

## BURIAL GOODS AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN MESOLITHIC EUROPE

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This paper will present some results of the Ph.D. dissertation by the author on **Mesolithic burials in Europe** at the University of Münster (Germany). The social differentiation in Mesolithic society is illustrated by many details of the burial rites (e.g. distribution of grave goods, burial construction, ochre etc.). The following examples will focus on the quantitative distribution of sex and age groups as well as burial goods. All results are, however, limited by the preservation conditions of organic artifacts.

### Data

In total 125 Mesolithic burial sites in 23 European countries were analysed, ranging from the transitional Lateglacial/early Holocene period to the older Atlantic.

### Location

The locations of the graves differ regionally. In Northern Europe, the northern part of Middle Europe, the South-East and Eastern Europe the Mesolithic burials were found on open-air sites. In Great Britain, Western Europe, the southern part of Middle Europe, South Europe and in the Crimea the graves were located in caves and under rock-shelters. In Denmark, France and Portugal Mesolithic burials were also placed in kitchen middens (fig. 1). In the study, the sites were divided into isolated graves and communal burial places. At a good third of the sites, between three and 177 individuals were excavated. The largest Mesolithic cemetery known was found at Olenij ostrov (Russia).

### Age and sex

The sample includes the inhumation of 1608 individuals of all age groups. Most of the Mesolithic graves belonged to adults and young children who died in the first seven years of their lives (Tab. 1). However, the age distribution of the buried children in 20 cemeteries (198/862) shows that over 40% (85) of the children died within the first 12 months of their lives. Mature individuals were also well represented, while older children, juveniles and seniles were rarely found. For about 40% of the skeletons (adults and sub-adults, but not children) no age could be determined. About 25% of the Mesolithic burial population were men and about 20% women. The distribution of the age groups implies that the average life expectancy was lower for women than for men. For 36% of the skeletons no sex could be determined. More than 90% of the individuals were

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excavated on communal burial sites. Each of the grave-fields shows a different age and sex distribution pattern which differs again from the total sample found in isolated graves. The number of children, in particular, can vary extremely, ranging from 5 to 100% of the cemetery population. About 14% of the individuals in isolated graves and 16% of the individuals on cemeteries were placed in double or group burials.

	Total burial	Mesolithic population	Women		Men	
infant I	250	(15,5 %)	-		-	
infant II	44	(2,7 %)	-		-	
juvenile	49	(3,0 %)	15	(4,7 %)	10	(2,5 %)
adult	372	(23,1 %)	146	(46,2 %)	163	(40,0 %)
mature	209	(13,0 %)	74	(23,4 %)	143	(35,0 %)
senile	23	(1,4 %)	13	(4,1 %)	9	(2,2 %)
not determined	661	(41,1 %)	68	(21,5 %)	83	(20,3 %)
<i>total</i>	<i>1608</i>	<i>(100 %)</i>	<i>316</i>	<i>(100 %)</i>	<i>408</i>	<i>(100 %)</i>

Tab. 1. : Age and sex of the individuals in Mesolithic burials

### Burial goods

The burial goods included a number of different items. The following analysis will only focus on the distribution of tools and ornaments. The burial goods consisted either of tools or ornaments, or tools and ornaments; in many cases they were totally lacking. The quantity and quality of artefacts differed not only regionally but also according to age, sex and probably according to the social status of the deceased. Further differences occurred between individuals buried in single or multiple interments, in isolated graves or on communal burial sites, and according to the circumstances of their deaths. The last group is generally characterized by a different treatment, e.g. the persons who had been killed were usually buried without grave goods. Individuals in multiple burials were not treated alike either. The quantity of grave goods varied greatly, and statistically the median is zero. This means that most individuals were buried without tools or ornaments and a few with an extremely large quantity of objects.

The distribution of tools and ornaments will be exemplified by the isolated graves and six cemeteries in different parts of Europe. With the exception of Olenij ostrov (Russia) all communal burial places were located near, or in the case of Vlasac mostly within the settlement area. At Olenij ostrov the connection between the grave-field and a nearby settlement has not been confirmed yet.

In **isolated graves**, men (36) and women (35) are represented equally, while only a few belonged to children (15). In addition, most men were found in single burials, while women and children were almost as often found in single as in double and group burials (fig. 2 and 3). The distribution of grave goods shows that most individuals in isolated burials who had received a larger inventory were men and children in single burials and women in double burials (e.g. Bad Dürrenberg, Dragsholm, Pierkunowo) (Grünberg, 1994).

In the cemeteries different patterns in the distribution of grave goods can be seen. At **Henriksholm-Bøgebakken** (Denmark) nine men, seven women and five children were buried. For another two individuals no sex could be determined. Women and children were found more often in multiple burials than men. With one exception (grave 2: a 50-year-old man) all men in single burials were given tools, ornaments or tools and ornaments, while women and children usually lacked grave goods, except in double or group burials (fig. 4) (Albrethsen and Brinch Petersen, 1975 and 1976; Albrethsen et al., 1976; Brinch Petersen et al., 1976, 1979 and 1982).

At **Vlasac** (Serbia) more men (55) than women (37) were found. But contrary to most other sites, more than one fifth of the burials were of children (27/124, 22%). The majority of the skeletons (110/124, 89%) had no grave goods (fig. 5). Only one woman, one man and one child were wearing one piece of jewellery made of shells (Srejović and Letica, 1978).

Differences in the grave inventories can also be seen at the cemeteries of **Skateholm I and II** in southern Sweden which were located only 150 m apart from each other. According to the radiocarbon dates Skateholm II seems to be somewhat older than Skateholm I. At both sites women and men were almost equally represented (Skateholm I: 18 women and 20 men; Skateholm II: 9 women and 9 men), while the number of children in proportion to the adults was much higher at Skateholm II than at Skateholm I (Skateholm I: 6/62 (10%); Skateholm II: 4/22 (18%)). Women had more often received ornaments than men. But overall, more women than men were buried without grave goods (fig. 6 and 7). However, contrary to Skateholm I, where only one child in a double burial had received grave goods (ornaments and tools), at Skateholm II all children in single and double burials were given tools (Larsson, 1980, 1981, 1982a, 1982b, 1983, 1984a, 1984b, 1984c, 1985, 1989; Persson and Persson, 1984 and 1988).

At **Olenij ostrov** (Russia) more men (70) than women (55) and only a few children (20) were found. In addition, more women and children than men were placed in double and group burials. About 75% of the deceased had tools and ornaments (132/177) (fig. 8). Differences in the distribution of tools and ornaments between women and men as observed in Scandinavia were lacking (Gurina, 1956; Jakimov, 1960).

The burial population at **Zvejnieki** (Latvia) is characterized by the presence of many children (58/145, 40%). Men (23) were found more often than women (10). However, for about 37% (54/145) of the individuals no sex could be determined. About half of the burial population had received no grave goods (75/145, 52%). Ornaments were more common than tools (fig. 9). In contrast to men, all women in double and group burials had tools and ornaments (Zagorskis, 1987).

In the isolated graves and in the different cemeteries the number of graves with tools and ornaments clearly differ. The extreme differences in the quantity of the items imply social differences between the individuals. The highest percentage (40%) of rich graves (burials with more than 2 tools and 10 pieces of ornament) was found at Olenij ostrov (Russia). In other cemeteries (e.g.

Henriksholm-Bøgebakken, Skateholm I) and in the isolated graves, the number of poor graves represent between 80 and 100% of the total graves (fig. 10). Remarkably, the distribution of the grave goods is more similar at the sites of Henriksholm-Bøgebakken (Denmark) and Skateholm I (Sweden) than at Skateholm I and II which might be explained by the chronological differences of the sites. Henriksholm-Bøgebakken and Skateholm I are both more recent than Skateholm II. Furthermore, rich burials were characterized in some cemeteries by the amount of ornaments rather than by the quantity of tools (e.g. Henriksholm-Bøgebakken, Skateholm I and Zvejnieki). Indeed, in isolated graves and at Skateholm II rich burials contained more tools than ornaments. At Olenij ostrov (Russia) the quantity of tools and pieces of ornaments were usually directly proportional.

Comparing the graves without tools and ornaments, burials of adults and sub-adults show different grave inventories from children (see Henriksholm-Bøgebakken, Skateholm II). At Henriksholm-Bøgebakken, Olenij ostrov, Skateholm I and in the isolated graves children were buried without tools more often than adults and juveniles, while at Zvejnieki (Latvia) and Skateholm II (Sweden) fewer adults and sub-adults were given tools. At Henriksholm-Bøgebakken and Skateholm II all children were lacking ornaments (fig. 11).

How the quantity of grave goods is related to the age and sex of the deceased can best be exemplified by the rich burials (burials with more than three tools and 10 pieces of ornaments) in the cemetery of Olenij ostrov (Russia). From birth onwards the number of tools and ornaments accompanying the dead increases (fig. 12 and 13). Among the adults grave goods were most frequently associated with individuals between the age of 20 and 40. Furthermore, the largest quantity of items was buried with this age group. On average, men received more tools and ornaments than women. From the age of 40, the number of individuals who were given grave goods, decreased. Mature men still received more tools than women but fewer ornaments. In addition, the change in the grave inventory with increasing age is more marked in burials of men than of women.

## DISCUSSION

To sum up, the fact that the overall number of children (16%) is much lower than the expected 50 or 60% for the Mesolithic (according to Nemeskéri, Kurth and other anthropologists), the different representation of the age and sex groups in the cemeteries, as well as the few infant graves on some sites (Vološskoe: 1/19 (5%), Padina: 3/37 (8%, only Inf. II), Vasil'evka I: 2/26 (8%), Skateholm I: 6/62 (10%), Olenij ostrov: 20/177 (11%)) imply that the Mesolithic burial population is not a representative sample of the actual Mesolithic society. In addition, the relatively high number of women and children in double and group burials, especially in isolated graves, is evidence of a deliberate funeral rite rather than of a random occurrence.

The differences in burial expenditure and complexity vary regionally. But they can also be related to age, sex and social status of the deceased. At Olenij

ostrov, the number and kind of grave goods increase from childhood onwards and decrease with progressing age, probably implying the loss of the distinguished social position in the course of life. However, causes of death and other factors (e.g. single or multiple burial) may also have influenced the burial of the dead.

Mesolithic burial rites in Europe seem to suggest a well-regulated, complex social stratification. Both the population pattern represented in the cemeteries and the composition of the grave inventory do not only suggest a social grading system within Mesolithic society but also lead to the conclusion that even grave-fields associated with settlement areas do not seem to be a representative sample of the living community. Therefore, one can assume that these cemeteries or maybe the funeral rites themselves were restricted to a selected group of individuals.

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# Mesolithic burial places in Europe

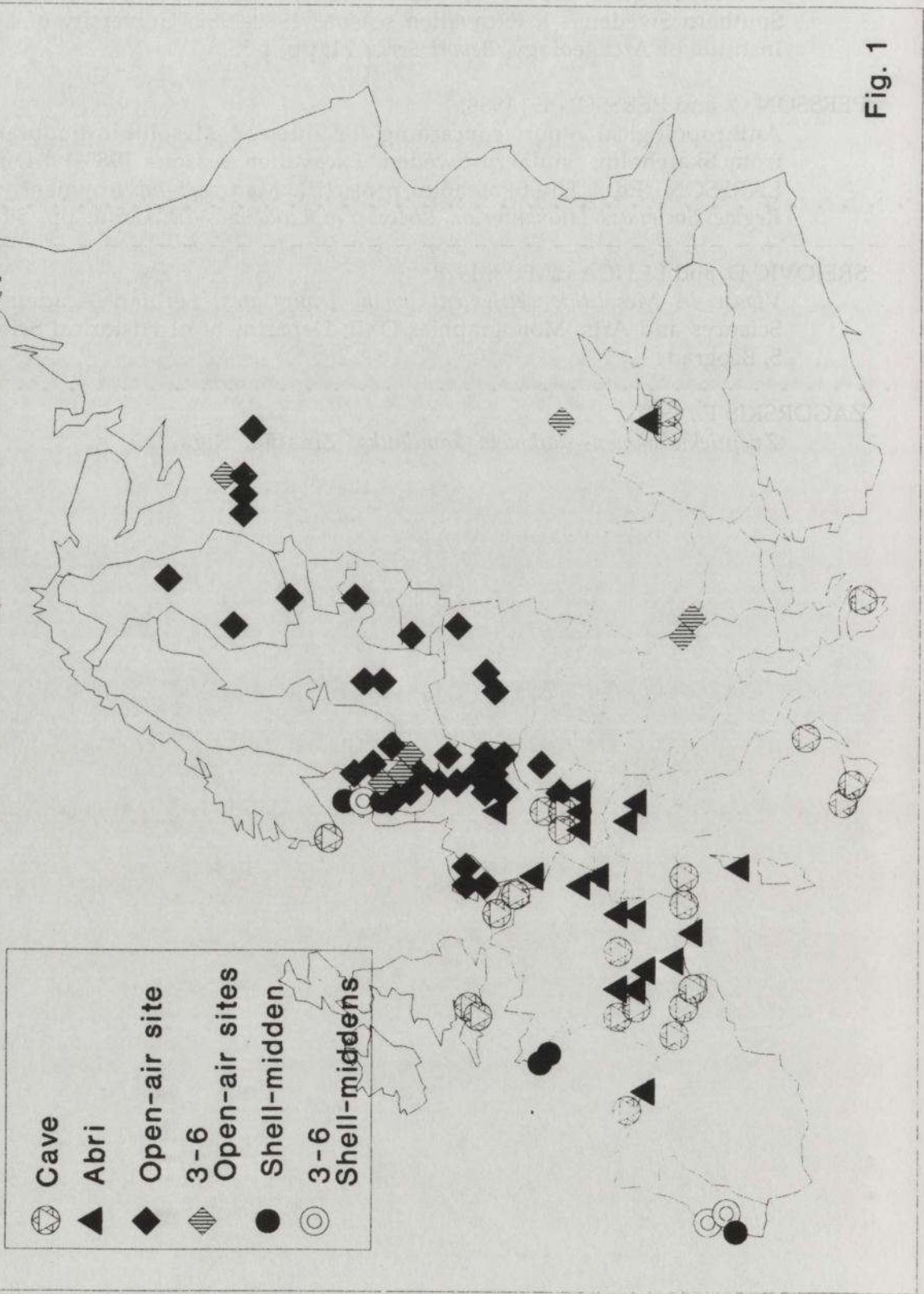


Fig. 1

**Number of Tools**  
in the isolated Mesolithic graves  
in Europe (without Finland and Russia)  
(Total number of the individuals = 103)

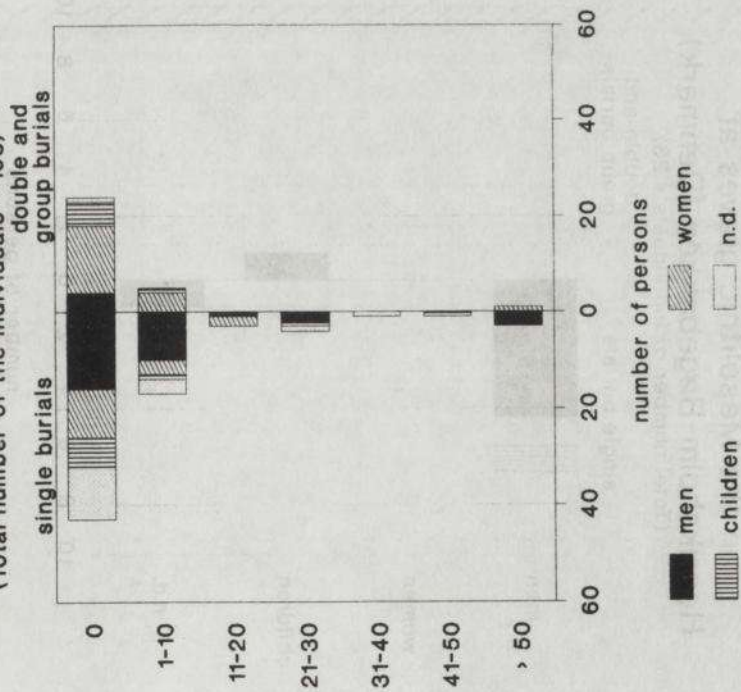


Fig. 2

**Number of Ornaments**  
in the isolated Mesolithic graves  
in Europe (without Finland and Russia)  
(Total number of the individuals = 103)

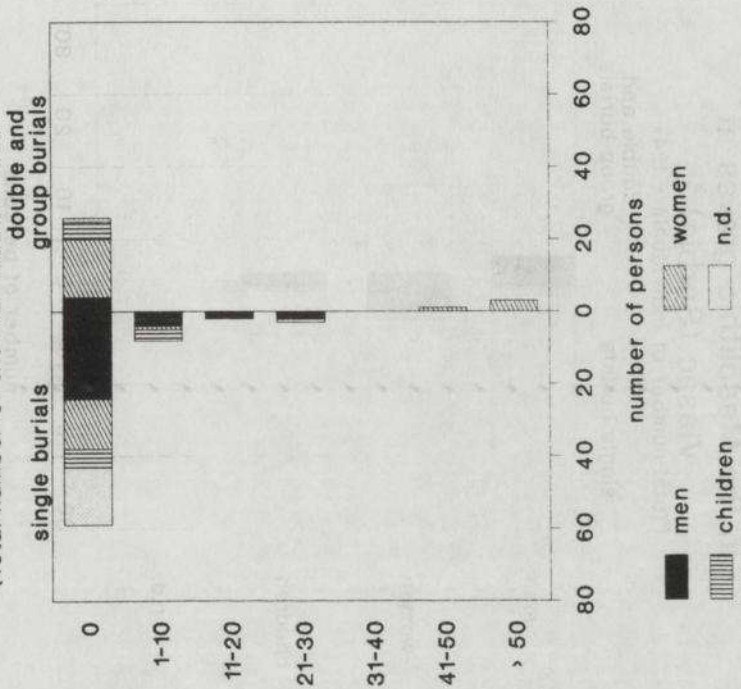


Fig. 3

n.d.: not determined

**Burial Goods**  
in the Mesolithic graves at  
Henriksholm-Bøgebakken (Denmark)  
(Total number of individuals = 23)

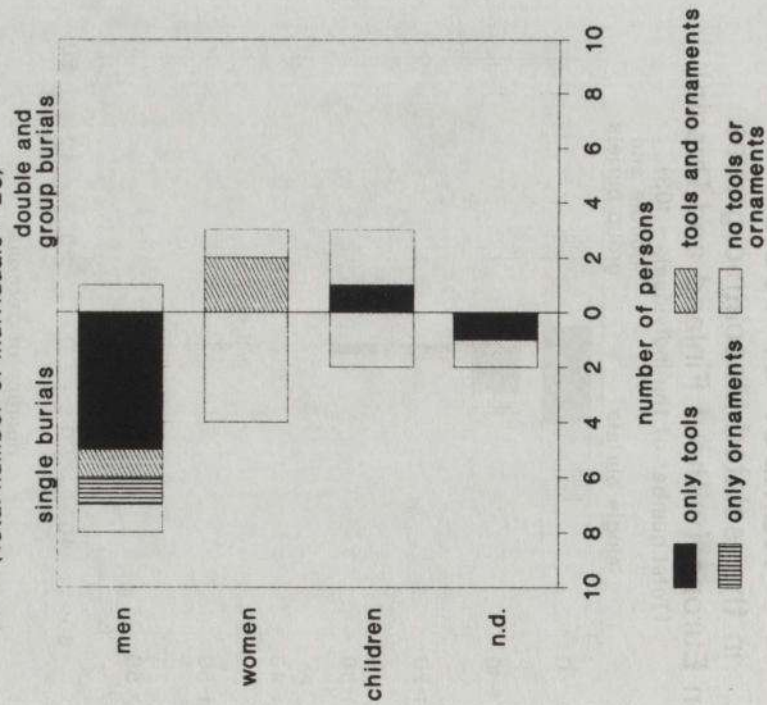
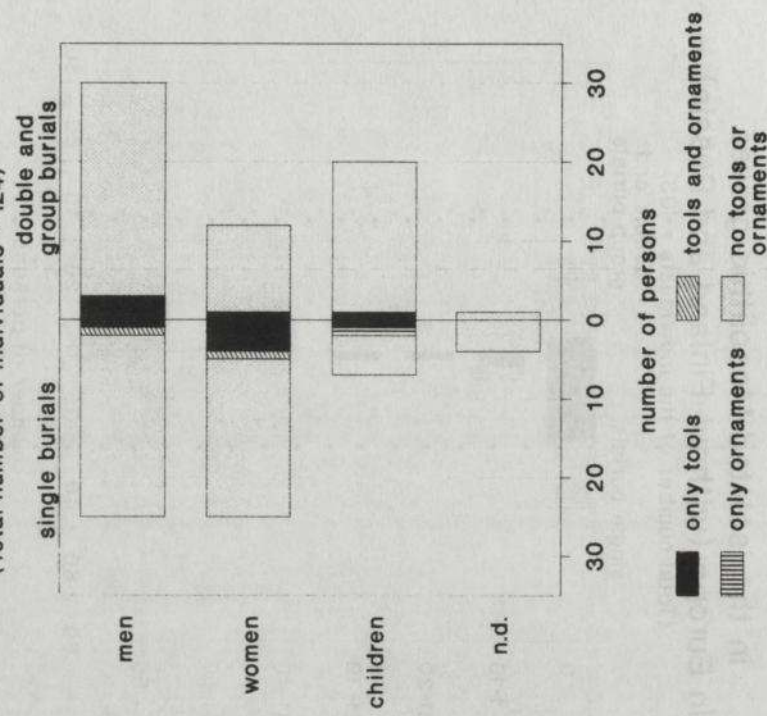


Fig. 4

**Burial Goods**  
in the Mesolithic graves at  
Vlasac (Serbia)  
(Total number of individuals = 124)

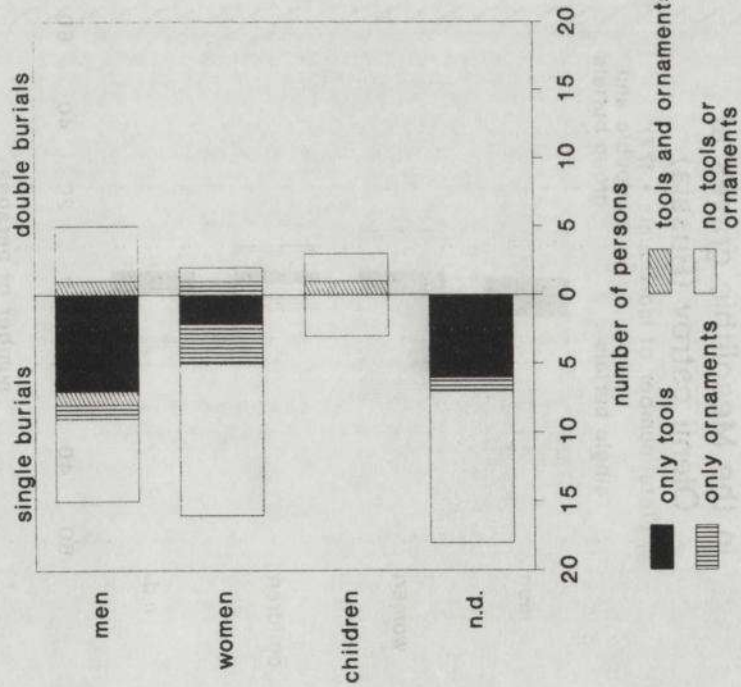


n.d.: not determined

Fig. 5

### Burial Goods in the Mesolithic graves at Skateholm I (Sweden)

(Total number of individuals = 62)



n.d.: not determined

Fig. 6

### Burial Goods in the Mesolithic graves at Skateholm II (Sweden)

(Total number of individuals = 22)

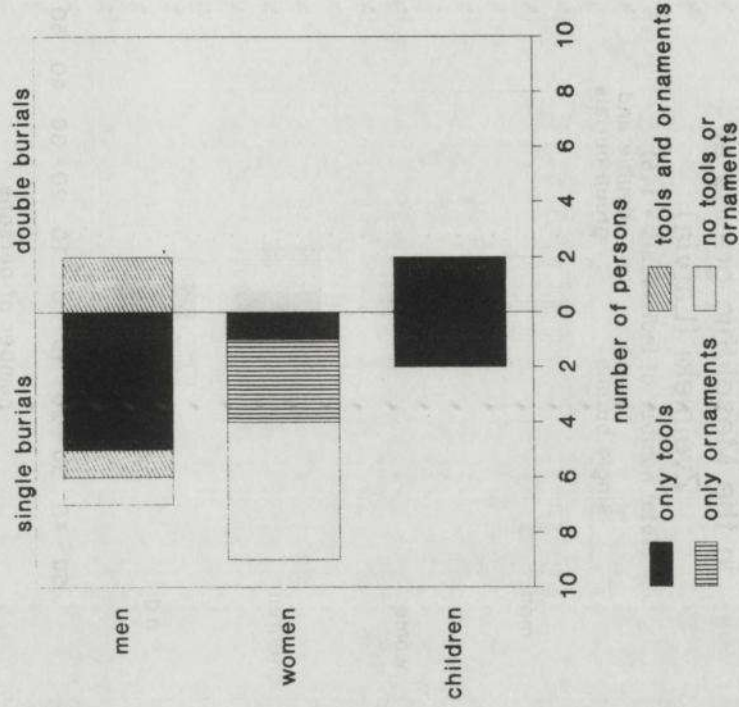


Fig. 7

### Burial Goods in the Mesolithic graves at Olenij ostrov (Russia)

(Total number of individuals = 177)

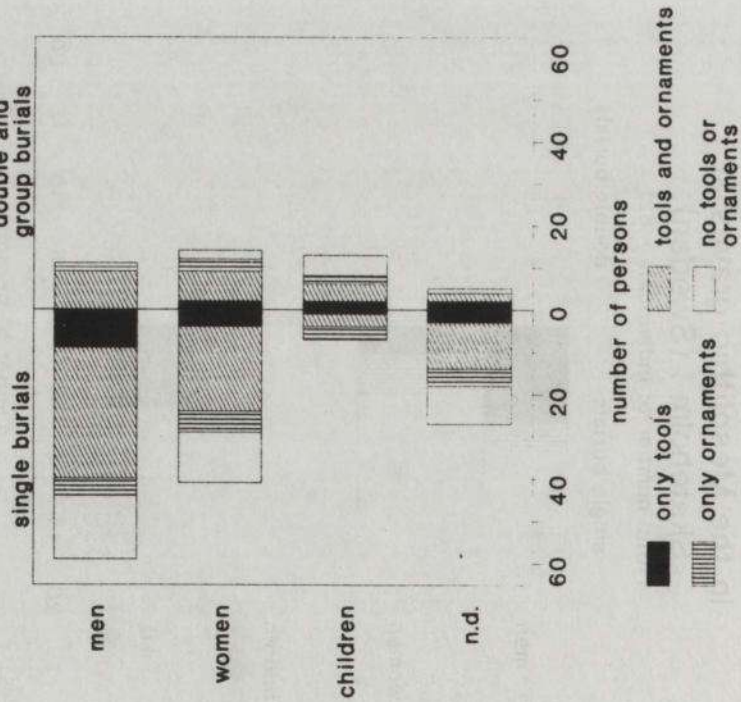


Fig. 8

### Burial Goods in the Mesolithic graves at Zvejnieki (Latvia)

(Total number of individuals = 145)

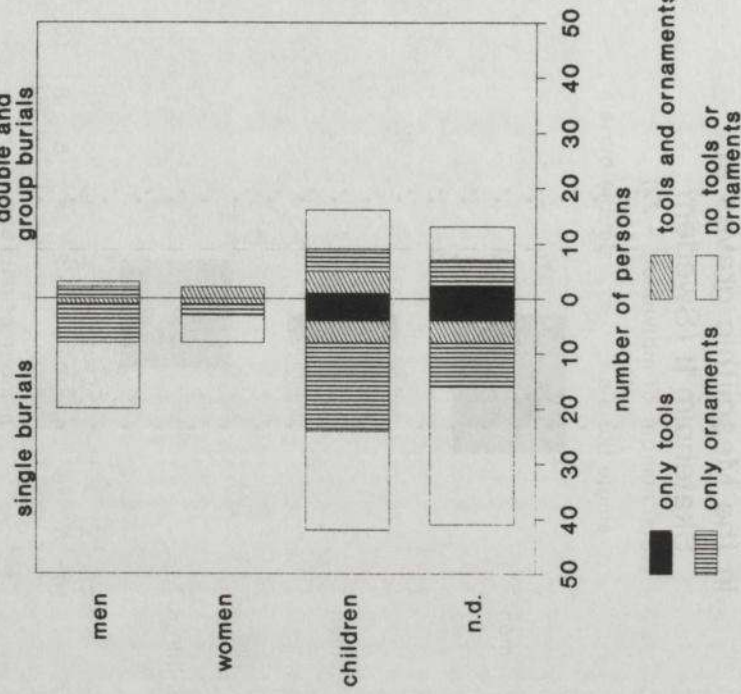


Fig. 9

### Number of Mesolithic burials with tools and ornaments (in %)

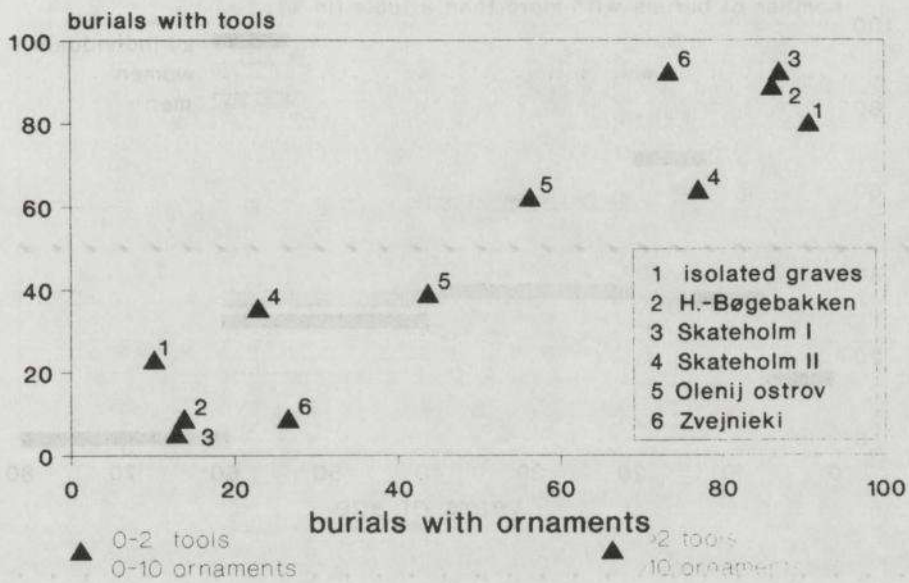


Fig. 10

### Number of Mesolithic burials without tools and ornaments (in %)

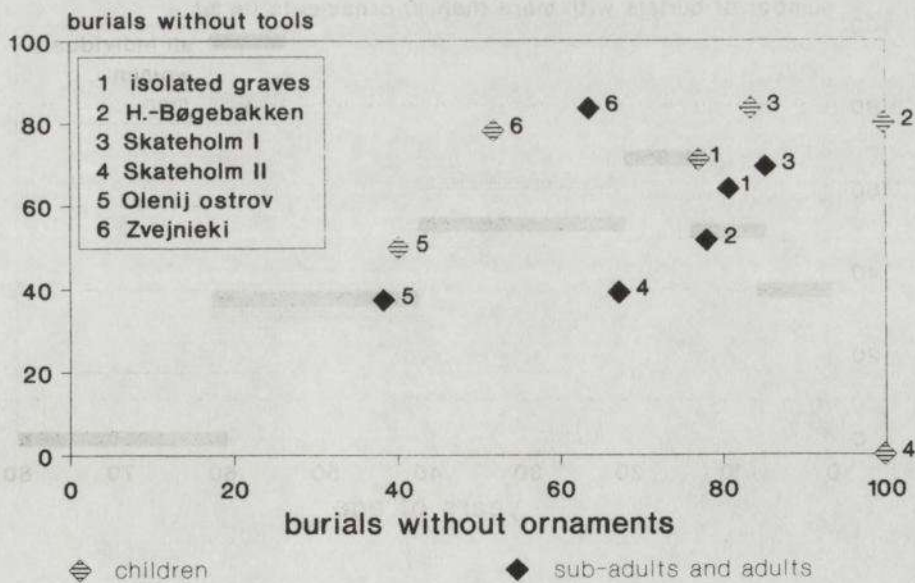


Fig. 11

### Tools in the Mesolithic graves at Olenij ostrov (Russia)

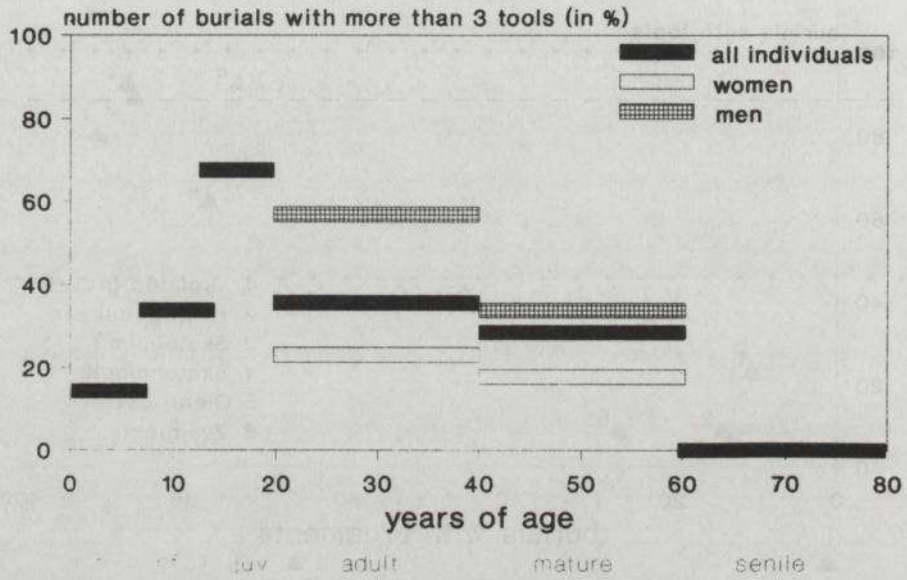


Fig. 12

### Ornaments in the Mesolithic graves at Olenij ostrov (Russia)

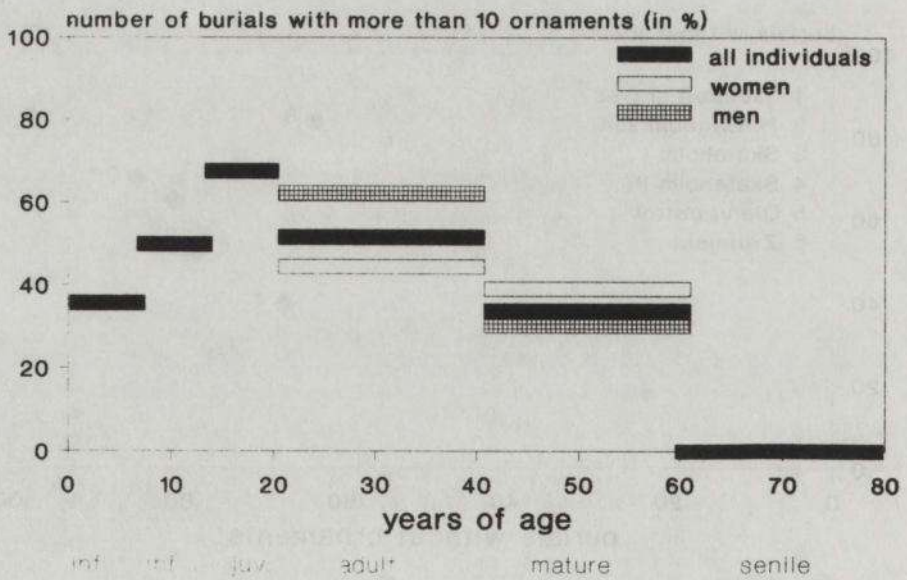


Fig. 13