

A Late Dorset Site on Axel Heiberg Island

The territory in the Canadian Arctic Archipelago known to have been occupied by the Dorset people has been extended as a result of the finding of a harpoon head on an old camp site consisting of a number of tent rings, and located about seven metres above sea level, near the east bank of a river connecting Buchanan Lake with Mokka Fjord on the east coast of Axel Heiberg Island. The find was made and reported by Robert F. Barstad of the Calgary office of the Compagnie Générale de Géophysique. The specimen, which is of ivory, belongs to a late period of the Dorset culture and exhibits a number of diagnostic attributes, viz: closed rectangular socket, bifurcated spur, double line-holes and a longitudinal lashing groove from the line-hole to the tip (see Fig. 1).

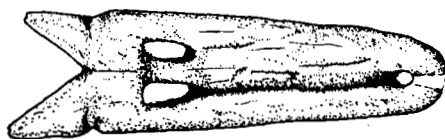


FIG. 1.
2 cm

A similar harpoon head was located by the author and Robert McGhee of Memorial University, Newfoundland, in a Thule house near Cape Storm, on the south coast of Ellesmere Island, in 1974. This specimen was probably intrusive in that it may have been picked up by the Thule occupants from a Late Dorset site located in the vicinity. The Bell site on Victoria Island and the M2 site near Resolute have yielded up a few Dorset harpoon heads with similar characteristics.

A number of harpoon heads found in the Thule District, northeastern Greenland, differ from the type just described in that rivet holes, for securing the end blades, were used more extensively than lashing grooves. Holtved has suggested that the emphasis on rivets and lashing grooves might reflect the use of iron end blades which created the need for a more secure way of attaching the latter. Jørgen Meldgaard of the Danish National Museum has stated (personal communication) that he has reached a similar conclusion from his studies of artefacts of the Arctic Small Tool tradition in the Igloodik region of the Canadian Arctic. The presence of this particular type of harpoon head at the Abverdjar site on Cape Matthew Smith, Melville Peninsula, was confined to a comparatively short time-span with a limited frequency of occurrences. Three of the specimens had lashing grooves and the narrow blade slits (average length 1.4 mm) further suggest the use of iron blades. Indicative of the use of iron end blades was the discovery by the author of small pieces of iron in a Dorset midden area near Cape Storm on the south coast of Ellesmere Island in 1974.

The harpoon heads with lashing grooves from the Abverdjar site were located on beaches 10-12 metres above sea level and dated to between 460 A.D and 710 A.D. (Jørgen Meldgaard, personal communication, 1974). The later of these dates is probably indicative of the temporal placement of the Axel Heiberg Island find and provides further proof of a late northward expansion of the Dorset culture during the latter part of the first millennium A.D.

Peter Schledermann
Department of Archaeology
University of Calgary
Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2N 1N4

NOTICE TO READERS

It is regretted that, due to the cumulative effects of the recent Canadian mail strike, publication both of this issue and that of March 1976 will be delayed. The June issue should appear on schedule.