

Aki Hakonen

## Local communities of the Bothnian Arc in a prehistoric world

*Lectio praecursoria*, May 28th, 2021

I wrote many different versions of this speech, but they all ran way too long. I would have preferred to just rant about the bureaucracy of this university – something about running a gauntlet – but I decided not to vent here. If someone is interested, I will be downtown later today having a beer or more.

For now though, I will focus on the issue at hand. And I guess it would be prudent to provide a summary of what this dissertation is about.

The subject matter is the prehistory of the Bothnian Arc. The Bothnian Arc is the coastal strip surrounding the Bothnian Bay, at the very northern end of the Baltic Sea. In this dissertation I have tried to understand the region's long-term prehistory – from approximately 5500 BCE to the year 600 – while also testing whether I could reorient the research focus from an inherited large-scale perspective of the society to a smaller scale of local community.

This reorientation is rooted in critique that is ongoing within the field of sociology. What is known as the Actor-Network Theory, developed most prominently by the French philosopher Bruno Latour, has shown significant deficiencies in the traditional sociology of Émile Durkheim. Archaeology is in many ways based on Durkheim's sociology,

where social life is understood in rather rigid and mechanistic terms. I have tried to maintain a more Latourian sociological framework, where interactions between and around individual actors are what matter the most. As individuals are most often out of reach in archaeology, I have tried to form my own theoretical framework that is informed by these recent critiques.

For those not so familiar with the region's archaeological heritage, suffice to say that the region is extremely rich in archaeological materiality and the vast majority of it remains unstudied. In fact, most of the archaeological sites in the region have been found only during the last 30 years. I have tried to compile a narrative of the region's prehistory and its context in the surrounding world, based on up-to-date research. But still, ongoing technological leaps in aerial lidar-based research are going to further expand the record. And it may well be that some sections of this dissertation are going to become outdated already in just a few years. That's not necessarily a bad thing. Not for me at least.

The work consists of five research papers and quite an extensive synthesis that brings them all together. The synthesis covers basically everything that went on outside the workflow of the five papers, while also summarizing them and further discussing their implications.

The first paper is an introduction to the subject. It is a short case study about how a local community is manifested in the archaeological record. The second paper is a method-based work about the local shoreline displacement chronology. Papers III, IV and V all relate to each other, although they have different themes and different scalar perspectives. In the third paper, I studied the macro-scale of the whole Bothnian Gulf. Then, in the fourth paper, I with Ville Hakamäki focused on the northern half of the Gulf. And in the final fifth paper I zoomed in on the Bothnian Bay. I planned the scalar progression so that at the very least I gained a good grasp of the context. This is why the title of the book is two-fold: the local and the context.

In the largest scale, the macro, what became my guiding light was labor. The question was what level of labor was involved in producing what eventually became the different forms of archaeological remnants in the region. And here I saw that the approach highlighted the division of the region's prehistory into two different cultural contexts: the northern subsistence procurement and the southern subsistence production. Large monumental structures, which seem to reflect hierarchical power relations within and between communities, were favored in the south, while the north reflects less prominent forms of these. And while in the south such activities were adopted and maintained, in the north these became only periodical, and they were regularly given up on. I interpret this as differing attitude to extra-subsistence labor, or labor that is supplemental to providing food and shelter. Perhaps the north has a lot to teach us about what really matters the most in life.

Moving on to the fourth paper, we zoom in just a bit closer to the northern half of the Bothnian Gulf. Here we decided to focus on mortuary practices, and from a slightly different perspective than Ville and I were used to.

We decided to take the positive road here. If you look at archaeological literature, burials are often interpreted as reflections of power structures or they are considered territorial markers, or other rather strategic devices. I certainly did this in my prior papers, and the perspective has often been extremely productive.

But we decided to reconstruct our approach from the intimate, meaning in this sense the relationship of the deceased to those conducting the burial. This way, if we found the interpretative key into what basically all mortuary traditions share, we could study burials without having to constantly change our perspective about what the burials are meant to communicate. To achieve this, we figured that the best way to approach the subject is to understand the relationship in terms of respect.

This may seem simplistic. Yet, studying respect in archaeology is not really something that has been done very often. Respect brings us into the world of morality. And morality concerns the question of what is appropriate. So we were ultimately dealing with morally appropriate ways to conduct burials. I am not going to go into a lot of detail here, but once we shifted our lenses to this mode, some patterns emerged, especially regarding the close connection between fire and mortuary practices that predate even the cremation burial traditions of the Bronze Age.

In the final paper, I zoomed in closer to the Bothnian Bay and studied what to me was the most interesting part. The emphasis was now on whether any truly local traditions can be identified. And it became clear that local traditions are in fact quite apparent in the archaeological record if one goes through the effort of finding them. This goes to show, that the way prehistory is often presented in archaeology, with vast material culture groups reflecting rather homogenous societies, is probably more compromising to our view of the prehistoric world than we would prefer. In my mind, prehistoric archaeology does not

fully grasp what a society without any governing state is actually like.

Let me explain. The archaeological record is filled with gaps. And when these gaps are encountered, archaeologists tend to fill them with data from other contexts that seem similar. This is perfectly understandable, yet there is a problem here. This is like the Jurassic Park equivalent of using frog DNA to plug gaps in dinosaur DNA. The result is actually something else entirely, as well as a major plot hole.

What it does in archaeology is that it dilutes local differences. And because there is this tendency to homogenize prehistoric society, we do not often question whether prehistoric societies ever truly existed. At least it may be agreed upon that they did not have much in common with the way we understand society, which is just another term for the nation state.

So what would happen if we changed our perspective so that the prehistoric world would be conceptualized as a colorful fabric of unique local communities interacting with each other in largely unpredictable ways? Would this change of perspective even be possible or would we get mired in the swamp of trivial detail? This is why society is such an appealing concept. It is a simplified abstraction, where variety is mostly out of focus. But what if the reality is exactly the swamp teeming with multitudes that we cannot account for, or even begin to wrap our heads around, unless we adopt variety not as sidenote but as the focus. Perhaps variety is the key to bringing the prehistoric world back to life.

Archaeologist Aki Hakonen defended his doctoral dissertation, *Local communities of the Bothnian Arc in a prehistoric world*, on May 28, 2021, at the University of Oulu in front of four attendants and a webcam. Professor Marianne Skandfer from the Arctic University of Norway acted as the opponent, with professor Vesa-Pekka Herva, University of Oulu, as the custos.

aki.j.hakonen@gmail.com

The dissertation is an electronic publication openly accessible at the University of Oulu JULTIKA repository:

<http://urn.fi/urn:isbn:9789526229386>

Papers I, II and V are open access.