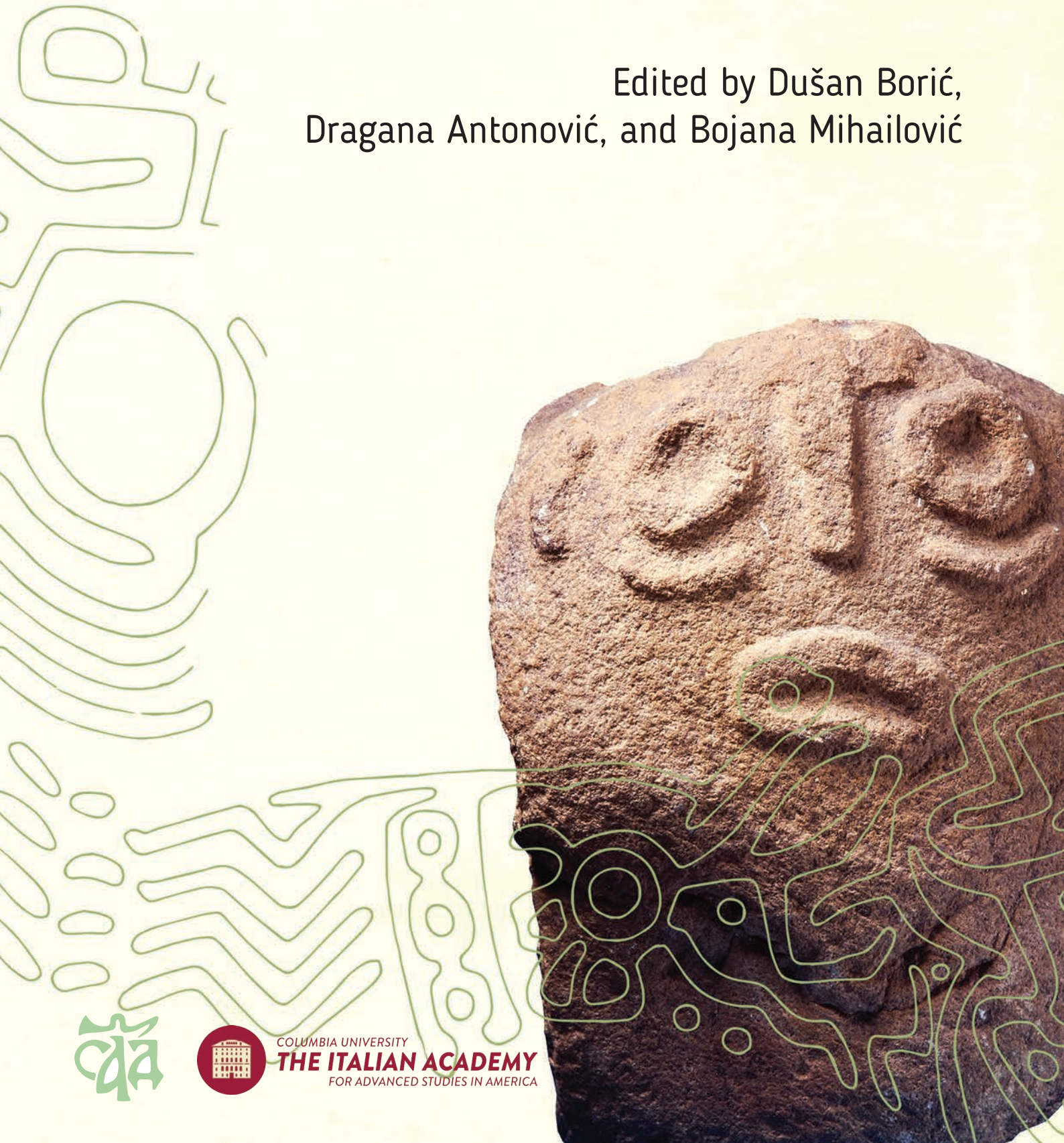


# Foraging Assemblages

Volume **2**

Edited by Dušan Borić,  
Dragana Antonović, and Bojana Mihailović



COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY  
**THE ITALIAN ACADEMY**  
FOR ADVANCED STUDIES IN AMERICA

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## 90. A portable object in motion – Complex layers of meaning embedded in an ornamented sandstone-object from the Late Mesolithic site of Brunstad (Norway)

Almut Schülke

This contribution deals with an ornamented and pierced sandstone tablet found at the Late Mesolithic coastal site of Brunstad (Vestfold/Norway) in 2013. The delicately incised decoration comprise net-, wave-, and pigtail-patterns on both sides, as well as an anthropomorphic or fish figure. While the combination of the object's form, material, and decoration is unique, each of the three aspects have parallels in Middle and Late Mesolithic cultural traditions. Stylistically, the decorative motifs are similar to other pieces of portable 'art' known from the Middle and Late Mesolithic periods, while the material resembles sandstone knives known from Norwegian sites. However, it is difficult to determine the function of the object. Through a visual analysis of the object, and with the help of the RTI technology, changes in the object's form and decoration can be observed. These changes indicate several layers of meaning that are imbedded in the Brunstad object, and can be interpreted with regard to aspects of the object's changing meaning over time, mobility, and social contexts in which it was used.

**Keywords:** sandstone tablet, decoration, RTI technology, portable object, complexity

### Introduction

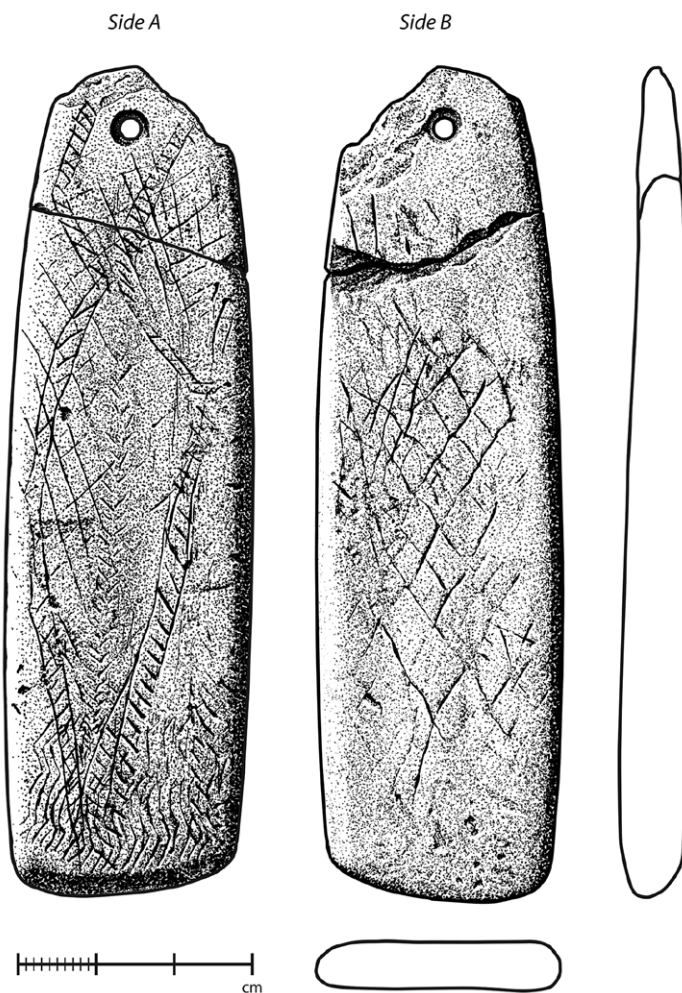
In 2013, an ornamented sandstone tablet was found at a rescue excavation of a Late Mesolithic coastal site at Brunstad (Vestfold, south-eastern Norway). Here, two find areas between rocky outcrops, lok. 24 and lok. 25, have yielded thousands of lithic artefacts and several fireplaces, along with a Mesolithic grave at lok. 25. Radiocarbon dates indicate that the site was used repeatedly in the centuries between c. 6400 and 5600 cal BC (Reitan *et al.* 2019; Schülke *et al.* 2019).

The object – found at lok. 24 – is unique in its combination of raw material, form, and decoration (Fig. 90.1). Due to the hole at its narrower end, it could be defined as a 'sandstone-pendant'. However, a visual study reveals that the object is rather difficult to classify. The artefact that we see today has undergone diverse changes, which point to the object's complex history, hinting at different modes of use and different meanings that might have been ascribed to it throughout its Mesolithic use. The biconical hole, which can be the reason to classify it as a pendant, was added at a late stage of its use. This contribution will focus on the object's time depth and on aspects of change and mobility that can be studied through it.

### Description and context

When the object was found it was broken in two parts. The surface at the breakage shows that the fracture occurred before the object came into the ground. Both parts were found in the same excavation square, at c. 25 cm depth and with no stratigraphic context. Two cooking pits found close by have been radiocarbon-dated to 7439±39 BP (UBA-28736, 6400–6233 cal BC at 95 percent confidence) and to 7374±45 BP (UBA-28735, 6378–6097 cal BC at 95 percent confidence; both dates calibrated using IntCal13 calibration curve, Reimer *et al.* 2013) (Schülke and Hegdal 2015). The object's placement in this area of the site, which has yielded solely Late Mesolithic lithic material, along with the object's material characteristics, strongly suggest a date that falls in the centuries c. 6200 cal BC.

The artefact is 10.8 cm long and c. 3 cm wide. It was made of a natural piece of arkosic sandstone, most likely found in a riverbed (Schülke and Hegdal 2015). The cross-section shows that its long sides and the top are slightly rounded, while the broader narrow edge is canted (see Fig. 90.1). Both sides are smoothed and partly polished, and so are the long sides. The ornamentation on



**Fig. 90.1.** The ornamented sandstone-tablet found at Brunstad, A- and B-sides and cross-sections. Illustration by Håvard Hegdal, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.

both sides is incised with very fine lines, the A-side being better preserved.

The Brunstad ‘tablet’ unites various Middle and Late Mesolithic cultural traditions known from different parts of northern Europe. The material used – arkosic sandstone – has the qualities of what usually is referred to as sandstone in archaeological literature. Sandstone knives are type-artefacts for the Middle Mesolithic and Late Mesolithic phase III in southern and western Norway (Bjerk 2010, 81; Glørstad 2010, 35; Mikkelsen 1975, 26). However, no ornamentation is known on sandstone knives.

Ornaments incised on both sides of the tablet represent typical themes and motifs used in both Middle and Late Mesolithic portable ‘art’, such as net-, wave-, and pigtail-patterns, bonds with vertical lines, and anthropomorphic or fish forms (Płonka 2003; Schülke and Hegdal 2015),

also found in the Scandinavian Mesolithic rock art (e.g. Mikkelsen 1977).

The form of the sandstone artefact from Brunstad is unusual, especially with regard to its rounded long-sides and canted edge. The latter might indicate that the object was (also?) used for some kind of smoothing activity. The smoothed surface of the artefact resembles the surface of bone finds from western Norway (Bergsvik and David 2015). A bone object similar in form to the Brunstad object has been interpreted as a needle for repairing fishing nets (Bøe 1934). In size, proportions, treatment of surface, and not least biconical transfixion at one end, the Brunstad object resembles slate knives known from the burial site of Olenij Ostrov in Karelia (Gurina 1956) that, different from the artefact from Brunstad, have sharpened edges. The time-horizon of Olenij Ostrov, with burials dating to c. 6000 cal BC (Dolukhanov 2010), is partly contemporaneous with the use of the site of Brunstad. Future use-wear studies might help to determine the function(s) of the Brunstad-object.

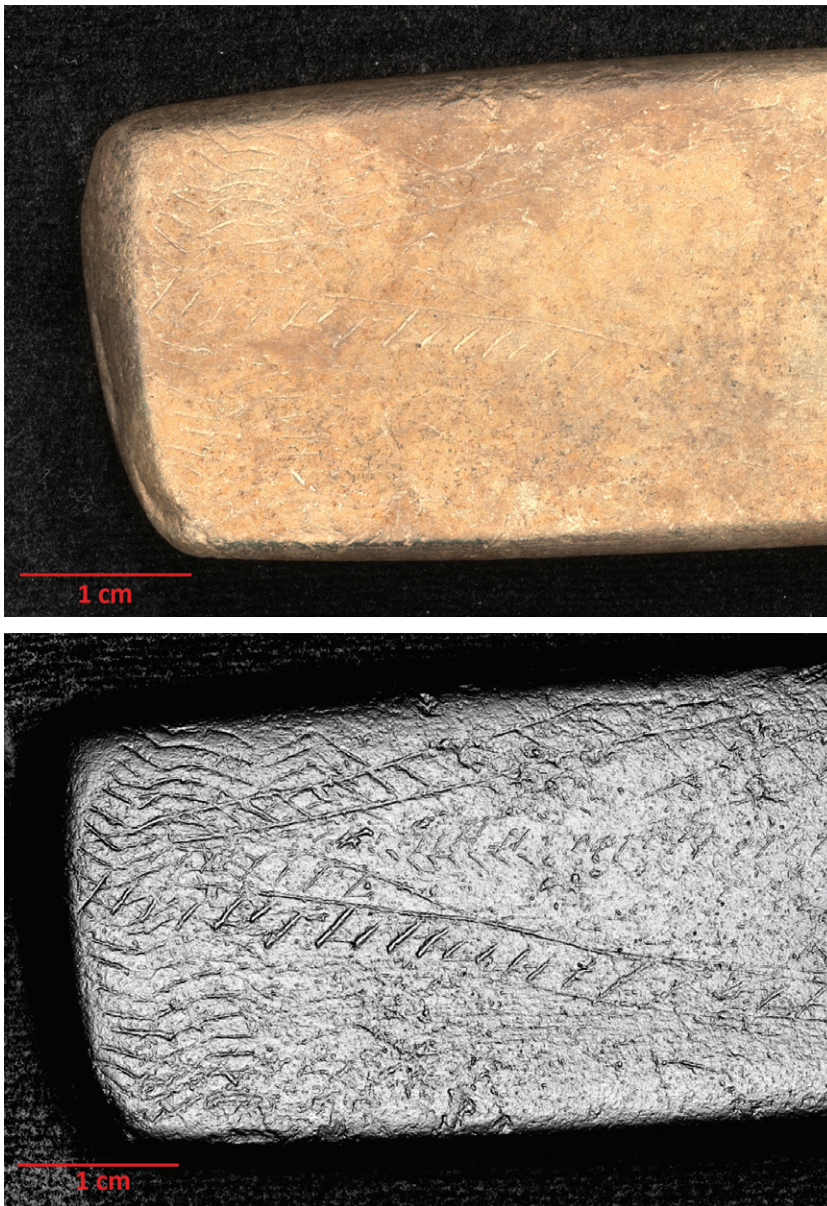
### Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI)

Traces of wear indicate that the artefact was used over a long period of time. Along with fine lines and overlapping incisions, the study of the ornamental themes was difficult. Therefore, Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) (Cultural Heritage Imaging) was used to study the surface incisions. The programme RTI-Builder [2.0] allows one to digitally expose the surface of an object to different shadows in

order to accentuate different features (Fig. 90.2). On the basis of overlapping incision lines, the following ornamental themes could be identified (Schülke and Hegdal 2015, 31ff).

Both sides show a kind of almond-form as the main motif. However, this form is differently composed on each side. On the A-side, which is better preserved, at least four overlapping ornamental topics can be detected, and a sequence could be established (Fig. 90.3), starting with (1) diagonal cuts as the earliest incisions (Fig. 90.3:e), followed by (2) parallel wave-lines and a net-pattern (Fig. 90.3:c-d), which do not overlap, followed by (3) a pigtail-pattern (Fig. 90.3:b), and, finally, (4) the fish- or anthropomorphic form, which is formed by a bond with transverse stripes (Fig. 90.3:a). The latter has been ‘sharpened up’ at least once. The B-side (compare Fig. 90.1) is worn and shows only ornaments that also occur on the A-side: net-motif, reminders of a bond with transverse stripes, and traces of single lines.





**Fig. 90.2.** Two photographs showing the same section of the sandstone-tablet's A-side, illustrated using the RTI-Viewer; a: the stone-plate without a shadow-effect illustrating how the object looks in ordinary daylight; b: the ornamentation and the sequence visualized with the help of the programme; 'Specular Enhancement Filter' used (diffuse colour: 0; specularity: 62; highlight size: 81). Photographs by Steinar Kristensen, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.

The net motif seems to exhibit a different 'handwriting' to the one on the A-side, with shorter and more organic lines.

The biconical hole is not symmetrically applied. Instead, it seems to have been placed right in the middle of the fish or anthropomorphic form (compare Fig. 90.1). As the latter is applied as the last ornament on the A-side, the hole must have been applied at a later stage of the objects'

use. Also, the RTI image (Fig. 90.4) shows that there are no signs of use-wear, for example, impressions of a cord, along the edge of the hole. This stands in sharp contrast to the object's signs of use-wear. Furthermore, on the B-side, the hole cuts into the damaged part on top of the object (Fig. 90.4), while on the A-side the fish- and tail-structure continues into the damaged part.

### Discussion and conclusions

Summing up these observations, the following practices or events in relation to this portable object during its Mesolithic use can be identified (Schülke and Hegdal 2015) (Fig. 90.5):

- the acquisition of the raw material used;
- the choice of the stone plate for the production of the artefact;
- the forming of the artefact;
- the sequential ornamentation on both sides;
- the damage at the top;
- the application of the hole;
- the fragmentation into two parts; and
- the abandoning of the object.

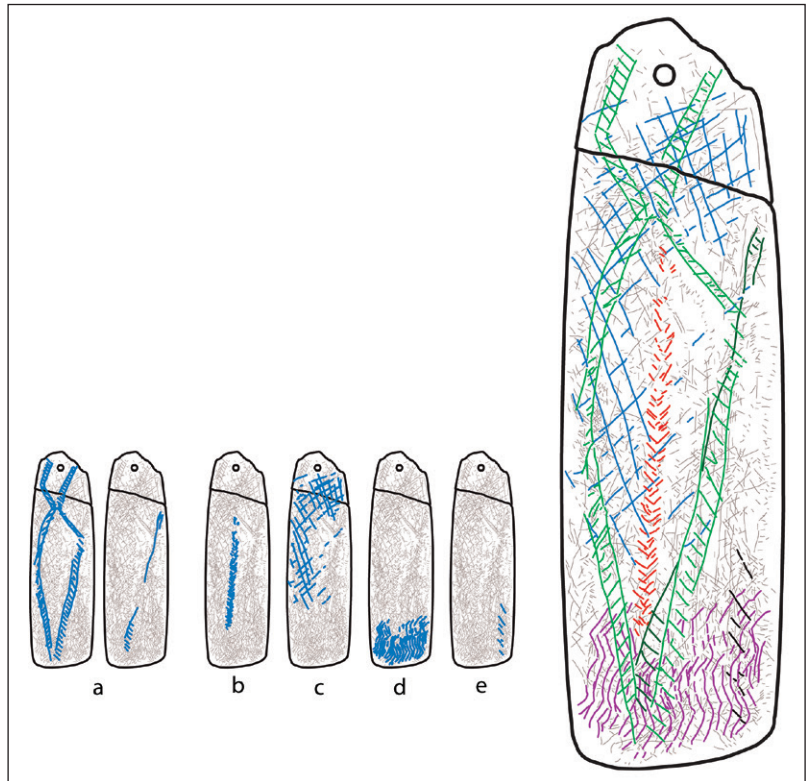
Not all of these events, decisions, and practices needed to have been performed by the same person. Also, the chronological relation of some of the events to each other is unclear, as for example between the decorative motifs on the A- and B-sides. Even if the object's time-depth is difficult to estimate, its use-wear and changes that can visually be observed suggest that it was utilized over a long period of time, maybe over generations. Furthermore, the different identified practices imply a spatial dimension with this portable object being moved, both from place to place but also while being used at one location. Several aspects hint at the possible complexity of such movements. Firstly, the used raw material is not found locally at Brunstad

and must have been acquired from sources further away (Schülke and Hegdal 2015, 40). Thus, at least the raw material, or even the artefact itself, must have been brought to the place of its later deposition. Secondly, it is likely that the object was carried around, while being altered over time. As the hole is applied very late, and supposedly shortly before the object was abandoned, one can ask whether the



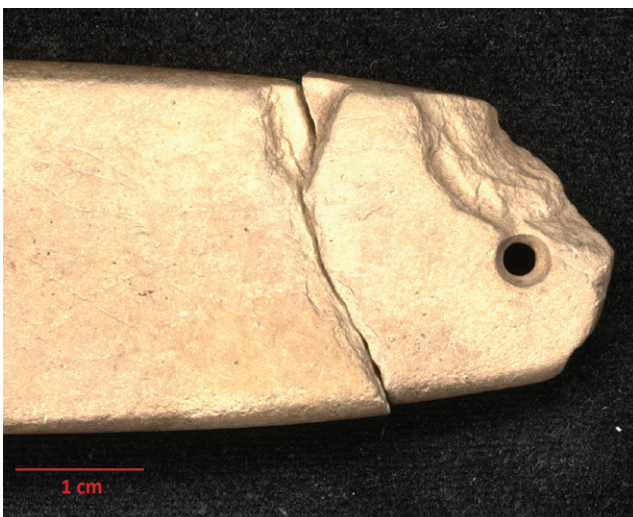
object was originally longer, with a (first?) hole applied further up, so that it might have been fastened using a cord when being carried around? However, it is impossible to estimate possible distances of movements of the object. The incisions, and especially the net-pattern, show different ‘handwritings’, suggesting that several persons were involved in the sequential ornamentation of the object. Who had the possibility to use it? Were (only) different artists involved? Or was the artefact carried and used by different persons, and given from person to person – either over extended periods of time or over a short timespan? Looking at our difficulties in deciphering its decoration, we could ask whether the ornament on the object might have been visible only at certain occasions, for example under oblique illumination, or when being wet. Also, the angle from which the ornament might have been seen is not determined, especially if the object was used as a tool.

Considering the time that must have been spent to form, wear, and change this artefact, the Brunstad object can undoubtedly be seen as a valued object with a special meaning. However, it most likely also had a practical function, as a tool – with or without a hole. This artefact belongs to a group of objects, along with some examples of fishing gear and net-sinkers (Bergsvik and David 2015, 197–201; Bjerck 2010, 81), that show that ornamentation was not restricted to hunting-weapons

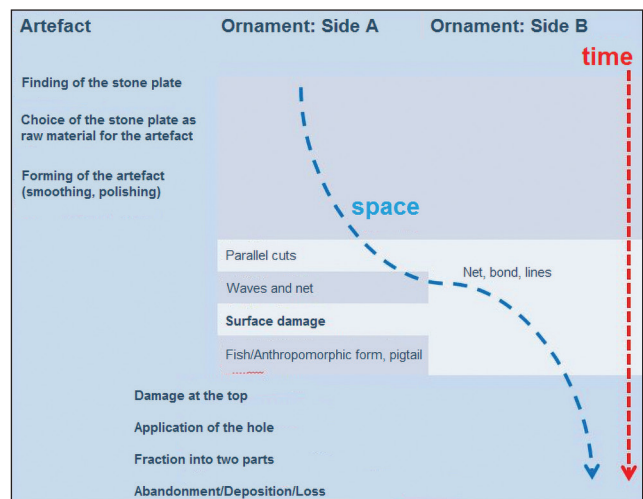


**Fig. 90.3.** Elements of ornamentation on the A-side (e: oldest, a: youngest). Illustration by Håvard Hegdal, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.

or supposed male prestige-goods alone. For the latter it has been assumed that thoroughly worked ornaments on prestige goods and fetish objects, which are interpreted as belonging to the male sphere, reflect the power of male



**Fig. 90.4.** B-side, detail, illustrated with RTI-Viewer. Photograph by Steinar Kristensen, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo.



**Fig. 90.5.** The Brunstad-object: events or practices during the time of its Mesolithic use. Illustration by Almut Schülke.

leaders in their role as big game hunters in the Late Mesolithic society of south-eastern Norway (Glørstad 2010, 164–69, 232–34). The ornamented Brunstad object does not fit into this picture. In its form and treatment of the surface it resembles the slate knives from Olenij Ostrov, which, though unornamented, occur in both male and female graves (Grünberg 2000, 231–32, 240–45; Gurina 1956). It also has to be taken into account that unfavourable preservation conditions to a great extent confine our knowledge of Mesolithic ornamentation.

Looking at the final stage of its Mesolithic use, the Brunstad object was broken shortly after the hole had been added and both parts were laid down/deposited close to each other, putting it out of use. This situation of abandonment shows similarities to other portable objects with ornamentation, *i.e.* pieces of ‘art’ that were damaged before being deposited, found at southern Scandinavian sites. Such objects have been interpreted as signs of a ritualized practice (Toft 2009). Was the fracture incidental, or was it a deliberate destructive action? Was it part of a ritualized behaviour of the user(s) of the object or was it performed by somebody else?

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***Foraging Assemblages*** is the publication of the proceedings of the Ninth International Conference on the Mesolithic in Europe, held in Belgrade in September 2015. The two volumes of these proceedings gather 121 contributions on Mesolithic research in Europe, covering almost every corner of the continent. The book presents a cross-section of recent Mesolithic research, with geographic foci ranging from the Mediterranean to Scandinavia, and from Ireland to Russia and Georgia. The papers in the volumes cover diverse topics and are grouped into 11 thematic sections, each with an introduction written by prominent Mesolithic experts. The reader will learn about changes in forager lifeways and the colonization of new territories at the end of the Ice Age and the beginning of the Holocene warming; the use of diverse landscapes and resources; climatic instabilities that influenced patterns of settlement and subsistence; the organiza-

tion of settlements and dwelling spaces; the formation of regional identities expressed through various aspects of material culture and technologies of artefact production, use, and discard; aspects of social relations and mobility; symbolic, ritual, and mortuary practices; diverse ways in which Mesolithic communities of Europe were transformed into or superseded by Neolithic ways of being; and how we have researched, represented, and discussed the Mesolithic.



### Volume 1

- Transitions – Beginnings
- Colonization
- Landscapes
- Settlement
- Regional Identities

### Volume 2

- People in Their Environment
- Technology
- Social Relations, Communication, Mobility
- Rites and Symbols
- Transitions – Endings
- Representing and Narrating the Mesolithic

