Along the seemingly barren and inhospitable coasts of the northernmost parts of Norway, numerous remains of settlements from the 10,000 year long Stone Age are known (Engelstad 1985, 1989; Helskog 1980; Olsen 1994; Simonsen 1961). A repeating element of these coastal settlements is the immediate proximity to the ancient sea shore. This close relation between people and the sea must have influenced social life, and structured interaction and contacts as well as settlement patterns and subsistence. The aim of this paper is to briefly look into some dimensions of this relation, and I will start out with a Late Stone Age (5000-1800 BC) settlement at the island of Melkøya in Finnmark, Northern Norway (Hesjedal, Niemi, & Ramstad in prep; Ramstad 2009).

The seascape of Melkøya

Melkøya is situated northeast of the city of Hammerfest, in the Sørøysund fjord basin (fig. 1). This is a fjord/skerry seascape (Bjerck 2009); several islands divided by narrow straits, fjords, smaller skerries and a multitude of sheltered inlets and bays. This type of seascape provided many natural harbours and relatively safe conditions for travel, hunting and fishing at sea in an area where the weather is unpredictable and storms frequent (ibid.).

The island of Melkøya is small, less than 1 ha, separated from the larger Kvaløya in the east by a narrow tidal current, itself a particularly productive biotope (i.e. Bergsvik 2001; Ramstad, Hesjedal, & Niemi 2005). Settlement remains were found in the two only sheltered areas on the island; along the raised beach terraces in the broad western bay Normannsvika, and in the narrow funnel-shaped southern bay Sundfjæra (Hesjedal et al. in prep) (fig. 2). The size of the island limited available terrestrial resources even during the periods of prehistory when the climate was more advantageous than today. Central for the settlements on this island were without doubt the maritime resources available around the island.
A shore-bound community

While the habitation history of Melkøya starts already c. 9500 BC, the prehistoric use of the island culminates during the second phase of the Late Stone Age (4000-3300 BC) (Hesjedal et al. in prep). A total of 15 houses from the period have been excavated, in addition to a variety of different structures, like fireplaces, cooking pits, cairns, graves and cleared spaces.

On the edge of a terrace in Sundfjæra, overlooking a steep slope down to the sea, a cluster of 5-6 houses with central hearths were excavated (fig. 3). Close to the houses, graves with pearls of amber from the Baltic were found (Ramstad 2006). Below the houses, in the steep slope towards the sea, an estimated amount of 8 tons of fire cracked stones, waste from fire-related activities that had taken place in or close to the houses above, had been deposited (Hesjedal et al. in prep). The size of the stones indicates that they primarily had been used for heating, and to a lesser degree for cooking (Odgaard 2001; Ramstad in prep).

At the bottom of the slope, on the prehistoric shore, four fireplaces were documented. Some of these structures seem have been cooking pits for preparation of larger amounts of food (for boat crews or ritual feasts?), or drying ovens for food conservation (i.e. Fretheim 2009; Heibreen 2005). Other functions can be related to maritime technologies, for instance for processing of tar and oil from sea mammals (Ramstad in prep), or for heating water to shape wood for boat hulls or hunting equipment (Lindqvist 2007). Based on rock carvings from the terminal phase of the Early Stone Age (Gjerde in prep; Hesjedal, Damm, & Storli 1996:82) it can be assumed that boats were made with skins on a wooden frame.

Ethnographically known skin boats are described as seaworthy, light, fast and easy to manoeuvre; the draw back is that they require constant care and maintenance. Since they need re-oiling after about four days at sea to stay waterproof, the skin hulls are the main concern (Ames 2002). Obviously, such boats demanded a permanently available large supply of oil and tar.

The artefact inventory reflects a maritime orientation. Single-edged slate knives can be related to flensing of sea mammals (Fitzhugh 1974), and slate spear heads were probably parts of composite harpoon heads similar to the types known from North American Inuits (i.e Murdoch & Fitzhugh 1988; Nelson 1979 for hafted examples). The knives themselves are seemingly shaped to invoke associations to the animals they were applied on; sea mammals like whales and dolphins (fig. 4). Permanent schools of fish in the tidal currents close to the island were a resource base that could be harvested year-round with a minimum of effort.
Direct evidence of fishing is available as stone sinkers that probably were attached to a fishing line with hooks made of bone, as seen on rock carvings where the elusive large halibut, riddled with myths even today, is caught from boat with such equipment (fig. 5) (see also Ramstad 2009:426).

**Affinities and relations in maritime societies**

The pronounced maritime orientation, the amount of fire cracked rocks, the solidity of the houses, the thick cultural layers and the large number of structures points towards repeated and more lasting stays during (at least) the colder part of the year (Hesjedal et al. in prep). The place was probably occupied by a larger group who utilized a general set of maritime resources, of which a large part could be collected in the rich tidal current close by. A stronger orientation towards maritime resources and more permanent establishments on the coast is postulated for the larger region in this time span as well (Olsen 1994:68).

Simultaneously, the relation between people and the landscape seems to have changed in profound ways. Through wood clearing, physical structures, waste deposits and production activities, people were now clearly making an imprint on the natural environment. On the deforested island the bay of Sundfjæra would have appeared as a collection of inhabited and abandoned houses, with a massive accumulation of charred rocks, ashes and organic refuse in the slope towards the sea shore, where fireplaces, boats and equipment demonstrated human presence. It should be expected that the daily experience of such a “domesticated” landscape would give people a strong sense of home and belonging to the place, thereby legitimising their claim to the area. This would further have been substantiated by genealogical attachments; particularly through the ancestral presence that was observable in graves and ruins of older houses (Ramstad 2006).

In these more sedentary and territorially defined societies certain social differentiation, with more defined leadership and restricted access to resources, could have been the case (Olsen 1994:82). Maritime technologies provided good conditions for task organisation and consequent group dispersals. Boats facilitated the simultaneous deployment of smaller or larger task groups, who efficiently could utilise different foraging areas through one or several trips a day (Ames 2002). Such groups or boat crews could have been coordinated by separate leaders, whose authority rested on successful accomplishments of the relevant tasks. Among the Iñupiaq of Alaska such leaders were known as *ataniq*. Based on their knowledge about certain areas of life they commanded respect and obedience in activities related to those areas,
for instance beluga drives, whaling- or seal-hunting crews (Burch 2005). The status was context-specific; to be *ataniq* in one setting might not qualify to be one in another. In other words, a task group organisation would imply that several people had the possibility to achieve prominent positions in social and/or economic activities of the community.

It has been pointed out that for the coastal hunter-fishers, the sea was not a barrier but worked as an efficient highway (Ramstad 2009:428). Even though increased awareness of territorial affinities and more exclusive settlement patterns could have involved a higher risk of inter-group conflicts, such conflicts seem to have been discouraged through extensive and regularly maintained contacts. Relations may even have been institutionalised (Damm 2006:138; Olsen 1994:84). Overlapping networks of marriage, learning, trade and rituals are archaeologically visible as distributional patterns of groups of artefacts and structural traits across northern Fennoscandia, such as slate tools, pearls of amber, house forms, burial customs, rock art and technological traditions (Damm 2006; Gjerde in prep; Gjessing 1944; Ramstad 2006; Skandfer 2005). A well-developed boat technology would allow large cargo and heavy bulks to be transported for trading purposes, and parties could embark on longer journeys to distant areas for trades and feasts, raw material extraction, transition rites, or to participate in collective hunts on aggregating animals – and through the meetings with others objects, histories, and craft techniques were exchanged (fig. 6).

While boats technically must have been capable for long-distance travels of families, children and dogs, with all their equipment (Ames 2002), it seems that travels and contacts increasingly were maintained by individuals or smaller groups, i.e. specialists (Damm 2006).

Numerous ethnographical examples show how control of networks, distribution of knowledge and objects from outside is integral to discourses around power and status (Mauss 1954; Weiner 1992). Long-distance travelling may be charged with symbolic connotations, and in traditional societies geographical distance is often correlated with supernatural distance, giving the ones who performed the travels and visited these distant and foreign realms special status (Helms 1992). The distribution of certain objects show that the networks possibly stretched over larger areas than earlier, involving objects of distant and foreign origin; “exotic, power-filled material goods” acquired from afar, tangible proofs of the owners’ successful encounters with distant lands and peoples (Helms 1992).

It can be concluded that maritime technologies were central actors in the development and maintenance of complex networks that involved the transfer of materials, people, knowledge, myths and traditions over large areas (Damm 2007). These networks would again have had a pronounced impact on the local communities. However, the substance of these
networks, and their consequences for the communities along the shores of the Barents Sea, remain vague. A more detailed understanding of how the arctic coastal hunter-fishers participated in and influenced these networks, and in turn were influenced by them, is clearly needed (Jordan & Damm in prep).

References


Figure 1. The fjord/skerry seascape is a productive environment for marine life, and provides relatively safe conditions for travel and hunting. Melkøya is situated close to a tidal current with a particularly productive biotope. Illustration: Kystverket/Norge Digitalt.
Figure 2. The island of Melkøya is small, and the terrestrial resources available during the Stone Age were highly limited. Settlement location and artifact inventory reflect the importance of maritime resources for the Late Stone Age people living here. Illustration: Anja Roth Niemi. Photo: Fjellanger Widerøe.
Figure 3. Top: In the period 4000-3700 BC houses were placed on a terrace overlooking the sea, while waste was deposited in the slope below. At the shore several fireplaces were used for different production and processing activities. Contemporary sea level is illustrated here (c. 10 m.asl.), giving an impression of the good harbour conditions at the place. Bottom: View from the sea shore up towards the terrace with houses. Illustrations: Anja Roth Niemi © Tromsø Museum – Universitetsmuseet.
Figure 4. Single-edged slate knives probably used for flensing fish and sea mammals. Their maritime dimension is emphasised by seemingly being shaped to evoke association to diving whales and dolphins. Illustration: Adnan Icagic © Tromsø Museum – Universitetsmuseet.
Figure 5. Rock carving from Alta depicting the fishing of halibut with a line from boat. Fish sinkers like the one on the right are commonly found on Late Stone Age sites, this one is from the beach area below the houses at Melkøya. Illustration: http://www.donsmaps.com/norge.html (rock carving), Adnan Icagic © Tromsø Museum – Universitetsmuseet (fish sinker).
Figure 6. Rock carving showing a collective whale hunt from New Zalavruga 8, Vyg by the White Sea in northwest Russia. Tracing: Savvateyev, Ju. A. 1970. Zalavruga. Photo: Jan Magne Gjerde.