

Building Small, Living Large: A Corpus of South-Eastern Norwegian Settlement Evidence, 2350–500 BC

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This study examines settlement evidence from south-eastern Norway during the Late Neolithic and Bronze Age, revealing unique aspects of regional architectural and social organization. Notably, smaller and uniform house sizes suggest a divergence from the monumental power displays seen in southernmost Scandinavia. The uniformity in house sizes and significant spatial distances between contemporary houses imply a social structure akin to segmentary societies with symmetrical power relations, reliant on mobility and mixed subsistence practices. Changes in settlement patterns and house sizes during the Late Bronze Age could have been the result of increased social stratification or responses to population growth. Overall, the settlement patterns and house sizes in south-eastern Norway reflect a society that, while connected to the broader Nordic Bronze Age world, developed distinct social and economic strategies. These findings highlight the importance of considering regional variations and responses to environmental and social challenges in prehistoric societies.

Keywords: settlement evidence, social organization, movement, Late Neolithic, Bronze Age

INTRODUCTION

The construction of permanent houses marked a significant departure from previous forms of non- or semi-sedentary living, providing physical protection from various threats, natural or otherwise, as well as serving as visible and effective claims to land. From this basis, houses often become symbols of social identity and economic prosperity (Blanton, 1994; Carsten & Hugh-Jones, 1995), with architectural forms functioning as a medium for expressing the social dimension

(Delitz, 2010). In Scandinavian Bronze Age archaeology, this investment in houses and their diverse sizes is commonly argued to reflect the transformation to a clearly stratified society, characterized by the presence of chiefly farms (Brink, 2013: 433). Many scholars interpret this as the establishment of a ‘house society’, where house sizes reflect individual status and socio-political power (e.g. Streiffert, 2005: 25, 67; Artursson, 2009: 198; Austvoll, 2020: 23; 2021: 55–56).

Although numerous archaeological, historical, and ethnographic examples show a

positive correlation between wealth and house sizes (David & Kramer, 2001; Kohler et al., 2017; Hofmann et al., 2024), making the concept of a 'house society' a fruitful line of enquiry, such models and their inherent structural inequalities need to be proven rather than simply assumed (Harding, 2013). To this end, this article presents a newly collected corpus of 149 houses and other buildings from fifty-six sites in south-eastern Norway (Figure 1), dating to the Late Neolithic (2300–1700 BC) and the Bronze Age (1700–500 BC).

The primary objective of this article is to provide, for the first time, a comprehensive overview of the settlement evidence in south-eastern Norway, offering detailed supplementary data for further studies. A second aim is to present a comparative analysis, using data from across southern Scandinavia, and consider trends discernible in a broader corpus of settlements in the Netherlands and northern Germany. Given that south-eastern Norway is traditionally viewed as a geographical and cultural periphery in the Nordic Bronze Age world (Kristiansen, 1998: 70), and recognizing that models need to be proven rather than assumed, it is particularly important to examine how the houses and settlement patterns in our region align with the wider trends outlined for the Nordic Bronze Age. Further, this study aims to assess and discuss the settlement and social organization in south-eastern Norway, as evident from its houses. Chronologically, the focus is on developments during the Late Neolithic and the Early Bronze Age (1700–1100 BC), with the trends emerging in the Late Bronze Age (1100–500 BC) addressed more briefly.

BACKGROUND

In Scandinavian archaeology post-built, aisled structures about twice as long as

they are wide are referred to as houses or longhouses and believed to represent architecturally a supra-regionally shared way of dwelling, although variations in practice may be concealed by architectural similarity. Based on the idea that the size of permanent dwellings correlates with agricultural productivity and access to resources, as traditionally associated with Iron Age Scandinavia (e.g. Webley, 2008: 52), clear differences in house sizes are also commonly interpreted as indicative of status, with larger structures demonstrating the existence of chiefdoms during the Nordic Bronze Age, as these are considered chiefly farms (e.g. Vandkilde, 1996; Earle, 2002; Kristiansen & Larsson, 2005; Kristiansen, 2006; Artursson, 2009; Egelund Poulsen, 2009). Regarding houses, such hierarchical manifestations are interpreted by several scholars as the emergence of a 'house society' (e.g. Artursson, 2009, 2015; Nordvall, 2019; Austvoll, 2020; Earle et al., 2022). This concept draws on Claude Lévi-Strauss' theoretical framework (Lévi-Strauss, 1982), which has been successfully applied to numerous anthropological and archaeological studies (e.g. Joyce & Gillespie, 2000; González-Ruibal, 2006; Beck, 2007; Borić, 2008; Sharples, 2020). The archaeological application of the concept primarily revolves around houses reflecting social inequality owed to unequal access to capital (González-Ruibal & Ruiz-Gálvez, 2016: 385), a notion that resonates with the dominant Marxist approach to political economies in Scandinavian Bronze Age research (Earle et al., 2015).

Within this framework, the house served as a hierarchical symbol during the Nordic Bronze Age, the conceptual underpinnings of which are illustrated in Figure 2 (Kristiansen, 2006: 192, fig. 50). This model shows an increase in house sizes from the end of the Late Neolithic through the Early Bronze Age, in which



Figure 1. The south-eastern Norway study area within Scandinavia, with the extent of the Nordic Bronze Age overlaid following Prescott and Glørstad (2012), extended to encompass the Netherlands and northernmost Germany.

200 m² could potentially mark a significant threshold (see Bech & Haack-Olsen, 2018: 135, fig 4.3). Large houses often

co-existed with smaller houses, indicating that it is not just the size of some houses that are at the basis of the chieftdom

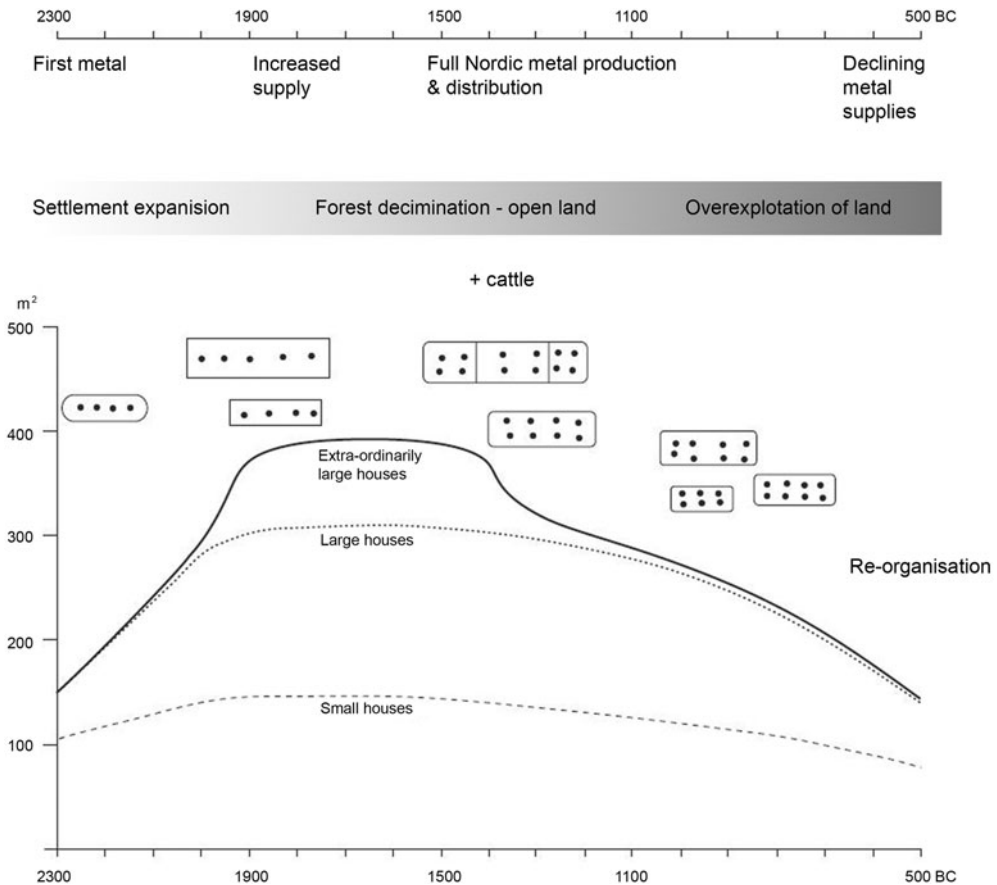


Figure 2. Schematic model of the long-term change of house types and sizes from the Late Neolithic to the Bronze Age in southern Scandinavia (from Kristiansen, 2006: fig. 50). Reproduced by permission of K. Kristiansen.

model, but rather that a relatively wide size range can be present. A prominent example is the Højgård houses in southern Jutland, where a 400–500 m² house was contemporaneous with several smaller houses (Ethelberg, 2000).

From around 1300 BC, house sizes in southern Scandinavia decreased and continued to decline throughout the Late Bronze Age. Interestingly, this trend contrasts with northern Germany, where house sizes decrease from 1700 BC before starting to increase again from 1400 BC (Kneisel et al., 2019: 1611). During the Early Bronze Age, houses in northern

Germany typically occupied a surface of 100–200 m², although a few slightly large examples are known (Donat, 2018: 184). From the transition to the Late Bronze Age, houses sharply decrease in size again in northern Germany (Kneisel et al., 2019: 1612), as also seen in southern Scandinavia. As evident in Figure 2, large farmhouses in southern Scandinavia reached 100–150 m², and while the houses decreased in size, they increased in number. Hence, houses are more often organized in hamlets in the Late Bronze Age, although this form of living is known from earlier periods (Kristiansen, 2007:

166; Bech, 2018: 27–28; Løken, 2020; Risch et al., 2022). In such hamlets, houses are typically located 50–100 m apart (Horn et al., 2023: 16).

Against this background, it becomes evident that while a dominant model of house development in southern Scandinavia exists, a comparison with other regions both within and adjacent to southern Scandinavia in northernmost Europe reveals diverging developments. Suggesting that the outlined conceptual model is not universal. Looking outside the Nordic zone, Stijn Arnoldussen (2008) has argued that house size in the Dutch area is a direct reflection of the number of people living in the house, irrespective of social stratification. Within Scandinavian Bronze Age research, however, alternative explanations of size differences are rarely considered or given much attention (Brück & Fokkens, 2013).

MATERIAL PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

The south-eastern Norwegian settlement evidence consists of 119 post-built houses and thirty other buildings, the latter mostly interpreted as serving various economic functions (see [Supplementary Material 1](#) for details). While the state of preservation varies (see [Supplementary Material 2](#) for details), around eighty per cent of the houses had enough definable features of their ground plans to derive sufficient measurements for analysis. Although primarily relying on the information and interpretations of the settlements presented in excavation reports (links in [Supplementary Material 1](#)), all available GIS data and additional documentation have been reviewed to ensure a thorough examination of all excavated features, including those not included in the presentation of houses in the reports. Further details on this matter are available in [Supplementary Material 2](#).

Temporal distribution

There are 269 radiocarbon dates available, ranging between 2873–2207 cal BC (4000 ± 110 BP, T-18022) and 775–400 cal BC (2415 ± 80 BP, T-19882), visualized in summed probability plots using the rcarbon package (Crema & Bevan, 2021) and calibrated with the InCal20 calibration curve (Reimer et al., 2020) using the rintcal package (Blaauw, 2022). The summed probability distribution ([Figure 3](#)) shows a noticeable establishment of houses around 2200 BC, followed by growth until approximately 1800 BC. From this point on, there is a gradual decline until *c.* 1600 BC, when a significant drop occurs among the two-aisled material. Concurrently, three-aisled houses (although introduced earlier) become established, and two-aisled houses are constructed later ([Figure 4](#)). Considering the distribution of radiocarbon dates for each construction, [Figure 4](#) reveals that some structures within the same sites overlap, suggesting that they may have been contemporary. This is observed at, for example, sites 8, 18, 23, 24, 47, 48, and 54. To further investigate this possibility, their spatial distribution needed to be analysed.

Spatial distribution

Spatial analysis suggests that houses with overlapping dates must have been successive, as they are often constructed in the same location ([Figure 5](#)). On the other hand, sites situated very close to each other do not feature contemporary structures, resulting in houses located at least 1 km—but more commonly several kilometres—away from any contemporary buildings. From around 2200 BC to 1400/1300 BC, the distribution of sites shows a general distance of around 4–7 km, increasing to 10–12 km around

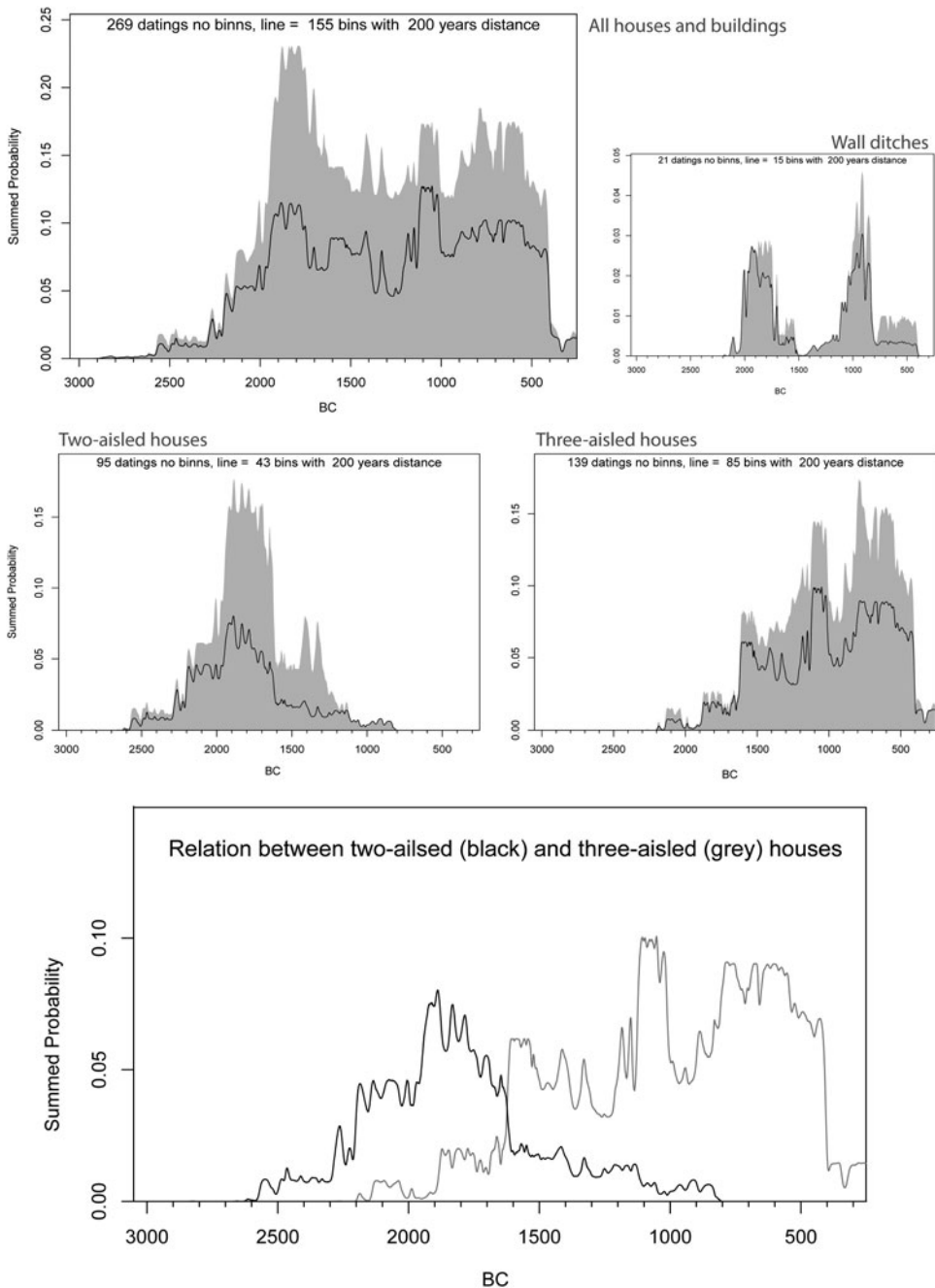


Figure 3. Summed probability plot of available radiocarbon dates from the settlements ($n = 269$) binned in 200-year long phases, differentiated in building types.

1200–1100 BC. From the Late Bronze Age onwards, the distances decrease, with contemporary houses occasionally as close as 1 km apart towards the transition to the

Pre-Roman Iron Age (500 BC–AD 1). Overall, the spatial arrangement suggests a large living environment throughout the entire study period.

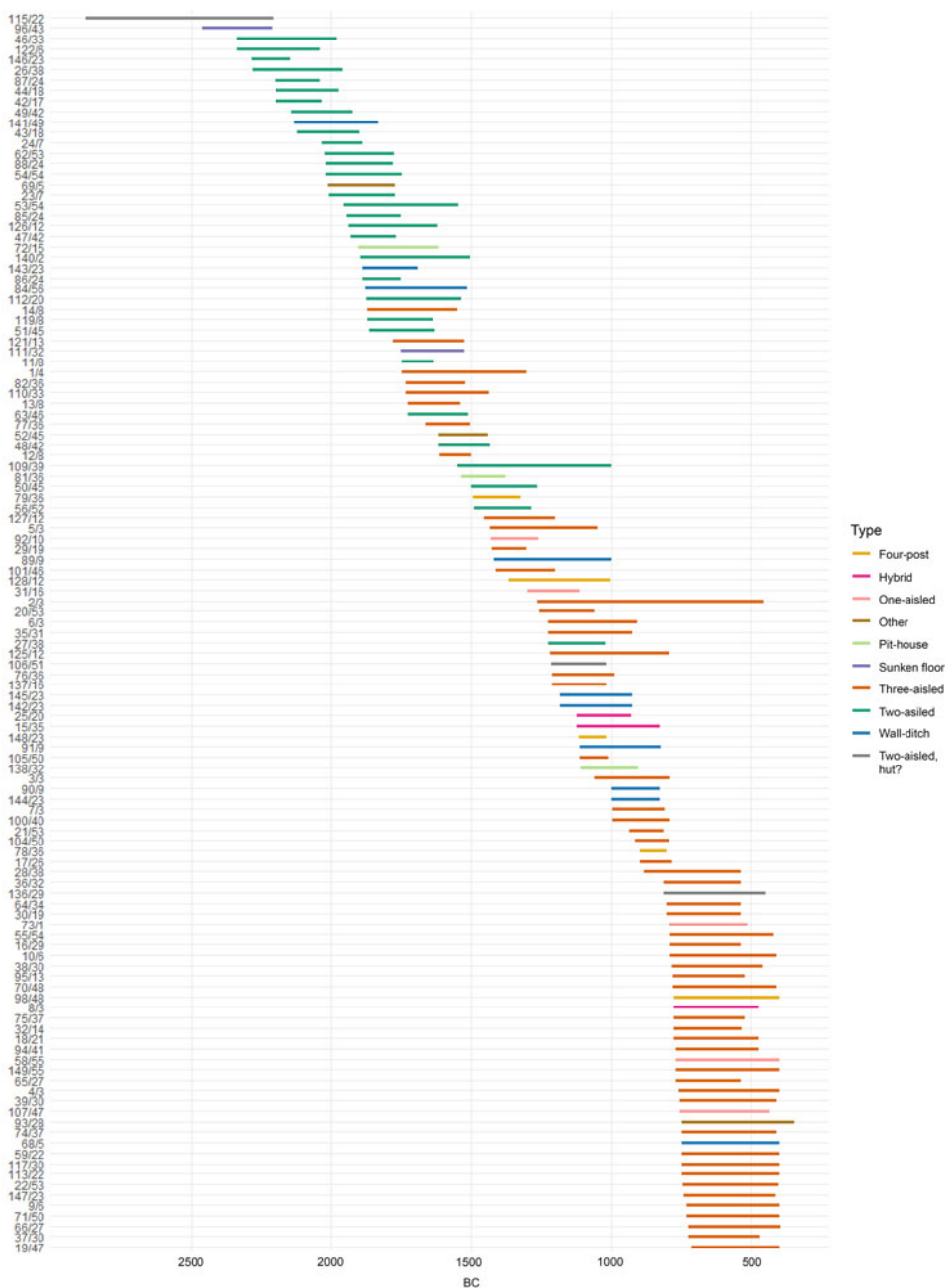


Figure 4. Start and end times of all individual radiocarbon-dated buildings, differentiated by building types.

There are, however, a few instances of contemporary constructions at the same site in terms of houses alongside a four-

post structure, which is typically interpreted as storage buildings at the farmstead (Løken, 1998). Other economical

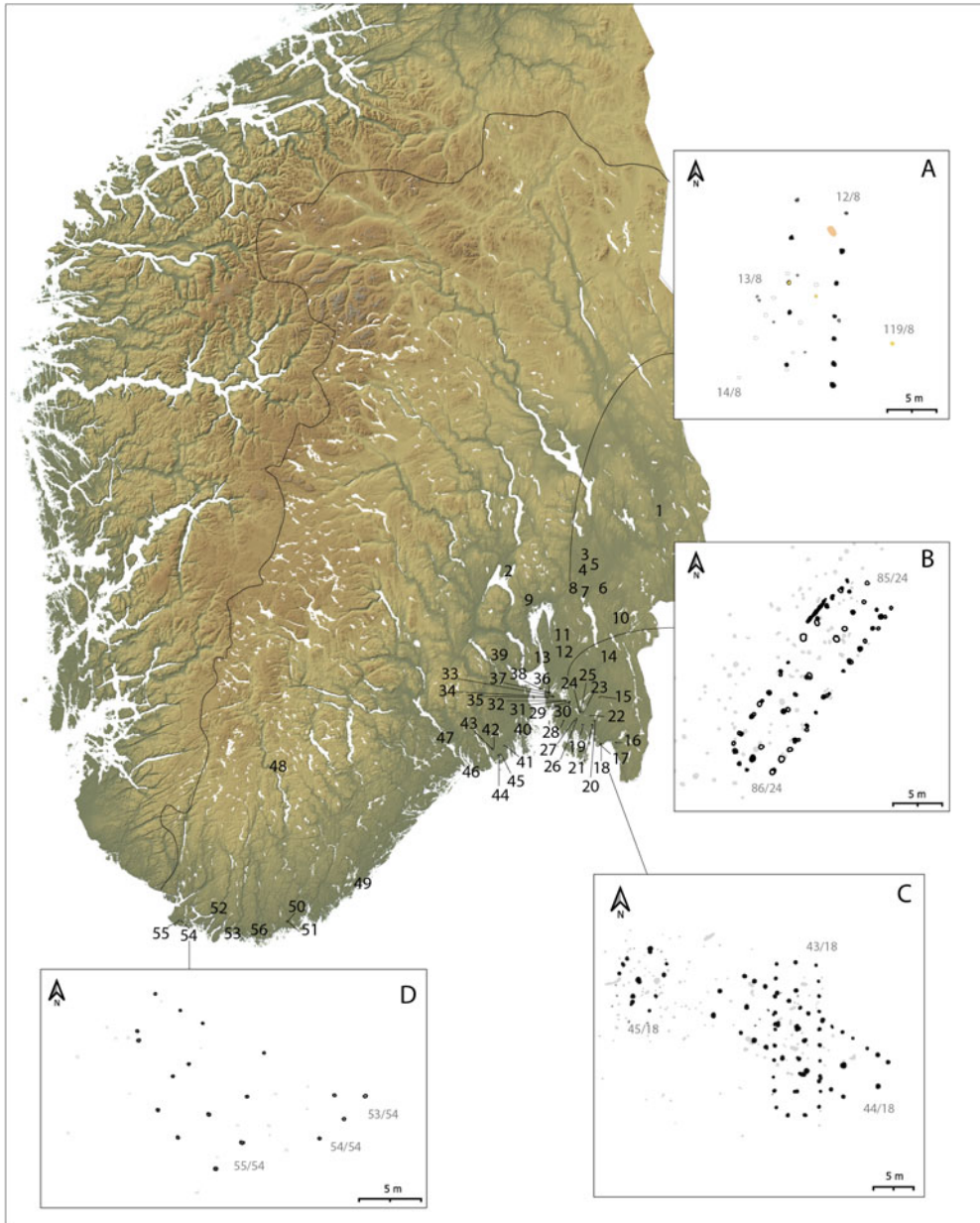


Figure 5. Spatial distribution of the settlement sites within south-eastern Norway. For details on the number of buildings and their dates, see Figure 4. The inset examples (A–D) illustrate sites with buildings that overlap in date, but which are too close to each other or directly on top of each other to have been contemporaneous.

buildings, such as the wall-ditch buildings, are more typically suited further away from the houses, sometimes encountered in

more isolated locations, possibly due to their use as outbuildings, a topic I will return to later.

Measurements and sizes

The post-built houses range from 5 to 25 m in length and from 3.5 to 10 m in width. Typically, three-aisled houses are wider, while two-aisled are slightly longer but have a narrower range of square metre (Figure 6, details available in Supplement 1). To quantify these measurements and assess changes in the house sizes to create a chronological distribution similar to that presented for the south Scandinavian material in Figure 2, weighted means of house sizes were calculated in 200-year intervals (see also Løvschal, 2020).¹ The results show an increase from an average surface of 25 m² during the Middle Neolithic transition to 86 m² in the latter part of the Bronze Age, peaking at 114 m² between 1000 and 800 BC (Figure 7). To test the normality in the size distribution (see e.g. Peterson & Drennan, 2018: 41), Gini coefficients were calculated for the same 200-year intervals using the DescTools package in R (Signorell, 2024; see also Hofmann et al., 2024). The results indicate low to moderate levels of unevenness (ranging between 0.09 and 0.31; Gini coefficient values are defined as ranging from 0 (perfect uniformity) to 1 (maximum disparity)), in which the period 900–800 BC marks a shift (Figure 7).

HOUSE FEATURES

Architectural forms and features

The most distinctive building type (Figure 8) is the curved-end rectangular

¹ The calculation is based on the calibrated time interval of each house: $\Delta Y_{\text{interval}} = (Y_{\text{start}} - Y_{\text{end}})$. The weighted mean for the individual house is then defined as $\bar{W} = 1/Y_{\text{interval}}$, reflecting the precision of its date and its contribution in the following calculations. These weights and their corresponding roofed areas are then grouped into 200-year intervals, and the weighted mean for each interval is calculated using $(W) = \Sigma (xi * wi) / \Sigma wi$, where roofed areas are multiplied by their weights to provide an average that ensures the precision of each house within the given 200-year interval.

house, common in Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age houses, with clear parallels in Sweden, eastern Denmark, and eastern Germany (Pettersson, 2010; Fokkens, 2019b). Obround houses (i.e. with parallel sides and rounded ends) emerge as most typical for the Late Bronze Age. Similarities for this type are found across southern Scandinavia, typically dating to the Late Bronze Age (Artursson, 2009; Løken, 2020). Rectangular houses are most numerous overall, but are more evenly spread throughout the study periods. In the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age, some resemble the distinctive, small, rectangular Fosie-type houses (e.g. Björhem & Säfvestad, 1989).

All these houses used a trestle construction technique, *grindverk* in Norwegian, a technique associated with Scandinavian post-built houses (Oma, 2018: 59). Another architectural feature in south-eastern Norway consists of possible instances of *staveline* construction (Gunnarsjaa, 2007: 731; Godal et al., 2018: 158, 164). This technique involves building with timbers set lengthways, with the two rows of roof-bearing posts bound laterally by the top sill, instead of transversally in trestle pairs. Archaeologically, this feature is noticeable in the skewed relative position of the posts, giving these buildings a distinct trapezoidal form. While this could belong to a three-aisled construction, it is interpreted as one-aisled, built in a less robust fashion. What appears to be roof-bearing posts may be wall-posts supporting the roof, as known from historical sources. Historically, these ‘staveline’ buildings often served economic functions, such as boat-houses and hay barns (Godal et al., 2018: 159).

Exterior features

Identifying the exterior architecture from excavated materials can be challenging, but

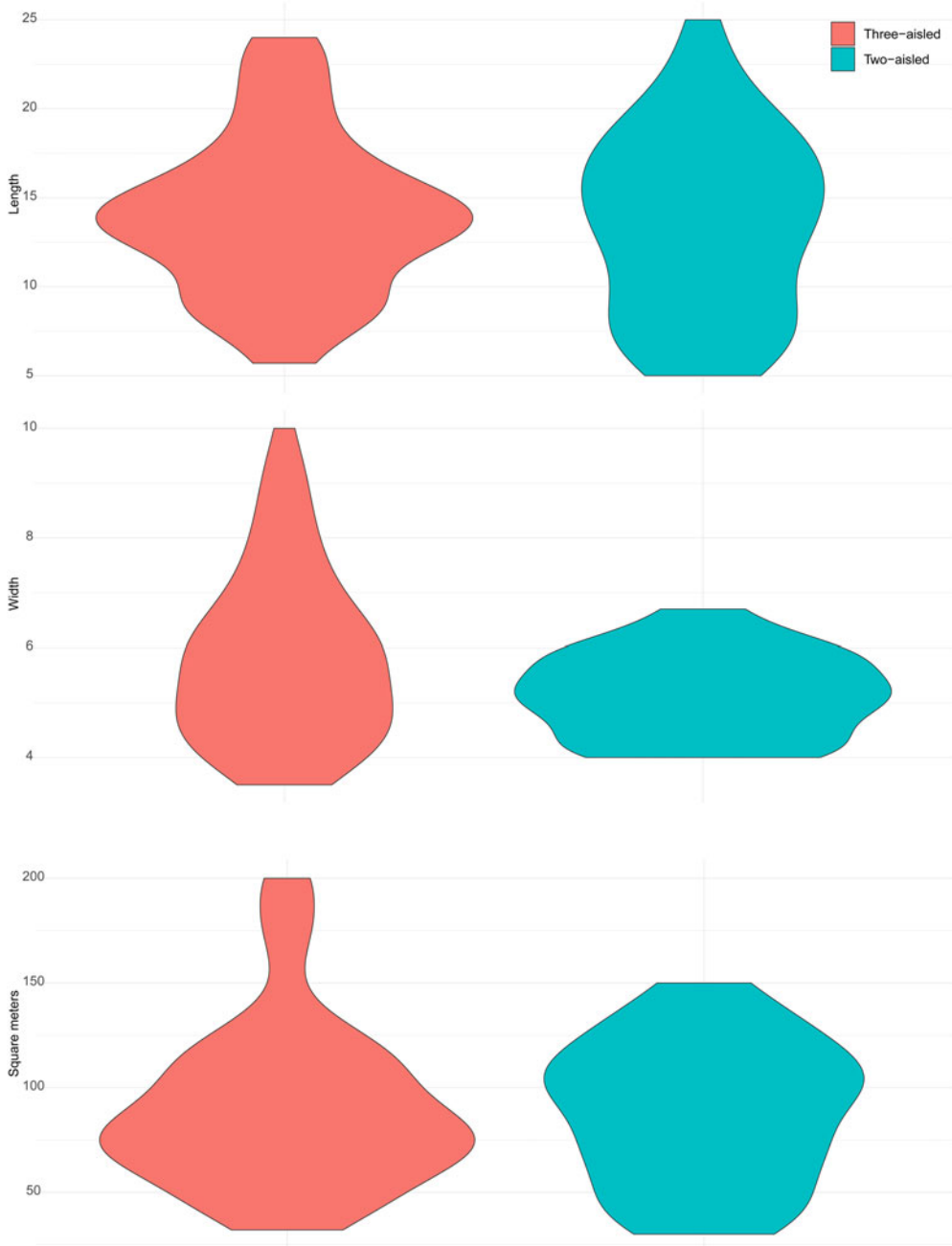


Figure 6. Violin plots of measurements grouped by house types.

specific wall types can be suggested for about one-third of the structures (Table 1a). These wall types are primarily identified by examining the spacing and

size of the wall-posts (see Austvoll, 2021: 77, with further references). Closely spaced, smaller posts, often arranged in a curved exterior pattern, are associated with

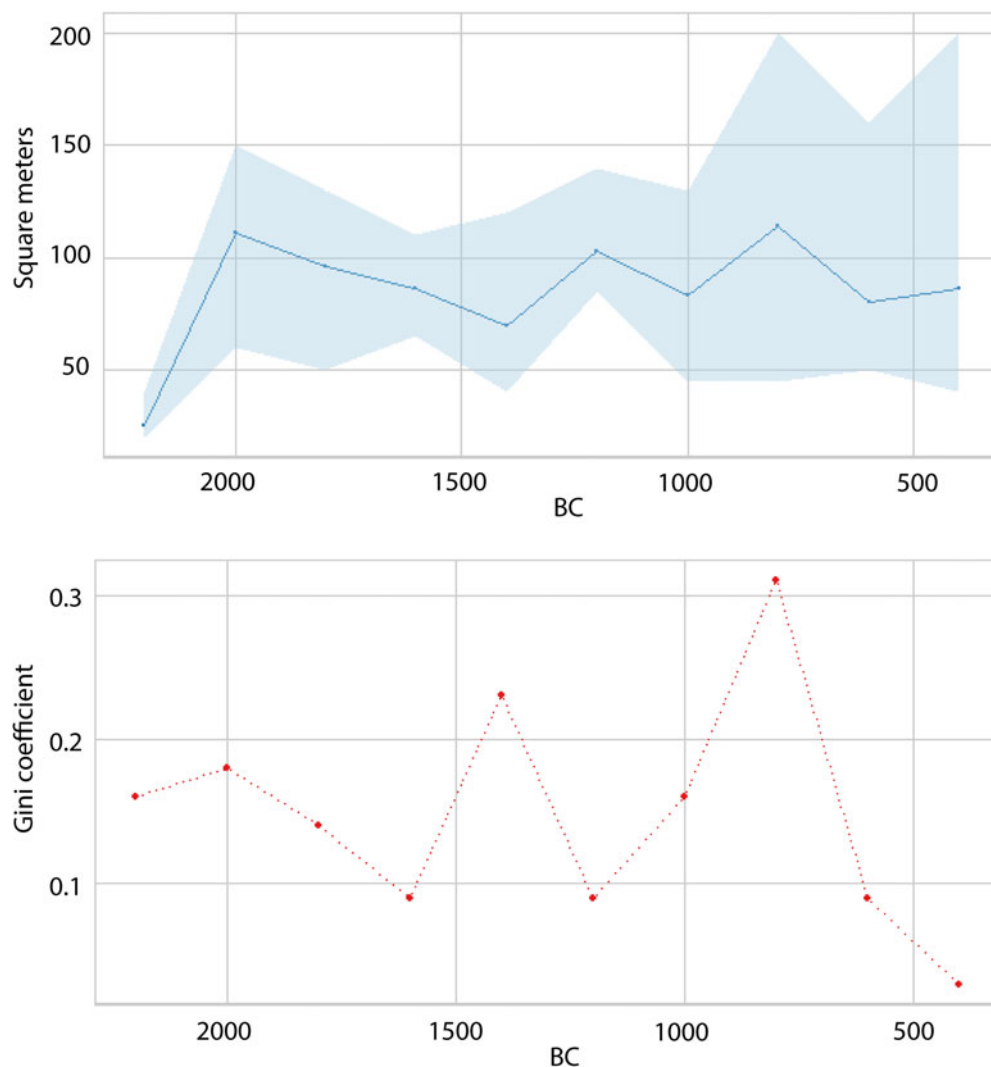


Figure 7. House surfaces by weighted m^2 following the 200-year intervals (blue line), with the maximum and minimum m^2 represented as a shaded outline. The Gini coefficient of the same 200-year intervals is illustrated in the plot below.

wattle-and-daub constructions. In contrast, larger posts spaced further and more evenly apart indicate bole walls, which can be either made of solid timber or planks, with the presence of wall-ditches suggested to indicate the latter. Based on these traits, bole walls are most common in two-aisled houses dating to the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, while three-aisled structures more frequently

consist of wattle-and-daub. This is further indicated by the presence of clay with imprints of latticework found in postholes.

Building orientation

A north-east to south-west orientation is generally most prevalent (Table 1b), with a relatively even distribution among other

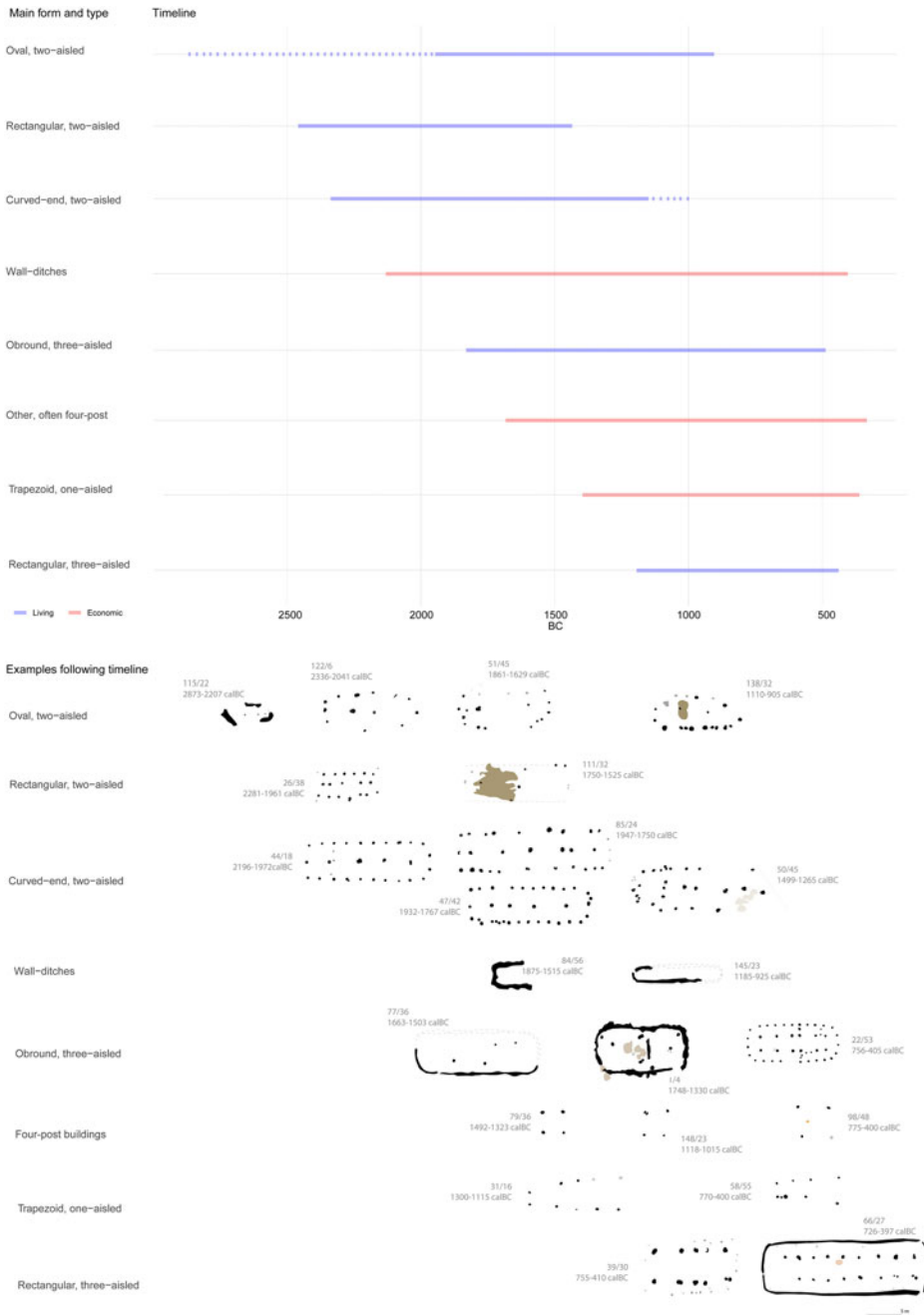


Figure 8. Time interval of the settlement evidence, with examples of the different building types from the south-eastern Norwegian corpus.

orientations and no apparent overarching pattern. There are, however, variations between different types of buildings; for

example, an east-west orientation is more common among three-aisled houses compared to two-aisled houses.

Table 1. Overview of building features, including orientation. For details, see Supplementary Material.

A						
Exterior feature	Two-aisled	Hybrid	Three-aisled	Wall-ditch	Other	Sum
Bole	11	1	1	0	0	13
Wattle-and-daub	2	0	14	0	0	16
Wattle-and-daub with traces of clay	1	0	9	0	0	10
Plank	2	1	3?	5?	0	11
Unknown	35	0	38	6	20	99
Sum	51	2	65	11	20	149
B						
Orientation	E–W	N–S	NE–SW	NW–SE	NA	Sum
Two-aisled incl. sunken floor	5	14	17	14	1	51
Three-aisled incl. hybrid	21	14	18	13	1	67
Wall-ditch buildings	2	4	4	1	0	11
Others/unknown	3	5	10	2	0	20
Sum	31	37	49	30	2	149
C						
Interior feature	Two-aisled	Hybrid	Three-aisled	Wall ditch	Other	Sum
Entrance	9	1	10	2	1	23
Hearth/fire features	6	1	12	0	2	21
Floor	4	0	4	0	1	9
Interior walls/partitions	4	1	3	1	0	9

Interior elements

Interior features are generally fragmentary, with entrances and hearths being the most common (Table 1c). Evidence of pens is only found in two Late Bronze Age buildings. The lack of indoor stalls does not necessarily exclude the possibility of animals being kept indoors; this could, for instance, be attested by the replacement of posts through more intensive rotting as well as by a smaller distance between the trestles (Pettersson, 2006: 64–66). These features are found in eight houses, dated to the Late Bronze Age, predominantly towards the transition to the Pre-Roman Iron Age. Floors constitute another interior feature, and, while these mainly consist of rammed clay-like soils, there is one possible instance that a floor was covered in wood. Additionally, the revision of the

data has also revealed instances of sunken-floor houses (Figure 8), previously unrecognized within the region.

DISCUSSION

The south-eastern Norwegian settlement evidence aligns with overarching trends observed in Scandinavian Bronze Age houses, such as the adoption of three-aisled structures around 1600 BC, while the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age curved-end houses align closely with an eastward trend in house styles observed across northern Europe (see Fokkens, 2019b: 928, fig. 13), particularly across the border and within south-western Sweden (see e.g. Pettersson, 2010). Obround-shaped houses, on the other hand, are less common in this period, but well known

across Jutland and northern Germany at this time (Ethelberg, 2000; Bech & Haack-Olsen, 2018; Geschwinde & Heske, 2019). The eastward trend is supported by a similar trapezoidal 'staveline' type of construction being recognized in south-western Sweden (Lönn, 2010), and is further reinforced by the narrow, oblong wall-ditch constructions without posts, which, to my knowledge, only have parallels in Halland along the west coast of Sweden (Nicklasson, 2001; Häggström & Kalmar, 2003).

The settlement data also reveal distinct regional characteristics. While east-west oriented houses are predominant among settlements in southernmost Scandinavia (e.g. Bunbury et al., 2023: 10), this orientation is only most common in three-aisled houses compared to two-aisled houses in south-eastern Norway. Considering that eighty-five per cent of east-west oriented houses in southernmost Scandinavia are found in Jutland (see Bunbury et al., 2023: appendix D), the differing orientation of houses in south-eastern Norway could be a result of a more varied topography and a different landscape compared to further south. This varied topography, with different wind directions and exposure to sunlight, is likely to have influenced the orientation and siting of the houses. The most notable regional characteristic in the south-eastern Norwegian settlement evidence, however, is the tendency to construct smaller houses compared to those traditionally associated with the Late Neolithic and Bronze Age in Scandinavia (Figure 9). In the following, I will explore some possible reasons behind the emergence of this particular trend in the region.

Potential reasons for building small houses

One possible explanation for building small could be the need for more efficient

heating in colder latitudes compared to further south (Porčić, 2012; Sand-Eriksen & Mjærum, 2023). This trend can also be observed along the western Swedish coastline, where Bronze Age houses appear to decrease in size from Halland northwards into Bohuslän (Carlie, 1992; Streiffert, 2004; Nordvall, 2015, 2019). Furthermore, a similar pattern is attested to in western Norway, where the average length of the houses dating to the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age in southern Rogaland is 17 m compared to 10 m further north along the coast (Austvoll, 2021). An interpretation linked to climate is thus plausible but insufficient since houses in northern Germany are generally smaller than those typically associated with the Scandinavian Bronze Age.

Another possibility is that variations in size reflect different subsistence practices. This is particularly relevant given that monumental houses in southernmost Scandinavia are considered to be directly proportionate to agricultural productivity. Although husbandry is regarded as a fundamental part of the domestic economy in southernmost Scandinavia, it has recently been argued that the monumentalization of houses has its roots in agricultural intensification beginning in the Late Neolithic (Johannsen, 2024). Considering that south-eastern Norway has a shorter growing season compared to southernmost Scandinavia (Moen, 1999: 21), arable farming may have been on a smaller scale due to climatic factors, requiring communities to rely on other forms of subsistence economy. Reduced house sizes may thus relate to both climatic and domestic factors. There is, however, little evidence of animals being accommodated indoors before the latter part of the Late Bronze Age. If we further consider that the shift from two- to three-aisled buildings is associated with the indoor stalling of livestock (e.g. Fokkens, 1999; Rasmussen,

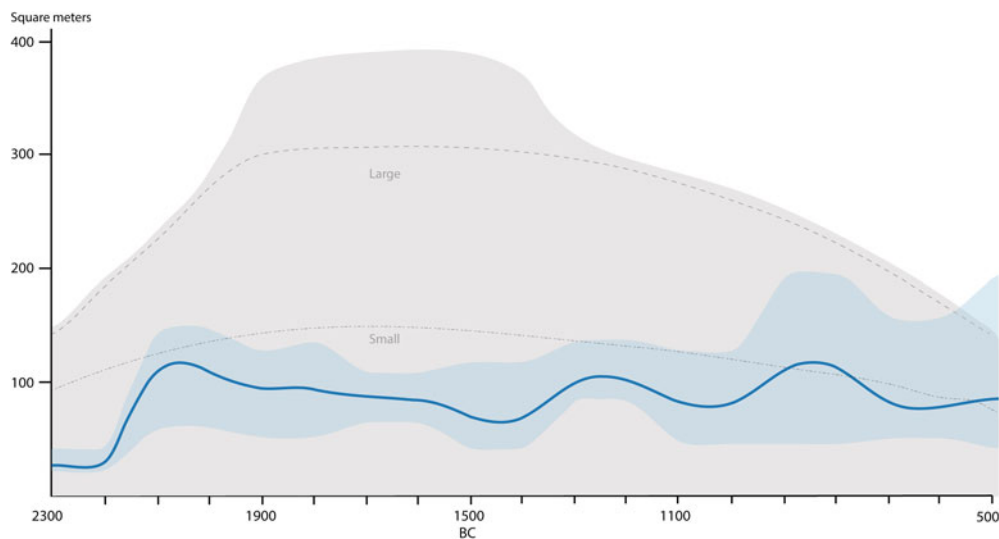


Figure 9. Chronological size distribution in south-eastern Norway (blue) compared to the south Scandinavian development model (grey), illustrating differences in size variation. The results in Figure 7 were smoothed using spline interpolation within ggplot2 and then overlaid on the model in Figure 2 using Adobe Illustrator CS6.

1999; Oma, 2018), the overall small house sizes within south-eastern Norway seem less compatible with indoor stalling. Therefore, animal husbandry must have taken another form here, possibly oriented and adapted to outdoor conditions (Pettersson, 2006).

Given that both the wall-ditch and one-aisled, trapezoidal ‘staveline’ buildings are less robust and less suited to permanent residence, they could have served as temporary shelters for human and animals, as well as for storage of equipment and fodder. On the other hand, it is equally possible that they were associated with other activities than pastoral practices, such as hunting and gathering. Although further archaeological data sources should be considered to confirm this, which is beyond the scope of this study, the ‘large’ outdoor living space between farmsteads indicates the possibility of a subsistence strategy reliant on high mobility.

This inference is further supported, I argue, by the low Gini coefficient observed

among the houses in this region. Kohler et al. (2017: 619) found a correlation between higher Gini coefficients and agricultural societies (greater than 0.3), compared to lower coefficients in hunter-gatherer societies (less than 0.2), with horticulturalist societies falling in between. These provides us with values to make inferences about subsistence practices based on the Gini coefficients in our own study area. The Gini coefficient calculated here shows that south-eastern Norwegian households only reach an agricultural level from *c.* 800 BC and remain below 0.2 until about 1500 BC (Figure 7). In comparison, when we apply the same calculation to material from Sweden and Denmark, as derived from Bunbury et al. (2023), the Gini coefficients for around 1100 houses dating to the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age reach an agricultural level of 0.33. The material from western Norway remains slightly below the 0.3 threshold, with an overall coefficient of 0.29. However, a regional analysis along the

coast reveals a clear south-to-north gradient: the southernmost region of Rogaland exhibits coefficients reaching agricultural levels, while those further north stay below this threshold.

This pattern, combined with evidence of mixed subsistence practices in northern areas—including pastoralism, hunting, and fishing alongside arable farming (see Austvoll, 2021: 143–75)—suggests that houses in these regions may not have been intended as year-round dwellings for everyone. Instead, they may have allowed for certain, possibly seasonal, groups to live away from the house. Consequently, the lower Gini coefficients may not only reflect subsistence practices but could also support the argument for more mobile lifestyles that, in turn, permitted a smaller overall house size.

A ‘house society’ or a society with houses?

Considering how architecture can serve as a medium for the social structure and that socio-economic factors can influence the size of houses, the variation in house sizes within western Norway—specifically between the Jæren region in Rogaland and areas further north—suggest differences in household organization. These range from coercive to cooperative models (Austvoll, 2020, 2021; Lund et al., 2022), with the former related to a hierarchical house-based form of societal organization, and the latter diverging from this structure. These findings align well with results obtained from the Gini coefficients in the present study. Against this, the smaller and more uniform house sizes in south-eastern Norway suggest a social organization that differs from the dominating ‘house society’ model within the Nordic Bronze Age world.

However, significance could also be attributed to houses through different means (Lévi-Strauss, 1982). Studies of ‘house societies’ in Southeast Asia show that ancestral practices are common. For example, the Atoni of Timor make offerings to the inner left post in the house, as this is the ‘head mother’, while the Torajan in Indonesia put similar value to the centre or ‘navel-post’ (Waterson, 1997: 85, 124–27). The Kayapó or Mëbêngôkre of central Brazil prioritize upkeep, and it is the oldest house that is the most important (Lea, 1995: 208). Relating to these examples, I explored features or finds suggesting significance attributed to houses beyond their size. Although forty-nine houses had finds in structural features, these were primarily isolated occurrences and mainly consisted of types typically associated with household refuse (see Supplementary Material 1). While a few instances of arrowheads and an axe placed in postholes have been interpreted as possible house offerings (for details see e.g. Valum, 2011), no noticeable patterns were observed within the material. On the other hand, the frequent rebuilding of houses in the same locations across many sites (see Figure 5) could be linked to some form of ancestral reverence, signifying the enduring importance of place across generations (see e.g. Brink, 2013; Fokkens, 2019a), even when large spaces were available. Yet, the empirical evidence overall does not support the idea of a ‘house society’ in south-eastern Norway.

The uniform nature of the settlement evidence suggests an organizational structure resembling segmentary societies. These societies consist of smaller, autonomous domestic groups without central authority, indicating a more symmetrical power relation (Currás & Sastre, 2020; Lund et al., 2022). Considering the region’s connection to the Nordic Bronze Age networks, the results of this study

suggest a coexistence of different social systems in proximity to each other (see also Fontijn, 2003; Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Hofmann et al., 2022). While further studies using additional archaeological data are needed, I believe that the key lies in its spatial organization within an environment that afforded mobile activities.

The significant distance between contemporary houses suggests that households had extensive areas at their disposal. This does not imply that communities avoided each other, but rather indicates a socioeconomic organization reliant on and centred around movement. Collective efforts, as shown by parts of the western Norwegian evidence (Austvoll, 2021), could have been a structuring feature within this, as often encountered among mixed farming communities in historical and ethnographic sources in these areas (Kaldal, 2000). Within this, the house functioned as place of reference for people throughout the year, and not necessarily as a place of dwelling and activity for all, as farmsteads are more traditionally portrayed (Holst & Rasmussen, 2013). Stable isotopes studies from neighbouring south-western Sweden have shown increased mobility during the Late Neolithic and the transition to the Bronze Age that lend support to such an interpretation (Blank et al., 2021).

In the Late Bronze Age, however, changes took place. Contemporary settlements began to appear closer together, though they did not form hamlets like those found further south. From around 900–800 BC, there was greater variety in house sizes, with the first occurrence of a house surpassing 200 m². The Late Bronze Age settlement evidence from south-eastern Norway hence diverges from southern Scandinavia during this time, where houses are expected to decrease in size, but also from the previous period within the same area (see Figure 9). Given the common interpretation that large

houses indicate greater wealth, this shift may reflect an increased social stratification in south-eastern Norway at this time. Alternatively, the houses might be built larger to accommodate greater numbers of people (as argued by Arnoldussen, 2008), as seen in the wider increase in the population at this time following the final breakthrough of farming towards the end of the Late Bronze Age (Solheim, 2024). To fully understand this, however, these results warrant further investigation.

CONCLUSION

The settlement corpus from south-eastern Norway displays clear connections to the wider Nordic Bronze Age world, with houses reflecting broader trends across southern Scandinavia and northern Europe, especially in their eastward orientation. However, significant differences also emerge when comparing regions, underscoring the need to critically assess existing models, even within traditionally unified cultural spheres like the Nordic Bronze Age.

The main result of constructing smaller house sizes in south-eastern Norway, compared to other parts of southernmost Scandinavia, indicate a different social organization. Considering this alongside the significant distances between contemporary settlements, implying that households had extensive landscapes or territories, suggests a continued reliance on mobile activities, like hunting, gathering, and pastoralism, even after settling in post-built houses. Thus, the farmstead served more as a fixed point in a regularly traversed landscape than a continuous dwelling place.

The uniformity among these houses, on the other hand, reflects a society organized around symmetrical power relations and cooperation rather than hierarchy. Living far apart may have encouraged collective

efforts for various purposes, such as cooperative hunting or pastoralism, a pattern seen later among mixed farming communities in this region of southern Scandinavia, though further studies using additional archaeological data are needed to confirm this.

By the Late Bronze Age, increased size variation and the closer construction of contemporary houses marks a shift, possibly indicating social stratification, changed mobility patterns, and/or population growth. Even with this shift, south-eastern Norwegian settlement practices diverged from southern Scandinavian trends, highlighting the importance of recognizing regional variations. Moreover, these results remind us not to assume the validity of existing models without testing them first, while further illustrating how distinct social systems can coexist in close proximity.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/ea.2024.50>.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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Petits édifices, grands espaces : un corpus de données sur l’habitat dans le sud-est de la Norvège, 2350–500 av. J.-C.

Cette étude sur les données concernant l’habitat au Néolithique final et à l’âge du Bronze recueillies dans le sud-est de la Norvège met en évidence des éléments uniques de leur architecture vernaculaire et de leur organisation sociale. Notamment, la petite taille et l’uniformité des maisons indiquent que ces dernières divergent des formes monumentales du pouvoir connues dans l’extrême sud de la Scandinavie. Cette uniformité et la distance appréciable entre structures contemporaines laissent supposer un système social comparable aux sociétés segmentaires dont les rapports de force sont symétriques et qui dépendent d’un mode de vie mobile et d’une économie de subsistance mixte. Les transformations de l’habitat et de la taille des habitations pendant l’âge du Bronze pourraient être liées à une stratification sociale accrue ou à une augmentation de la population. Dans l’ensemble, l’organisation spatiale de l’habitat et la taille des maisons dans le sud-est de la Norvège reflètent une société qui, bien que liée à la sphère de l’âge du Bronze nordique, avait élaboré des stratégies sociales et économiques distinctes. Les résultats de cette étude soulignent qu’il importe de tenir compte des différences locales et des réactions des sociétés préhistoriques face aux défis environnementaux et sociaux à l’échelle régionale. Translation by Madeleine Hummler

Mots-clés: habitat, organisation sociale, mobilité, Néolithique final, âge du Bronze

Kleine Bauten, große Gebiete: Eine Sammlung von Siedlungsquellen aus Südostnorwegen, 2350–500 v. Chr.

Die vorliegende Untersuchung von Siedlungsquellen aus Südostnorwegen im Spätneolithikum und in der Bronzezeit bringt Besonderheiten der ortstypischen Architektur und der sozialen Organisation zum Vorschein. Vor allem unterscheiden sich die kleineren und einheitlichen Häuser von den monumentalen Zeichen der Macht im südlichsten Teil Skandinaviens. Die gleichmäßig großen Häuser und der relativ beträchtliche Abstand zwischen gleichzeitig erbauten Strukturen deuten auf eine soziale Organisation, welche segmentäre Gesellschaften mit symmetrischen Machtverhältnissen ähnelt und die auf Mobilität und eine gemischte Wirtschaft angewiesen sind. Veränderungen in der Besiedlung und der Größe der Häuser während der Spätbronzezeit könnten vielleicht eine erhöhte soziale Stratifizierung oder ein Bevölkerungswachstum belegen. Generell widerspiegeln die Siedlungsstruktur und die Größe der Bauten in Südostnorwegen eine Gesellschaft, die verschiedene soziale und wirtschaftliche Strategien entwickelte, obwohl sie mit der weiteren Welt der nördlichen Bronzezeit verbunden war. Diese Ergebnisse machen

es deutlich, dass man in urgeschichtlichen Gesellschaften regionale Variationen und verschiedene Lösungen zu umweltbedingten und sozialen Problemen in Betracht ziehen muss. Translation by Madeleine Hummler

Stichworte: Siedlungsquellen, soziale Organisation, Mobilität, Spätneolithikum, Bronzezeit