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A household-economic approach to archaeology with special reference to exchange and trade

By Nils Ringstedt


This article discusses a possible household-economic approach to archaeology with special reference to exchange and trade. The exchange of products was an essential function in prehistoric times. Even then there were different factors of production in different regions which necessitated exchange, although the forms were different from those known today. The degree of exchange was affected by the degree of self-sufficiency and production for domestic consumption, the susceptibility of the society to outside influences (innovations) etc. Modern archaeology could employ a household-economic approach whereby the households' use of time, labour, money (means of payment/exchange products) and knowledge are taken into account in the analysis of exchange and trade during different periods. It is important to analyse the diffusion of artefacts primarily from the point of view of the ancient household's needs. Such an approach could supplement other analyses of dwelling sites and market places.

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The treatment of exchange and trade in archaeology often seems to start from leaders and their role in the trade in and exchange of products. The need to acquire products to enhance prestige and status is stressed — a mode of reasoning heavily based on the fact that most preserved artefacts are made of non-perishable material, frequently metal, sometimes precious metal.

Furthermore it is often presumed that these products were brought from a distance for commercial reasons although it may well be that the products were copied nearby or not even involved in exchange and trade. Rather, robbery, gifts and the like could in many cases explain the existence of alien manufactured artefacts in Scandinavian soil (Ringstedt 1987, pp. 469 ff.).

Archaeological literature or articles seldom contain analyses founded on the premise that all societies consisted of individuals, who together with others formed households with different needs and requirements as regards products from both neighbouring and sometimes distant regions. Thus the purpose of this article is to outline a possible household-economic approach to archaeology to be used when e.g. discussing exchange and trade in a prehistoric society. My considerations are based upon current Swedish consumer economic theory.

The household concept

The household consists of one or several individuals who form a co-resident group. The ancient household consisted of both free and dependent individuals under the leadership of a paterfamilias, the head of the household with unlimited power over children, grandchildren, slaves etc. The big household was according to Finley the basis of European society up to the 18th century (Finley 1985, p. 18 f.). Duby too mentions the role of the family/household when discussing the conditions of the farmers during the Middle Ages (Duby 1962/67, pp. 66, 94, 100, 214). von Borst refers to the big household in his publication about everyday life in the Medieval period. This household comprises several genera-
tions including journeymen and apprentices (von Borst 1983, p. 260). Lindkvist asserts that the primary production unit in a feudal society comprised so-called household farms, consisting of families and eventually some farm-hands (and slaves during the Early Middle Ages) (Lindkvist 1988, pp. 16 f). Gurevitj is of the opinion that the extended family — three generations — was one of the microstructures of the barbarian society. The family was the principal social group (Gurevitj 1979, pp. 138 f).

In an interesting survey Herlihy points out that in Early Medieval Europe, the decline of ancient slavery, the spread of peasant agriculture, the rules of monogamy and exogamy which the Church enforced with slow success, lent unprecedented uniformity to households across society. From c. 700, apparently for the first time in the West, households are used as units in surveys, intended to measure the population and productivity of communities (Herlihy 1985, p. 78). Callmer comments that analysis of economic transactions in archaeology, which from many points of view is related to anthropology, could profitably be divided into a number of different social and spatial levels. It is, he says, of the utmost importance that these problems be viewed from the perspectives of the individual settlement, the individual household, and the connections over great distances (Callmer 1988, p. 261).

Magnusson recently mentioned the economic role of the agrarian families in the bloomery furnace industry in Jämtland and Härjedalen during prehistoric and right down to the 19th century. Iron working was a more or less important sideline for an agrarian population whose social family pattern was much the same as in later centuries. Production within the family was feasible and the products could be sold in various markets, above all in Norway. The households in the 16th and 17th centuries consisted of 5—7 persons (Magnusson 1986, pp. 287, 310 f).

Bender distinguishes between families, co-residence, and domestic functions as three distinct social phenomena. He maintains that hitherto co-residence and domestic functions have been mistakenly considered as inherent familial attributes. The first major analytical breakthrough came when families were distinguished from households, the former having as their referent, presumably, propinquity or locality. But, says Bender, this distinction left the job only half done, since the concept of the household, as formulated, included two distinct social phenomena: co-residential groups and domestic functions. While all three frequently correspond, they also can and do vary independently (Bender 1967, p. 504).

It seems that the concept of household has to be separated from the concept of family. From prehistoric times until almost the present day households in an agricultural economy could consist both of family members and servants — in the prehistoric/early medieval period also slaves. For this reason it is difficult to state the possible size of households during late prehistoric/early medieval times. A possible point of departure is a size of 7—10 persons which then includes one or two generations as well as servants/slaves.

Prerequisites for trade

Before discussing the household economic approach it is appropriate to recapitulate the conditions for exchange and trade. One of several necessary conditions for exchange and trade is the existence of a surplus within an economy. This makes specialization and distribution possible. The factors of production in different regions (natural resources, labour, capital, knowledge and organization) are of importance for the distribution of labour and specialization between regions and countries. Exchange and trade between regions are governed by their mutual differences as regards access to factors of production. Different regions are differently equipped with so-called comparative advantages. However, trade and exchange are obstructed by barriers of different kinds — in modern times tariff and non-tariff. Such barriers also existed to a certain extent in early civilizations (Ringstedt 1988, pp. 92 f).

It is my conviction that the exchange of products in different forms was also an essential function in prehistoric times. Even then there were different factors of production in different regions which necessitated exchange. However, the degree of exchange was affected by the de-
gree of self-sufficiency and production for domestic consumption, the susceptibility of the society to influences (innovations) from outside etc.

The author sees the concept "trade" as comprised of different elements such as motives, forms, value of exchange (price), relations/structures, sellers, buyers, products, means of payment and transport. Exchange and trade could then be defined as "an activity with the task to distribute from seller to buyers products which are adapted to different needs and thereby see to it that products which originally do not exist on the spot are supplied in an appropriate way with — for the purpose — suitable means to a certain value of exchange (price)" (Ringstedt 1987, pp. 21-23).

Gifts may have dominated the exchange process in low-technological societies. The importance of the gift has been discussed by many authors e.g. Mauss (Mauss 1969/1925, p. 10). Einzig considers that tribute and pillage long surpassed trade (Einzig 1949, pp. 348, 388).

However, unilateral gifts, redistribution, pillage, tax etc, (which frequently explain diffusion of artefacts) are not to be included in the trade concept, which pertains to conveyance of products. In other words:

Artefact diffusion in a wide sense comprises several possible alternatives to take into account when discussing the prehistoric household's access to nearby as well as foreign products.

A household-economic approach

The household's needs can be characterized as basic needs (physical/physiological). Such needs as hunger, thirst must be satisfied as well as the need for dwelling, energy, clothes, human fellowship etc. There are also secondary needs. They rest in the consciousness of individuals and are awakened by diverse influences. These concern e.g. products which are not essential for the daily subsistence but which nevertheless improve the quality of life or enhance status etc.

The household's needs affect the demand for products. But irrational factors also play their part. Indeed, it seems that nowadays habit and impulse exert more influence than rationality over the choice of products. Probably also in prehistoric times irrational factors predominated. Perhaps the choice of a product depends on the current situation and on individual behaviour in similar circumstances previously — something Sandell calls the situation-model, a co-ordination between the individual, the situation and the alternatives (Sandell 1969, pp. 283 f.). In prehistoric times too the current situation must have governed individual households in their struggle to acquire basic as well as luxury products.

Welinder emphasizes that the ambition of archaeology is to find methods of studying all aspects of human activity in prehistoric societies (Welinder 1986, p. 9). According to Hodges anthropologists and archaeologists work most successfully with regional spatial units, focusing upon sample communities, and thereafter very often upon sample units (households) within these communities (Hodges 1988, p. 26). As modern archaeology tries more and more to research the everyday human problems it seems that a household-economic interpretation of archaeological finds — not least as regards exchange and trade — may be one proper starting point.

Thus the situation of the households is analysed with respect to their use of time, labour, money (means of payment/exchange products) and knowledge in order to satisfy their needs. This approach to the human situation is closely related to the ecological concept which already exists and concerns the co-operation in different respects between man and his environment. However, the household-economic approach pertains more to the users, concentrating on the situation in which private households find themselves as consumers of products and services. As such, households in different societies in antiquity were dependent on their own and external resources. They had in some cases total, or almost total, self-sufficiency and production for domestic consumption but were in others also dependent upon products which were not close at hand.

The household-economic approach means that the household is centred when an archaeological context is analysed, The household may be seen as the organization which produces the pro-
ducts and services consumed by its members. The household needs different resources or means of production in order to meet the requirements of its members (e.g. food, clothes, material for tools). In different ancient societies the households depended on their own and on external resources. In low-technological societies the needs for external products were limited for the majority of the population. But exchange and trade occurred with all probability also from the earliest times, albeit on a small scale and not in a market economic sense. Knowledge of external products spread slowly in some cases and faster in others. There were problems of communication between different regions, for topographical and other reasons. The distribution net was non-existent or rudimentary, travel was hazardous etc.

It may be that early societies were dependent for news/innovations etc. on wandering merchants/agents/middlemen/craftsmen. These itinerant “salesmen” perhaps spread the news by objects, ideas, craftsmanship and the like. The households’ acceptance of the innovations then depended on their access to a certain surplus and their existing or awakened needs.

A household-economic approach could — very schematically — be illustrated via a model; ancient households in terms of exchange and trade.

Hunters/gatherers lived in a predominantly self-sufficiency economy. Production and consumption took place within the framework of the hunting group’s households. The production was dependent upon the absolute needs of the members thereof. Food was gathered with a restricted input of labour and time which made it possible to use the existing resources economically — also allowing time for rest and leisure activities. Existing knowledge regarding the environment and where to find food was extremely high. Mobility was a necessity which meant that ownership of objects were confined to the essentials. The households in a group had to support each other so that all individuals could endure the necessary transfers. There were few specialists and equality was a rule. The need for status products was thus insignificant. Raw materials for tools were not always at hand in the group’s resource area but could be bartered at the regular meetings with other communities in connection with the exchange of matrimonial partners or other social activities.

Low-technological agricultural households combined hunting/gathering with some farming and stock-raising. The mobility was restricted to a certain area. The household moved when the returns decreased. The input of labour to extract food was probably greater than in the hunting society. The household had a limited knowledge of how to spare the agricultural resources and extract a satisfying return. The competition for resources between households was keener and may have resulted in aggressive behaviour. Ownership was more important than in the pure hunting society. The household required objects for different needs, e.g. hard stone for axes to fell trees. Such stone was sometimes to be found locally but otherwise had to be acquired (e.g. by barter) from elsewhere, e.g. flintstone.

Developed agricultural households used the existing resources more frugally. They had the same characteristics as the low-technological as regards ownership of products, competition for scarce resources, aggressive tendencies, but also probably more discernible leadership-structures with a need for status products not available locally. But the main needs were satisfied in a self-sufficient household, although the necessity to barter or to trade must not be overlooked (cf. the need for flintstone for axes or arrowheads, salt for food, slate for ornaments etc.). Increased connections between self-sufficient households, better utilization of existing resources, improved tools and more effective techniques could result in a surplus to be used for exchange and trade, e.g. for products not available nearby.

Urban households in ancient times were more dependent on external resources, although many Medieval households also had their own farms. As a rule, however, the urban households were consumers of farming products but producers of craft products. Time, labour and knowledge were important factors of production for the households and crucial for their ability to use their existing resources in order to pro-
duce for both their own needs and for sale in order to be able to buy other necessities. The function of markets was to satisfy the needs of the households. Surplus from the hinterland was brought to the markets for sale. The more urbanized the society, the more dependent the households became on exchange and trade and thus external products.

Perhaps the following table can relate the above-mentioned households to different “economies”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hunters/ Low-techn.</th>
<th>Gatherers agricul.</th>
<th>Dev. agricul.</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-sufficiency</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchange</td>
<td>(X)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>(X)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

X = normal condition
(X) = incipient condition

Discussion

Apart from by way of e.g. gifts, tribute, robbery the diffusion of artefacts in exchange and trade in former societies occurred for varying cultural, social, economic and ecological reasons. From a chorological point of view artefact diffusion can be attributed to nature, ideas and demography. Product diffusion in antiquity satisfied different needs, basic as well as status, which of course varied over time according to type of households and their resources. The forms for the diffusion fluctuated between direct transfer to distribution via “middlemen”. The relations between “seller” and “buyer” may have been one-sided or two-sided — in the latter case a kind of exchange and trade if the transaction had a peaceful character. But there was no need for the transaction to have the characteristics of a market economy, which is a fairly recent phenomenon. Diffused materials/products had an exchange value. This fluctuated in different places due to supply and demand, which in turn depended upon the topographic conditions, the existing means of transport/communication, the existence of eventual “sellers” and “buyers” and conceivable, acceptable means of payment/exchange goods.

It seems to me that exchange and trade in different forms over time has been of great importance for the development and expansion of societies in conjunction with other factors while changes in societies over time influenced exchange and trade. Not only social leaders but probably much more the ordinary people played a major role in this process — or in the author’s vocabulary — the households, the co-resident groups controlling certain resources mentioned above. But because a high proportion of the ordinary households’ exchange and trade concerned perishable consumer goods this has not resulted in many archeologically traceable artefacts. The real role of e.g. local trade is thus a subject which might be further analysed in future. This calls for hypotheses or qualified guesses regarding the perishable products in circulation, to supplement the non-perishable artefacts which have come to light.

A household-economic approach in an archaeological perspective could, concerning ancient households’ need for products, provoke — increased awareness in different investigations regarding the needs and requirements of ancient users/households of products for subsistence and other purposes at different periods;
— concentration on the various innovations with respect to utility goods, status goods, long-distance products and local products;
— consideration of the different conditions over time for ancient households and the various resources at their disposal;
— evaluation of the artefacts as expressions of the economic situation of the households, considering the hypothetical value of the products in the then existing circumstances.

This way of analysing exchange and trade could perhaps supplement existing techniques. It could be applied to e.g. settlements or market places. The following questions could be asked in an investigation of a settlement:
— What did the households on a dwelling site need during a given period as regards products for subsistence, own production, status or luxury?
— How did this need influence the degree of self-sufficiency and own production?
— What were the households’ possibilities of acquiring “foreign” products, taking into account their location, the environment and access to distant resources?
Attempts could be made to trace the packaging used for the products brought to market places in order to illustrate its significance for exchange and trade during different periods. It is a fact that packaging has existed and probably been used as long as products have been carried from one place to another. It protected the products during transport and storage, and delimited suitable purchase and consumption quantities. It eased the handling of the product and also provided a means to identify the product and its producer and inform the purchaser thereof. Early examples of packaging include pottery, barrels and wooden chests, unfortunately to a large extent perishable materials.

Furthermore the prerequisites of the surrounding region could be studied on the basis of a production factor analysis in order hypothetically at least, to reconstruct the eventual comparative advantages of the region in ancient times. The household-economic approach discussed above could be supplemented by an analysis of the relative value of artefacts based on their weight and the distance to their place of origin (on the assumption that the value of products diffused increases with the distance from their place of origin due to value added via risk-taking, transport costs etc.). The formula to be used is weight multiplied by distance to the place of origin to give the “transport-work” in kilo-kilometers. A comparison of the relative values of such calculations in different regions could indicate the economic capacity of the place investigated, although such an analysis incorporates disturbing factors, because some objects may have been diffused in other ways than by exchange and trade.

Further, the eventual relative values of diffused products may hint at the economic sacrifices made by the households to acquire the products, and thus the wealth of the market place and its surroundings. Such an investigation would also reveal what type of products could have been diffused by way of exchange and trade, taking into account at the same time the difficulty in determining what are trade goods and goods dispersed for other reasons.

Finally — which is important — an analysis which makes use also of qualified considerations as to what type of non-perishable products were needed during the time in question could give some knowledge of the external needs of the ancient households. These needs concerned of course not only products from nearby but also those from other regions or from “abroad”.

The households’ dependence on resources in their vicinity and at a distance has to be taken into account. A household economic approach — as described above — may supplement the attempts to shed light on the economic and social conditions of ancient societies, their wealth and the then existing political influence of exchange and trade. It will thus contribute to the study of human activities in prehistoric societies.

I am well aware of the difficulty of using a theoretical approach such as that described above but nevertheless considers that it may illuminate the highly complex structure of the exchange and trade systems in former times.

Concluding remarks
It remains of course to prove the theoretical considerations outlined here. Such a test must start with a study of properly excavated sites which are also thoroughly documented. The household-economic approach could then be applied in order to test the possibility of examining the artefacts, the sites and their functions from a different angle, such as e.g. the needs and requirements of the individual households which — taken together — formed the basis for the development of the sites over time.

A model could be a point of departure. Consideration can first be given to e.g. the production factors. For each of them several archaeological indications can be identified as being of interest in an household-economic approach. Secondly, artefacts may be classified according to their functions, e.g. for consumption, use, work (raw material etc.), status, means of payment. Thirdly, the archaeological finds must also be used to discern possible types of households existing at the sites, e.g. “leading individuals”. Fourthly, their role may be discussed in relation to different types of product exchange such as barter, gift exchange, administrative exchange, incipient market exchange, trade in a market economy context etc.
Helgö in Lake Mälaren, Central Sweden is an excavated, well documented site where crafts were pursued in workshops, where connections with far away places apparently existed, where a market was perhaps held occasionally, but which — nevertheless — was only inhabited by a few households at the same time. Perhaps Helgö together with other conceivable sites in the Mälaren Valley could be a suitable point of departure for the household-economic approach outlined above?

References

Sammanfattning
När utbyte och handel diskuteras i arkeologin, utgår man ofta från ledande personer och deras roll i detta sammanhang. Sällan beaktas att individer i tidiga samhällen ingick i hushåll som hade olika behov och krav på föremål m. m. från närområden såväl som från avlägsna trakter. Då man talar om hushåll bör dessutom skillnad göras gentemot begreppet familj. I förhistorisk tid och fram till modern tid kunde hushåll i en jordbruksekonomi bestå av flera generationer/familjer som hade olika behov och krav på tillgång till naturresurser, arbete, kapital, kunskap och organisation. Byte av produkter var en nödvändig funktion i omgivning och produktion för egen konsumtion samt ett samhällets mottagande för inflytande (innovationer) utifrån.

Handelsbegreppet ses vidare såsom sammansatt av olika element såsom motiv, former, bytesvärde (pris), relationer/strukturer, säljare, köpare, produkter, betalnings- och transportmedel. Definitionsmässigt betraktes byte och handel som en aktivitet med uppgift att från säljare till köpare förmedla föremål m. m. anpassade till skilda behov och därvid att sådana som ursprungligen inte finns på platsen på lämpligt sätt och med för ändamål lämpade medel tillhandahålls. Ett hushållsekonomiskt synsätt skisseras som
bakgrund för arkeologiska överväganden om byte och handel. Därvid understryks bl. a. vikten av att ta hänsyn till olika hushålls behov, även vid förhistoriska analyser. I en hushållsekonomisk analys beaktas hushållens situation med hänsyn till nyttjande av tid, arbete, pengar (betalningsmedel/bytesvaror) och kunskap för att tillfredsställa sina behov. I en arkeologisk analys kan med denna utgångspunkt hushållen sättas i centrum och ses som en organisation som producerar produkter och tjänster att konsumeras av hushållets medlemmar. Även i tidiga samhällen fanns dock också behov av icke egenproducerade föremål. Dessa kunde spridas av vandrande säljare/hantverkare t. ex.

I artikeln skissas ett antal modellhushåll för att illustrera det hushållsekonomiska synsättet (jägare/samlare, lågtekniska jordbrukshushåll, utvecklade jordbrukshushåll samt stadshushåll) samt understryks bl. a. vikten av ökad medvetenhet i olika undersökningar om behov och brukarkrav på produkter för livsuppehåll och andra syften under olika tider. Olika frågor, som bör ställas för att komplettera existerande metoder i samband med analys av byte och handel, tas upp.

I artikeln pekas bl. a. på vikten av att uppmärksamma förpackningarnas betydelse i samband med byte och handel, liksom att utföra en analys av områdets produktionsfaktorer för att få en uppfattning om dessa eventuella komparativa fördelar i forna tider. Artefaktternas relativt värde kan konstateras utifrån antagandet om ökat värde med avstånd från ursprungsplats genom att uträkna transportarbetet i kilokilometer. Härigenom kan en viss uppfattning erhållas om den ekonomiska kapaciteten i ett område, dvs. de där befintliga hushållens ekonomiska förmåga att förvärva externa produkter. Författaren menar att ett hushållsekonomiskt synsätt kan komplettera andra metoder för att belysa tidiga samhällens ekonomiska och sociala förhållanden, förmögenhetssituation m. m. Ett teoretiskt synsätt av det slag som skissas i artikeln kan dock vara svårt att praktiskt tillämpa. En utgångspunkt för en praktisk tillämpning är bl. a. ganska väl utgrävda och dokumenterade platser.

Helgö i Mälaren är en delvis utgrävd och väl dokumenterad plats med hantverksaktiviteter, förbindelser med avlägsna platser och där marknader då och då hölls men som sannolikt endast beboddes av några få hushåll samtidigt. Kan Helgö jämte flera liknande platser vara en lämplig utgångspunkt för att pröva ett hushållsekonomiskt synsätt?