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CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR (1) NORSE AND NATIVES IN THE EASTERN ARCTIC

Patricia Sutherland

When the Norse lived in Greenland between the tenth and fifteenth centuries AD, two distinct aboriginal populations were present in the eastern Arctic: the Dorset Palaeo-Eskimos, descendants of the first

inhabitants of Arctic North America, occupied Arctic Canada and far north-western Greenland when the Norse arrived. The Thule Inuit, who were the ancestors of the present-day inhabitants of the area, immigrated to the eastern Arctic from Alaska at some time between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries ad.

Historical accounts of meetings between native groups and the Norse are rare and vague. The earliest mention of Arctic natives appears in the *Historia Norwegiae*, an Icelandic manuscript which may have been copied from an original dating to the mid-twelfth century. This brief description tells of apparently hostile meetings with natives living beyond Greenland, whom the Norse called *Skrælings*, and who used tools and weapons made from stone and walrus ivory rather than iron (Jones 1986:18). This account may refer to either Dorset or Thule people.

The archaeological evidence bearing on the question of Norse–Dorset contact derives from a number of different localities (Figures [44.1.1](#) and [44.1.2](#)). A fragment of a bronze vessel, of a type made no earlier than the end of the thirteenth century, was found in a Dorset dwelling in the Thule District of north-western Greenland and is interpreted as an indication of direct contact (Appelt *et al.* 1998). Small pieces of smelted copper have been recovered from two Dorset villages, one on the east coast of Hudson Bay (Harp 1975) and the other on the south coast of Hudson Strait (Plumet 1982). These objects are assumed to be of Norse origin, but probably reached their final locations through native trade routes, and therefore tell us little about the nature of meetings between the two groups or where

they occurred. Objects which appear to be consistent with a knowledge of medieval European technologies – whetstones, artefacts of soapstone, fibre and wood – have been recovered from several Dorset sites on Baffin Island and in northern Labrador (Sutherland 2000a). The findings from these sites suggest direct contact and more complex interactions than previously thought.

A few later historical records refer to Arctic natives who were encountered in Greenland. These people were first met in the *Norðrsetr*, the northern hunting grounds to which the Norse travelled in summer in order to obtain walrus ivory and other



Figure 44.1.1 Map showing the distribution of objects

relating to Norse contact recovered from aboriginal archaeological sites (see p. 615).

commodities for use in their trade with Europe. The *Norðrsetr* is usually considered to be the western coast of Greenland to the north of the Norse farming settlements in the area around Disko Bay, but it may have extended as far north as the Upernavik region at almost 73° latitude. A Norse presence in this region is confirmed by the discovery of a small runestone apparently dating to the latter half of the thirteenth century. A letter written by a Greenlandic priest states that in 1266 a hunting party returned from travelling further north in the *Norðrsetr* than ever before, but they had seen native dwellings only at one location, probably on the Nuussuaq Peninsula at the northern boundary of Disko Bay. The church then sent an expedition still further north, perhaps to the Upernavik region or possibly beyond the heavily glaciated coast of Melville Bay and as far as the Thule District of north-western Greenland. The explorers reported an abundance of seals, whales and bears, as well as native dwellings (Jones 1986:80). Jette Arneborg (1997:44) argues that this account seems to indicate that the Norse were looking for natives with whom to trade, probably for walrus ivory and hides.

Archaeological evidence suggests that both Dorset Palaeo-Eskimos and Thule Inuit were living in the Thule District at the time of this Norse voyage (Appelt *et al.* 1998), but the dominant occupation of the area, as well as of the adjacent regions of Ellesmere

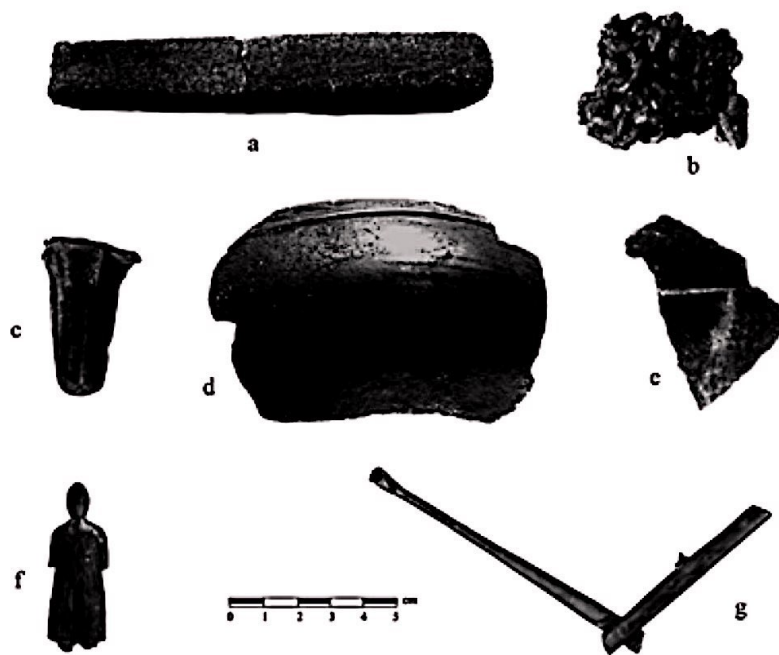


Figure 44.1.2 Selected artefacts relating to Norse contact recovered from aboriginal archaeological sites in Arctic Canada and adjacent regions of north-western Greenland: (a) squared and tapered whetstone (quartzite) (KdDq-9:618,5183); (b) fragment of chain mail (SfFk-4:2); (c) leg of bronze vessel (L3.1466); (d) bowl portion of bronze vessel (RbJu-1:269); (e) bowl portion of bronze vessel (KNK 2280 × 613); (f) wooden figurine apparently representing a person in European dress (KeDq-7:325); (g) arm portion of bronze folding balance (SlHq-3:4). (a, b, d, f, g: Canadian Museum of Civilization; c, e: Danish National Museum.)

Island in Arctic Canada, was that of the Inuit. The dwellings and middens of the Thule people on both sides of Smith Sound have produced a wide variety of objects of Norse origin. In addition to small pieces of metal that have been reworked into blades for Inuit tools and weapons, these finds include ship rivets,

fragments of chain mail, the leg of a bronze cooking vessel, woollen cloth, a double comb, chess pieces, a wooden spoon case, wooden box and tub parts, and a carpenter's plane (Holtved 1944; McCullough 1989; Gulløv 1997; Schledermann 2000). Peter Schledermann (1993) has suggested that the concentration of materials and the nature of the finds indicate a Norse visit to the area, which perhaps ended in shipwreck. Part of a bronze balance of the type used by medieval Norse traders, which was found in a Thule Inuit site on the west coast of Ellesmere Island, likely relates to this event and is suggestive of an intention to engage in trade (Sutherland 2000b).

Objects of European origin, which reached the Inuit through contact with the Norse, are found in association with a number of other sites in Arctic Canada and northern Greenland. The majority of these objects are small pieces of smelted iron, copper or bronze which were valuable commodities to the Thule Inuit, and would have been widely distributed through native trade routes. Other items include a piece of oak wood incorporated in the frame of an umiak found on the north coast of Greenland (Knuth 1980), and a portion of a bronze vessel found on Devon Island (McGhee 1984), which is similar to that recovered from a Dorset site in north-western Greenland. It is currently impossible to determine whether this scatter of materials may have originated from one contact episode, such as the thirteenth-century event in the Thule District described by Schledermann (1993), or whether it resulted from multiple contacts along the eastern coasts of the Canadian Arctic and Greenland

The latter interpretation is supported by an archaeological find from the southern coast of Baffin Island: a small wooden carving that appears to represent an individual in European dress (Sabo and Sabo 1978). The figure is typical of Thule Inuit carving of humans, with a blank featureless face and stumpy arms, but the clothing style is European. It would seem unlikely that such an object would have been traded from Inuit who had met Norsemen in north-western Greenland, and more probable that the artist depicted a European encountered in the area which the Norse referred to as Helluland and which they coasted on their way to Markland and Vinland. It is interesting to note that the Thule village from which this carving was recovered is located only a few kilometres from Dorset sites, mentioned earlier, that have produced evidence suggestive of direct contact.

Historical records contain no further mention of Inuit in the regions to the north or west of the Norse colonies. A few confusing and suspect accounts refer to Inuit attacks on the Norse settlements (Gad 1971:141–57), but no archaeological confirmation of such attacks has been found, and archaeological evidence that Inuit had actually appeared in the area of the settlements prior to Norse abandonment (Gulløv 1997) is inconclusive. Early Inuit sites in western Greenland contain many objects of Norse origin, but it is impossible to assess whether these were obtained by trade or were scavenged from abandoned farms after the Norse settlements disappeared. The oral traditions of the Greenlandic Inuit refer to trade between Norse and Inuit, and of a more complex relationship between the

two peoples occupying western Greenland than is suggested by Norse historical accounts (Gad 1971:158). A divergence also exists between the historical records and the archaeological evidence from north-western Greenland and the eastern Canadian Arctic. The archaeological finds suggest considerably more interaction than do the historical accounts. Direct contact between the Norse and aboriginal groups appears to have occurred in at least two regions: the High Arctic coasts of Smith Sound, and the area of southern Baffin Island/Hudson Strait. Relationships between these groups probably included cautious trade as well as the hostile encounters mentioned in historical reports, and while most evidence relates to the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, meetings may have taken place throughout the period that the Norse occupied Greenland.

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