Clamber of the dead: material ontology and cosmological affect within the hunter-gatherer mortuary traditions of the Eastern Baltic 4000-3000 cal. BC

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ABSTRACT

The application of clay to the heads of deceased hunter-gatherers within the Middle Neolithic burials of Finland and Latvia was originally identified by researchers working in these regions during the 20th century. This practice stands apart from the deeper-seated traditions of grave adornment which characterise the hunter-gatherer archaeology of the Baltic region during the Middle Holocene. However, the variable extent to which these ‘death masks’ are preserved and recorded has confounded attempts to discuss their meaning or significance in detail. This paper approaches the problem through a discussion of the materials involved in masking, rather than the forms represented by the masks themselves. Through this discussion, an understanding of the relationship between material ontology and cosmology emerges, which is subsequently situated within a socio-historical context through a review of the available radiocarbon dates and broader patterns of social change in the Middle Neolithic archaeology of the Eastern Baltic.

KEYWORDS

Ontology; mortuary; mask; Comb Ware; affect

Introduction

The Middle Holocene is defined by a characteristic process of interstadial climatic amelioration which is observable within the global palaeoenvironmental record from c.7000 – c.3000 cal BC (Park et al. 2019). This period marks a phase of immense cultural fluidity and social diversity for the communities of hunter-gatherers living around the Baltic Sea. Despite the relatively early appearance of ceramic technologies, and sporadic experiments with livestock herding and cereal cultivation, fisher-hunter-gatherer lifeways remain dominant throughout the Baltic region for the duration of the Middle Holocene (Apel et al. 2018; Piličiauskas et al. 2017, 2020).

During this time, the Baltic Sea formed the nexus of a series of interconnected hunter-gatherer waterworlds. These were structured across the sea itself, the islands within it, its coastlines, and associated lagoonal and lacustrine bodies of inland water. An extensive system of rivers and estuarine wetlands connects the Baltic Sea to inland regions of Fennoscandia, the North European Plain and Northern Russia. Across this region, water facilitated the movement of people and the exchange of ideas and material culture throughout the Middle Holocene. Consequently, there are a series of observable consistencies in the hunter-gatherer archaeology of the Baltic region, and this has previously been treated as a single unit of analysis for hunter-gatherer research (Zvelebil 2006).

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This paper will examine one specific, historically situated phenomenon which emerged in the Eastern Baltic during the early 4th millennium cal. BC: the application of clay, ochre and amber to the faces of the deceased within primary inhumations. It will define the challenges that this practice has presented for conventional approaches to the study of archaeological masks which rely on the details of form to explore representation. Our research will take a different path; instead pursuing an approach which hinges around concepts of material ontology and affect.

**Baltic death masks of the 4th millennium cal. BC**

The practice of creating ‘death masks’ appears around the Eastern Baltic in the early 4th millennium cal BC (Ahola 2019; Edgren 2006; Nilsson Stutz, Larsson, and Zagorska 2013). Generally, this entails covering the face of the deceased with worked pieces of amber set in layers of clay that are 5–15 mm thick – and in a limited number of instances this also involves the setting of circular amber rings, disks or buttons over the eyes (Denisova 1994; Zagorskis 2004; Zagorska 1997). Within the subsequent discussion, burial numbers will be referred to in parentheses, following the site name. Clear examples of this practice can be found at Zvejnieki in Latvia (206, 225, 263, 275, 317) and at the Finnish Typical Comb Ware sites of Harikka (3 & 7), Kolmhaara (1), and Pispa (X). Further burials from Finland and Latvia feature material embellishment of the head and face, which appear to be variations on this theme (Table 1). The Finnish sites are noted for their general lack of bone preservation (Ahola, Salo, and Mannermaa 2016), but negative grave features have been identified archaeologically, and their fill deposits dated through a combination of material culture and direct radiocarbon methodologies. Instances of small, paired amber buttons/discs, or head-shaped clay deposits at the end of these grave features, have led to their interpretation as extensions of the clay and amber masking practices observed at Zvejnieki. Some of these clay fragments feature impressions of facial hair and small amber artefacts, or remnants of tooth enamel, further suggesting similarities to the Zvejnieki burials (Edgren 2006). Edgren notes that the majority of the Finnish examples originate from collective graves; an observation which also holds true at Zvjeniek (see

**Table 1.** Instances of burials featuring “death masks” in the Eastern Baltic, as identified by previous authors. C = cemetery site; CaS = Cemetery at settlement site; GaS = Grave at settlement site.

| Site     | Site type | Burial | Individuals in grave | Clay | Ochre | Amber |
|----------|-----------|--------|----------------------|------|-------|-------|
| Latvia   | Zvejnieki | C      | 206                  | Y    | N     | Y     |
| Latvia   | Zvejnieki | C      | 225                  | Y    | Y     | Y     |
| Latvia   | Zvejnieki | C      | 263                  | Y    | N     | Y     |
| Latvia   | Zvejnieki | C      | 275                  | Y    | N     | Y     |
| Latvia   | Zvejnieki | C      | 276                  | Y    | N     | N     |
| Latvia   | Zvejnieki | C      | 317                  | Y    | Y     | Y     |
| Finland  | Kolmhaara | C      | 1                    | Y    | N     | Y     |
| Finland  | Harikka   | C      | 3                    | Y    | N     | Y     |
| Finland  | Harikka   | C      | 7                    | Y    | N     | N     |
| Finland  | Pispa     | CaS    | X                    | Y    | Y     | Y     |
| Finland  | Vaarteranta | CaS     | 3                    | Y    | N     | N     |
| Finland  | Vaarteranta | CaS     | 9a                   | Y    | N     | N     |
| Finland  | Vaarteranta | CaS     | 9b                   | Y    | N     | N     |
| Finland  | Kangasa   | CaS    | 3                    | N    | N     | Y     |
| Finland  | Kanava    | GaS    | 1&2                  | N    | N     | Y     |
Ahola’s (2019) research on Stone Age burial practices in Finland has established that these occur predominantly within cemeteries, despite the existence of individual graves at settlement sites or within the landscape during the Typical Comb Ware period.

The Zvejnieki examples were typologically dated to the Middle Neolithic by the site excavators (Zagorskis 2004), and account for six of the 33 (c.18%) burials confidently ascribed to the Middle Neolithic. However, this is most likely an over-representation of the true proportion of masked individuals – as some of the 276 graves lacking a direct date must be expected to belong to the Middle Neolithic. Marine-reservoir adjusted direct radiocarbon dates ascribe the earliest masked burials to 3821–3463 cal BC (see Table 2). This period of time straddles the Typical Comb Ware (4200–3750 cal BC) and Porous Ware (3750–3250 cal BC) phases of Meadows et al.’s (2018) refined chronology for the Middle Neolithic burials at Zvejnieki. Edgren (2006), and more recently Ahola (2019), ascribe all of the Finnish examples of these practices to the Typical Comb Ware phase of the Middle Neolithic. This has now been comprehensively dated to the 3800–3545 cal BC, based on Bayesian models derived from marine-reservoir adjusted radiocarbon dated food crusts on Typical Comb Ware pottery, and charcoal from securely associated contexts (Pesonen and Oinonen 2019).

Table 2. C14 dates from burials featuring “death masks”. The Zvejnieki dates have been corrected for the carbon reservoir effect, following Meadows et al. 2018.

| Site     | Burial | Radiocarbon measurement | Calibrated date (BC) |
|----------|--------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| Kolmhaara | 1      | 4992 ± 60                | 3946–3650            |
| Vaateranta | 9a    | 4835 ± 80                | 3788–3376            |
| Zvejnieki | 206    | 5285 ± 50                | 3512–3207            |
| Zvejnieki | 225    | 5110 ± 45                | 3312–3003            |
| Zvejnieki | 277    | 5545 ± 65                | 3821–3463            |
| Zvejnieki | 317    | 5105 ± 50                | 3316–2988            |

Figure 1. Probability distribution plot of radiocarbon dates from 4th millennium cal BC clay masked burials. Shaded area shows the modelled extent of the Typical Comb Ware period in Finland, after Pesonen & Oinonen (2019).
Figure 1 demonstrates that the initial appearance of this practice seems congruous across Finland and Latvia, despite other differences in local material culture. The later dates from Zvejnieki suggest that this practice persisted in Latvia for longer than in Finland, and may even continue into the earliest phases of the Corded Ware period (c.3250 cal. BC onwards).

The recurrent covering of the face with clay has led previous authors to identify these practices as a form of death mask (Nilsson Stutz, Larsson, and Zagorska 2013). The broader suite of Baltic Middle Holocene funerary rituals included placing grave goods around the head, pelvis, hands, knees or feet, the inclusion of ochre within the grave feature, the adornment of the body with animal tooth pendants, and the inclusion of faunal remains (Mannermaa et al. 2021). Considered within this repertoire of practice, this specific focus on using clay and amber to cover the face is discrete and distinctive. It stands apart from other practices involving the head (Elliott and Coneller forthcoming), such as the placement of strung animal tooth pendants in latitudinal or longitudinal arrangements around the cranium (e.g. Gurina 1956; Zagorska and Lóugas 2000), or the placement of stones or animal teeth on or in the sense organs (e.g. Butimas 2012). The placement of amber over the eyes is distinct from the latter practice in two respects. Firstly, the dates of the burials where amber is placed over the eyes are all tightly grouped within the early/mid fourth millennium cal BC (see Figure 1), whereas the broader practice of placing animal teeth and stones over the sense organs extends right through the Middle Holocene period. Secondly, the material choices made in selecting objects to place over the eyes, mouth, ears and nose vary to an extent. However, they appear to focus on hard materials – hard stones or animal teeth (tooth enamel representing the hardest tissue in the body). The relative softness of amber, the chronological specificity, and its spatio-temporal congruence with the appearance of clay around the head of the deceased, suggests that this is a distinct practice, and not an extension of the preexisting attention to placing hard materials over the orifices of the head.

Given the specific focus of these clay-based practices on covering the face, ‘mask’ seems an appropriate term to use within these contexts. Interpreting the form of these masks, however, is complicated by their variability. Whilst some feature amber rings placed specifically over the eyes, these form a minority of cases. When amber does feature, it can take the form of globular beads, buttons or disks, and can appear in a variety of locations around the face and cranium. There is little consistency in the precise thickness of clay applied, or its extent across the head beyond the face. The use of ochre to colour the clay is variable, and often absent – being recorded in three of the 15 (20%) examples listed in Table 1. The situation is further compounded by poor organic preservation conditions at the Finnish sites, which inhibit our ability to critically consider the exact areas of the head to which clay was applied. Cumulatively, these factors confound any attempts to discuss the masks as images, or their visual references. The finer details of their physical form, from which these discussions conventionally draw, are impossible to ascertain. As such, interpretations which focus primarily on the placement of amber discs over the eyes, and draw historical connections to later traditions of votive material offerings placed at the facial orifices within funerary contexts (e.g. Butimas 2012; Edgren 2006), struggle to develop arguments which account for the formal ambiguity and diversity present within these examples.

However, this need not inhibit critical engagement with the significance of this practice. Our inability to discuss the way in which facial features are depicted offers an opportunity to side-step some of the historically rooted dualism of concealment and revelation that underpin Western understandings of mask function (Pizzorno 2010). We are free, perhaps, to explore non-Western mask ontologies. Pizzorno (2010, 10) argues that, in some non-Western societies, masks act as
cosmological lenses. They function primarily as objects to be looked through rather than at; looking through a mask allows the wearer to see from their own world into another. A specific example is provided by the work of Fienup-Riordan (1987), in her collaborations with the renowned Yup’ik mask carver Nick Charles in late 20th century Western Alaska. Here, the concentric design of ceremonial masks is deeply rooted within Yu’pik cosmology and echoed in other material contexts across a range of social settings. Through this pattern, attention is drawn to the dot at the centre of the circle; the aperture between worlds.

Taking this non-representational approach to the Eastern Baltic death masks situates the mask as a contact surface between the living and the dead; with each taking up a distinct position on respective sides of the mask. It could therefore be argued that these masks form a lens or membrane between the world of the living and the world of the dead. As such, a more fruitful form of analysis might focus on the materials involved in the creation of this cosmological lens, rather than the specific forms or features depicted.

**Material affects**

Conneller (2011) argues that archaeologists have long prioritised form over material within their analyses, and that this runs counter to a growing body of theory concerning the relationship between these concepts. Ingold (2000) has highlighted that conventional associations of form with culture often underpin this ontological hierarchy. Citing the broader body of philosophy arguing for material affects (Deleuze and Guattari 1999; Simondon 1964), Conneller (2011) argues that the properties of materials emerge through technological interactions, and furthermore that tracing how these properties emerge provides an insight into past articulations of culture, nature and the supernatural. This places the focus of analysis on the properties of clay and amber (as they emerge through both technological processes and depositional combinations) and a consideration of why these particular materials were combined to create cosmological lenses to adorn the faces of the dead.

The material choices made in the creation of these masks appear fraught with contradictions. Superficially, clay and amber appear diametrically opposed – the fluid plasticity of clay (Boivin 2008) contrasting abruptly with the density and relative immutability of amber. Polished amber is translucent; clay, in all of its forms, opaque. Clay is often described as cold, whilst amber can be warm to the touch. However, closer inspection of these materials muddies some of these distinctions. Both clay and amber, when treated in certain ways, possess lustrous qualities. They partially reflect light, and their surfaces can be smooth and slick to touch. Although the effect may take significantly more time to achieve, amber can be endowed with continuously smooth surfaces and a fluid form, similar to that of clay. Clay, when dried, or fired, has a more stable form, similar to amber. Both also have effects that might be seen as indicating a material animacy: amber has a static, electromagnetic charge which means it can attract small things such as particles of dust when rubbed on clothing; clay transforms from wet and malleable to hard with the ability to hold its form when dry or fired.

The binary distinction between translucence and opacity is also slightly more complex when we consider other ways in which materials can act as transmitters. The translucent nature of amber noted above allows for the transmission of light through this material, albeit in a discoloured and refracted form. Whilst clay unequivocally blocks the transmission of light, its extreme plasticity affords the ability to transmit form, when applied to a firm shape or object which acts as a mould or a stamp. This produces a negative impression of the original material, often very precise in its form;
this property was well-known to people producing Comb Ware pottery where the forms of other objects, such as wood/bone, cord, shell and fish vertebrae were used to make impressed designs (Akulov 2019).

**Clamber**

The novel material created in the combination of clay and amber (let us call it clamber) therefore appears to hold properties of both transmission and transformation at its core. Although not universally practiced, the repeated occurrence of amber rings in areas of these masks which correspond to the eyes of the deceased suggests an intention for interaction between the dead and the mask itself. Zvejnieki 225 features amber rings set over the eyes of the deceased and sealed by clay (Zagorska 2008, 122), and whilst the preservation conditions in the other 14 burials makes the precise details of this relationship impossible to establish, it should be noted that the comingling of clay and amber within clamber would not have allowed the literal transmission of light from outside the mask onto the eyes. A combination of factors including obscuring clay, variations in the precise positioning of amber within the mask, and the filling of the grave itself suggest that, the translucent affordances of amber functioned on a conceptual level, rather than physical. The shape of the deceased’s face is precisely moulded in the interior of the mask – as evidenced by the impressions of facial hair on clay from the Finnish sites (Edgren 2006). On the side of the mask facing the living the finer details of the deceased individual’s face would be distorted and coloured blue or blue-grey from the clay, or red from the application of ochre. In this way, the clamber mask acts as a physical and conceptual membrane between the deceased and the surrounding world – allowing the unidirectional transmission and transformation of both vision and physical form.

The ability of clamber to transform may also be key to understanding its role within mortuary practices. Clamber alters both the properties of light and the form of the deceased, creating effects which are simultaneously recognisable and strange. In other words, something we might consider to be ‘otherworldly’; to exist in a familiar, yet different reality. In allowing the deceased to ‘see’ a different form of light, whilst appearing transformed to living observers, clamber allows the deceased to do more than represent the face of death. It allows the deceased to ‘be’ in a different world, through their vision or perspective into the world of the dead; where light behaves differently; where to the dead, human faces retain their form, but to the living, on the other side of the membrane the dead take on a different appearance (Figure 2).

A further factor to consider in interpreting the clamber death masks of the 4th millennium is their near exclusive occurrence at cemeteries, and frequent occurrence in group burials, in close proximity to other individuals who were not treated in this way following their death. This highlights a key aspect of their broader social context; that not everyone was selected to wear a clamber mask. As such, the clamber lens not only allowed the wearer to ‘be’ dead, but to ‘be’ dead in a different way to the other people. Clearly, it was not deemed necessary for everyone to view light though clamber, or transform their facial features in order to successfully transition from life to death. So what might the selection of a smaller portion of the society to wear clamber masks in death be telling us about the cosmologies within which these mortuary practices were situated? Here, the unidirectional nature of transmission afforded by clamber may come into play. Conceptually, a clamber lens allows light from the world of the living to pass through to the face of the dead – albeit having been transformed – a kind of ‘deadlight’. As such, it allows the wearer to see the world of the living. At the same time, the clay covering gives the face of the
wearer a presence within the world of the living – albeit in a physically altered state. It allows the wearer to be in the world of the living, as a dead person. In this way, we might see the clamber lens wearers as having the ability to observe the living world, and to have presence within it, from the world of the dead.

**Case study: Zvejnieki 316/317**

The practice of using masks for the dead may also be tied in with other ontological concerns that are given form in the ritualized treatment of the dead body, and its resonance with other cultural practices. The double grave 316/317 at Zvejnieki offers an opportunity to explore these concerns in more detail – within the context of a recently excavated burial with evidence for a rich array of mortuary practices extending beyond the characteristics listed in Table 1 Here an adult (35–40 years old) female (316) and an adult (25–30 years old) male (317) were buried side by side, in a relatively deep grave, on their backs with their limbs in extension (Figure 3). The grave was extremely rich in grave goods including at least 135 amber pendants, two large and one small amber ring, over 100 beads made from tubular bird bone, one tooth pendant, a bone awl (made from elk bone), a flint knife (Larsson et al. 2017), and 68 beads made from fossilized sea lilies (Macâne 2020). The male’s face and the anterior side of his cervical vertebrae were covered by a fine and intensely red sediment, interpreted as the remains of an ochre-coloured clay mask covering the face and neck.
(Figure 4). The archaeoathanatological analysis confirms that the bodies were buried simultaneously, shortly after death, in a deep pit that was immediately filled with sediment (Nilsson Stutz and Larsson 2016; Larsson et al. 2017).

This analysis suggests that the body of the masked male had been tightly wrapped in its entirety before burial (Nilsson Stutz and Larsson 2016; Larsson et al. 2017). This arrangement, in combination with the face mask would have radically altered the appearance of his body at the time of burial. The wrapping is identified only by the secondary evidence of how it has affected the body during
decomposition, creating a strong bi-lateral pressure along the body, and maintaining anatomic elements, such as the feet, in forced positions that would have required an additional support (Figure 5). We do not know what the wrapping consisted of, but given how tightly it exercises the pressure, it would have had to be strong and flexible, probably ruling out more sturdy and unmalleable forms of bark wrapping and basketry. A combination of animal skin and rope, made from animal or plant material, seems a more likely candidate for the bindings which obscured the

Figure 4. In-situ cranium of Zvejnieki 317.
shape of the body. The wrapping process could have included several complex practices which manipulated both the binding materials (preparing skins and fibers), and the body itself. Like the clamber mask, this wrapping therefore became a membrane; dividing internal and external spaces through the creation of specific effects. The process may even have included a form of activation for the transformation of the dead: A scorched stone found behind the sacrum appears to have been intentionally inserted into the wrapping – perhaps as a form of index to heat, used to transform both food and clay – turning the grave into a metaphorical cooking pit (Figure 6). When considering this preparation of the body in grave 316/317, we see how the mask is enmeshed in a broader cultural structure, blending everyday practices such as food preparation, pottery making, and the work with skin and fibers, to highly ritualized practices such as burial, or rock art. Here, the clamber mask forms part of the container for the body; a semipermeable membrane between the worlds of the dead and the living.

The perceivable transformations of the body in decay appear to have been a key part of the broader experience of death. Just as clay drying in the sun or fired in a kiln transforms the material from wet, sticky, malleable and soft, to hard rough, and dry, so the dead body transitions through the processes of decomposition and putrefaction from soft flesh and skin to hard white bone. The selection of clay for the mask may have intentionally harnessed these parallels to accelerate the transformation from living individual to dead bones – and may also be echoed in the technological transformations plant matter or animal hide materials underwent in their preparation for the body wrapping. This transformation of the body was not only known at

Figure 5. Tightly constricted foot bones of Zvejnieki 317.
Zvejeniki, but repeatedly experienced, visible and witnessed. At Zvejneiki, the mortuary practices, especially during the Middle Neolithic phases of the site’s use, involved repeated encounters with human bone. Disturbances of older graves are common in the heavily used parts of the cemetery, with younger graves cutting through older ones, and with fragmented and disarticulated human remains occurring frequently in the soil. To prepare a grave at Zvejneiki would have entailed an encounter and engagement with the remains of people, transformed from cadavers to skeletons during their time in the earth, and it is likely that this transformation would have been given meaning in the myths, symbols, and rituals of death (Nilsson Stutz, Larsson, and Zagorska 2013). It even seems as if this fragmentation and absorption into a collective mythical place must have been central to the mortuary practice, overriding other concerns such as the preservation of the integrity of the individual body. But there appear to be exceptions.

In this regard grave 316/317 provides an interesting example of somebody who was dead ‘in a different way from other people,’ not only in the preparation of the body at the time of burial, but in the preparation of the grave with regards to future interactions. Just like many other graves, the burial cuts through several pre-existing grave features, and the disturbance can be traced through the presence of remains belonging to multiple previously interred people in the grave fill. The archaeothanatological analysis reveals that there are even indications that some of these disturbances would have occurred before complete skeletonization of some of these burials (Nilsson Stutz, Larsson, and Zagorska 2013, 1025). Yet, at the same time, there are several

**Figure 6.** Heat scorched stone behind the sacrum of Zvejnieki 317.
indicators that precautions were being taken in order to protect this specific burial from a similar fate. The burial is significantly deeper than the other features in the area, and a large stone (16 cm wide and 30 cm high), was placed in the fill, interpreted as a grave marker (Figure 7). This kind of stone does not occur naturally in the substrate and no other such grave markers have been registered on the site. Here we see a strategy to protect this burial from destruction, and perhaps these measures, along with the containment of the body and the masking of the face, were all complementing strategies to set this individual apart in death – as somebody being ‘dead in a different way.’

As a case study within the broader corpus of clamber masked burials, Zvejnieki 316/317 draws out several different aspects of this difference in death. Whilst the practice of deep-cut grave features and full-body wrapping are difficult to substantiate for other clamber mask burials in the Eastern Baltic, the peculiarity of these practices helps to draw our attention to the variability in the clamber masked burials. As noted earlier, these are neither a normative mortuary treatment or an asynchronous event; clamber masking persists sporadically within this region for almost a millennium. Each burial represents a decision made by a different hunter-gatherer community, facing different opportunities and challenges. As such, these burials are acutely historically situated at the local level, and draw from various other forms of contemporary mortuary practice to tailor a difference in death specific to the individual, community and circumstances.

**Figure 7.** Intrusive stone grave marker for Zvejnieki burials 316/317.
Earth, land, and ontological anxiety in the Eastern Baltic’s 4th millennium BC

On a regional scale, the broader context for the emergence of this clamber masking tradition suggests that both clay and amber played an important role in the shifting social and material worlds of the 4th millennium BC Eastern Baltic. Herva, Mökkönen, and Nordqvist (2017) note that the arrival of Typical Comb Ware in the Eastern Baltic occurs alongside an increase in what they describe as ‘non-vessel clay work’ on archaeological sites, with the appearance of roughly moulded and lightly fired clay balls, fragments and ‘figurines’. This is accompanied by a shift to subterranean dwelling structures, experiments in the addition of asbestos and organic materials to pottery temper, and hints within the paleoenvironmental record of a steadily increasing role of horticulture and woodland clearance. Herva, Mökkönen, and Nordqvist (2017) argue that this marks an ontological renegotiation of the concept of earth, soil and land in the early fourth millennium cal. BC – and that the increased ‘non-functional’ working of clay on settlement sites represents a material expression of this renegotiation. They cite literature on contemporary accounts of the haptic, meditative and mutualistic character of clay work (Bat Or 2010; Sholt and Gavron 2006; Timmons and MacDonald 2008), arguing that clay became a good material with which to think with during the 4th millennium cal BC. The turn of phrase may be borrowed and adapted from Lévi-Strauss (1964) here, but Heva et al.’s argument for thoughtful, meditative clay work as a practice whose very materiality facilitated a renegotiation of the relationship between people and earth within Typical Comb Ware ontology is perhaps more analogous to Berger’s discussion of smoking habits (Berger and Selcuk 2017).

Ahola (2017) characterises unfired clay and pottery as key features of Finnish Typical Comb Ware funerary practices, suggesting that this thoughtful handiwork spilled across the realms of domestic and funerary practice. The application of clamber to the faces of the deceased further supports this, and provides an example of bodily engagement with clay, within the context of a tripartite encounter between clay, living and dead bodies.

Meadows et al. (2018) also note a shift in subsistence strategy in Northern Latvia during the Middle Holocene – with stable isotope analysis of human remains suggesting a growth in the importance of freshwater aquatic protein within mid-4th millennium cal BC diets. These practices of clay masking therefore appear to emerge within the contexts of connected societies whose relationship with land and earth is in flux – albeit in different ways.

Interestingly, the Typical Comb Ware period is also associated with an increase in the use of amber for communities living around the Eastern Baltic. Amber artefacts begin to be found in larger quantities on Typical Comb Ware sites, and at distances further away from their sources on the Baltic shoreline. Whilst evidence of the direct extraction of amber during the Stone Age is lacking, the assumption here is that this represents increased exchange and communication with groups who had access to the areas of Baltic coastline upon which submerged outcrops of amber are frequently washed ashore. Within funerary contexts, amber appears to share an intimate relationship with shale. Amber artefacts are found deposited in similar areas of the grave feature to shale (Ahola 2017), and the use of both amber and shale to create rings is a feature of the Typical Comb Ware period in Finland. The deeper history of shale in the Eastern Baltic provides important context for this apparent equivalence.

By the early 4th millennium cal BC, high-quality green shale from the Lake Onega region of Northern Russia had been arriving in Finland for over a millennium (O’Shea and Zvelebil 1984). Ahola’s analysis of Finnish grave assemblages demonstrates that shale appears with relative frequency within Finnish Mesolithic and Neolithic burials, accounting for c.25% of the material culture recovered from such contexts. However, this proportion drops dramatically during the
Typical Comb Ware period to 1% of grave assemblages. In contrast, amber artefacts increase from being absent within Mesolithic and Early Neolithic graves to accounting for c.15% of material culture recovered from Typical Comb Ware graves. This dramatic shift in the choices of materials used to furnish graves suggests a change in the forms of social interaction between the hunter-gatherer communities of the Eastern Baltic region during the 4th millennium. This shift is underscored by the use of these differently sourced materials to produce identical artefact forms, such as rings, during this time. Here we see particular artefact types becoming caught up within social interactions, and materialising historicised change. Consequently, the choice to work amber affects – and rings in particular – into the death masks, further captures and compounds these broader, historically situated changes in intercommunity relationships within the materiality of the masks themselves. Had this practice emerged earlier, shale sourced from Lake Onega would have most likely been the material combined with clay to cover the faces of the deceased in Prehistoric Finland. The makers of these masks would have been well aware of this.

As such, it appears that clamber masking techniques emerged in a period of social, economic and material dynamism. It also appears that, during this time, both clay and amber had become material media for the expression of changing relationships between the people and materials which made up the Eastern Baltic world. As such, concepts of change in relation to social and human/land relationships, and perhaps a degree of ontological anxiety, were woven into the materiality and meaning of clamber masking practices. The materialisation of this particular form of interloper may have been a way for prehistoric communities to seek reassurance over the choices they made in the adoption of new practices within a rapidly changing world.

Conclusions
The argument presented above moves archaeological discussions of masks into new territory. In focussing on the materiality of masks, rather than the specifics of the forms depicted within their design, we have attempted to circumvent our own historically situated ontological biases which equate form with culture, and so privilege discussions of form over considerations of material. Approaching the Middle Neolithic death masks of Finland and Latvia in this way has allowed us to generate a rich and contextually developed understanding of the role that these materials played within prehistoric mortuary practices. However, the argument we present here extends beyond the immediacy of the grave itself. Our consideration of the material affects of clay, amber and clamber within the Middle Neolithic societies of the Eastern Baltic unfurls across multiple social contexts, and draws from the use of these materials in a broad range of ways. In doing so, it has begun to illuminate the material ontologies of these groups; the historicised nature of their material choices, and the fluidity of categorisation which underlay their understandings of what materials are and what they were capable of doing. At the macroscopic level, this discussion posits that death masking practices are a human response to changes in material ontology. Our argument recognises that changes in human subsistence behaviour and settlement patterns are inextricably linked to unconscious attitudes towards the material world and its expected behaviour. Change in one is fundamentally dependent on change in the other, and identifying ‘prime movers’ (if such things exist) within these processes is often beyond the reach of prehistoric archaeology. However, identifying the social fallout and behavioural after-tremors of these periods of ontological dynamism is well within the remit of prehistorians, and we hope that this paper serves as a case study in how these processes might play out.
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