

Western Elements in the Early Thule Culture of the Eastern High Arctic

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ABSTRACT. Excavations of Thule culture winter sites in the Bache Peninsula region on the east coast of Ellesmere Island have yielded a number of finds which indicate a strong relationship to cultural developments in the Bering Sea region. Specific elements under discussion include dwelling styles, clay pottery, needle cases, a brow band and harpoon heads. Evidence is presented suggesting an initial arrival of the Thule culture Inuit in the eastern Arctic around 1050 A.D.

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the origins and expansion of the Thule culture into the Canadian Arctic. That this event took place as a result of population movement and migration from the west is never seriously contested. However, the timing and causes of this movement are subjects of continuing debate.

During the past three summers, excavations have taken place on several Thule culture winter sites in the Bache Peninsula region on the east coast of Ellesmere Island (Fig. 1). The winter settlements, containing approximately 150 house ruins distributed over 12 sites, span a 500 to 600 year occupation period which ended about 1700 A.D. The retreat of the Thule culture Inuit from this region to the more viable Thule district in northwest Greenland probably marks the final abandonment of the Canadian High Arctic as a semi-permanent settlement area.

Research into the early Thule culture occupation in the study area has been one of several primary objectives, particularly in relation to the temporal and spatial affinities of the Nûgdliit and Ruin Island phases initially described by Holtved (1944; 1954). Since our research is clearly indicating that there is little reason to separate the Nûgdliit and Ruin Island phases, for the purposes of this paper the two will be treated as one.

THE SKRAELING ISLAND SITE

Skraeling Island is located about three miles northeast of the abandoned RCMP Station at Alexandra Fiord. The data presented in this paper come from excavated house ruins on the Skraeling Island site (Fig. 2). The 23 dwelling ruins from this site are all associated with the Ruin Island/Nûgdliit phase. The houses have all been partially or completely excavated, producing a large inventory of artifacts and faunal remains. The amount of cultural debris within the houses varies considerably, as is true with most Thule culture sites.

The culture history of the Skraeling Island site is without question closely related to cultural developments in the Bering Sea region of the western Arctic.

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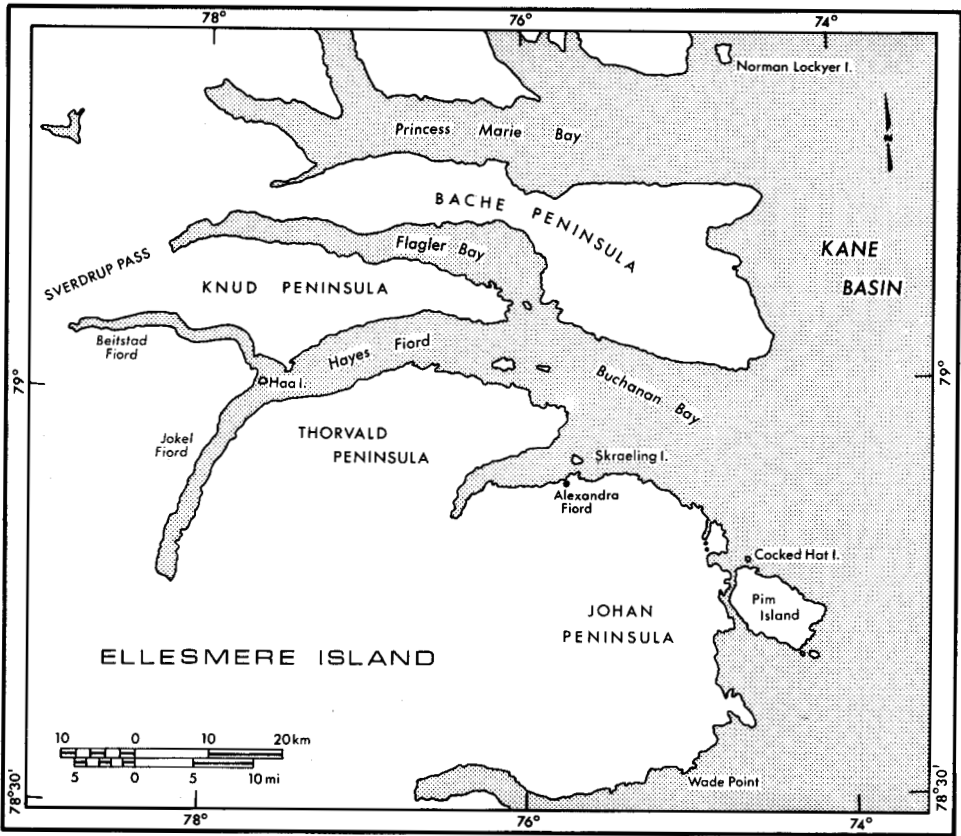


FIG. 1. Study area.

Subsequent to the initial arrival of the Thule culture pioneers in the Bache Peninsula region there may still have been periodic contact with the west. The following discussion will focus on a number of artifacts from the site which show a particularly strong link with the western Arctic. These items include dwelling styles, clay pottery, needle cases, a brow band, and harpoon heads.

Dwelling Styles

The general design of the Nûgdliit/Ruin Island dwellings on Skraeling Island and in northwest Greenland is clearly related to Alaskan house styles of Western Thule affinity in the Bering Strait region (Holtved, 1944 II:153-156; 1954:102, 193; Schledermann, 1978:470-472).

There are two basic house styles: the main dwelling, and the festival structure. The latter dwellings are usually attached to or in very close proximity to the former. The large square to sub-rectangular festival structures measure between 5 and 7 m in interior dimensions. The structures are constructed from sod and whalebone and very large boulders which at times take on megalithic proportions. In a couple of instances the roof support originally consisted of large sections of baleen overlain by skin. In house ruin 8 the roof structure was found

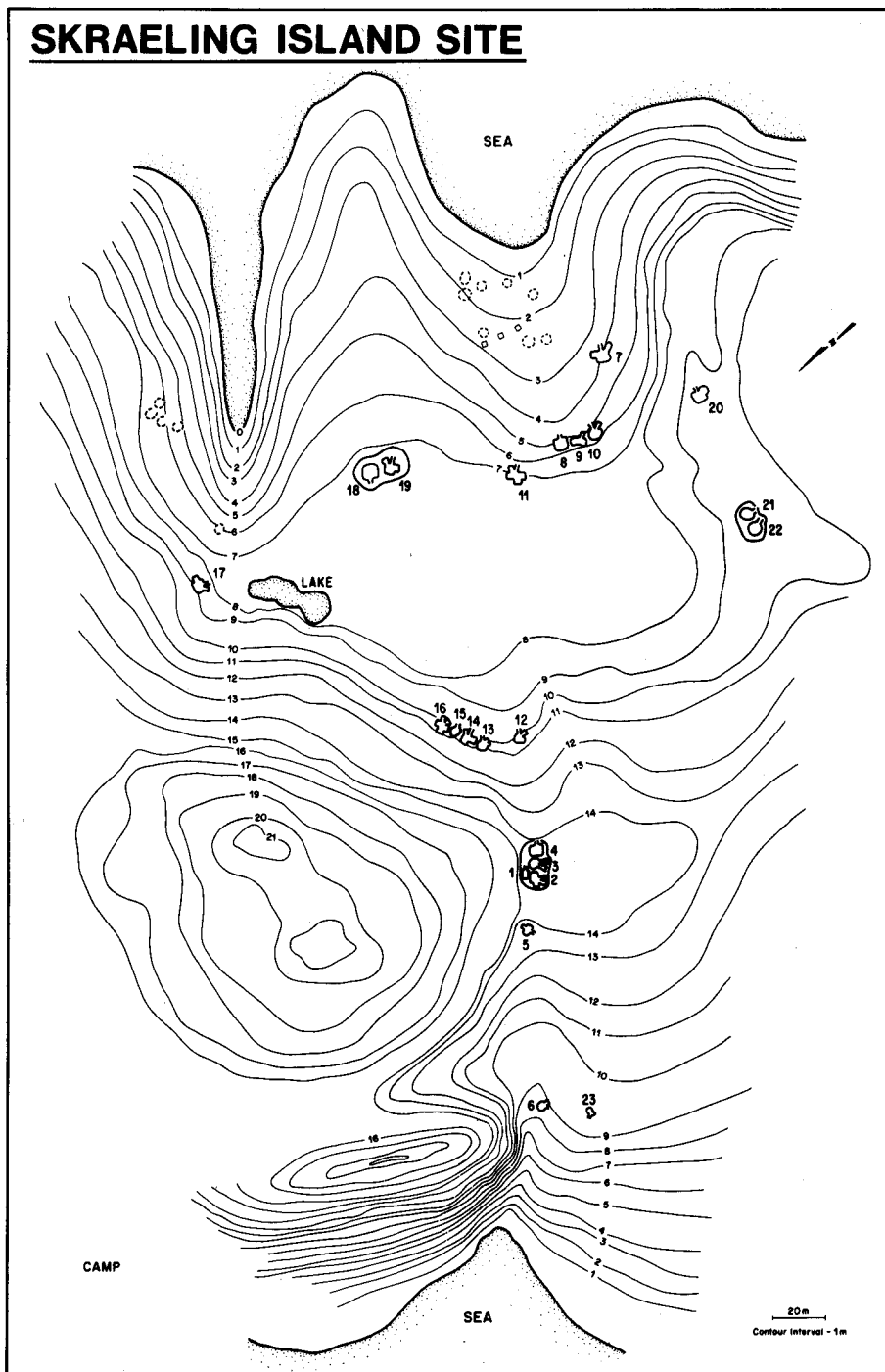


FIG. 2. The Skraeling Island Site.

still partially intact following the collapse of the dwelling. Thick layers of cultural debris on the flagstone floors attest to considerable, perhaps even predominant use of these festival structures.

The smaller family dwellings range in outline from roundish to very angular forms and nearly all feature a separate kitchen room entered from the main dwelling and located parallel to the entrance passage. In general, it can be said that these family dwellings become progressively angular in appearance and often develop one or more sleeping area offshoots. There is usually no trace of a flagstone floor, nor are there any clear signs of sleeping platforms. In some instances the sandy floor is raised slightly above the main floor creating a sleeping area which, in a few houses, contained a layer of heather. The separate kitchen compartments are very similar in design throughout the early stages of the Thule culture. The short tunnels lead into a small working space situated in front of several small stone-partitioned fire hearths. The hearths are raised, partially through successive reconstruction and use, above the kitchen floor and in many instances close to the present surface level.

Clay Pottery

Thick, black earthenware fragments were found in many of the dwellings on Skraeling Island. While the majority of the pottery fragments are undecorated, a large rectangular body sherd found in two pieces near the floor of House 20 and several fragments of a vessel from House 15 feature the Barrow Curvilinear

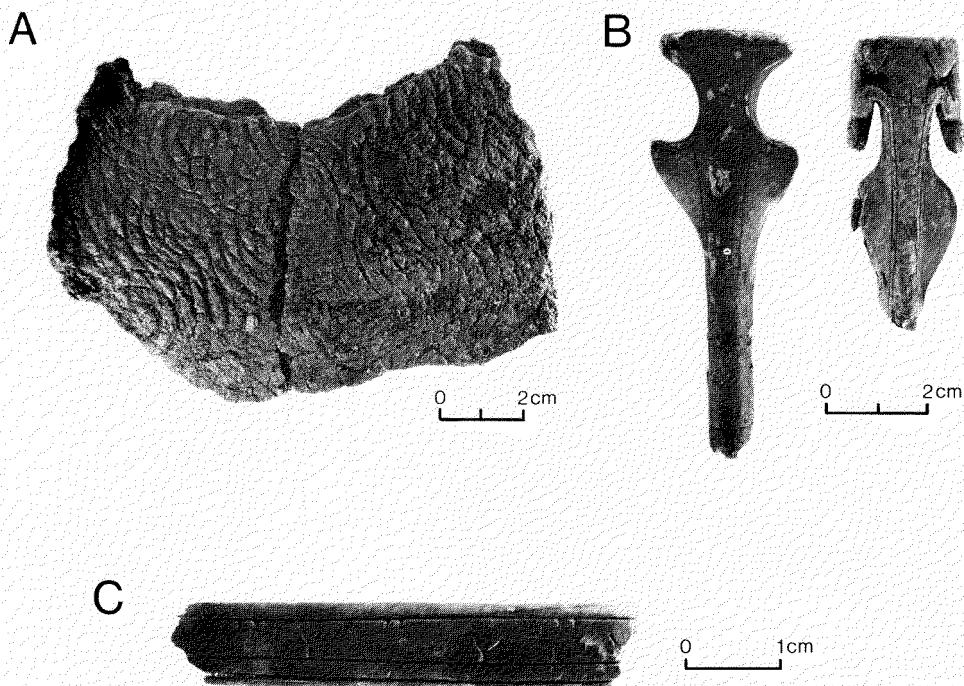


Plate 1. a) Barrow Curvilinear Paddled pottery; b) needlecases; c) brow band fragment.

Paddled decorative pattern consisting of sets of concentric circles deeply incised into the exterior surface (Plate 1a). The sherds vary from black to grey in colour and are between 13 and 20 mm thick, tempered mainly with pebbles and sand particles and characterized by a granular, laminated texture. In some cases, the decorated exterior surface is also heavily encrusted with a hard, black deposit of burned fat or blubber.

Described by de Laguna (1947:234), as the "Birnik type of paddled decoration", the Barrow Curvilinear Paddled design has been found on lamps and cooking pots from sites in northeastern Siberia, the Kotzebue-Kobuk River area of Alaska, and coastal Alaska from Norton Sound north to Point Barrow and eastward to the Cape Parry region (Ford, 1959:198; Giddings, 1952:95; 1964:104; 1967:89; de Laguna, 1939: Fig. 1b; 1947:234; Larsen and Rainey, 1948: Plate 91(8,10), Plate 95(20); Taylor, 1972:10,25).

The occurrence of Barrow Curvilinear Paddled pottery on sites in the Bering Sea area from the Birnik period of 500-900 A.D. to Western Thule sites of 1400 A.D. defines the broad chronological position of this ware. Its discovery in Thule culture sites on eastern Ellesmere Island represents the most easterly extension of this ceramic style.

Identification of the specimen from House 20 as a lamp or cooking pot sherd is difficult although the minimal curvature of the fragment suggests that it may be a remnant of a shallow, saucer-shaped lamp such as those described by Collins (1937:238) from Puduk sites and by Ford (1959:202, Fig. 98 e-g) from Birnik.

Speculations concerning the manufacturing locale of the decorated pottery fragments are interesting, albeit inconclusive. The earthenware items represented by the sherds in Houses 15 and 20 may have been made in the Bache Peninsula region or may have been transported across the Arctic from Alaska by the early Thule migrants. To date, no pottery paddles have been found on eastern Ellesmere Island to suggest localized manufacture of Barrow Curvilinear Paddled pottery. The remaining pottery from Skraeling Island may represent attempted local manufacture, which resulted in poorly fired, friable vessels of questionable utility. The gradual shift to the use of soapstone vessels was undoubtedly a reflection of the difficulties in producing well-fired earthenware.

Needle Cases

During the 1978 field season, a decorated ivory needle case of distinctly western style was located in House 6 on Skraeling Island. This artifact has been illustrated and discussed in an earlier paper (Schledermann, 1978:471). Further excavation of House 6 during the past summer produced another ivory needle case of related design to the earlier find (Plate 1b). Both needle cases feature the characteristic "wings" of the eastern style of needle case (Mathiassen, 1927 II:92-97) and the incised parallel line decoration on the two artifacts is quite similar. However, the later find differs from most, if not all, eastern Arctic needle cases by the presence of two anthropomorphic figures crawling or crouching face downwards at the upper end of the needle case. In a review of Alaskan needle cases, Boas (1908:321-344) illustrates and describes a number of specimens having zoomorphic figures along the sides, none of which closely

duplicates the Ellesmere Island find. Due to the poor condition of the latter needle case, it is difficult to identify the particular species represented except as a quadruped, most likely human. Mathiassen (1930:62) discusses a winged needle case in the Stefansson collection from Langton Bay between the Mackenzie and Coronation Gulf which apparently has two bear figures crawling on the wings. Illustrations of this specimen have not been located, making a detailed comparison impossible.

Brow Band

An ivory brow band fragment (Plate 1c) from House 17 on Skraeling Island is ornamented with a number of design elements found in western decorative art. The simple Y figure and grouped triangles with bases on a line are replicated on brow bands from the Nukleet site at Cape Denbigh and are common elements in Punuk art (Giddings, 1967:98-101; de Laguna, 1947:262, 263).

Harpoon Heads

The harpoon head collection from Skraeling Island now contains eight specimens (Plate 2) similar to those found by Holtved (1944 I:186; 1954:62) at the Ruin Island and Nûgdliit sites in northwest Greenland. The two primary harpoon head styles at the latter sites are those designated by Mathiassen (1927:24,25) as Thule types 2 and 3. Unique to Ruin Island and Nûgdliit in Greenland is the presence of vestigial or rudimentary spurs on these harpoon heads. A variant of Mathiassen's Thule Type 3 found at Nûgdliit is keeled with an outflaring fore-end giving it a hexagonal shape in cross-section. Harpoon heads of the latter style from Point Barrow, Alaska are described by Ford (1959:83) as Sicco Open Socket harpoon heads and are generally characterized by raised line ornamentation in the form of spurred lines forming triangles over the line hole or straight spurred lines emphasizing the angular shape of the head.

Five dwellings on Skraeling Island yielded Sicco Open Socket harpoon heads decorated in a manner similar to those described by Ford (1959:83). Instead of triangles over the line hole, the Ellesmere Island specimens are either undecorated in that area or feature a curved line with spurs on one side. Of the six decorated specimens, two show faint evidence of a vestigial knob on the spur whereas the other four are too fragmentary or eroded. The two undecorated harpoon heads exhibit more pronounced vestigial knobs on the spur.

The distinctive Sicco Open Socket harpoon head style has been considered as a definitive hallmark of the early Thule expansion into the High Arctic (Taylor, 1963:458; McGhee, 1970). In addition to the Greenland and Skraeling Island finds, Sicco style harpoon heads have been found in a number of sites in the Arctic including Kukulik, St. Lawrence Island (Geist and Rainey, 1936:173, 174); Walakpa Mound, Alaska (Stanford, 1976:19); the Booth Islands near Cape Parry; Minto Inlet and Lady Franklin Point on Victoria Island; Inman River east of Cape Parry; Maxwell Bay on the south coast of Devon Island (McGhee, 1970:179; Taylor, 1963:458, 459) and the M1 site on Cornwallis Island (Collins, 1952:51).

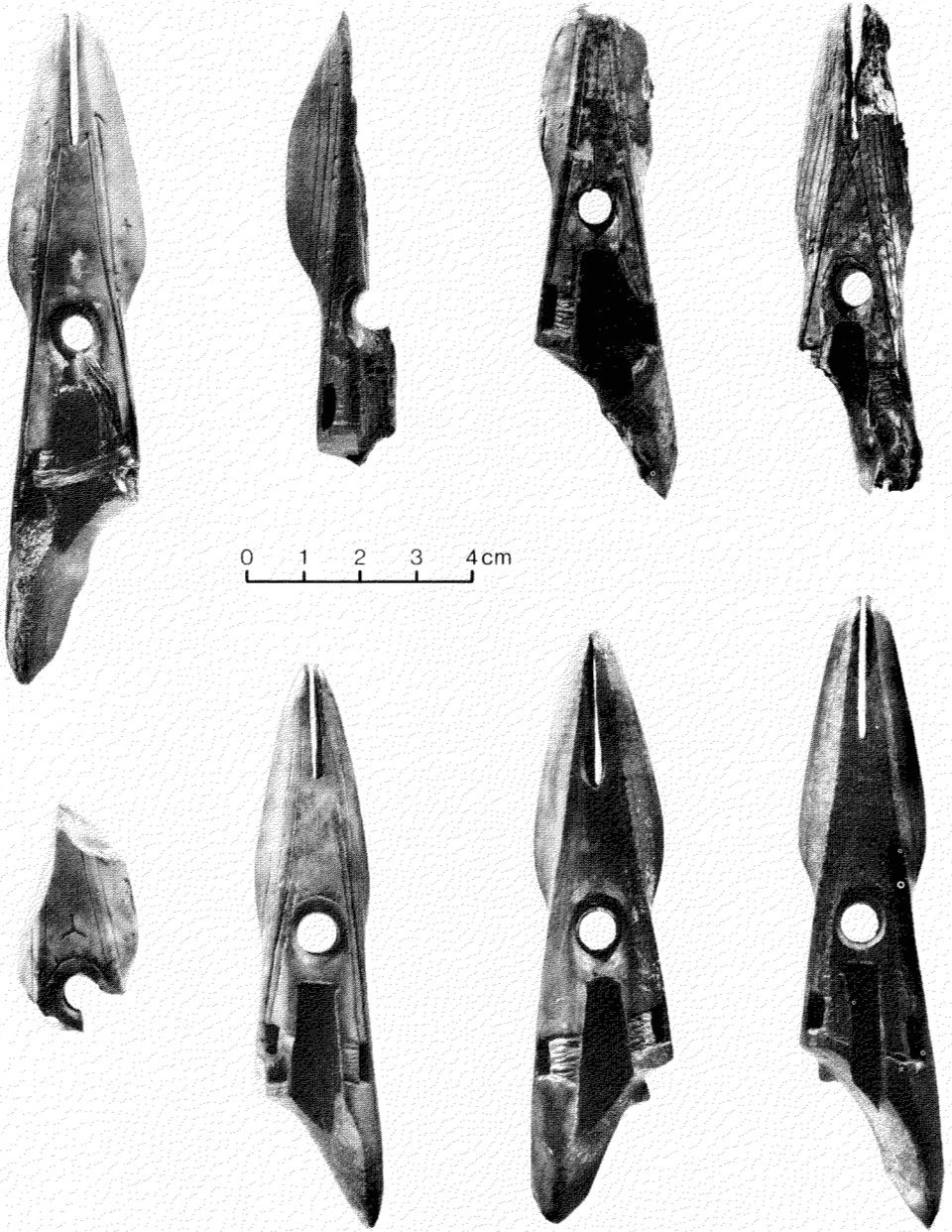


Plate 2. Harpoon heads.

The stylistic attributes of these harpoon heads are most closely related to Punuk forms from the Bering Sea region designated by Collins as Open Socket Type III(a)x. Harpoon heads of this style were found in the Early Punuk upper levels of the Miyowagh site at Gambell, St. Lawrence Island and were the dominant form at Ievoghiyoq, a developed Punuk culture site which was occupied just prior to the abandonment of Miyowagh and for a lengthy period afterward (Collins, 1937:119, 183, 203).

DISCUSSION

The strong cultural links between the early Thule culture occupation of Ellesmere Island, northwest Greenland and the Punuk-Western Thule stage in the Bering Sea area are unquestionable. The questions now remain whether the so-called Nûgdliit and Ruin Island stages represent the pioneering arrival of the Thule culture in Canada and Greenland, and if so, when did this event take place? The present data from the Ellesmere Island research can now, at least tentatively, be applied to those questions.

The excavation results from Skraeling Island strongly suggest that no particular difference exists between the Nûgdliit and Ruin Island phases. The changes which do take place during the first centuries of Thule Inuit occupation of the High Arctic are in degree only. If we are to retain Holtved's terminology let us acknowledge the arbitrary separation between Nûgdliit and Ruin Island.

A total of 12 radiocarbon dates associated with the early Thule culture on Skraeling Island have now been processed by Dr. W. Blake, Jr. of the Geological Survey of Canada and additional dates are being finalized. The dates have been run on a variety of materials in order to study the variations known to exist between various sample sources. Without going into great detail on the results of the radiocarbon assessments which will be presented elsewhere, it would appear that the initial arrival of the Thule culture Inuit on Ellesmere Island and in Greenland is an event which took place probably not much earlier than between 1050 A.D. and 1100 A.D. This statement is based upon the assumption that harpoon heads of the finely decorated Sicco Open Socket type found on Skraeling Island reflect an early Thule culture stage. Radiocarbon dates associated with these finds are no earlier than the 12th century. Four radiocarbon dates on willow, walrus tusk and driftwood samples related to the Nûgdliit stage in northwest Greenland range between 910 A.D. and 940 A.D. (Tauber, 1973:105, 106). Our own studies indicate that such materials tend to produce dates older than the event. A comparison between willow and heather dates from similar occupation units on Skraeling Island indicate a discrepancy of over 100 years, heather consistently and probably more accurately producing the younger date. The clustering of the Greenland dates is remarkable considering the three different materials involved and the many decades of museum storage and possible treatment prior to dating.

If the pioneering Thule culture first arrived in the High Arctic around 1050 A.D. or even 1100 A.D. the following reassessments are in order.

- 1) The Norsemen had settled Greenland nearly a century prior to Thule culture Inuit arrival.
- 2) The eastward expansion of Thule or Punuk culture was not so much associated with the onset of the warmer Atlantic climatic episode but rather with the latter part of that period. The eastward movement may have related to economic and population pressures in the Bering Sea area rather than resulting from the effect of a warming climatic trend.

To what extent the Skraeling Island data relate to early Thule culture developments in the central and eastern Arctic must remain the subject of later discussions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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