When the sea become a monster? The social impact of the Storegga tsunami, 8200 BP, on the Mesolithic of northern Europe

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Around 8200 years ago, the Storegga tsunami, caused by a massive submarine landslide off the coast of Central Norway, struck the coasts of west Norway, Scotland and Doggerland. This event is well known from wide ranging geological and palaeobotanical work undertaken over the last 30 years. What has been less explored, however, is the potential social impact that this natural freak event had on the Mesolithic hunter-gatherer societies living on the coasts and shores of the North Sea. What happened in the tsunami’s aftermath? It has been widely assumed to have been a disaster – but was it? What constituted a disaster in the Mesolithic? In the Mesolithic, people were hunter-gatherer-fishers, they lived by, off, and with the sea. Settlement sites in West Norway were concentrated along the outer coast. People lived on the shores of islands and headlands, or along resource rich tidal currents. Eastern Scottish Mesolithic sites are also found on contemporary coasts, while the coasts of central Doggerland have long since become submerged. What happened to groups in these landscapes on the day the sea became a monster and in the years that followed? In this paper, we will outline a newly started project that will investigate the social impact of the tsunami in areas of the North Sea that have distinctive Mesolithic histories. These coastal inhabitants had, for millennia, developed their own traditions to engage with and learn how to exploit and keep safe from the sea. What can we learn about Mesolithic societies by investigating how communities handled the forces of a tsunami? Responses identified in the archaeological material and environmental archives can potentially inform us of social structures, institutions or ways of living that made the existing societies resilient or vulnerable.