Mesolithic Childhoods: Changing Life-Courses of Young Hunter-Fishers in the Stone Age of Southern Scandinavia

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Abstract
This paper stresses the importance of distinguishing between different categories of children in order to better understand their changing lives and their shifting relations with the adult world. The example is taken from the Mesolithic burial/settlement site of Skateholm at the southernmost coast of Sweden. By contrasting grave content and spatial arrangement of the site it is argued that the inhabitants recognised differences between infants (<1 year), younger children up to seven years, and older children between about eight to thirteen years. The children seem to have started to engage in the adult world by the age of seven or eight, and by the age of around fourteen years, their graves are inseparable from those of the adults. Individuals of the intermediate age-group, between the ages nine to thirteen, are completely missing among the burials. It is suggested that their absence is not singularly due to lower mortality rate, but rather that this age-span constituted a socially distinct transitional phase between childhood and adulthood.

Keywords: Children, childhoods, Mesolithic, Skateholm, burial archaeology, dogs

Children and Childhoods: The First Steps of the Life Course

The archaeology of children and childhoods has grown quite vast during the past decade (e.g. Bacvarov 2008; Baxter 2005; Crawford and Shepherd 2007; Dommasnes and Wrigglesworth 2008; Lillehammer 2010; Sofaer Derevenski 2000). From previously having been a neglected subject the young ones are getting better represented in our narratives of the past (although yet limited in relation to other mainstream topics). Research on children and childhood has also matured in a methodological and theoretical sense. While the pioneer studies tended to take the concepts of ‘children’ and ‘childhood’ more
or less for granted, more recent research recognises the quite substantial variations in how young individuals are perceived in different societies (Baxter 2005, 4; Montgomery 2008, 3). The child is not as easily a defined category as it may seem at first glance. From a social point of view, there is no fixed age when ‘children’ become ‘adults’. Further, the content and meaning of ‘childhood’ is fluid and tends to vary according to, for example, gender, sex and lineage (Jordanova 1990, 76). When discussing social implications of age in prehistory, ‘children’ are perhaps better perceived in terms of a life course perspective that focuses on culture specific thresholds and stages in a person’s life (Gilchrist 2004). Such a perspective bypasses the problematic binary view of ‘children’ and ‘adults’ and allows a wider discussion of different children as well as the possibilities of multiple and parallel courses of life (cf. Stoodley 2000, 465–6). In most modern societies chronological age is the chief aspect regulating a person’s life, which does not necessarily have to have been the case in small scale prehistoric communities. The different thresholds in a person’s life may rather depend on an intricate matrix of individual corporeal, mental and social properties (Fahlander 2011a, 15). How such different facets intersect with, for example, sex/gender, lineage and status is normally a key to understanding a particular society as a whole. As such, a study of the first steps of the life course need not be particularistic and only concern children per se.

The present text seeks to explore the possibilities of both studying the changing worlds of children, and also how such a child perspective can be informative about wider issues of the adult sphere. The example is taken from the Mesolithic burial/settlement site of Skateholm at the southern coast of Sweden (Fig. 1). It is quite a complex and varied material, but it is also carefully excavated and documented and contains a sufficient number of individuals of different ages to facilitate a discussion about Mesolithic childhoods.

**Dead and Living Children**

Besides scattered indications of children’s activities, such as tooth impressions in resin (Nordqvist 2005, 26, 36), or preserved footprints in clay (Scales 2007), the most palpable source of data about them is perhaps their graves (or lack of them). Graves generally constitute quite complex sets of data that by no means allow simple connections to be made between the buried body, the interments or grave construction. Still, when it comes to the graves of children we need to be even extra observant. Although the life expectancy for young individuals were probably quite low, are children’s graves nonetheless ‘exceptions’ in the sense that they died prematurely; obviously many children did reach older ages and are thus not directly represented as children among the burials (cf. Wood et al. 1992, 347). It may thus be problematic to understand the lives of children based upon the graves of those who died. This bias may, of course, be as important when regarding the graves of adults, but since small children generally are more dependent on their parents and have not yet passed traditionally transitional stages in the life course (e.g. puberty, marriage, specialist occupations or skills, etc.) their burial rituals tend to be more an affair of family and lineage concerns than individual aspects (Baxter 2005, 94; Houby-Nielsen 2000, 152).

Graves of the North European Mesolithic pose additional problems. The known
graves are scattered over quite large geographical areas and span over a long time period. It is therefore particularly questionable to employ traditional comparative analyses of burials between, for example, Skateholm in Sweden and Vedbæk in Denmark or Zvejnieki in Latvia because they probably represent quite different sections of the Mesolithic. A recent comparative study of these sites was only able to suggest that the Mesolithic groups probably recognised ‘a period of childhood’ (Janik 2000, 128). Instead, as the present local study of Skateholm indicates, the different sites are better discussed individually on a case-to-case basis in order not to lose sight of interesting exceptions and significant variations. For instance, it is indicative that the similar patterns concerning children discussed here are not found in any other known Late
Mesolithic site. The North European Mesolithic groups may share a lot in terms of lifestyle and material culture, but there is no reason to assume that they should be less varied in a cultural sense than during any other time period.

The Skateholm Complex

The Skateholm area constitutes one of the largest concentrations of Late Mesolithic (c. 5500–4000 BC) graves in Northern Europe. The site is divided into several separate sub areas termed Skateholm I–IX which were all located around what would have been a brackish lagoon during the Late Mesolithic. The first two areas (Skateholm I and II) contain the majority of burials and are thus the primary sites discussed here (Figs 2 and 3). Skateholm I is the larger of the two sites, comprising sixty-five graves and c. 200 features of a more domestic character, such as the remains of postholes, huts and hearths (Bergenstråhle 1999, 338; Larsson 1988a). The smaller Skateholm II is c. 150 m south-east of Skateholm I and contains twenty-two graves together with approximately 100 other features. Skateholm II is assumed to constitute an older phase, which was abandoned in favour of Skateholm I. Larsson (1988b, 97–8; 2000, 84–5) suggests, based on a general rate of shoreline transgression, that the two sites were actually situated on separate small islands of which the lower Skateholm II became submerged over time, forcing people to move to Skateholm I on a higher location. The excavators have interpreted Skateholm as a typical hunter-fisher site which would have harboured only a few families (Larsson 1988b, 167). It seems not to have been populated on a year-round basis as seasonal indicators evident in the animal bones and teeth show no evidence of activity during the summer months from June to September (see Carter 2004).
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The human skeletal material is relatively well preserved considering its early date, but it is often fragmentary and incomplete. The sex assessments are thus generally uncertain and have been disputed and reinterpreted in several cases (Nilsson Stutz 2003, 172–3, 177–8; Strassburg 2000, 155). That particular problematic is, however, less relevant in the case of the youngest children because none of them can be satisfactorily determined as boys or girls. The osteological age estimations have also been supplemented with odontological analyses and could therefore be considered to be sufficiently accurate (Alexandersson 1988; Persson and Persson 1984; 1988). It is important to stress that the age estimations only give an assessment of biological age translated into calendar

Figure 3: Plan showing the burials of Skateholm I and II. Graves with individually buried dogs and children are emphasised. The grey arrows illustrate the general horizontal stratigraphy (the image is constructed in ArcGIS by the author).
years, however, which does not necessarily need to coincide with social age or perceived age (Sofaer 2006, 126). Normally, demographic distinctions are discussed in terms of fixed categories such as by five-year age intervals or stages of body development (e.g. infant, juvenile, teenager, etc.), which relate individuals to burial data as categories. However, in this study, the discussed thresholds and stages are primarily based on social differentiations in treatment after death on an individual basis, and because they do not always coincide with general categories, such terminology is avoided in favour of simple descriptive categories such as ‘young children’, ‘older children’, and ‘young adults’ – which roughly correspond to ‘infans I’ (c. 0–6 years), ‘infans II’ (c. 6–14 years), and ‘juvenilis’ (c. 14–20 years). Besides the human burials a number of dogs are also buried at Skateholm. As we will see, it would seem that they play a crucial role for our understanding of the young children and how Skateholm has developed over time.

Infants, Children and Young Adults

At Skateholm I and II there are a total of eleven burials of individuals ranging in age from infancy up to about seven or eight years. To these we can add an additional twelve ‘young adults’ in their late teens (c. 14–22 years). It is difficult to predict whether this is a ‘normal’ representation of young individuals since we have no idea about group size, fertility rate, or the rate of infant mortality. However, in comparison with other North European Mesolithic sites, it would seem to be neither an especially high or low number (cf. Zarina 2006, 135–8). The reason for singling out a category of young children up to seven or eight years is in this case based on the site specific material. A gap exists for the age bracket from nine to thirteen years among the burials, which makes it reasonable to separate the younger children from the young adults. In Table 1, the children (<8 years) and the young adults (approximately 14–22 years) are presented in tabular form (for a recent overview of the other graves, see Nilsson Stutz 2003, catalogue). Skateholm I and II are separated from each other in the table since there seems to be important differences between the older and the younger site.

At the older Skateholm II four of the total number of twenty-two graves (assigned with roman numbers, I–XXII) were constructed for children between the ages of two to eight years and an additional three graves contain young adults (aged 18–22 years). The children’s graves at Skateholm II are generally empty of artefacts, but they all contain red ochre (which is only present in eight of the total number of graves). The three young adults are clearly distinct from the younger children since their graves generally contain flint and bone implements and animal teeth, a typical adult constellation, which is never present in the graves of the younger children.

Among the sixty-five graves in Skateholm I (assigned with Arabic numbers, 1–65), there are at least two infants, four individuals of three to five years of age, and one indeterminate individual from a damaged grave that is simply classified as a ‘child’ (Nilsson-Stutz 2003, catalogue, 72). The category of ‘young adults’ (aged 14–22 years old) comprises nine individuals. A difference from Skateholm II is that three of the children (both infants and a three/four year old) were buried together with adults. Because it is impossible to be certain which grave goods are associated with which body (adult or child) these data have been omitted from Table 1. Traces of ochre are
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grave</th>
<th>Osteology (age/sex)</th>
<th>Odontology (age/sex)</th>
<th>Ochre</th>
<th>Stone/bone implements</th>
<th>Animal bone/teeth</th>
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<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7–8</td>
<td>thigh</td>
<td>4 transverse arrow-heads of flint</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>XIIa</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>head</td>
<td>2 flint blades, 1 bone point</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>XIIb</td>
<td>2–3</td>
<td>2,5</td>
<td>head</td>
<td>2 flint blades, 1 bone point</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>XIII</td>
<td>c. 6</td>
<td>5–6</td>
<td>head</td>
<td>2 flint flakes, 1 ‘flat stone’</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Young adults</th>
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<tr>
<td>XI</td>
<td>18–22, ♂ 18–20, ♂ - 1 flint flake 6 deer antlers, 1 with skull-fragment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XV</td>
<td>19–20, ♂ 19–20, ♂ head 2 flint blade knives, 1 core axe, 1 flint flake Fish bone, 4 red deer antlers, teeth from red deer and wild boar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XX</td>
<td>18–20, ♀ 18, ♀? c. 30 Teeth from red deer and aurochs</td>
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<tr>
<th>Skateholm I</th>
<th>Children</th>
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<tr>
<td>Grave</td>
<td>Osteology (age/sex)</td>
<td>Odontology (age/sex)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>4–5</td>
<td>10–11</td>
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<tr>
<td>41b</td>
<td>4–5</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>2–3</td>
<td>2–2.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>46b</td>
<td>child?</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>47b</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>64</td>
<td>4–5</td>
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<th>Young adults</th>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>19–20, ♀ 19–20, ♀ head 1 transverse arrowhead of flint,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>19–20, ♂ 18–20, ♂ knee flint flakes, 1 bone point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>19–21, ♂ - chest and thigh 1 piece of amber, worked tubular bone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14b</td>
<td>17–19, ♂ c. 20, ? - (buried with adult) Seal jaw and fish bone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47a</td>
<td>14–16, ♂? 15, ? chest flint flakes 2 teeth from red deer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>18–20, ♀ c. 20, ♀ - - 25 teeth from wild boar, red deer and elk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>16–20, ? 18–20, ? thigh flint flakes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>16–20, ? bottom of grave - c. 20 teeth from wild boar and red deer, fish bone</td>
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Table 1: Summary of the osteological age and sex, dental age and sex, presence and position of red ochre, and grave content in association with the young individuals at Skateholm I and II. Data compiled from Alexandersson (1988), Nilsson-Stutz (2003, catalogue) and Persson and Persson (1984; 1988).
present in half of the graves (n=38), but in contrast to Skateholm II the practice is more frequent among the young adults and is only found in one of the child graves. Amber is a new category of artefact found at Skateholm I and it was discovered in the grave of a young adult (Grave 12), and in two of the graves in which children were buried together with adults. In all other respects the general pattern apparent at Skateholm II was consistent with that of Skateholm I – the children’s graves are generally not associated with grave goods, while young adults were buried with both flint and bone implements and the teeth or jaws of animals in a fashion similar to adult burials.

Although the material is limited, some interesting patterns emerge that deserves a more thorough analysis. For instance, infants are apparently never buried individually; children between four to eight years old are distinct from teenagers who in their turn are given a typical adult burial. The apparent absence of individuals aged nine to thirteen years is also interesting. An individual in Grave 8 at Skateholm I may be an exception – the age is estimated to around ten or eleven years based on odontological evidence, while the osteological analysis suggests an age of four to five years (Alexandersson 1988, 151; Persson and Persson 1988, 104). This is the only instance where odontological and osteological data radically diverge. However, considering the fact that the grave is empty of artefacts like the other graves with young individuals, and that the oldest of the pre-teens (Grave I, Skateholm II) was buried with a few arrow-heads, the osteological estimation is perhaps more likely to be correct. It also needs to be considered that the absence of individuals around ten years may be due to methodological errors in osteology and tooth-morphology, or simply because of the slightly lower mortality rate most populations generally exhibit around this age (Jackes 2011, 109). But the gap is nonetheless curious and is possibly also a social phenomenon. Perhaps this period of life between childhood and adulthood was assigned to some special practices or status that prevented these individuals from visiting the Skateholm area?

It is also interesting to note the differences in burial practices between Skateholm I and II since this may allow a more dynamic picture of the site complex. By analysing the small displacements in burial practices between the two burial sites we find indications of changes in children’s status over time. One such example is the variances of red ochre in some of the graves. What ochre really represents here is difficult to establish – it could represent remnants of coloured clothes or it may have played a part in the funeral ritual (cf. Larsson 1988b, 146; Zagorska 2008). The presence of ochre does nonetheless show some interesting variability between different age-groups over time. At the earlier Skateholm II, all young individuals below the age of seven or eight are buried with ochre. Otherwise it is only present in association with one of the three young adults and only four of the adults. Perhaps it is significant that the oldest of the children had ochre on his/her thighs instead of the head as was the case for all of the other young individuals? At Skateholm I, on the other hand, ochre is only found in one of the children’s graves but is much more common among the young adults and the adults. Although it is difficult to establish what this change means, it still implies that children were subject to changes at Skateholm – at least in the way they are treated in death.

Another difference between the two sites concerns the number and types of artefacts found in the graves. The young adults generally received a typical adult set of flint
and bone implements and animal teeth at death, which never occurs in the younger children’s graves. At Skateholm II, however, the children’s graves occasionally include single bone points, flint blades, or, as in one case, arrow-heads (Grave I). This also suggests changes in the life of children from the earliest phase of the site to the later. Especially interesting is the previously mentioned seven/eight year old child who was buried with four transverse flint arrow points (Fig. 4). This might hint that the child had reached a threshold age more associated with, and involved in, the ‘adult’ sphere. It is also interesting to note that the youngest of the young adults (Grave 47, Skateholm I), who is estimated to be fourteen to sixteen years old, apparently belonged to the same category as the slightly older young adults (on the basis of the grave contents). The data thus seem to indicate a threshold around the ages of seven to eight years, or perhaps a transition period between the ages of eight to thirteen years during which the young are recognised as adults. In this context the grave of the seven/eight year old is of special interest because of its apparent in-between character. The child is the only one below ten years that has been buried with some kind of tools besides simple flakes (four transverse arrow heads). There are, however, no animal teeth or any other ‘adult’ items present in the grave. It may perhaps be questionable to put too much emphasis on a single grave, but the indication of a threshold at this stage in the life course is partly sustained by the previously mentioned absence of any buried individuals of the intermediate age-group between eight and thirteen years.

**Children and Other Small Creatures**

At Skateholm nine complete dogs were discovered buried in individual pits accompanied with artefacts in a similar way to humans (Fig. 5). The buried dogs comprise a special category of graves that show some interesting links with the young children. In general, these burials have been interpreted symbolically or metaphorically. Larsson (1994, 568) has suggested that the buried dogs may have been substitutions for human bodies lost at sea. Strassburg (2000, 161, 213–4) reasons along similar lines but suggests that the dogs symbolise shape-shifters or shamans. The idea of symbolic watchdogs has also been raised (Munt and Meiklejohn 2007, 167), but, of course, the dogs may simply have been dear members of the household and buried as such when they died (cf. Morey 2006, 171). A most interesting aspect of the dog burials at Skateholm is, however, their close spatial relationship with the younger children. The dogs and children are typically buried at the periphery of the two activity areas. At Skateholm II, children are placed in the south (Grave I) and the north (Graves XII and XIII), while the individually buried dogs are found in the east (Grave XIX) and the west (Grave XXI). In a sense the children and dogs are ‘framing’ the burial area by their marginal placement at the four cardinal points. At Skateholm I, they are clustered together to the south, east and west of the main area (see Fig. 3). This is a distinct pattern that needs some sort of explanation.

The marginal placement of the graves of the dogs and the young children can perhaps be explained by a common low status – they are buried when they die, but only at the fringes of the main burial area. Generally, burials of small children are only rarely as elaborate as the graves of adults and the bodies of dead children are often handled
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Figure 4 (left): Grave I with a buried 7–8 year old child from Skateholm II. Four transverse arrow-heads were found near the left thigh (Photograph by Lars Larsson).

Figure 5 (above): One of the buried dogs at Skateholm II (Grave XXI). It should be noted that this burial represents one of the most content-rich graves at Skateholm (Photograph by Lars Larsson).

differently from the adults (Duday 2009, 58–71; Gilchrist 2010, 164). This is, however, not likely to have been the case at Skateholm because one of the graves (Grave XXI) with the most varied and plentiful grave goods was actually given to one of the dogs (Larsson 2000, 91). The main reason for the spatial pattern therefore needs to be found elsewhere since it does not appear to be a simple question of status. Interestingly, the dogs and children are not ‘alone’ in these peripheral clusters – they are accompanied with ‘odd’ burials that in various ways differ from the rest. For instance, three adult graves that include bones affected by fire are placed at peripheral locations at both sites (Nos 11, 20 and XVIII). These circumstances suggest that the periphery was designated for bodies that for some reason diverged from the norm and ‘needed’ special treatment in death.
It is also interesting to find that the location of the young adults also differs from the younger children. The young adults are generally buried in central areas at both Skateholm I and II. Two exceptions do, however, stand out from the rest. The individual in Grave XX is buried to the west at Skateholm II and it is in this sense as peripheral as the dog in Grave XXI. The grave contained about thirty animal teeth but none of the bone or flint tools that the other young adults were typically buried with. In terms of grave goods this particular grave therefore falls between the pattern for both children’s graves and those of the young adults. The other unusual young adult individual (Grave 14) was buried together with dogs and young children in the southern cluster of Skateholm I. In this case, this is the only young adult who had been buried with an adult. Even though the examples are few, it is interesting that the two peripherally buried young adults diverge from the others of the same group in other respects too. Why all young children were being associated with dogs and various ‘non-normative’ individuals is quite interesting. Does this imply that children in general were regarded as ‘different’ – perhaps even strange or dangerous? Here, we need to consider that we are dealing with dead bodies that may, or may not, reflect real life circumstances. If children (and dogs) were also considered ‘different’ in real life is therefore a question that needs more elaboration.

It is perhaps tempting to resort to an image of the ontologically ‘different’ Mesolithic here, and suggest that the modern distinction between the species (dog and human) was not as evident then as it is today. For instance, may young children and dogs, despite their obvious differences, have been perceived to belong to the same category of ‘non-adults’ based on similarities in size and mental capacities? A less speculative and less exotic interpretation, however, is that the children and the other ‘non-normative’ individuals were placed peripherally because of the circumstances of their deaths. One significant issue about the buried children under the age of eight years at Skateholm is their untimely death. After all, it is not ‘normal’ for parents to survive their offspring no matter how low their chances of reaching maturity may be (Fahlander 2011b, 10–1; Gilchrist 2010, 164). The peripherally located burials may thus have been organised around at least two different principles – one that separates the species (dogs and humans), and one that has to do with their manner of death (the way they died or the cause of their deaths).

**Beyond the Children**

It is not unusual to find that children are displaced in a social sense; they are often considered to be in between a ‘proper’ gender, sex, identity, citizenship, as well as between dichotomies such as wild-domestic and animal-human (e.g. Mizoguchi 2000, 142). This intermediate position can thus be informative on social life in general – the way children of different ages are being treated in relation to these terms reveals how such aspects are generally viewed. For instance, a tangible result of the focus on children at Skateholm is that it clearly exposes the general horizontal development of Skateholm (see Fig. 3). The hypothesis that Skateholm II is older than Skateholm I is based upon minor differences in typology of pots and tools traits, but also on elevation in relation to shore displacement (Larsson 1988b, 100; 2000, 94). These indications, in combination
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with the few available radiocarbon determinations, are unfortunately not sufficient to firmly establish such a development (Fahlander 2008, 35). It is therefore noteworthy that the spatial pattern of children’s and dog’s graves provides independent support for the hypothesis that Skateholm I and Skateholm II are, in fact, two subsequent burial areas. Although Skateholm I at first sight seems to lack a northern cluster of child/dog burials, we find that Skateholm II is ‘closed’ at the four cardinal points by dogs and children, while the southern part of Skateholm I remains more or less ‘open’ in the north (see Fig. 3). Graves 46 and 47 contain infants, but they are buried together with adults and were not given individual graves. Interestingly, these two intersecting graves are the only ones in this part of the area that contain children at all (none contain dogs). This strengthens the assumption that Skateholm II was a first phase that became abandoned and that the same spatial pattern was repeated at the later Skateholm I. A previous, more detailed, analysis of the horizontal development of the area suggests that the burials on the northernmost ridge constitute the latest phase of occupation (Fahlander 2008, 38). If the absence of child graves at this part of the burial ground are due to circumstances which caused children (and dogs) to no longer visit Skateholm, for example, or they were buried in new ways we cannot recognise is difficult to tell. Nevertheless, the phenomenon indicates that children and childhood are matters which endured changes over time.

These spatial distinctions are also interesting when compared to other sites on a greater scale. The peripheral location of certain dead bodies seems to be a unique trait for the groups that occupied Skateholm. Similar patterns are not present among any other known Mesolithic burial sites in northern Europe – for example, Tågerup (Karsten and Knarrström 2001) and Vedbæk which are also located in Denmark (Albrethsen and Brinch Petersen 1976), or Zvejnieki in Latvia (Larsson and Zagorska 2006). The study therefore also demonstrates differences in social structure and ways of thinking that probably existed between the various hunting, gathering and fishing groups in northern Europe during the Mesolithic. As such, although children may not have occupied prominent positions in prehistoric societies the way they are treated in death can nonetheless be helpful when exploring the life of the adult world. The variations in treatment of children at different ages can provide a platform for subsequent discussions on, for example, gender roles and social hierarchies, as well as hybridity and changes in the cosmology and ideology of the North European hunter-fishers. A focus on children not only hints at the existence of social distinctions between different young individuals, but is also informative about social and ritual aspects of life during this period – topics that are normally explored from a traditionally ‘adult perspective’.

Summary: To Grow Up and Die at Skateholm

Judging from the burial data at least three different categories of children can be distinguished in the funerary ritual at Skateholm – Infants (<1 year old), younger children (2–7/8 years old) and older children (c. 8–13 years old). Infants below the age of fifteen months are only buried together with adults, suggesting that this category were only buried in conjunction with an adult’s death. Statistically, a substantially greater number of individuals of this vulnerable age ought to have died (Kjellström
2011, 199), but how these infants were disposed of remains unknown. Young children between two and eight years of age are only buried individually at the periphery of the main areas of activity, a location that they share with dogs and a few ‘non-normative’ individuals. Their burials also differ from those of adults in terms of have little or no accompanying grave goods.

The older children between the ages of eight and thirteen years seem to be completely missing from Skateholm. This might, as previously discussed, simply be an effect of the generally lower mortality rate of this period in the life-course, but it is nonetheless intriguing that not a single individual in this age span was buried at Skateholm. It is therefore difficult to dismiss the possibility that their absence could, at least partly, be due to cultural circumstances. They may, for instance, be buried in a manner not detectable to us, or perhaps this age-group was for some reason prevented from participating in the seasonal visits to Skateholm, and was therefore buried elsewhere? From such a perspective, this age-group may be considered to be an intermediate period in life between childhood and adulthood.

The late teenagers from fourteen years of age do not differ from the grown-ups in terms of burial location or the presence of grave goods and they seem to have been recognised as adults. The changes from ‘child’ to ‘adult’ therefore appears to occur somewhere in the gap between seven and thirteen years of age. The correspondence of this trend to living children must be considered probable, but other intersecting parameters (sex/gender, abilities, body shape, descent, etc.) may, of course, have also been involved (cf. Fahlander 2011b, 29–35).

An interesting aspect of the Skateholm material is the way in which young children were treated in death appears to change over time. The distinctions between different age groups remain more or less unchanged between Skateholm I and II, but the grave contents vary. Among the older graves at Skateholm II, the child graves sporadically contain a few single objects, but always include red ochre, preferably on the head. This changes at Skateholm I where the graves of children usually lack grave goods and where only one of seven individuals contain traces of ochre on the head (ochre is instead more frequent among the young adults contrary to the pattern at Skateholm II). During the very last phase of activities at the northernmost part of Skateholm child burials are no longer present at all. The way the children are buried therefore develops over time – the grave goods (including ochre) change from a few to none and, during the last phase, no children at all were buried. This phenomenon can be interpreted as a possible indication that the status and importance of children generally decrease over time, but, of course, the reduction of grave goods may simply be related to general changes in burial rituals (most of the adults and dogs also get less grave goods over time). When the number of child burials decreases at a site this is generally considered a positive development as it indicates increased health-status and fewer premature deaths. In this particular case, however, the lack of children’s graves during the last phase of activity could simply imply that the youngest children were restricted from the site like the older children before them.

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References


