gendered normalities throughout time and shows how biological sex influences the creation of gendered normalities and how these normalities influence the body over time(Ibid., p.98). Sofaer claims to view a body as sex and gender can be done because of the interconnectedness between the two. Biological sex and how someone interacts with their environment can change their physical characteristics down to the bone (Ibid., p.77). Sofaer is making the argument to throw out the sex as body and gender as mind! There are many connections to be drawn from understanding sex and gender as fluidly influencing one another throughout one's life through the conceptions that a society has of both.

In their simplest form, Joyce and Sofaer are saying let the group speak for themselves. Sofaer is claiming that a society will speak through their actions that are solidified in skeletal remains. Joyce is saying let the society show you how they categorize and distinguish themselves instead of imposing gendered categories. Archaeologist imposing their assumptions of gender onto the past restricts the ways that sex and gender can be viewed to understand the past. I agree with both Joyce and Sofaer but an important bias has been excluded from both. Each touches on a lot related to assumptions for females and males in archaeology but seems to evade discussing issues of value directly. When I reference value I mean the socially constructed assumptions that individuals agree to that catalyze activity. There are three types of values that are important in

gender-related analysis: what an archaeologist's society values, differences of value in societies, and how each society expresses value.

I do not speak for all cultures but the western world generally does divide along the lines of sex and the way we think is influenced by this divide. When removing the dualistic perspective from our archaeological gaze as Joyce and Sofaer suggest, it is important to dispel the cultural values associated with each as well. This takes the form of sexism, domestic labor as female, male as strength, etc. Not simply sexism toward biological women but biological men as well as biologically different bodies. I want to emphasize that this is not a problem that just men need to take responsibility for but as a woman attempting archaeological research, it is women's responsibility to not be sexist toward male work or characteristics. We all have biases associated with who we are and it is easy to look at a civilization and think of the group we identify with, whether that be male, female, or otherwise, as 'better'. As soon as we place 'better' into any context, even if unintentional, we are diminishing our goal to pursue knowledge. In other words, Joyce and Sofaer are arguing for how we should see sex and gender but we need to be aware that we still exist within our context that consists of binary categories and there are conceptions and opinions about these categories. For example, it is often assumed that men are physically stronger than women. This is an assumption about men that catalyzes men to spend time increasing strength through activities like exercising while women spend more time cutting down on their size to be skinnier and physically weaker. Like Sofaer and Joyce claim, these are a back and forth reaction between what a society thinks a male and female should be and what they do as well as vice versa. However, it is important to recognize that the society we are analyzing may not have valued physical strength to the extent that we do similar to that of other associations like women and child care.

Not only is it important to not impose value onto the past but recognize that there may be differences in value within each society. Joyce comments on this in the context of Mayan society saying that the upper-class provided social rules but this did not mean the people followed them (Joyce, 2008, p.103). Today, it is not uncommon that if you asked a man and some women about menstruation they would find it disgusting, shameful, and a sickness. However, there are many instances where to men this may seem like such a disgusting occurrence and women believe it is a beautiful time of the month that represents fertility and the possibility of motherhood (Hennegan, Shannon, Rubli, Schwab, Melendez-Torres, 2019). When one group can be understood in more detail within an early human group, there may be an ignored perspective concerning gender or any other identity.

When discussing value, it is important to remember, like different ideas of sex and gender in other times and places, other people may not show value the way that we do today. Archaeologists may approach a grave and find that an individual has many or 'rare' grave goods but this does not indicate that a person was necessarily any more important or valued more highly than one without. For instance, the person who put these materials in the grave may have held more significance than the items included. Finding out how a society illustrates value may give insight into what is actually valued. Relating this to the research of sex and gender, there are often differences in the way that men or women are buried but assuming gender relations based on our conception of value and expression of value limits how we understand past groups. I do think Joyce and Sofaer have excellent approaches to archaeological research. That is to let a society speak for itself as to how important the differences in sex and what these differences are as well as view sex and gender as fluidly influencing each other. On top of these ideas, I will

keep in mind the influence of my cultural values and binary division, that there can be differences of opinion within a group, and what actually represents value.

4. **Burial theory and how burials give insight into gender relations**

Why is this research centered around burials and what do they have to do with understanding culture in the past? Liv Nilsson Stutz makes the argument that burials allow "the mourners to separate from the dead and at the same time, structure and acceptance of death. By producing a 'good death', the ritual further reinstates order and a society as a whole can manifest its resistance and control over death" (Stutz, 2010, The Way We Bury Our Dead (A)). The mourners are attempting to come to terms with the loss of a loved one and solidify the relationship with the dead which can fix the tear in the social organization. A burial is a reconstruction of 'culturally and socially acceptable' behavior in death that would have been accepted in life creating a 'good burial' (Ibid.). For example, most Americans would not bury their dead in the nude because it is not socially acceptable in life, which can translate to the ritual of burial. In other cases, it is the replication of a social structure as a whole that could manifest as social status or other such social organization.

In addition to the body and artifacts left with an individual, the rituals centered on burial are reflective of a society. Instead of the meaning behind rituals being the primary focus, the reproductions and messages they send should be the main concern. For example, in Cahokia mound 72, 53 females were clubbed and thrown into a mass grave for two male's burials. In this instance, the clubbing of 53 women was not for the dead but most likely a display of power, control, and convention(Pauketat, 2010). The power of people's lives is a large expression of control that was openly displayed (Ibid.). The death of these two men most likely required direct expression of order and reinstatement of hierarchy that manifested in the clubbing of women to

like Stutz claims is a reaction to a tear in the social fabric. While this is a severe example of a burial ritual, many less obvious rituals are often observable through consistency in the way individuals are buried. These consistencies show non-negotiable aspects for a group but expectations and variation are indicative of negotiation of culture, cultural complexity, or a specific reaction to an event (Stutz, 2010, A). The rituals people use create divisions and connections between groups through the differences and similarities of practice. In the period following the Mesolithic, there are less drastic examples of social convention and inequality. The Neolithic is a period when people lived in more settled societies and there was a drastic increase in violence (Cintas-Peña, 2019). Males were often the ones that had arrows logged into their remains and were buried with axes and arrowheads, but women had very few of these injuries and grave goods. Women having few to no injuries from violence is significant because they were excluded from participating in violence and therefore could not receive the power and prestige that come along with it (Cintas-Peña, 2019). Women's bodies are also found significantly less and when they are with fewer grave goods at Neolithic burial sites suggesting that they were buried less or were not given a 'good' death like males received (Ibid.). Due to women not having injuries and therefore prestige as well as not receiving proper burials, inequality is apparent with women and men being treated with different levels of respect (Ibid.). In this instance, there is a subtle difference between the positive treatment of men and the somewhat less celebrated treatment of women but it is still obvious that there was extensive inequality.

In any burial, especially that of Cahokia, it is important to keep in mind those involved with the ritual even if it is unclear in archaeological evidence (Fahlander, 2010). In Cahokia, the entire community was likely not involved in the planning of the ceremony or had any say over

what was included in the burial despite the theatrical performance in the main part of the settlement (Pauketat, 2010). In other instances, it may have been the entire community, selected religious leader, a few family members, etc. The burial may be exposed to many or not shown to anyone outside of the approved few (Fahlander, 2010). The individual that has died often has little control over the ritual or burial. Thus, those participating in the burial are the ones deciding how the body rests, what is given as grave goods, where the body is put, how the body is disposed of, and many other factors like in some cases when the body is removed or split apart (Budja, 2010). Grave goods are particularly complicated because they could be related to the individual during life in the form of activity or possession, given as gifts from the living, customary for a certain age, gender or ethnicity, or any other reason one could come up with.

The remains of any group of people, whether structures, burials, etc. can be explicitly used to mask other realities such as inequality (Ibid.). Masking inequality can be treating people in death the same but in reality, their lives were filled with unequal conditions. There may be official and unofficial histories to uncover. In Cahokia, it was exposed that the 53 women were from a farming village outside the main city that was made up of a different cultural background meaning they were likely immigrants (Pauketat, 2010). This is unobservable at first glance and without further investigation, this could present as a gender disparity but could have been both gender and ethnicity or simply ethnicity. This occurs in the present day when certain groups attempt to cover up massacres, genocides, or civil rights violations, to name a few bad examples. The bodies are often in mass graves far from the site that is populated and often left unmarked and unrecorded (Budja, 2010). Societies in the past and contemporary world often present themselves as they would like to be viewed instead of the whole truth creating the distinction between their official and unofficial histories.

While my research does not cover mass burials or a huge range of practices, it is significant for any archaeologist or person reading interpretation of burials to consider the difficulties in identifying what a past culture was doing with their dead and how they went about the disposal. The main takeaways are that bodies, body disposal methods, and grave goods should be thought of within the known context of a society and should be questioned as accurately showing everyday life. It is easy to assume that grave goods are related to the dead individual but there are plenty of instances this may not be the case. Burials and other forms of body disposal are nonetheless often indicative of social rules, customs, and individuals dealing with a loss, making them good places to find aspects of ideologies and the negotiation of these beliefs over time.

As mentioned above in the case of Neolithic burials and in Cahokia, there can be a lot learned about gender relations from grave clusters. In America during the late Pleistocene era, there are almost equal numbers of women as men with hunting kits as burial goods, which points to big game hunting as gender-neutral with some variation between 30 to 50 percent of women participating (Haas, 2020). During the Iron Age in Central Asia, women were buried with objects associated with spinning and religious practices and others with weapons, and a couple with both while men mostly had weapons and horse gear. Joyce comments that these burials have been analyzed as women having had more freedom to choose jobs they would have liked making women the more powerful sex or men having more power because the few bodies that were most adorned in death were only men (2008). Both analyses have different assumptions about gender and power like the concept that a couple of men having power means all men have power. That assumption is a social distinction predicated on the fact that the categories of male and female transcend time and place (Joyce, 2008, p.74). This situation can get complicated when talking

about what the hierarchy might have been, but on the base level, it is apparent that spinning clothes, hunting, protection, and horses were parts of these people's lives (Ibid.). All things considered, grave goods and burials show archaeologists today what was going on in women's and men's (and otherwise) lives. As mentioned before, Neolithic burials have been interpreted as the starting point for a more apparent gender divide in Europe making the Mesolithic an important part of history to explore for variation in gender relations. It is possible that some of the disparities in treatment after death in the Neolithic can be observed earlier than previously presumed.

5. **Prominent grave clusters in Mesolithic Europe**

I follow Brinch Petersen and his colleagues and do not use the term cemetery. They argue that this terminology is not appropriate because Mesolithic burials are not independent sites but are often intertwined with living areas and other workspaces (Meiklejohn, Petersen and Alexandersen, 2000, p.225). However, I will solely be focusing on the graves so I refer to the grave sections as grave clusters in an attempt to not differentiate them from other relevant sites. Furthermore, this new terminology does not presuppose a particular connection between each of the dead like so often happens with the word cemetery. For example, different groups may be using the same location to bury their dead but may have separate cultural norms and practices. Despite the Mesolithic grave cluster association to other parts of the site, it is non-negotiable that they are significant independently. As mentioned above, burials represent a place people create meaning by dealing with loss, fix tears in the social fabric, and mirror social convention.

As we focus on grave clusters in Mesolithic Europe, it is necessary to explain that Western Europe does not have many bodies from this period. It is suggested that they did not bury their dead, but either placed them in bogs or put bodies out in the open during

decomposition, which would explain why there are many bones left strewn around Ireland and England (Woodman, 2015). The bodies that were buried were likely not preserved because the acidity in the soil decomposes the subject quickly. There can be graves found in these regions but most do not contain any physical body (Ibid.). Due to the limited time given to complete this research, I will not be focusing on western Europe despite the interesting possibilities that accompany the complications. Instead, I will focus on four prominent burials in the East: Vedbaek, Zvejnieki, Olenii Ostrov, and Skateholm.

- General Eastern Body Disposal Methods

Across eastern Europe, there are instances of inhumation, cremations, exposed burials, air burials, midden burials, and more. Inhumation burials are what most of us are familiar with. It is simply putting a body or pieces of the body in the ground. Sometimes these burials are dug up later by the same group of people for other purposes or have been left alone until excavation (Fahlander, 2010; Petersen, Jønsson, Juel, and Kjaer, 2015). Cremations have been found in many areas and are when the body is burned leaving the bones charred. Cremations may take place before an inhumation (Meiklejohn and Petersen, 2003). Exposed burials likely occurred in the West but some were present in the East. These burials are simply the laying of a body out in the open, sometimes on a raised platform. It is speculated that there are some instances of air burials based on ethnographic data but this is not an overly accepted claim. Air burials are where an individual is placed in a tree after death by the living. The reasoning that exposed and air burials have been considered possible is because there are instances of bones scattered around unaccompanied with a platform (Grøn, 2015). This could be that an exposed body after decomposition was discarded around by living people or animals or as a body decomposed in a tree the bones fell to the ground. Middens are mounds of discarded material such as clamshells

that may have gained significance for a group of people over time for a multitude of reasons. There are instances in which a body is put in these middens or on top of, similar to an exposed burial (Lillie, 2015). The sites discussed used inhumations often and occasionally cremations so these methods of discarding cadavers will be the major focus for this paper but the others provide evidence of the variability of Mesolithic groups.

- Vedbaek

The site was excavated first in 1924 and again in 1945, but very little was found or analyzed (Albrethsen and Petersen, 1977). In 1975, the Vedbaek project was started and conducted by Brinch Petersen. Vedbaek is dated from around 6,000 calBC to 4,700 calBC and in Denmark North of Copenhagen. There were a total of 17 graves with 22 individuals uncovered (Ibid.). I will not be talking about all graves or skeletal remains but graves 8, 15, and 19 present interesting gender-related circumstances and will be discussed in greater detail after contextual information about sex identification, grave goods, and skeletal wear and tear.

The sexes of the skeletal remains are difficult to identify because the skeletons with their pelvic bones preserved that can be identified show that some males are less robust than some females so that a proper scale can not be created (Albrethsen and Brinch Petersen, 1977). The level of preservation of most of the skeletons also makes sex identification challenging. The skeletons overall are relatively robust with brow ridges and thick cheekbones making some female skeletons appear male compared to other populations (Albrethsen and Brinch Petersen, 1977). Grave 22 provides a good example of these difficulties. The skeleton is very well preserved and can be identified as female from the pelvis. She showed many typical male features like a prominent brow ridge and thick facial structure that would have been considered male in other regions (Ibid.). With these complications, Petersen and anthropologists identified

eight biological males and seven biological females. There were five children and two individuals that could not be identified through grave goods or skeletal remains (Ibid.).

There are a couple of inhumations without grave goods, but because the site was disturbed before excavation, it is unclear if this was the case originally. Some graves contained short blades, knives, and axes, and a spatula crafted from a rib and one bone axes (Ibid., p.9). The flint knives typically were placed under the pelvis. The majority of graves containing these tools were sexed as male and initially, inhumations including these objects were considered male tools. Perforated shells, teeth, and beads were associated with females (Ibid., p.14). Three individuals had antlers under their heads and these three individuals contain an unsexed individual of older age and one male and one female also of older ages suggesting certain older adults from the group were placed with antlers (Ibid., p.22). All but four graves contain red ochre either around the head, pelvis, and legs or a mixture of the three.

Violence and injury are not incredibly common at Vedbaek like in the Neolithic. Two skeletons from graves 3 and 6 appear to have fractured their spinal column but these injuries had healed before the time of death (Ibid., p.20). Another skeleton, which will be discussed later, has an arrowhead logged in the upper spinal cord suggesting an arrow entered through the neck damaging internal organs severely enough to be the cause of death (Ibid., p.20). It is the most common to see wear on the skeleton's teeth such as lack of enamel and chipping most likely from eating tough foods or using the teeth as a tool (Ibid., p.20).

Grave 8 is one of the most referenced burials from the site. It is a relatively well-preserved double burial of a woman and a newborn child. The woman is thought to be 18 years of age at death and has many grave goods such as 190 pendants made from animal teeth under her head, another 50 perforated shells near her pelvis, and red ochre around her head and

pelvis (Albrethsen and Brinch Petersen, 1977, p.8). The teeth were mostly from red deer and boar but seal and elk teeth were also present. The placement of these pendants is thought to be a dress laid under her head and a belt around her waist. The child was laid on a swan wing and had a blade put over its pelvis which led to the conclusion the child was male (Ibid., p.9). There was also red ochre under and above the child.

Grave 15 contained a female and child but was heavily disturbed because grave 6 cut through this one as well as a fox hole and construction caused some destruction (Ibid., p.14). No grave goods were found that could be associated with this grave but there were a few red ochre splotches throughout. Grave 6 was that of a 40 to 60-year-old male. Within this grave, there was an antler axe with the male and three flint blades associated with him (Ibid., p.9). The depth of grave 6 was unusual and was only similar to that of the older individuals with deer antlers. There are no other instances where one grave was carved through another making this grave significant by nature of being an exception.

Grave 19 is by far the most complex when it comes to interpretation. Grave 19 is a triple burial with two adults and a child (Albrethsen and Brinch Petersen, 1977, p.14). Individual A was between the ages 25 to 30 and had grave goods surrounding the body. This individual had an arrowhead lodged into the throat region of the spine and likely caused instantaneous death. Red ochre was found around the head and on the chest and pelvis. Individual C, the other adult individual was around the age of 35 to 40 and had many grave goods with roughly 50 tooth beads. 12 of these teeth were perforated and three were human teeth along with red deer, wild boar, and aurochs. Below the neck, there is a small knife and red ochre spread around the legs, pelvis, skull, and shoulders (Ibid.). The child rests in the middle of the two adults but does not appear to have any grave goods associated with them. The child does have red ochre on the skull

and chest. Petersen along with others interpreting this site originally concluded that one of these individuals must have followed the other into this burial and that it must have been a family burial. Sex identification is questionable but based on the graves goods associated with individual C archaeologists concluded it must be female (Ibid.). The other was considered a male based on the fact that the skeleton was thought to have been slain by the arrow and because it was a family burial. If so then the woman and child must have been killed to then be placed in the grave (Ibid., 22). The knife under the chin of the wife could then be explained as the weapon used to kill them for inhumation.

Petersen returned to this analysis, later claiming a couple of new conclusions about sex identification of grave 19. The new identification shows that the individual with the arrow lodged in the spinal cord is less robust than the other individual in the grave, and has some pelvic similarities to a female (Meiklejohn, Brinch Petersen, and Alexandersen, 2000). The other adult has cranial features similar to those of a male, and is slightly more robust. This individual also has dental measurements closer to those of other men in the Vedbaek group. However, it is not impossible to rule out this second individual also being female due to the general robustness of skeletal remains from other parts of Vedbaek (Meiklejohn, Brinch Petersen, and Alexandersen, 2000). Either way, it is important to be cognizant of the complication with identifying the sex of each skeleton at Vedbaek.

Vedbaek is the place archaeologists tend to look to first to understand the Mesolithic. There are few burials at Vedbaek compared to the other three locations making consistencies about gender relations less apparent. Vedbaek does encapsulate some of the difficulties of looking at gender in the past because it has a few unsexed bodies or many that had their sex identified by grave goods which is problematic (Ibid.). These complications come from not

having consistently robust males and smaller females, but instead they are occasionally indistinguishable based on size and few pelvic bones have remained intact. However, it is quite obvious that Neolithic and Cahokia's burials differ from Vedbaek. For starters, there is an equal distribution of women and men buried and an equal number of their graves contain different but relatively equal goods. The mother and child from grave 8 were referred to as an instance of a woman being associated with fertility in Vedbaek culture from an older archaeological gaze, but like Joyce mentions this is an overapplication of biological essentialism. There is much more complexity to this grave than just a woman and child together, such as the swan wing under the child and excessive amount of tooth beads around the woman. There are a couple of other graves with women and children, but none have quite the same detail and no other grave has a wing of a swan. It would have taken time, effort, and care to place the child nuzzled comfortably by the woman's chest, clothing under the woman's head, and the wing making each component appear planned. According to Robert Schmidt, the wings of birds have sometimes been considered significant during the Mesolithic due to birds' ability to be on land and in water and the sky (2001). They may have been considered significant because of their ability to transcend the limitations of other creatures, making them spiritual guides in some way (Schmidt, 2001). To make the argument that in this society women were associated with fertility is not only obviously reductionist, but like Joyce points out this does not actually tell us about the experience and culture of the group or of this woman and child. The woman being reduced to fertility is one problem but another is that the child is designated male because it received a flint blade. The observation and placement of the knife are important but to only assume this child as male is also quite insignificant and similarly reductionist. This interpretation stems from the older archaeological theories where there are only two categories of male and female and that this is

always a necessary distinction for defining relationships but the child appears to have more significance in relation to the woman and because of the swan wing than because of it possibly being a male. Its identity as a child is also overlooked as significant in an effort to categorize the sex of the individual. This woman and child were given special and symbolically significant treatment but this is not to say that women or children held more significance and power overall. If you were to make this argument, Joyce would say this is drawing a connection between all individuals of the same sex or gender (2008). Again, that seems relevant to us today, but sex may not have been a division these people prioritized or recognized. Especially because there are women buried with children who did not receive this treatment. While suggesting this woman and child may have been celebrated more than the others is not a stretch; it is an unwarranted conclusion to say this burial is indicative of a hierarchy. There are only a few examples of a mother and child buried together, making it hard to conclude any kind of pattern. It is possible this particular woman could have had some form of leadership position or may have been respected by the group but it is not likely she had systematic control as this does not appear to be present in many early hunter societies (Spikins, 2008). Most forager groups today determine leadership based on prestige, and this may have been the reason for her distinguished treatment in death (Ibid.). However, Joyce claimed to say women held more power or prestige based on simply one person from that sex appearing more celebrated is an exaggerated connection between individuals of the same sexual identity. Hence this woman may have been significant, but it is not indicative of women holding more power overall as a group.

Unlike grave 8, the triple burial could appear similar to that of something seen in Cahokia on a smaller scale. The original analysis of this site, mentioned above, assumed that it was a male and female with a child and that the mother and child were interned for the male. Upon later

identification, the individual with the arrow in its neck has a couple of pelvic similarities to a female, and the other individual can be identified as both male or female. The initial conclusions about grave 19 were based on a couple of other assumptions. One assumption in the original analysis was that the person with the arrow in their neck must have been male because the arrow was considered an act of violence and only men could have been affiliated with violence. This is a conclusion about gender based on bias because there are many instances of women participating in these activities, like during the Iron Age in Central Asian groups mentioned above. The arrow being associated with violence might also qualify as an assumption because it rules out the possibility of an accident. It also assumes that it must have been a family grave, and on top of that, the family followed the nuclear archetype (Cobb and Jones, 2018). The people using Vedbaek possibly had different understandings of reproductive sex and child-rearing practices than modern western culture, which will be further examined below. It is unlike any other grave in that it has three people, different placement of grave goods, and a supposed act of violence. Due to these three differences, I think it is quite possible that this grave is not representative of a normal situation. If you go based on grave goods alone it appears that one of the individuals was celebrated or treated equally to the rest of the group while the other was shown little of the same treatment with no grave goods. Then why would they have been interred together? I can only begin to imagine why but it would be fascinating to consider further possibilities such as an execution done by the group, an accidental death while hunting, perceiving no attachment between the three individuals other than a similar time of death, etc. The fact that sex identification is challenging for these three people leaves open a couple of possibilities. First, these are two women buried with a child as a familial grave. There are a couple of instances that have been mentioned already where a mother is buried with a child at

Vedbaek so it is not far off to consider one of these individuals is the mother. The individual with the arrow in their neck has already been considered very likely to be female, so she could have been the mother, but I think it is more likely the other individual was the mother. The child was placed next to the chest and facing the unidentified individual much like the mother from grave 8. This could suggest there were other familial arrangements, not just male and female as previously assumed, but female and female. The other option is that the unidentified individual is male. In this case, the male would be challenging gender conceptions that appear somewhat consistent in other graves. He would have more 'female' grave goods and would be more heavily associated with the child for the reasons mentioned in the previous sex identification interpretation. Either way, the individual is identified, the remains provide new insight that possibly shows complex and malleable gender relations where a male could be more associated with children and female grave goods or a family could be composed of two women. As Joyce claimed, there are examples of individuals crossing gender boundaries often like in the Native American groups explored above. At Vedbaek, there appears to be a "broader range of acting as a sexed person" in grave 19 making a two-sex, two-gender approach incomplete (Joyce, 2008, p.58). Vedbaek could be a new representation of human variability through same-gender family structures or fluidity in gender identity.

On top of gender identity expressed through grave goods and the sex of the skeleton, Soafer requests that we look at the wear on skeletal remains to see how males and females repeatedly used their bodies as an expression of roles in society (2006, p.95). While there is little analysis done on the wear of the skeletons there are two skeletons with intriguing injuries that could shed light on this issue. Both a male and female have broken backs. Two individuals are a significant percentage of the group considering there are just 22 individuals. A broken back is

also a relatively severe injury to sustain. Due to the severity and the high percentage, it is likely their backs were not broken simply by both experiencing the same random accident. This man and woman may have both been participating in similar activities that caused this injury. These people hunted larger terrestrial game which is a dangerous activity that in other parts of the world has been shown to cause many injuries and broken bones. In the study of early American foragers, they concluded that women and men participated about equally in hunting activities, so it is possible that at least some women participated in hunting at Vedbaek as well, or at least men and women were doing similar activities, whatever they were. There are not enough skeletons and by far not enough bone analysis done at Vedbaek to conclude which individuals participated in what activities but the injuries shared by a male and a female may be indicative that both participated in dangerous hunting activities.

Vedbaek burials do not seem to have many items included, and even fewer that suggest what these people were doing on an everyday basis. Males were typically buried with tools such as flint knives, with one instance of an individual interned with a bone axe, which could suggest their everyday activities consisted of hunting. But like the injuries mentioned before, such a specimen could be male or female. Women were more often buried with beads made from teeth and most likely had bones attached to their clothes. Older people get different treatment than younger people with the inclusion of antlers. Both males and females are buried with no grave goods an equal number of times. Some of these may be because of grave robbing or destruction of the graves during construction but even seemingly undisturbed graves occasionally have none and continue to remain consistent along the lines of sex. Male and female grave goods may be different in the majority of graves that have artifacts but neither appear to be treated with significantly more care or respect. In this case, it is likely that the people using Vedbaek did not

distinguish along the line of sexual differences. No matter how you look at this site, it appears there is little similarity to the Neolithic in that an equal number of women and men are buried, women and men receive different grave goods but a similar number and quality, there are instances where neither receive grave goods and they receive the same treatment in old age. There are even some indications that men and women used their bodies in similar activities in an expression of similar gender roles. There may be differences between people but almost none on the basis of sex.

- Zvejnieki

Zvejnieki is located in northern Latvia, and was found in the process of quarrying gravel. Due to the quarrying, some graves were destroyed, mostly in the Mesolithic section of the burial site (Stutz, Larsson, and Zagorska, 2013). Even with the destruction, 330 individuals in 317 burials out of possible 400 were found and excavated from 1964 to 1971 by Francis Zagorskis. The grave cluster is projected to have been in use from 7500 cal BC to 2600 cal BC, which carried the usage of the site into the Neolithic (Ibid.). Like Vedbaek, the majority of the dead were buried shortly after death and covered over. There seems to be an equal distribution of male and female sexed bodies though there are many cases in which sex identification can not be confirmed. One-third of the bodies are children. Harpoons, fish hooks, spears, and arrowheads are found in a few female and male graves, but this is not the majority (Eriksson, Lõugas, and Zagorska, 2003, p.2). Animal teeth pendants are more consistent grave goods across the burial cluster in both adult and child inhumations. There are 18 mammals represented including red deer, wild boar, aurochs, and seal (Ibid., 5). The settlement corresponding to the burial cluster has a large number of fish bones present but there are few fish bones present in graves. The pendants that were found in the graves were mostly terrestrial mammals but the isotope analysis

of teeth shows the main diet was freshwater fish (Ibid., p.15). Both the fish bones and isotope analysis point to a heavy reliance on freshwater fish suggesting the many burials with terrestrial animal teeth had symbolic significance differentiated from everyday life (Ibid., p.20). Along this line of interpretation, it is entirely possible that the grave goods were offerings from those who participated in the burial, knew the person, and/or for the burial ritual. Other interpretations are that these tooth pendants were signs of hunting and fishing success but were symbolic representations of this success instead of trophies (Ibid., p.20). There are a few individuals that have seal teeth buried with them but no signs they ate food caught in the sea in their dental analysis which supports these four interpretations.

Even with a large number of burials, it is possible not everyone was buried here, since the average number buried for each generation would have only been about three to four individuals (Ibid., p.19). There is a large portion of individuals of different sexes and ages but all seem to have been treated relatively similarly in death. Again, they could be from a distinguished group because it is possible not everyone was buried or was buried at a different location.

Graves 316 and 317 are technically considered Neolithic burials because the Neolithic/Mesolithic distinction for the region is the presence of pottery. However, this time is still during the middle Mesolithic in other regions so they will be discussed here with the understanding they have similar subsistence strategies and similarities with Mesolithic burials. These burials present a somewhat common trend in Zvejnieki because a younger burial disturbed five older graves (Stutz, 2010, A). The other disturbed graves do not have skeletal remains, which suggest they were moved at the time of the later burial. However, there were bones from other bodies found in the grave fill of 316 and 317. Individual 316 is sexed as female aged 35 to 40 and has grave goods such as amber rings near the neck as well as amber beads strewn from

the pelvis down to the knee area (Larsson, 2010). Other bone beads were found just below the knee and upper femur. Grave 317 contained a male aged 25 to 30 with a flint blade near the head and more amber beads. Along the left arm, there was a dagger made from bone (Ibid.). Upon further investigation, this individual was wrapped completely before internment and may have had a mask placed on the face (Stutz, 2010, A). The difference between these two burials is the concentration of beads and amber around the head of 317 and from the hips to the knee on 316. Both had red ochre on the bodies and under which could have been put on clothing or the bodies directly. Like 316 and 317, graves 323 and 325 also disturbed a grave with internment (Stutz, Larsson, and Zagorska, 2013). An adult male and a child were buried here over an older grave with no grave goods or associated components in the grave fill, but some objects have been associated with the adult male. Another instance is grave 315 cutting through grave 314 (Ibid.). This appears to be a common pattern in Zvejnieki that Liv Nilsson Stutz argues means the place of burial is more significant than the actual body (Stutz, 2010, A). Not only were the bodies buried in the same place as older burials, but the fill used for the older graves also came from an older part of the settlement 200m from the actual burials. Specifically, graves 316 and 317 were much deeper which could indicate those involved in the burial did not want these remains to be removed by future generations for burial (Ibid.).

Similar to Vedbaek, Zvejnieki has similar treatment of their dead based on gender. Both a few males and females are buried with tools that might have been used in life. However, it is not consistent that people were buried with personal tools, so it is highly possible these tools were not used by the individuals but rather gifts from others, unrelated to the dead individuals. It is an interesting possibility to consider these as indicative of some level of skill higher than others who just received teeth. It is more likely that during a particular period the grave cluster was in

use that changed over time. The more notable consistency is that of teeth as grave goods. It was originally conceived that the teeth were symbolic of the hunting success of an individual. In this case, it is possible both males and females participated in fishing, hunting, and other activities. Again, it is easier to see the hunting aspect of any subsistence strategy because bones and tools are preserved quite well, and it is easier to assume these activities are only for males. I think it is reasonable to assume that these teeth represented something different than hunting success because they were from different animals than were consumed. They are likely to be a part of some kind of ritual because they were included about evenly in all graves including child graves which at their ages could not have had much hunting success. Either way, the teeth look to be represented about the same in both male, female, and child graves. Out of 317 graves, almost all had teeth from terrestrial animals. This type of consistency is incredible, and I speculate it is a very ingrained and important tradition for this group. Stutz claims that the meaning of rituals should not be explained but the messages and reproductions should be the main focus (Stutz, 2010, A). This appears to be a place of obvious value because it is a socially constructed assumption that teeth are required in burials which causes teeth to be interned with everyone. What these teeth mean is unknown, but the inclusion of teeth was a non-negotiable part of their burial ritual and were necessary for a 'good burial'. Knowing this is required for this group, it is significant that no matter age, sex, or other identity they receive teeth and a 'good burial'. There is one exception of a male with teeth from a saltwater animal but there is no other difference in his grave and all other graves have the same types of terrestrial animals. I would say at this point that the teeth were placed in the graves no matter what activities these individuals were doing or what age or gender there was equal treatment of the dead in a symbolically significant way.

The lack of bodies per generation in this area could mean this area was not for everyone. If this is the case, it can not be assumed there was no hierarchy but also that there may be an unofficial history that can not be identified. If there were individuals not interned at this site, where are they, what did they think, were there different conceptions of gender relations or value, and how were they treated? Like in other societies this could be another case of gender being different in divergent social hierarchies like Joyce observed in Mayan culture (2008, p.68). So few bodies could also just mean there are other locations used by this group or similar ways of disposing of the dead that did not preserve the body as well. However, I believe that the former is a more likely hypothesis based on the seeming significance of this location proposed by the consistent practice of digging up previous individuals for the purpose of placing the new dead in the same place. In another research project, the concept of an alternative unofficial history should be explored at Zvejnieki. Despite this possible history, women and men were buried equally as often here so if there are instances of people being buried in a different way or elsewhere, the decision was not based on sex differences.

- Olenii Ostrov (also known as Oleneostrovskii Mogilnik)

Olenii Ostrov, also referred to in local folklore as the island of the dead, was located near Karelia in western Russia (Jacobs, 1995). Different excavations occurred from 1936 to 1938, with the 1937 excavation showing the most success with 105 burials recovered in just over two months. Upon arrival at the site, there was already some destruction due to quarrying and because the island was known as the island of the dead there was a considerable amount of grave robbing (Ibid.). The Archaeologists were asked to evacuate due to the impending invasion of Poland, and when they returned after World War II the site had been completely destroyed. Only 117 individuals from 141 burials of a suspected 500 graves were recovered (Jacobs, 1995;

O'Shea and Zvelebil, 1984). All of the information from the site is based on detailed notes, sketches, and bodies during the original excavation. During preliminary excavation and in these notes the site was considered Neolithic because it was assumed that a mobile group would not have a specific location to bury their dead. This was later proven incorrect and Olenii Ostrov was added to the list as a historically significant Mesolithic gravesite (Price and Jacobs, 1990).

The individuals' at Olenii Ostrov are oriented mostly East to West with the head toward the East with most individuals on their back, a few on their side, and only five flexed (Jacobs, 1995). The graves were dug so that the bottom of the pits was angled at around 45 degrees. Most of the grave goods consisted of pendants and jewelry made from bear, elk, and beaver teeth as well as bone and stone pendants (Jacobs, 1995). An assortment of tools such as arrows, spears, knives, and scrapers made from bone and flint were found. Only 27 graves contained animal bones: 14 beaver, 11 reindeer, 11 elk, 7 wolf, 4 bear, and 2 dog (Ibid.). The original archaeologists that excavated the site found that three different ranks in status were present through the number and variety of grave goods. There are about 67 males and 50 females with a remaining 27 unable to be identified because they were lost after the excavation (Jacobs, 1995). Grave cluster number 5 is considered to be a prestigious all-male hunting group due to the grave goods and lack of female skeletons present. However, Ken Jacobs critiques this idea by pointing out that there is a large percentage of unsexed individuals in group five, and depending on what portion of them are male or female, the data could show something drastically different (Ibid.). The other grave clusters found had approximately an even number of male, female and unsexed individuals. Jacobs did three manipulations of the data but the most significant and likely to be correct is his argument that the preserved female skeletons are much less robust in this region and they may have decomposed faster (Ibid.). This would mean there is a high possibility that the

unsexed individuals are more often female than male making the grave clusters evenly distributed between male and female. His other statistical manipulations show that there is much variety in the sample because of the high percentage of unsexed skeletons making it impossible to claim an all-male or female group had prestige (Ibid.).

In the original analysis, it was thought that three or four individuals were religious leaders or people with a particular status (Schmidt and Voss, 2005). The four considered are two males and two females which were buried with the typical female and male grave goods. Robert Schmidt summarizes and adds to this line of argument by pointing out that these individuals had their heads to the West instead of the East, their bodies were almost completely vertical and they had beaver mandibles as grave goods (Ibid.). The significance of the beaver mandibles is based on a general idea that during the Mesolithic beavers were thought to contain medical and ritual purposes. Schmidt uses ethnographically informed data from Eurasia to make further conclusions. While there can be problems with using present-day societies to interpret the past because there are likely many changes and almost always a large variety in culture over time even in the same geographical location, there is strong evidence for an ideological connection. Present-day Siberian groups have similar opinions towards beavers and a tradition that values the sexuality of both males and females (Schmidt, 2001). Schmidt suggests that the religious leaders at Olenii Ostrov were similar to these more modern foragers in that they had men and women take on the roles of the other gender especially through sexuality. These leaders are thought to have more power and knowledge because they learn the ways of the other gender and are aware of their own gender (Ibid.). They may have taken on this role for a lifetime, a short time, or only for rituals. The females and males typically continue to have sexual relations with all sexes and occasionally could have had offspring (Ibid.). They took on a particularly important role in a

group because they were the spiritual guides for others in life and death. There is also a possibility for untransformed religious leaders that would still partake in different sexual relations without fully becoming the opposite gender. However harmful ethnographies can be in interpreting the past, it is significant to recognize there is variability in present-day culture and was likely in some way or another variable in the past. Religious leaders at Olenii Ostrov likely shared many similarities like variable sexualities and statuses based on said sexualities in practice with these present-day foragers which can be identified through the grave goods being typical of the opposite sex and the beaver mandibles indicating spiritual significance.

At Olenii Ostrov there appears to be more hierarchy among the entire group, with grave goods being of different qualities and quantities. The five rarer items placed in graves were elk incisors, beaver incisors, slate knives, bear tusks, and bone points. These items are used less universally throughout the grave cluster but in both wealthy and poorer burials other bones from these same animals are included. While there does appear to be a consistent pattern of certain clusters of graves being treated differently, archaeologists need to be careful not to automatically assume that these people were more celebrated because they had grave goods that were used less consistently throughout the grave cluster. Other more universal grave goods are teeth. The graves with these special items are located relatively close geographically to one another and vice versa. This conclusion does bring up some questions as to what the differentiating factors were for some groups to have been celebrated more in death. It is unlikely that it is because of skill because there are infants that had more grave goods than others. Infants having different grave goods in higher numbers is not a full-proof way of telling whether there is a hierarchy but it does tend to rule out special treatment based on prestige due to infants not having the lifespan to gain more refined skills (Renfrew and Bahn, 2018, p.157). These geographically close graves of both

infants and adults with similar grave goods may be family groups not only because of geographical location but they have similarities in bone structure and DNA (Jacobs, 1995). While there is some indication of social status being split into three classes, there is no division along the lines of biological sex. It does appear that males and females were treated equally within each 'class'. In the case of grave cluster 5, which was originally thought to have more men than women and was the most celebrated group, it would not necessarily mean that males had the power and influence or that there was inequality based on sex. Joyce claimed that just because some individual men or individual women are celebrated in death more than others this does not indicate that as a group one sex is valued more highly. Again, this draws a possibly unrecognized biological distinction between males and females (Joyce, 2008, p.58). There are also only a few individuals in comparison to the total of 117 individuals in cluster 5 meaning it is not the only group to reference when talking about gender. However, it is refuted by Jacobs that this group is only made up of males. If this is the case, both males and females are represented in the more celebrated groups and this cluster does not represent a prestigious all-mall hunting group. The graves with fewer grave goods are also evenly distributed along the lines of sex. Both male and female sexed bodies receive the same number of grave goods and similar types within each class (Jacobs, 1995). Unsexed individuals, females, and males received teeth no matter the social class, animal bones are distributed evenly in the middle range class and the special items are equal in both unsexed, most likely female, and male graves.

It is also noteworthy that outside of the apparent hierarchy there were religious leaders of both male and female sexed bodies. While it is unknown what kind of influence these leaders would have had, it is indicative that this occupation was open to both males and females or buriers to prevent a certain sex from participating. These religious leaders are not only

significant for their possible influence but because they could have had different sexual orientations. Like mentioned earlier, they could have switched gender roles and had sexual relations with the same biological sex. Not only were these differences in sexual orientation and gender identification accepted but they appeared to be revered unlike in Western culture where men and women are considered a part of their gendered characteristics and should not stray from these boxes. If a man was to act like a woman this would be looked down upon as a weakness, but at Olenii Ostrov there was likely no discrimination toward women or men because these spiritual leaders were celebrated in death regardless of sex. This emphasizes Joyce's point that a two-gender model is not always accurate throughout time or location. These people had people of one sex participating in the opposite sexes' activities meaning there were more ways of acting as a sexed person. Joyce discusses that the more individuals break or cross gender roles the less strong and more negotiable they are (2008, p.75). The spiritual leaders crossed the line between gender identities which means there were likely less strict gender-specific roles or at least they were negotiable at Olenii Ostrov. It is accepted that Olenii Ostrov does have more hierarchy than appears at both Vedbaek and Zvejnieki, yet still debatable based on the group's expression of value. However, they still do not appear to have much differentiation based on sex or gender identities. It appears that males and females are buried the same amount, received the same or similar symbolic grave goods and males and females could be a part of the wealthier class as well as hold spiritual positions. The lines between male and female were likely disturbed often and individuals were celebrated for the disturbance. This is much different than in the Neolithic where women weren't buried as much, could not participate in violent activities and share in the power that came along with it unlike the freedom at Oleni Ostrov for both males and females to be spiritual leaders. These distinctions alone show that women and men were not severely

distinguished based on sex. In general, Olenii Ostrov is a grave cluster that has many interesting patterns but there is little attention paid to the sex of an individual for that individual to have powerful spiritual positions as well as wealth. On top of this, it is possible there were few restrictions placed on gender roles based on the religious leaders' fluidity in gender identity.

- Skateholm

Skateholm is located in Sweden and is another large grave cluster comprising 85 individuals (Stutz, M. Larsson, and Papmehl-Dufay, 2010, B). It was first excavated in 1980 which allowed it to be analyzed in more detail similar to Vedbaek. Due to this, there is a lot of information that will not be discussed here like the other three sites since this is not an in-depth summary of all information. Skateholm is a couple of grave clusters in close proximity. Skateholm II is thought to be older and Skateholm I younger (Fahlander, 2010). The reasoning for this is that the water level would have risen by the late Mesolithic and covered the older burial cluster (Bogucki, 1993). These sites are only 200m apart and have similar qualities so they are most likely related and used by the same group over time but it is also possible this site was used by a couple of different groups at the same time or during different periods (Ibid.).

In the younger cemetery, two-fifths of people were placed in a crouched position while practically none were in the older cemetery. The older cemetery has many red deer antlers but almost none later on (Larsson, 2020). The earlier burials have more grave good variation while the later dated burials appear to have more variation in the positioning of the body. These positions include supine, seated, and crouching (Fahlander, 2010). Some burials have the skeleton bound and even some that have bones broken which seems to be done intentionally to form a particular position (Bogucki, 1993). Generally, the individuals seem to have been treated similarly in death but it is difficult to tell what the symbolic meaning is behind grave goods or

the body's positioning. Older men and younger women have the most grave goods which Peter Bogucki argues could be because men could achieve more refined skills over longer periods of time and women of reproductive age were celebrated or considered a great loss (Ibid.). However, Bogucki does say this is likely not indicative of any kind of special status. It is also interesting to note that men tended to live longer on average than women which contradict a lot of present-day understandings (Ibid.). Grave goods typically included axes, knives, and tooth beads more often than not men and women had belt decorations and animal bones which were likely attached to clothing (Ibid.). The teeth used were most likely from terrestrial animals, which anthropological interpretation would suggest meant the diet of the individuals consisted of terrestrial animals (Fahlander, 2010). When further analysis was completed, the dental remains showed that the diets were composed mostly of freshwater resources and fish. A couple of graves have fish bones near the stomach region but these are considered parts of the last meal further demonstrating their diet as freshwater fish (Ibid.). This makes the terrestrial animal teeth somewhat of a mystery and maybe is a symbolic component to the burial. In addition, most people had red ochre on the head, pelvis, or both (Bogucki, 1993). There are also graves without any grave goods which are mostly not indicative of a lack of status because it seems more related to ritual practices for a particular period (Ibid.).

There are also a couple of graves where skeletons are missing bones and not from decomposition. Grave 28 is a perfect example because it is missing the left radius, ulna, os coxai, and femur (Stutz, Larsson, Papmehl-Dufay, 2010, B). These bones were most likely removed at a late stage in decomposition. A couple of archaeologists have guessed why these bones were removed and concluded that it could have been a kind of revenge scheme to not allow an individual to rest peacefully in death, or that these bones were used by the living in some way

(Stutz, 2008). There is also an instance like that at Zvejnieki where a later burial cuts through another. For Liv Nilsson Stutz this means that the other bodies that had bones removed were likely acts of violence because cutting through another grave was destroyed without trying to preserve the older burial (Stutz, 2010.). However, Stutz argued that the destruction of other graves at Zvejnieki was symbolic that the place was more important than the body, and defacing other graves could have represented a connection to ancestors (Ibid.). I think this theory could be true at Skateholm although this destruction is less consistent.

In both Skateholm I and II, children and dogs are buried away from the adults (Fahlander, 2010). At Skateholm I they are buried to the East and West side and Skateholm II the children are to the North but dogs are still to the East and West. This is consistent and obvious so it appears to be intentional and therefore significant in some way (Ibid.). The dog graves include red ochre and have some of the most richly adorned graves. Fredrik Fahlander argues that the grave goods are especially challenging to interpret because those included in dog and child graves (Ibid.). His reasoning is that dogs were buried with weapons and other such grave goods that obviously could not have been used by the dog in life or death. The same goes for children being buried with objects that they could not have used in life. This would allude to the adult humans receiving the same treatment and grave goods may not be personal belongings but instead gifts from the group (Ibid.).

Skateholm is by far one of the most difficult and interesting sites to analyze the topic of gender. The analysis of grave goods is complicated due to the most adorned graves being that of dogs and children. As mentioned above, they consistently have tools that neither a dog nor child could use meaning grave goods most likely did not reflect what the individuals did in life. However, these goods do appear to still have meaning and are worth exploring in detail because

they are consistently used and have certain patterns. Of the adults richly adorned, it appears that older men and young women are the most celebrated in death but from certain perspectives, this could be taken as offensive. With this information, it is important to check the biases that we have in our culture. It is, first of all, assumed that women were celebrated in youth for their fertility but like Joyce mentioned this is a stretch because there are plenty of ways that these groups could have viewed fertility, reproduction, and sexuality. Like the example of grave 8 at Vedbaek, associating women with fertility is likely a simplified version of what it was to be a female at Skateholm. Even so, if they were celebrated for their fertility and not for being at marrying age, for having died in childbirth, or whatever other reason, it is not something that we should be excited about calling sexism. In an attempt to remove the common western values, the typical association of women with childbearing and rearing does not have to be considered a negative restraint put on women by biology that hinders their ability to interact with the world like men. It is likely childcare was valued and is celebrated no matter who was involved. Nonetheless, it is relevant that age appears significant in deciding what is placed in the graves. Other than these two groups of people getting more grave goods, the distribution of terrestrial animal teeth is relatively even so at least in burial practices there does not seem to be much hierarchy and not along the lines of gender.

Some other conclusions that should be considered but require further exploration are on the placement of the dogs and children. Unlike the other three sites, there are practically no instances of women and children being buried together which might just be because children had a designated place in the grave cluster but since this differs from other sites in the Mesolithic it may have some significance. A possibility is that women and children were not heavily associated with one another which could indicate a different conception of fertility. It is already a

known theory that child-rearing was a group activity in foraging groups due to many factors that we will not be exploring here (Hrdy, 2009). The location and dissociation between mother and child might suggest this group was responsible for children as a whole. The children appear to have great significance due to their special treatment in placement and special attention to grave goods which indicates that losing a child could represent a great loss for the group. Ultimately burials, according to Stutz's, are a means of dealing with a loss, which seems to be relevant here due to the great attention paid to the children (2010, A). The location of the children makes me question whether the women were being celebrated for fertility when they received more grave goods in their youth. It is also generally believed that women live longer than men but in this instance, they do not. Why might that be? A difference in diet or responsibilities for men and women possibly leads to differences in health. This is something that needs to be explored in future research because a disparity in the average age of death could be the product of divergence in treatment between men and women. Either way, the average age of death for men and women should be investigated further when considering gender at Skateholm.

Final Thoughts and Conclusions

This is a brief exploration of gender in the Mesolithic and there is much more to be done on this topic. Overall, the Mesolithic period appears to follow a different trend than the Neolithic. Individuals of different sexual identities and gender affiliations are treated relatively similarly in death, which most likely reflects how they lived in life. Women and men are both treated to proper burials, there are extensive grave goods in both male and female graves, instances of wealth and power appear distributed equally between males and females and both men and women could have had the option to participate in the same tasks.

There are many instances of men and women participating in the opposite gender's more common identity. Both biological males and females are found with grave goods that would be considered typical of the opposite sex at all sites. At Vedbaek, grave 19 has a seemingly female skeleton with an arrow in her neck buried with an unknown possibly male skeleton with ‘female’ grave goods. Indications that not only was there most likely more equality between different sexes but the ability for individuals to fluctuate between different identities. Not only was this possible but at places like Olenii Ostrov, they were celebrated for doing so. This could reflect that there were less strict definitions for what it was to be female or male during this time in human history.

Along with the flexibility of gender identity, there are places where women were not solely associated with fertility like so often assumed in western social organizations or that of some modern foraging groups. At Skateholm women were not buried with children which detaches them from motherhood. The woman’s grave at Vedbaek is much more adorned and complicated than just a child and mother with the bones and swan wing. The women at Zvejnieki were a part of a much more significant tradition of graves adorned with teeth and were not segregated according to their biological components. Even when there could be an association between women and fertility they are respected for this contribution in the case of the young women being richly adorned at Skateholm. In the western tradition, childbirth and child-rearing are considered a curse that so often pins women closer to nature. This is not the case at any of the burial sites I have researched. In addition to women not being fully associated with fertility, they were possibly competently participating in the same types of labor. Similar injuries like the arrow in the neck and broken back at Vedbaek suggest there could have been crossover in what each sex did for daily labor whether that be warfare, hunting, or something else. There is a lot

more to be done with the analysis of skeletal remains to find out further wear on bones that could draw parallels in activities but the injuries and arrowhead serve as a start.

In future research, I would like to look at possibilities for mating patterns and focus more on what these people were really up to on a day-to-day basis. I think it is important to explore this era without starting by looking at gender and I believe archaeologists should do the same. It does not appear to be an important distinguishing factor in who these people were and what they did daily. It is also about time that the grave analyses from older excavations are rewritten to exclude the biased assumptions on the topic of gender. Instead, age does play a more important role based on the distinguishing grave goods of the children at Skateholm and elderly at Vedbaek so it should be considered important in future research.

A final consideration is that I want to believe that the differentiation and treatment based on biological sex are not deeply rooted in our species' past. I may be slightly biased at this point in my developmental and educational career and most likely will never overcome this completely, but the Mesolithic does appear to give some hope that a certain sex is not or has not always been considered biologically superior. The Mesolithic provides evidence that women and men in death were treated equally which differs greatly from the Neolithic and especially instances like Cahokia.

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