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## Research Article

Ben Elliott, Graeme Warren\*

# Consumers, not Contributors? The Study of the Mesolithic and the Study of Hunter-Gatherers

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**Abstract:** This article examines the relationship between the archaeology of the Mesolithic and the broader archaeology and anthropology of hunter-gatherers. Bibliographic reviews of articles presented at past MESO conferences and recent high-ranking Mesolithic research publications are compared to content reviews of contributions towards previous *Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies* conferences. The results of these are presented as evidence to suggest that, whilst Mesolithic archaeologists consume the results of the broader field of hunter-gatherer research, we do not contribute to this field as much as might be expected. We argue that this lack of engagement impoverishes both Mesolithic archaeology and hunter-gatherer studies and that closer collaboration between these fields would open up new avenues for interdisciplinary research with the capacity to address the challenges of hunter-gatherer societies living around the world today.

**Keywords:** Mesolithic, hunter-gatherer, anthropology, archaeology

## 1 Introduction

We begin this article with a simple question. Is Mesolithic archaeology hunter-gatherer archaeology? Ostensibly, the answer to this question appears straightforward: yes, Mesolithic archaeology is the archaeology of hunter-gatherers. As such, it is hunter-gatherer archaeology. However, it is surprising how infrequently European archaeologists working on the Mesolithic identify themselves as “hunter-gatherer archaeologists.” Let us try another question. Do we consider ourselves to be engaged in Mesolithic archaeology, hunter-gatherer archaeology, or hunter-gatherer research? An emphatic answer to this question seems harder to grasp.

The basic tenet of this short article is that whilst Mesolithic archaeologists consume the results of research produced by the broader field of hunter-gatherer studies, we are not significantly contributing back to that field. We will reflect on the problems associated with this unidirectional dialogue and explore how a closer relationship between Mesolithic archaeology and hunter-gatherer studies could be enriching. Finally, we will make some suggestions as to how Mesolithic archaeologists might initiate this integration. Given the original context of this article, delivered at the Toulouse MESO 2020 conference, we have

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focussed our discussion upon European Mesolithic archaeology. The arguments developed here may, however, hold relevance for other forms of hunter-gatherer archaeology within Europe.

This written version of the article we presented at the virtual Meso2020 meeting retains the character of that oral presentation – indeed to a large part this is the script we followed at that meeting. The oral paper aimed to set the scene for a session which we had proposed and which examined the relationship between archaeological and anthropological perspectives on hunter-gatherers. We were pleased with the very tight focus on this topic by contributors to the session, which enabled fruitful – and ongoing – conversations. These have continued in the two years between the submission and publication of this paper, and a such some of the points we make are now somewhat dated – notably, CHAGS13 has now taken place. Nevertheless, we leave this article in its original format as a record of where some of these conversations started.

## 2 What is Hunter-Gatherer Research?

Defining the field of “hunter-gatherer” research is challenging. Definitions of what is a hunter-gatherer have changed over time: from a focus on subsistence, to forms of social organisation, ontology, and world view (Bird-David, 2015). Hunter-gatherers past and present are enormously diverse, and no simple definition captures this diversity. The eclectic character of these societies creates fundamental problems for the use of “hunter-gatherer” as heuristic device, and this has been explicitly problematised in relation to hunter-gatherer archaeology at the global scale (Warren, 2021). Researchers trying to understand hunter-gatherer communities use an array of disciplinary techniques drawn from genetics, archaeology, historical analysis, and social, cultural, linguistic, and physical anthropology. Engagement with indigenous communities is a key theme.

Of course, hunter-gatherer research is not a self-perpetuating entity. It is a product of the structures of academic labour. At the forefront of this sits the *International Society for Hunter Gatherer Research* (ISHGR), which now runs the regular *Conference on Hunting and Gathering Societies* (CHAGS) meetings. These trace their origin back to *Man the Hunter* (Chicago, 1966), a conference widely considered “the twentieth-century’s watershed for knowledge about foragers” (Kelly, 2013, p. 9). CHAGS meetings have run since (Lee, 2014), with the most recent, at the time of writing the Twelfth, held in Penang in 2018. ISHGR also produces a specialist journal, *Hunter Gatherer Research*, which published four issues a year. Regardless of the diversity of the field, hunter-gatherer specialists therefore define themselves through their membership of organisations, their contributions to subject-specific conferences, and publication within themed journals.

Historically, hunter-gatherer studies have provided Mesolithic archaeology with a wealth of analytical tools and knowledge, which both aid our interpretation of the archaeological record, and define the period of study itself.

First, the concept of hunter-gatherers is foundational to the way in which the Mesolithic is identified and defined within the archaeological record across Europe. The focus of Mesolithic archaeology is Early and Mid-Holocene hunter-gatherers.

Second, Mesolithic research has persistently benefitted from the knowledge generated by hunter-gatherer studies since its original conception. Mesolithic archaeology consumes anthropological theory concerning hunter-gatherer behaviour, cosmology and ontology, and ethnoarchaeological studies, which relate to the formation of specific aspects of the archaeological record.

To demonstrate this, we analysed the bibliographies of a sample of 243 Mesolithic publications over the last c. 20 years. These included all of the contributions within the proceedings of the Stockholm 2000 and Belfast 2005 MESO conferences (Larsson, Kindgen, Knutsson, Loeffler, & Aker, 2003; McCartan, Woodman, Schulting, & Warren, 2009), the two most recent Mesolithic conference publications available. For a more recent sample we used the 20 highest ranking Mesolithic-focussed research articles published between 2016 and 2020 – as identified by Google Scholar in April 2020 (Hansson, 2018; Bjerck, 2017; Çilingiroğlu et al.,

**Table 1:** The use of HG ethnography and ethnoarchaeology in three samples of Mesolithic publications

	Articles citing HG ethnographies (%)	Articles citing ethnoarchaeology (%)	No. articles
Mesolithic on move 2003 publication	29	14	85
Mesolithic horizons 2009 publication	20	14	138
2019–2019 top 20 most cited Mesolithic articles	21	11	20

2016; Conneller, Bayliss, Milner, & Taylor, 2016; Cristiani et al., 2018; Cristiani, Radini, Edinborough, & Borić, 2016; Damlien, 2016; Eriksson et al., 2018; González-Fortes et al., 2017; Gummesson & Molin, 2016; Günther et al., 2018; Little et al., 2017; Matuzeviciute et al., 2017; Milner et al., 2016; Modi et al., 2017; Montes et al., 2016; Peyroteo Stjerna, 2016; Ritchie, Hufthammer, & Bergsvik, 2016; Robson et al., 2016; Vetro & Martini, 2016).

This analysis aimed to identify references to ethnographies of hunter-gatherer communities, or direct syntheses thereof that claimed to provide general theories of hunter-gatherers. General works of theory that were not exclusively focussed on hunter-gatherers were not included – thus, for example, Ingold’s *Perception of the Environment* (Ingold, 2000), a common citation from some groups of Mesolithic archaeologists, was excluded. The review of the literature was partial: it was based on what one of us (GW) recognised as being hunter-gatherer ethnography and in the English-language literature. It is therefore likely an underestimate of the actual reliance on this material. Notwithstanding the flaws of this approach, we feel it offers a reliable broad-level indication of the use of ethnographies and ethnoarchaeologies (Table 1).

Within these samples of Mesolithic research, we found that 20–29% of articles cite hunter-gatherer ethnographies or syntheses thereof. Beyond these, a further 11–14% of articles cite ethnoarchaeological work with hunter-gatherers, but not conventional ethnographic studies. This gives a total of 31–43% of Mesolithic research which directly cites one or more pieces of hunter-gatherer research. It is important to reiterate that this was a limited analysis – the real proportion is likely to be much higher (Table 1).

It is therefore uncontroversial to state that without the core concept of a hunter-gatherer, Mesolithic research would not exist in the form we all recognise today. It is also clear, based on the references we cite within our published work, that Mesolithic research consumes and repurposes knowledge generated by hunter-gatherer studies. But what are we offering back to the broader discourse on hunter-gatherer peoples?

### 3 Mesolithic Engagement with the Broader Hunter-Gatherer Research Community

One way of approaching this question is by looking at how we choose to engage with that academic discourse. A key event for the hunter-gatherer research community is CHAGS. Following *Man the Hunter*, meetings in Europe, America, Asia, and Australia continued until 2002, and after a hiatus resumed with meetings in 2012, 2015, and 2018. The next CHAGS will be held in UCD, Dublin in 2022, with the overall theme being how we can “live well together.” CHAGS are large, international, and interdisciplinary conferences; contacts are made, networks established, friendships formed, and major research projects instigated. These opportunities are not afforded to those who do not attend.

CHAGS is global in scope, and given our interest in hunter-gatherer groups of the Holocene, we might expect considerable engagement in these meetings from the Mesolithic research community. To test this theory, we analysed the proportion of articles focussing on the Mesolithic presented at the 2002

(Edinburgh), 2012 (Liverpool), 2015 (Vienna), and 2018 (Penang) CHAGS meetings. To do this, we reviewed the abstracts for the most recent three meetings, and the titles from the 2002 meeting, and made a judgement of the topics covered (Table 2). With these data available, it was not possible to analyse the total number of archaeology articles for Edinburgh. In the data below, “archaeology” does not include articles focussing on pre-Sapiens human evolution.

**Table 2:** Mesolithic contributions to CHAGS based on analysis of titles of presentations for Edinburgh 2002 and abstracts of Liverpool 2012, Vienna 2015, and Penang 2018

	Mesolithic	Archaeology	Total No. articles	% Total articles	Overall % archaeology articles
Edinburgh 2002	10*	n/a	218	4.6	n/a
Liverpool 2012	3	7	127	2.4	5.5
Vienna 2015	4	59	339	1.2	17.4
Penang 2018	5	26	268	1.9	9.7
Total	22		952	2.3	

\*Includes seven articles in one session organised by a Mesolithic researcher and does not include three ethnoarchaeology articles presented by Mesolithic researchers.

Although analysis of abstracts and titles is not a fool-proof way of assessing the content of a article, against a large sample (a total of 952 articles), we are confident in the broad patterns identified. Data are not available on the proportion of articles focussing on the archaeology of hunter-gatherers at Edinburgh, but archaeological articles typically make up 5–17% of the total. However, the picture is slightly different for the Mesolithic. Archaeological articles focussing on the Mesolithic of Europe represent 4.6% of those at Edinburgh, 2.4% in Liverpool but only 1.2% of the Vienna articles and 1.9% of the Penang articles, with the slight increase at Penang in 2018 mainly a product of the overall drop in archaeology articles, rather than a significant increase in the number of Mesolithic contributions, which remains low. This suggests that the Mesolithic community is not substantially engaging with the major international forum for hunter-gatherer research. It is important to note that of the four meetings reviewed, three took place in Europe, where we might have expected a higher level of engagement.

We must stress that Mesolithic archaeologists appear highly engaged with other international meetings and interdisciplinary discourse – there is no evidence to suggest that Mesolithic research is generally insular or inward looking. Although we have not analysed this in detail, engagement with EEA, for example, is strong. The EAA Palaeolithic and Mesolithic community newsletter lists seven EAA sessions in September 2020 with Mesolithic and Palaeolithic research themes. Based on the conferences we choose to engage with, it would appear that Mesolithic archaeologists actualise themselves as European archaeologists more than they do hunter-gatherer researchers.

The disconnection between Mesolithic archaeology and hunter-gatherer studies is curious. To a certain degree, this may be attributable to the conventional structuring of research and teaching in Europe – the obvious point of contrast being the North American system, where archaeological teaching and research is embedded within that of anthropology. However, many European archaeological institutions share strong links with anthropological counterparts, and as such, this structural argument cannot solely account for this phenomenon.

Another potentially contributing factor here is the lack of indigenous hunter-gatherer or ex-hunter-gatherer groups within twenty-first century Europe (with the possible exception of the Sámi). This leads to the absence of those voices within discussions of European hunter-gatherer archaeology, and the hugely fruitful dialogues, which emerge elsewhere between archaeologists, anthropologists, and indigenous groups around cultural lineage, analogy, and plurality (for broader discussion, see Bruchac, 2014; Rizvi, 2015; Smith & Wobst, 2005), do not occur in relation to the Mesolithic. *This lack of engagement with indigenous groups and descendant communities is a strikingly distinctive feature of Mesolithic archaeology in comparison with other parts of the World, and we strongly believe that this absence has an influence on both the ways hunter-gatherers are conceptualised, and the way we “do” hunter-gatherer archaeology in Europe.*

Whilst the influence of more broadly Eurasian and Siberian groups on Mesolithic research continues to grow, not least with an increase in ethnoarchaeological research, it may be that the lack of a need for direct engagement with hunter-gatherer groups today is one reason that Mesolithic scholars do not consider themselves to be hunter-gatherer researchers.

Finally in this regard, it is possible that the absence of engagement by Mesolithic scholars in wider communities of hunter-gatherer research is due to an assumption that this broader context is not relevant, or that our research outputs would not be of interest. Whilst we have not carried out the kind of psychoanalysis of Mesolithic researchers needed to substantiate this point, we believe it is worth noting.

## 4 What Could Mesolithic Archaeology Contribute to Broader Debates About Hunter-Gatherers?

The European Mesolithic enjoys a uniquely privileged position for hunter-gatherer research and should be well placed to contribute to broad scale questions about hunter-gatherer diversity and change over time. Simply put, it represents one of the best continental-scale archaeological datasets for studying long-term hunter-gatherer behaviour on the planet. The initial emergence of the discipline of archaeology within the colonial nation-states of Europe during the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries predates that of other continents; people have been “doing” archaeology (in the form that we might recognise today) for longer in Europe than they have elsewhere. This protracted history of archaeological research within a relatively densely populated continent, combined with the intensive historic industrialisation and ongoing infrastructural development, has resulted in the identification and analysis of higher densities of Early Holocene hunter-gatherer archaeology than any other continent on Earth. Although there is variation, the introduction of near-continental-wide archaeological standards for the excavation of sites threatened by development has resulted in the consistent collection of high-quality data. There is substantial research funding available, and well-resourced interdisciplinary and international research teams are prominent. Similarly, the historiographical development of Quaternary Sciences within European universities has produced a prolonged history of research and knowledge concerning the Early and Middle Holocene environmental context of these archaeological data. The scholarly community associated with the Mesolithic is large and productive. Based on the lists of recent publications from *Mesolithic Miscellany* since 2017, c 22–23 books and c 260 articles/chapters have been published *per year*.

The archaeological record of Mesolithic Europe also possesses specific characteristics, which distinguish it from other continents. In contrast to the archaeological and paleoenvironmental records of Pleistocene hunter-gatherers in Europe, the Mesolithic dataset has suffered far fewer adverse effects from the processes of glaciation, deglaciation, and large-scale soil erosion associated with stadial climatic cycles. In addition, the duality of raised Early Holocene beaches in Northern Europe and submerged, accessible coastal settlements of the Baltic offer globally unique opportunities to study the relationship between hunter-gatherer groups and changing coastlines.

The majority of Europe’s Early-Mid-Holocene inhabitants can be characterised as living within temperate environments. As such, the Mesolithic represents specific forms of hunting and gathering which anthropologists seldom have the opportunity to study. Agricultural adoption, forced displacement, forest clearance, and genocide linked to colonial expansion in areas suited to European-style agriculture, and later expansion of industrialised farming practices, have resulted in the near total loss of hunter-gatherer lifeways in temperate forested areas. If we wish to learn about hunting and gathering in temperate environments, then we have to refer to the archaeological record, and the archaeological record for temperate hunter-gatherers in Mesolithic Europe allows us a unique opportunity to study hunter-gatherer behaviour over the course of millennia.

The hunter-gatherer history of Holocene Europe should also be of broad interest to students of hunter-gatherer behaviour. The Mesolithic sees significant historical changes in relation to the movement of people

and ideas at a continental level. This is often considered in terms of the expansion of agriculture at the end of the period but should be expanded to include the migration of communities with different genetic and linguistic heritage, and the movement of new technologies and ideas, *within* the Mesolithic.

Furthermore, diachronic and synchronic changes in climate and ecology allow for a historical approach to hunter-gatherers in environmentally diverse and changing contexts across the long term. The increased use of “big data” modelling is a clear example of quantity of data available to us in this regard (e.g. Damm et al., 2019).

The histories produced by Mesolithic scholarship are important in their own right and form a key chapter in story of our species in Europe. As such, they represent a significant aspect of European cultural heritage and self-understanding. But they also have a heightened significance within the context of hunter-gatherer studies. The history of hunter-gatherers in Europe is one of persistence, adaptation, and resilience – to changing social contexts; to fluctuating climates; to the movement of people; to the development of new subsistence models; to the innovation and introduction of new material cultures; and to changing positions within ecologies, landscapes, and ontologies. An understanding of how the hunter-gatherers of Holocene Europe managed to “live well together,” with varying levels of success, over thousands of years may be of vital interest to those seeking sustainable solutions to twenty-first century farmer-forager conflicts and tensions.

## 5 What Could the Broader Field of Hunter-Gatherer Research Bring to Mesolithic Archaeology?

To recap, we have argued that Mesolithic archaeology has a contribution to make to the overall study of hunter-gatherers. We also believe that we would benefit from a more active engagement with that community, rather than just consuming their outputs. What might the advantages of this be?

Developing the influence of Mesolithic research beyond the discipline of archaeology would be of clear benefit – opening the door to collaborations on shared research interests. Better engagement will help develop our understanding of relevant key concepts, histories, and debates. Participating in this interdisciplinary discussion may also help to develop Mesolithic research narratives and understandings, which relate more directly to the contemporary world and contribute to the resolution of pre-identified political challenges. These kinds of collaborations may even open the door to new funding streams, which Mesolithic research has previously been unable to access.

Perhaps more importantly, we would also argue that contributing to the wider field of hunter-gatherer studies may well be an obligation for a group of professional researchers whose knowledge base is founded on the study of contemporary and near-contemporary hunting and gathering groups. In other words, on people living now: often in very marginalised and difficult positions. The anthropologist Jerome Lewis has argued passionately that scholars whose livelihoods rely on the knowledge gained from working with hunter-gatherers have a responsibility to ensure the safety and sustainability of these same groups. The threats facing these people are real and imminent. Speaking at CHAGS 12, Lewis (2018) estimated that without outside intervention, the vast majority of the world’s surviving hunter-gatherers will disappear in the next 10–15 years.

We take it as axiomatic that Mesolithic archaeologists should share in this responsibility. So much of our knowledge is founded upon understandings of documented hunter-gatherer groups, and the limited number of ethnoarchaeological studies, which continue to be undertaken, plays a hugely influential role in shaping our understandings of Mesolithic peoples. Yet our work seldom contributes directly to the support of these constantly threatened lifeways. Here, there is potential for Mesolithic research to seek to directly contribute to the well-being of marginalised communities in the present. We recognise that some colleagues may initially find this call difficult and may struggle to immediately conceive how their work can be placed into such a project. We believe that this difficulty is a product of the specific history of our discipline and is not an inevitable reality for Mesolithic archaeology.

So given the potential benefits, and a collective professional responsibility to safeguard the future of hunter-gatherer groups around the world, how might we go about engaging effectively with hunter-gatherer studies? Well, in the short term, a stronger representation of Mesolithic research at CHAGS Dublin in 2022 would undoubtedly be a positive step!

Beyond that, we might begin to ask some simple questions of our own research. How does my work relate to the challenges facing hunter-gatherer groups in the world today? Are there opportunities to feed back this knowledge and understanding into the broader debates within hunter-gatherer studies? The State of the World's Indigenous Peoples report (The United Nations Organisation, 2009), 2030 Agenda For Sustainable Development (The United Nations Organisation, 2015), and Survival International (2020) identify a number of key areas of cross-cultural concern for indigenous peoples – the political umbrella term under which hunter-gatherer groups fall. These include:

- Challenging the myth of the “Brutal Savage” within Western Popular Literature;
- Developing environmentally sustainable subsistence models for indigenous societies;
- Challenging conservation models which draw colonial distinctions between “nature” and “culture”; and
- Assessing the impact of forced cultural contact on traditionally isolated indigenous groups.

A consideration of the current contribution of Mesolithic archaeology to these issues is thought-provoking. Their foregrounding in future research would undoubtedly take us in some very different directions, directions that may well open the door for collaboration with the wider field of hunter-gatherer studies. A small group of researchers, including many of those who contributed towards the Meso2020 session in which this article was originally delivered, have tentatively begun to ask these questions of their own work and develop plans for an increased Mesolithic representation at future CHAGS. This embryonic interdisciplinary network has begun to ask questions concerning the relationship between broader agendas of decolonisation and the European Mesolithic, Stone Age archaeology as a nexus for hunter-gatherer and agriculturalist studies, and the specific ways in which strands of Mesolithic research might relate to the current needs of hunter-gatherer communities (Elliott, Nyland, Warren, & Piezonka, 2021; Elliott et al., 2022).

## 6 Conclusions

The argument we have presented here is simple. We contend that whilst Mesolithic research is consuming the outputs of hunter-gatherer studies, it is currently not contributing to that field as much as it might. This disconnection is mutually detrimental – hunter-gatherer studies discourse would be enriched by the contribution of Mesolithic archaeology, and Mesolithic archaeology would benefit from a closer involvement with broader debates concerning hunter-gatherer groups in the past, present, and future. Broadening our conversations can only benefit our self-awareness and reflexivity.

We have also suggested that if we are to take a sense of collective responsibility for the plight of hunter-gatherer groups who have provided the basis for so much of our interpretive framework, then we might consider the ways in which our work addresses the challenges that these people face today.

It is also important to stress what we are not arguing:

We do not believe that the lack of integration of Mesolithic research with hunter-gatherer studies poses a direct threat to progress of Mesolithic archaeology. Clearly, our understanding of the Mesolithic continues to develop apace, and the field is healthy.

We are not arguing that Mesolithic archaeology is insular – clearly we are engaging well with broader communities of European archaeology, and our colleagues in paleoenvironmental disciplines, for example.

We do not believe that the core research aims of Mesolithic archaeology need to be realigned to duplicate those of those of hunter-gatherer research.

But to return to our initial question of “is Mesolithic archaeology hunter-gatherer archaeology” – it does appear that Mesolithic archaeologists are not as engaged with that specific field as much as we



might have expected. This is somewhat puzzling for a subject which is defined around the idea of hunter-gatherers.

Fundamentally, this discussion dissolves down to a simple, explicit choice. As Mesolithic archaeologists, do we want our work to focus solely on “filling in” an important chapter of the human story in our geographical area of interest, or do we want our research to contribute to an applied, interdisciplinary understanding of hunter-gatherers?

To our mind, both answers are valid to an extent; we certainly would not argue for Mesolithic research to be doing one and not the other, and some research may be able to achieve both. However, if we want to properly address the latter and join this interdisciplinary conversation, some of us will probably need to start doing things slightly differently.

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