

Mesolithic pits in Germany – an initial overview

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Abstract

Inspired by the conference „Creuser au Mésolithique / Digging in the Mesolithic“ in Châlons-en-Champagne in March 2016, the authors start a compilation of Mesolithic pits in Germany. Although it is still incomplete, some statements can be already made. Nearly 80% of the pits known until now come from settlement contexts. The majority was found in sandy soils or flood loams. Although features are known from Early and the Final Mesolithic, the pits stem mainly from the Middle and the Late Mesolithic. The most intriguing features are the accumulations of small pits with up to 390 features, discovered in the last decades in sandy soils in Northern and Eastern Germany.

Keywords

Mesolithic pits; Germany; pit function; chronology; geographical distribution of pits

Pits from Mesolithic contexts in Germany have not been thoroughly summarised up to now. The conference „Creuser au Mésolithique / Digging in the Mesolithic“ in Châlons-en-Champagne in March 2016 was the occasion for the authors to collect the information on published pit features from the Mesolithic in Germany, to subdivide the pits into categories, and to start a compilation of the geographical and chronological data. Burial pits and "Schlitzgruben" (s. contribution Eckmeier et al., this volume) will not be taken into account. Here we present an initial – still incomplete – short overview. A detailed publication is in preparation (Gehlen et al., in prep.).

In Germany the following categories of Mesolithic pits can be distinguished:

1. Hearth pits from settlement contexts (140 features from 46 sites/layers);
2. Pit accumulations within settlement contexts (sensu stricto) (more than 550 pits from six sites);
3. Pit accumulations outside settlement contexts (more than 210 pits from five sites);
4. Storage pits / garbage pits (four pits from two sites);
5. Mesolithic dwelling-features and other building structures (20 features from 11 sites);
6. Hazelnut roasting pits (five features from five sites);
7. Waterholes (four pits from two sites);
8. Single larger pits of unknown function (three pits from three sites);
9. Pits from Mesolithic treefalls (12 features from three sites).

Most of the features come from „domestic“ areas. They are more frequent in open air sites and were excavated mainly from sandy soils or flood-loam. In abri sites or on the forecourts of the rockshelters Mesolithic features are mainly hearths or pits of unknown function. Pit accumulations are only known from sandy soils in Northern and Eastern Germany.

Until now, 85 14C-dates from 52 sites and/or layers are available from these features. 57 dates come from hearths within settlement contexts, 28 from other features. Only few hearth pits are dated to the Preboreal or early Boreal period. Most of these features from Northern, Eastern, and Western Germany date into the Late Mesolithic of the 7th millennium. In Southern Germany, most dates are from the Middle and Late Mesolithic (8th and 7th millennium). 23 dates from hearths stem from sites in Northern Germany, 13 from Southern Germany, 13 from Eastern Germany and only 8 from Western Germany.

Storage (or Garbage) pits, which were filled with fish bones and/or silex artefacts, date to the Middle and the Late Mesolithic of the 7th and 6th millennium. Hazelnut-roasting pits are only dated to the Early Boreal or 9th millennium, although roasting of hazelnuts still has been practiced in later Mesolithic periods. Features from pit accumulation sites date from the 10th to the 5th millennium with a certain focus in the 7th millennium. But up to date only 17 of more than 750 features are dated.

Since the publication of R.R. Newell (1980) Mesolithic dwelling structures in general are subjects of controversy and heated debates. After evaluation of the documented features, 20 structures, some of them with postholes, are accepted by the authors. Until now there are only few features, which are 14C-dated. In Westphalia the dwelling structure of "Bokel Fenn II", a shallow pit excavated during the 1920s containing a lithic assemblage with regular blades and microlithic trapezes, was dated to the final Mesolithic of the early 5th millennium (Gehlen et al. 2015). Another architectural structure was excavated in "Poel 12" in the Wismar Bay. The archaeological finds and the dating fit well into the late Ertebølle culture (Kloß et al. 2007). From the "Helga Abri" in the Swabian Alb a circular shallow pit with a paved fireplace inside was dated to the Middle Mesolithic (Beuronien C) of the second half of the 8th millennium (Hahn & Scheer 1983).

The most important group of features, which were detected during the last decades are accumulation sites in Northern and Eastern Germany with up to several hundred pits (Fries et al. 2013; Berthold & Gerken 2016; Gerken 2016). These features are 40 to 100 cm in diameter and up to 50 cm deep, with mainly the same construction characteristics. Due to ethnographic parallels, it is probable, that they were set up for cooking purposes. But this interpretation must be confirmed by more detailed examinations. These "pitfields" prove a much more complex land use as have previously been assumed by archaeologists for Mesolithic societies. The examples from the Champagne show that one has to expect Mesolithic pits in loamy soils in Germany as well. Mesolithic pits can be found within Neolithic or later settlements as examples from Lower Saxony already show (Berthold & Gerken 2016). It is a major task for the future to work on much better documentation, sampling, and dating of these Mesolithic features, which mostly contain no or very few stone artefacts, but often charcoal or other charred plant remains.

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