

Elks on the Loose

Antique Elk (*Alces alces*) in Funnel Beaker Culture Deposits from North Zealand, Denmark

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Abstract

This paper presents two Danish examples from the Funnel Beaker Culture illustrating a practice of depositing antique elements – in this case elk bones. While faunal remains are a well-known aspect of complex Neolithic deposition practices, the scope and nuances of these depositional practices remain unclear, partly due to a general lack of ¹⁴C dates and detailed zooarchaeological analysis. One key outcome of an increased focus on Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS) dating is the identification of deposited antiques. Although the concept of antiques in archaeological contexts is not new, it has rarely been discussed in Neolithic contexts, despite its relevance to theories of social memory and mnemonic materiality. Recognizing the phenomenon of deposited antique animal remains requires both archaeological openness to the idea and sufficient ¹⁴C dating. The two examples discussed here – both involving Maglemosian Elk bones found together with Neolithic domesticated animals – were discovered in wetland contexts in North Zealand, Denmark. Together, they highlight the potential of direct AMS dating in revealing previously unrecognized practices of temporal reuse, as well as shedding new light on Neolithic engagements with time, materiality, and memory.

Keywords: Neolithic animal deposits, ¹⁴C dates, elk, Maglemose period, deposited antiques, mnemonic significance, animal turn

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Introduction

The South Scandinavian Funnel Beaker Culture (TRB) is characterized by a rich and complex repertoire of deposition practices that reflect the multifaceted relationships between people, objects and places. These practices involve the intentional placement of various categories of objects, including bones, ceramics and flint axes. Deposits from the period are commonly located in various types of wetlands, associated with megaliths or placed in pits on dry land. These patterns have attracted scholarly attention, and several studies have investigated the spatial and material characteristics of these deposits, focusing on specific objects, such as ceramics, or on specific sites (e.g. Andersen 2000; Becker 1948; Berggren 2015; Kock 1998; Rudebeck & Macheridis 2015).

Despite this growing body of research, animal deposits from the TRB have only received relatively sporadic scholarly attention. While some pioneering studies have discussed faunal deposits from the Neolithic, these have often been case-specific, with limited synthesis addressing a broader geographic or temporal scale (e.g. Skaarup 1985; Koch 1998; Nilsson 1995; Nilsson & Nilsson 2003; Rudebeck & Macheridis 2015), while other studies have focused on adjacent periods and cultures such as Pitted Ware Culture (e.g. Wincentz 2020). Consequently, our understanding of the role of animals in TRB depositional practices remains fragmented. We still know little about how species were selected, which body parts were preferred or which social, symbolic or mnemonic principles guided the inclusion of animal bodies in ritual contexts.

This lack of synthesis is striking, since animal remains offer a unique interpretive lens through which to explore the human-animal relationship of the period. Animals were not merely by-products of human activity or indicators of economy – they were active participants in social life and ritual communication. As Armstrong Oma (2010:177) has argued, the human-animal relationship can be viewed as a social contract, entailing mutual obligations and forms of trust. When placed in depositional contexts – whether as complete carcasses or selected anatomical parts – animals may thus have operated as agents of transformation, mediating between temporal, spiritual and social domains. Archaeological inquiry into such roles requires sustained analytical attention that integrates zooarchaeological evidence with theoretical perspectives on materiality, memory and human-animal relations.

This study draws attention to one particularly evocative aspect of TRB depositional practices: the deliberate incorporation of antique animal remains or animal elements already ancient at the time of deposition. The Cambridge Dictionary (2026) defines *antique* as “something made in an



Figure 1. Map of the location of all South Scandinavian sites: Salpetermosen Syd 10 (1) Favrholm 5 (2), Dösemarken (3), Saxtorp (4) Skævinge (5) Syltholm Fjord (6) Lindgård/Kildevang (7) Ravnæs (8).

earlier period that is collected and considered to have value because it is beautiful, rare, old, or of high quality”. Applying this notion archaeologically, we use the term to describe curated faunal remains that were re-contextualized within later ritualized frameworks. This specific term has already been used by other scholars (e.g. Knight et al. 2019:4), while in other studies, the phenomenon is known as ancestral artefacts (Caple 2010:305). Rather than defining these faunal remains as ancestral, we choose to use the term antique throughout the article. Recognizing antiques and the faunal antiques in particular, opens new perspectives on Neolithic engagements with time, ancestry, and material continuity, suggesting that animals themselves could embody connections to a remembered or imagined past.

The current article seeks to improve our understanding of one aspect of the animal role: specifically, curated antique animal remains in TRB depositional practices. It suggests that the inclusion of temporally distant objects may have been an element within TRB ritual and mnemonic frameworks, as is known from other periods of the past. We argue that this aspect of ritual

and mnemonic frameworks should be included in Neolithic studies and be applied to faunal remains as well as artefacts. This approach will, in time, contribute to our understanding of the complexity of the Neolithic societies and examine whether these acts were deliberate attempts to reference or harness the power of the past. By foregrounding the animal as both material and mnemonic agent, we aim to contribute to broader debates about the entanglement of humans, animals and temporality in Neolithic ritual life. Rather than presenting a full catalogue of examples, the intention of this article is to present a new perspective on animal deposits from the TRB.

To investigate these questions, this study introduces two new Danish cases in which juvenile elk bones and antler from the Mesolithic Maglemose period were deposited together with Neolithic bones of domesticated animals in wetland contexts. These examples, identified through systematic AMS radiocarbon dating and detailed zooarchaeological analysis, demonstrate that some animal remains in Neolithic deposits were not contemporary but rather re-contextualized relics of a deeper past. As such, they offer insight into the ways Neolithic communities engaged materially and symbolically with animals and time.

Methods

The study is based on two faunal deposits from wetland contexts in North Zealand—Salpetermosen Syd (MNS50010) and Favrholt 5 (MNS50595), which form the core empirical material for the analysis. Both sites were excavated and documented by Museum Nordsjælland between 2018 and 2021, and all subsequent archaeological and zooarchaeological analyses were carried out by the authors.

Faunal remains were identified to species or the lowest possible taxonomic level using comparative collections at the Natural History Museum of Denmark, University of Copenhagen. Age-at-death estimations were based on dental eruption and wear, as well as epiphyseal fusion, and taphonomic observations recorded preservation and any working traces or burning. Selected bones were sampled for Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS) dating at the Poznań Radiocarbon Laboratory (Poz). Calibration followed OxCal 4.4 with the IntCal20 dataset, and all dates are reported as calibrated years BC at 2 σ (95.4%) probability.

The archaeological context of each deposit was recorded during excavation and subsequently re-evaluated in light of the new chronological data. The integration of stratigraphic observations, species identification and direct dating enabled an assessment of whether the faunal assemblages represented single depositional events or the deliberate inclusion of temporally

distant elements. Comparative data from published Neolithic faunal deposits in Denmark and southern Scandinavia have been used to situate the two cases within a wider interpretive framework (e.g. Koch 1998; Nilsson & Nilsson 2003; Rudebeck & Macheridis 2015; Berggren 2015).

By combining detailed zooarchaeological analysis with direct AMS radiocarbon dating, the study provides an independent and internally consistent empirical basis for interpreting the two assemblages as examples of deposited antiques, in this case animal remains re-contextualized within later ritual frameworks. This integrated approach allows for both fine-grained reconstructions of depositional practice and broader reflections on Neolithic engagements with time, ancestry and the agency of animals.

Secure elk remains and their chronological distribution in Denmark

Elk (*Alces alces*) appears to have disappeared from present-day Denmark by the Neolithic (Aaris-Sørensen 1980). The last secure elk remains on the Jutland peninsula come from Kainsbakke, near Grenå, dated indirectly via associated aurochs bone to around 4800–4400 cal. kyr BP (Richter 1991; Aaris-Sørensen 2010:26). On Zealand, elk disappeared significantly earlier and the last secure remains consist of a young adult bull and a calf found near Favrbø (Krudtmose, ZMK19/1920). The remains were C14 dated to 8632±130 and 8528 BC±150 (OxCal 4.4) respectively (Aaris-Sørensen 1998: 138–139; Møhl 1980, ZMK archive).

‘Secure remains’ refers to bones not exclusively consisting of teeth beads, worked antler or bones from the extremities, which were more often curated, traded or transported over long distances or even periods as part of skins or as valuable raw materials (Aaris-Sørensen 1998:178–179).

The complexity of animal deposits from TRB

The deliberate deposition of faunal remains, whether on their own or in combination with other objects, is considered a relatively common practice during the Neolithic period (e.g. Andersen 2000; Skaarup 1985). Eva Koch observed that 54 out of 100 finds of so-called ‘bog pots’ (deposited prehistoric ceramic vessels within a wetland context) include animal bones, yet she also noted that many wetlands appear to have been used over long time spans, complicating the temporal relationship between the deposited objects (Koch 1998:154). As such, the assumption that animal deposits were relatively common during the Neolithic is rarely grounded in solid 14C dates

from the faunal remains themselves. In truth, we are largely in the dark when it comes to determining the scale and timing of animal deposition practices in TRB wetland contexts and knowing whether certain species or body parts were favoured during this period. Nonetheless, a few published examples from South Scandinavia illustrate the diversity of these practices.

At Dösemarken, in southern Sweden, TRB pits contained articulated body parts of cattle and pigs arranged with flint and ceramics, suggesting deliberate composition (Berggren 2015). At Saxtorp, deposits of mixed species highlight both the complexity and the chronological uncertainty that often surrounds such assemblages, as some bones dated much later than expected (Nilsson & Nilsson 2003). Similar patterns appear in Denmark: at Skævinge Mose a funnel beaker contained a juvenile pig humerus and acorns (Becker 1948; Koch 1998), while the Syltholm fjord 'structure A' comprised of repeated deposits of animal mandibles spanning a millennium and included species such as pig, wild cat, dog, deer, fox, otter, and roe deer (Sørensen 2019). Other examples, such as Lindegård and Kildevang, likewise demonstrate the structured placement of selected animal parts in wet contexts (Skousen 2008).

Comparable Neolithic, ritualized deposits of animals are known beyond Scandinavia. In Britain, over 160 faunal deposits from the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age range from single bones to nearly complete skeletons, but few are directly dated (Serjeantson 2011). Among those that are, several include elements much older than their depositional contexts, such as Mesolithic remains incorporated into Neolithic features at sites including Stonehenge and the Dorset Cursus (Teather 2018).

These indications of temporal disjunction in Britain suggest that some Neolithic animal deposits may have intentionally included older material. In Denmark, antique faunal elements, such as the elk examples presented below, suggest that ancient bones could have been deliberately reintroduced into later ritual contexts, linking the living community to a remembered or imagined past.

TRB Deposition with Maglemosian Elements: The Case of Deposit E

The Salpetermosen Syd site (MNS50010) located south of Hillerød in North Zealand, was originally situated in a landscape of low-lying hills with dead-ice topography and young moraine formations, centred around the former inland lake of Salpetermosen, which gradually transformed into fenland. Smaller fens, kettle holes, creeks and natural springs created a rich wetland environment, inhabited since the Maglemosian period, as evidenced by scat-

Table 1. Overview of all mentioned bones from Salpetermosen 10 SydA793 with AMS dates.

Context #	Species	Bones	Observations	Dates
x1009 A793 Dep. E	<i>Alces alces</i>	1 kranium fragment, 1 mandible, 2 humeri, 1 metacarpal	Age: 4–4½ months (tooth eruption/wear), distal mtc unfused, minor carnivore gnawing on three elements	7941–7605 BC (Poz-102905) mandible
	Large ungulate	Teeth and ribs fragments	Age: juvenile, probably the same young elk	
	<i>Sus</i> sp.	1 femur	Age: pullus	3630–3372 BC (Poz-111856)
Surface find	<i>Alces alces</i>	1 radius	Age: distal unfused, similar size to bones in x1009	

tered flint and bone artefacts. During the early Neolithic, the area became more densely inhabited with settlements concentrated along the wetland margins, reflecting broader regional trends (Pantmann 2020).

Over the past 150 years, extensive drainage and land levelling have radically altered the landscape, converting it into a relatively flat agricultural terrain. During both the Neolithic and the Iron Age, the area provided critical resources such as water and grazing. Local pollen analyses suggest an open woodland landscape with indicators of grazing during the TRB. Furthermore, the wetlands were used for depositing orchestrated and curated artefacts such as pottery and flint tools. During the Iron Age the use of the wetlands intensified as peat was cut for fuel and wells were dug on the margins, making use of the high water level. So-called ‘mundane trash’ was dumped into the swampy areas, while orchestrated deposits – including animal bones, white stones, pottery and wooden objects – were placed in watery environments.

One such fen, A793, exhibited complex activity patterns from both the Neolithic and the Iron Age. The southern section showed more Neolithic use, while the northern section was predominantly used during the Iron Age. More than 40 peat-cutting pits and over 50 faunal deposits, along with wooden artifacts, whitish stones and ceramics have been documented from the fen (Bangsgaard & Pantmann 2021). On the brink of fen A793, and at the outskirts of the other activities in the fen, lay deposit E (x1009). The bones in this deposit appeared disarticulated, but they were concentrated within an area of 50 x 50cm with no visible disturbance or any other finds in the vicinity. Initially, the collection seemed unremarkable compared to the other bone deposits in A793, but upon closer analysis it was shown to be exceptional (Bangsgaard 2018).

Deposit E (x1009) contained six identifiable elk bones (a metacarpal, two humeri, a mandible, a loose tooth and a cranial fragment) as well as smaller mandibular and rib fragments only identifiable to a large ungulate.



Figure 2. The deposit x1009 (E) from Salpetermosen 10 Syd in situ with a 50 cm scalebar. Photo: Museum Nordsjælland.

The close correspondence in size and morphology suggests that all the bones in x1009 are from a single juvenile elk. Direct comparison of teeth wear and eruption suggest an estimated age of four to four and a half months at death. Notably, concentration E also contained a humerus diaphysis from a very young piglet (*pullus*), suggesting a multi-species composition similar to other TRB faunal deposits.

An additional juvenile elk radius was recovered from the excavated soil (x1721), likely belonging to the same animal, although this cannot be confirmed due to a lack of secure contextual information. However, the age category, size and morphology of the bone suggest that this bone originates from the same deposit and animal.

The bones in deposit E (x1009) along with the radius from x1721 consist of elements from the cranium, extremities and front legs, representing both sides of the body, without any overlap. This further suggests a single animal, either as a near-complete carcass or substantial portion thereof rather than a skin with attached bones.

Initially, the assemblage was thought to belong to the Iron Age, consistent with other deposits in A793. However, since elks were extinct on Zealand long before that period, this interpretation was untenable. Two alternative explanations were considered: either the elk remains originated from an earlier period and were found and redeposited during the Iron Age, or the bones were transported from a nearby region where elk were still present



Figure 3. Mandible from a 4–4½ months old elk calf from deposit x1009 (E). Photo: Globe Institute, KU.

during the Iron Age – such as southern Sweden. A direct AMS radiocarbon date on the elk remains placed them firmly in the Maglemose Period, specifically 7941–7605 BC (Poz-102905 8730±50 BP), a time when elk were still native to Zealand, though likely in reducing numbers.

The associated piglet bone also from deposit E returned with an AMS date of 3630–3372 BC (Poz-111856 4700±30 BP) with a 95.4% probability, placing it firmly within the TRB. No other Neolithic dated bones were found nearby and other Neolithic activity in the fen was concentrated at its opposite end, several hundred meters away.

A methodological concern arises from the palimpsestic nature of bogs. To assess association, each deposit at Salpetermosen was recorded three-dimensionally, and contextual boundaries between peat-cuttings and natural layers were documented. Deposit E was found in situ, embedded in stable peat with no signs of intrusion or redeposition, and the bones were spatially confined within a discrete pocket of undisturbed sediment. These observations make accidental mixing unlikely.

Taken together, the faunal composition, stratigraphic integrity and dual dating results indicate that Deposit E represents a TRB animal deposit containing an antique Maglemosian element. Rather than a random intrusion, it appears to be a deliberate act of inclusion. In this instance, the antique elk remains may have been encountered and incorporated to lend temporal or symbolic depth to the deposit.

Residual Elk: Interpreting Deposit X30

The site of Favrholt 5 (MNS50595), located near the Salpetermosen Syd site, is a part of the same Neolithic wetland landscape, characterised by scattered smaller wet areas. In one such drained fen, A8, several relatively poorly preserved bone deposits were discovered within the peat during the 2019 trial excavation. Based on the types of finds in the area, the depos-



Figure 4. Parts of an elk antler, including the main stem and lower part of the palm from deposit x30 at Favrholt. Photo: Globe Institute, KU.

its were initially broadly dated to either the Neolithic or the Iron Age. The faunal remains included a mix of domesticated and wild animals. Among these were deposit X30, which consisted of 31 fragments of an elk antler and part of a mandible as well as two upper premolars, the latter two from sheep/goat.

Deposit X30 was the first to be found during the trial excavation and was uncovered by the excavator. As a result, no formal photographic documentation was made at the time. However, the bones were reported to be found in close association with one another. Most of the antler fragments could be refitted to form a single left antler, including the main stem, brow tine and lower part of the palm from an adult elk. The remaining fragments are likely from the same antler, as no overlapping was identified (Bangsgaard 2024).

AMS dating of both elements produced strikingly different results: the elk antler was dated to the Maglemosian period 7300–7000 BC, (Poz-118004, 8180 ± 50 BP), while the sheep/goat mandible was dated to the end of the TRB 2800–2400 BC (Poz-150327, 4120 ± 35 BP).

Table 2. Overview of all mentioned bones from Favrholt 5, deposit x30 with AMS dates.

Context #	Species	Bones	Observations	Dates
X30	<i>Alces alces</i>	Antler (31 fragments)	Age: adult, no overlap, possible cut-mark	7300–7000 BC (Poz-118004)
	<i>Capra/Ovis</i> sp.	1 mandible, 2 teeth	Age: 2–6 years (tooth wear), premolar 3–4	2800–2400 BC (Poz-150327) mandible

In both cases, we considered alternative explanations to this specific combination of Maglemosian and Neolithic bones, such as disturbance by flowing water. However, this seems unlikely, as there was no indication of placement in running water or deep bodies of water; rather, the bones were situated at the margins of the fens and embedded in peat moss. No other Neolithic bones were found near the two deposits that could have intermixed with the elk remains. Furthermore, both deposits were described as concentrated when discovered, suggesting that they had not been disturbed. We therefore find it reasonable to conclude that these deposits are genuine and not the result of later mixing or post-depositional processes.

While both deposits stand out as exceptional, they are rooted in a periodical tradition, namely the wetlands' extended use for faunal deposits. The inclusion of ancient elk material may have been an extension of this tradition, in which old materials encountered during activity in the fens were imbued with meaning and re-contextualized in new ritual settings. These examples, therefore, suggest localized acts of engagement with deep time, revealing the ways in which TRB communities in North Zealand occasionally integrated ancient material traces into contemporary ritualized landscapes.

Other examples of deposited antique objects from Danish Neolithic

Although the deliberate deposition of antique elements is rarely discussed within Neolithic studies, the broader phenomenon of depositing antiques is well known from other prehistoric, and later, periods (Caple 2010; Knight et al. 2019). Within Neolithic studies, discussion has focused on the use of antique elements in relation to megaliths and menhirs (Bradley 1998, 2002; Gillings & Pollard 1999). The limited number of dated faunal remains may partly explain why antique bones have not previously been recognized as such. However, a few Danish Neolithic examples of antique elements in deposits indicates that the practice of depositing antiques is not foreign to the period and not confined to faunal remains.

Axes in particular, have been described as being ‘out of place’ by the original excavating archaeologist, when compared to the overall date of a deposit. In one instance they were referred to as “relics”, that is objects that may symbolize social memorability (Skousen 2008:167).

At Kildevang, the site mentioned earlier, eight pits exhibit traces of burning and contain a mixture of so-called mundane refuse and deliberately deposited objects. Among the latter are two core axes with specialized edges, a type associated with the Mesolithic Ertbølle culture – thus several centuries older than the TRB (Skousen 2008:164, 163–167). A similar situation was observed at Ravnsnæs megalithic tomb near Birkerød in North Zealand, where two axes of the Lindham type were found. Becker described these as “foreign objects” in relation to the site and the period of the tomb (Becker 1939:234–235). However, Ebbesen noted that the context of the axes is clouded in uncertainty due to the circumstances of their discovery (Ebbesen 1982:91, note 6).

More recently, a deposit of seven flint axes was uncovered at Skævinge in North Zealand (MNS50715). Six were of the Horneby type, dated to 2500–2350 BC, while the seventh is a type associated with the previous period, 2900–2500 BC. Though the latter axe could hypothetically have been produced around 2500 BC, the deposit might reflect a practice of incorporating an antique element.

Taken together, these examples parallel the faunal evidence from Salpetermosen Syd and Favrholt. In both cases, older materials were integrated into TRB depositional settings, suggesting a reappropriation of antiques, whether bone or stone, as part of a broader logic of temporal referencing within a TRB ideology. Similar behaviour has been observed within a Viking age context in Dublin, in which a deliberated bent Early Bronze Age halberd was found in a grave with bent and damaged Viking Age weapons (Knight et al. 2019:12). While such acts are rarely identified, they reveal that TRB communities occasionally engaged with remnants of a distant past as meaningful objects within their own depositional traditions. This broader perspective situates the two elk deposits not as anomalies, but as part of a subtle and selective material dialogue with past times.

Discussion

According to Bradley (2002:53–54), archaeology has an embedded paradox: typologies and chronologies are defined and based on closed finds that are assumed to be contemporary, despite numerous examples to the contrary. The comment by Ebbesen on the Ravnsnæs axes illustrates this challenge. While he acknowledged the objects as out of place, his hesita-

tion may reflect a broader discomfort with the idea that antique elements can occur legitimately within Neolithic contexts.

Animal deposition practices from TRB were complex, diverse and embedded in wider social, cosmological and mnemonic frameworks. The archaeological record reveals a variety of deposition practices from the meticulous placement of select skeletal parts, such as skulls, mandibles and horn cores, to the deposition of entire carcasses or disarticulated assemblages representing multiple individuals or species. Domesticated cattle dominate many of these deposits, but wild species, including elk, also feature within this ritual repertoire. Together they form a dynamic repertoire of ritualised interactions with the animal world.

These practices suggest intentionality and cultural encoding beyond mere refuse disposal. Specific body parts or indeed antique bones may have been chosen not only for their visual or symbolic impact, but also for their perceived connection to, for example, the past or their cosmological beliefs or, in this case, out of respect for their relation to specific animals. Unfortunately, due to a scarcity of systematically dated faunal deposits, our understanding of these practices remains limited. The few examples that have been directly radiocarbon dated emphasize how vital such work is for discerning longer-term patterns, such as the possible persistence or reactivation of depositional traditions, as suggested by sites like Saxtorp (Nilsson & Nilsson 2003).

A critical barrier to recognising curated or antique remains in the archaeological record is the reliance on contextual association rather than direct dating. Without routine AMS dating of individual faunal elements, antique elements may pass unnoticed – possibly accounting for their apparent rarity in Neolithic contexts. Indeed, curated antiques are more likely to be dismissed than accepted, since identifying such practices requires not only precise dating methods but also archaeological understanding and interpretive openness. Antique bones in Neolithic contexts are frequently dismissed as ‘outliers’, lab errors or residuality (Teather 2018:202). This tendency is exacerbated by the dominance of Bayesian modelling in chronological analysis. As Teather (2018:203) notes, such methods may be ill-suited for identifying deliberately curated antiques, since their presence inherently challenges the assumption of a clean chronological progression. This calls for a more reflexive approach, in which such ‘outliers’ are not viewed as errors to be corrected, but as potential evidence for practices of temporal reuse and memory.

While the scale of antique deposits in the TRB remains unknown, the practice itself is not implausible. Given the frequency of faunal deposits during the period, it is conceivable that older bones encountered by chance, whether unearthed during activities such as construction, ploughing or

ritual activity, could have been intentionally integrated into contemporary depositional practices. These antique elements may have carried mnemonic significance functioning as links to ancestral times, mythological origins or a deeply embedded respect for the role of animals. Such practices are known from later periods, particularly the Iron Age (Bradley 2002; Wessmann 2009), but it is increasingly plausible that such mnemonic practices may be considerably older. The two Danish elk deposits thus offer rare but compelling evidence of this possibility. These Maglemosian bones, found in TRB contexts, challenge the assumption that older faunal material must be intrusive. Instead, they open a window onto the Neolithic imagination, in which antique animal remains could serve as meaningful components in rituals alongside other artefacts. Whether the elk bones were intentionally curated for some time or encountered and re-contextualised shortly before their deposition, they signal a form of temporal awareness and engagement that has previously been underestimated in TRB studies. As such, they contribute valuable insights into the materialisation of memory and time in prehistoric ritual practice. While the evidence raises more questions than it answers, it opens a promising line of inquiry and highlights the need for further high-resolution studies of animal deposits in Neolithic deposition practices.

Concluding remarks

While we cannot determine precisely how TRB communities came into possession of Maglemosian elk bones, the evidence strongly indicates deliberate deposition rather than accidental inclusions. The pairing of these antique remains with contemporary domesticated animals follows the broader traditions of faunal deposition of the period but adds a distinct temporal dimension. The selective inclusion of these ancient remains indicates a deliberate engagement with deep time, an act that imbued the deposition with temporal depth and illustrates the depth of the human-animal relationship or indicates that the remains held symbolic potency.

The two North Zealand examples highlight how easily such practices could go unnoticed without direct AMS dating. As such, they illustrate the need for renewed attention to the chronological complexity of faunal assemblages and a methodological shift that prioritises direct dating of individual bones as part of routine excavation and post-excavation strategies.

The broader implications are significant. If the deliberate deposition of antique faunal elements was indeed part of TRB ritual practices, it introduces a new dimension to our understanding of prehistoric engagement with the past. Such practices suggest a more nuanced relationship to time

and memory, in which ancient bones may have acted as tokens of history, relational contacts with animals or symbols of enduring landscapes.

While the extent of these practices remains uncertain, examples from both Scandinavia and Britain suggest that the concept of depositing antiques was part of a TRB worldview. Recognising and understanding these practices will require not only more radiocarbon dates but also a fundamental shift in archaeological interpretation: one that embraces the complexity of a curated time-depth and the possibility that some of the materials we recover are not just remnants of the moment of deposition, but deliberate echoes of a more distant past.

Ultimately, these finds invite us to reconsider how Neolithic communities constructed relationships to time, materiality and memory. They call for interpretive frameworks that can accommodate a past-in-the-past: a past actively retrieved, curated and redeposited as part of a living cultural landscape. As such, they offer a powerful reminder that archaeology is not merely the study of what was, but also the study of how people remembered, imagined, and materially engaged with what had already been.

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