

## CHAPTER 35

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# CLASSIC THULE [CLASSIC PRECONTACT INUIT]

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## INTRODUCTION

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THE precontact Inuit (“Classic Thule”) lifeworld can readily be carved up into a series of discrete topical areas reflecting such things as the history of research, the chronological unfolding of Inuit history, and the character of particular domains of precontact life (material culture, economy, social life, belief systems) that are given both by the nature of the archaeological record and by analytical conventions that have taken shape in the discipline over the past century. This is largely the tack adopted here. It should be remembered, however, that this organization has inherently limited bearing on the universe as Inuit people lived and understood it—which was undoubtedly shot through with more belief and less system than archaeologists would normally be comfortable with. It seems equally possible (although more difficult, and riskier) to attempt to enter into this world in substantially different ways—from the perspective, for example, of Inuit cosmologies that understand the relationships between people and between people and nonhuman creatures in fashions that Western archaeology typically disallows (Wenzel 1991), or from the perspective of women or children or ritualists rather than that of adult male hunters and household heads. While the nonarchaeological and the perspectival are perhaps necessarily suspended here, they stand as silent witnesses and challenges to the accounts we provide of the lives of people in the past.

Before proceeding further, a note on terminology is in order. “Thule” has been used to refer to a precontact culture in the North American Arctic since Therkel Mathiassen (1927) first employed the term, in recognition of the Fifth Thule Expedition that provided the logistical umbrella for his pioneering research. Thule is the name that Peter Freuchen and Knud Rasmussen had given the trading post in northwestern Greenland from which the project was launched, in joking reference to the far northern island (“Ultima Thule”) of classical geographers from the fourth century BC (Rasmussen 1969

[1927]). However “Thule” also named a mythical Aryan homeland for members of the early twentieth-century Thule Society (who likewise read the classics). Members of this racial supremacist group founded the German Workers Party, which Adolf Hitler reorganized as the National Socialist German Workers (Nazi) Party (the label has been recently resurrected in Germany by the neo-Nazi “Thule Seminar”). Although Freuchen’s and Rasmussen’s Thule post (founded 1910) clearly predates the naming of the proto-Nazi Thule Society (in 1918; Phelps 1963), both names spring from a northern European romanticism that seems largely irrelevant to the Inuit past. Of course any terms (prehistoric, precontact) that archaeologists might adopt will inevitably channel a Western scientific chauvinism, but Inuit is the term of self-reference employed by most Canadian Arctic indigenous groups, and has been adopted by some pan-Arctic organizations. In any case, “Thule” has problematically distinct regional usages (for example in Labrador, Nunavut, and Alaska), and of course contact with post-Norse Europeans (the notional Thule-Inuit hinge) occurred at widely varying times between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Eastern Arctic archaeologists’ “Thule culture” usually refers simply to “precontact Inuit,” and so where possible versions of the latter are used in preference here.

## NATURE OF THE PRECONTACT RECORD

The precontact Inuit record consists of a variety of seasonal settlement types (winter villages, summer camps, travel camps) and features (semisubterranean house depressions, tent rings, qariyit [festival houses], inuksuit [cairns], burials, caches, hearths, fox traps, hunting blinds, boat rests, trails, play houses, hopping stones, etc.), and the artifacts, animal and plant remains, and even human tissue they contain; stray artifacts and debitage; and a vast scatter of slowly deteriorating animal bone. This record also clearly includes a contemporary arctic biome transformed in many details by generations of Inuit and pre-Inuit harvesting and land use, including organically enriched village sites, chemically altered ponds (Douglas et al. 2004), and animal populations shaped by centuries of harvesting and coresidence with humans in the north (e.g., Alter et al. 2012). Less obviously, perhaps, it embraces the textual residues of precontact terminology and placenames (with a material, documentary reality); the historical kernel of contemporary Inuit stories, understandings and practices (the rationale for an ethnoarchaeology); and a contemporary human molecular legacy of millennia of population movements, interactions, and drift. Although arctic archaeologists concentrate on the artifacts, ecofacts, features, and sites, the discipline constantly spills across these boundaries into bioarchaeological, anthropological, biological, and geological problem areas.

The most characteristic features of this record are its exceptional preservation and visibility. Although sediment deposition, soil formation, and coastal erosion have obscured or destroyed some proportion of sites, especially in the Western Arctic where submergent coastlines have erased great swaths of coastal settlement (e.g., Friesen 2013),

in much of the Canadian Arctic isostatic emergence has outstripped eustatic sea-level rise over the course of the Holocene, with the result that settlements once positioned just above the storm ridge for ease of maritime travel are now suspended some meters above contemporary sea level. This removes them not only from the zone of active coastal erosion but from burial and (to a certain extent) disturbance by later occupants of the locale. The most pronounced expression of this is the declining age of Pre-Dorset and Dorset sites as one approaches sea level (Dyke et al. 2011), but some separation of Inuit components occurs as well: relatively ephemeral sites and site components relating to a pioneering Inuit colonization of the Central Arctic occur at slightly higher elevations than Classic ones (e.g., on southeast Somerset Island [Dyke et al. 2011]). The elevation of sites above sea level allowed Therkel Mathiassen (1927) to plausibly estimate the age of “Thule culture” settlements to within a couple of hundred years of the period suggested by contemporary radiometric dating (Friesen and Arnold 2008).

Cold and arid conditions and thin vegetation mats afford slight protection for the refuse deposited in and around warm-weather settlements, but these features lie at the ground surface and so the associated assemblages are organically depleted; in many ways these features are less archaeologically tractable than much older pre-Inuit ones that produce abundant imperishable lithic refuse. Land-based winter settlements, however, are characterized by the accumulation of refuse in and around semisubterranean dwelling features during cold weather, rapid sediment aggradation and seasonal vegetation growth, the eventual slumping and infilling of abandoned house depressions, and the consequent incorporation of some archaeological deposits in permafrost (Reynolds 1995). Deposits in entrance tunnels and on house floors may have been persistently frozen since feature abandonment and collapse, and even seasonally thawed deposits in the active zone benefit from lengthy periods of freezing conditions and protection from wind, water transport, and scavengers. Although permafrost complicates recovery, there is more to recover; the resultant rich faunal and artifactual assemblages have allowed detailed archaeological reconstructions of precontact Inuit lifeways.

## EARLY SETTLEMENT

Mathiassen’s A.D. 1000 estimate for the Inuit colonization of the Eastern Arctic, based on analogy with dated rates of isostatic uplift in Scandinavia, was accepted for decades, before accumulating radiocarbon dating evidence, and a recognition of the inaccuracy of dates on sea mammal materials and driftwood, led to a number of recalibrations of the precontact Inuit chronology. Many arctic archaeologists now recognize A.D. 1200 (and occasionally as late as A.D. 1300; McGhee 2000) as the approximate beginning of the Inuit colonization of the Canadian Arctic, based on a recent suite of radiocarbon dates from stylistically early western Canadian Arctic sites (Friesen and Arnold 2008). A separate and archaeologically distinct population movement—likely arising in northwest Alaska given the nature of decoration of harpoon heads, arrowheads, and

pottery—gave rise to Ruin Island Phase settlement on Ellesmere Island and northwestern Greenland somewhat later (McCullough 1989); dates on Greenlandic Norse artifacts from Skraeling Island (averaging A.D. 1246) nicely agree with a documentary record of a Norse ship being lost in the Nordrsetur in 1247 (Schledermann 1980). This agreement reflects the reasonable accuracy of most recent radiocarbon dates on terrestrial mammal bone and short-lived plant materials.

If a substantial precontact Inuit occupation dates to 1200 and later, what should be made of the occurrence at some sites of lightly constructed winter house features at higher elevations than the bulk of precontact remains? The very occasional occurrence of Natchuk harpoon heads (a North Alaskan late Birnirk or Early Thule type) at a string of Canadian Arctic sites (Cape Kellett, Nelson River, Co-Op, Pearce Point, Lady Franklin Point, M-1, Maxwell Bay, Mittimatalik) further hints at an ephemeral pioneering movement from the Mackenzie Delta–Amundsen Gulf region into the Central Arctic. These initial explorers and colonists presumably expanded along the recently Dorset-inhabited and resource-rich south side of Victoria Island, into Prince Regent Inlet or perhaps Peel Sound (Morrison 1999), rather than navigating the desolate, ice-choked coasts of the north side as suggested in the past.

An attraction of this scenario is that it allows for an early Inuit encounter with Late Dorset groups, likely the indigenous Tuniit of historic Inuit tales, and the inception of a *tradition* of Inuit-Tuniit interaction, without implying that contact was a frequent occurrence during the initial stages of colonization. Such interactions may well have occurred in some areas but were almost certainly projected onto the archaeological record (initially the Dorset record, but later the precontact Inuit one) in most in the form of Tuniit stories; there is no Dorset genetic legacy in Inuit populations (Raghavan et al. 2014). If a distinct movement by Natchuk-using pioneers did not occur then we must imagine the independent abandonment of Natchuks and adoption of plainer Thule 3 harpoon heads across a large swath of the Eastern Arctic, and account in some other way for the elevation gap between ephemeral house clusters and Classic-era communities.

The primary source of the Classic migration pulse appears to have been the eastern Mackenzie Delta–Amundsen Gulf region. An assemblage reportedly collected on the Booth Islands, in the border zone off Cape Parry (Morrison 1990), bears a striking resemblance to early Classic ones from the Central Arctic in the stylistic idiosyncrasies of the harpoon heads. One parsimonious interpretation of this similarity would be that the Booth Islands inhabitants are representative of those who settled the Central Arctic around the early thirteenth century. Information regarding the economic potential of bowhead whaling was presumably transmitted west by earlier pioneering groups (how the Dorset could have served as an information vector is unclear). This need not have involved the “return migration” once posited, but rather the inception of communication channels between east and west, such as are also implied by the occurrence of the distinctive Coronation Gulf “Clachan” variety of Thule 2 harpoon head at sites from the Mackenzie Delta to Hudson Bay to Bathurst Island (Whitridge 1999a).

## CLASSIC SETTLEMENT SYSTEMS

The Inuit colonization of the Eastern Arctic did not consist in a single, momentary pulse, as migrations are often imagined archaeologically, but rather a long-term, cumulative expansion of Inuit groups into ecozones for which they were not always well prepared, either economically or cognitively (Whitridge 2012). Although some episodes were relatively rapid and long-range, perhaps even leapfrogging areas already occupied by Dorset or other Inuit (such as the Ruin Island phase settlement of Ellesmere Island and northwest Greenland by a North Alaskan-affiliated group), others appear to have been more protracted (such as the 200–250-year-long period of gradual expansion down the Labrador coast). Furthermore, regional occupations did not always persist; the Barrenlands, southern and eastern Greenland, and Labrador were settled at around the same time that the Canadian Central and High Arctic witnessed large-scale abandonments. The Inuit diaspora played out at personal, generational, and multigenerational time scales, beginning, from a North American perspective, with the movement of ancestral Inuit groups onto the Bering and Chukchi Sea coasts in the mid first millennium A.D. (Mason 1998) and continuing through the massive population upheavals of the twentieth century. For present purposes, this important temporal dimension must be suspended so that a schematic picture of precontact Inuit life between roughly A.D. 1200 and 1500 can be drawn from the archaeological evidence.

The Inuit lifeworld can be pictured as a nested series of spatial horizons. At the largest scale is a pan-Arctic Inuit cultural sphere that extends, in the anthropological mind at least, from Bering Strait to Greenland, and south to the Barrenlands and Labrador. However, it seems clear that the cultural commonalities across this vast zone are due more to a recent common ancestry than significant multidirectional flows of people, things, or information, at least in the precontact period. Although large swaths of the Arctic do appear to have been connected for a time, this is better understood in terms of interlocking regional trade networks (Friesen 2012; McCartney 1991; Whitridge 2002a). Valuable materials such as iron, copper, ivory, sea mammal oil, caribou hides, wood, and amber moved between adjacent groups, and perhaps occasionally over longer distances through down-the-line exchanges, as Vilhjálmur Stefánsson imagined a Copper Inuit soapstone pot making its way to Greenland. The normally limited spatial scope of trade, however, is suggested by the absence of such portable preciosities as native copper and meteoritic iron more than a few hundred kilometers from their presumed sources.

At a finer scale still, people sharing a dialect and affiliation to a named group (historically designated with the *-miut* suffix, meaning “people of,” as in Aivilingmiut, literally “people of Aivilik”) historically constituted the largest regularly interacting social network. *-miut* groups were sometimes linked with particular land-based winter settlements, sites of repeated seasonal aggregation, and sometimes with looser associations of communities joined by kinship and economic commonality and only occasionally by common residence (such as the temporary snow house communities of the Central

Arctic). Archaeologically, we likely encounter both in precontact contexts. Large, intensively occupied sod house settlements, or settlement clusters, that may have anchored such polities occur in some parts of the Canadian Arctic (e.g., the Mackenzie Delta, east and southeast Somerset Island), but are absent elsewhere (e.g., the High Arctic channels surrounding Bathurst, Cornwallis, and Devon Islands). In the latter areas -miut groups may have been small, or widely dispersed, presumably reflecting the productive possibilities of the region under a precontact Inuit organizational regime.

Regional groups occupied a number of different settlements over the course of an annual round. Savelle (1987) has nicely illustrated the seasonal articulation of these site networks in different parts of the Central Arctic. Winter villages composed of durable sod houses (Figure 35.1), as well as transient households occupying qarmaq or even snow houses, were usually the largest seasonal aggregations. Archaeologically, sod house (iglu) villages are by far the best preserved and most conspicuous traces of precontact settlement. The rapid and long-term accumulation of debris at these sites while in use, and collapse or slumping of architectural sod and stone onto house floors after abandonment, often sealed refuse beneath an insulating layer of sediment, resulting in near-perfect preservation of some deposits in permafrost. Large precontact snow house (igluviak) villages are largely inferential. They were reported historically, typically on sea ice (where they would leave no trace) to maximize access to ringed seal, and likely occurred prehistorically, but unambiguous archaeological examples have not been recorded. A dense concentration of sod patches and Inuit occupational debris at Port Leopold may represent a historic example. The ubiquity of snow knives (and related gear, such as shovels and snow

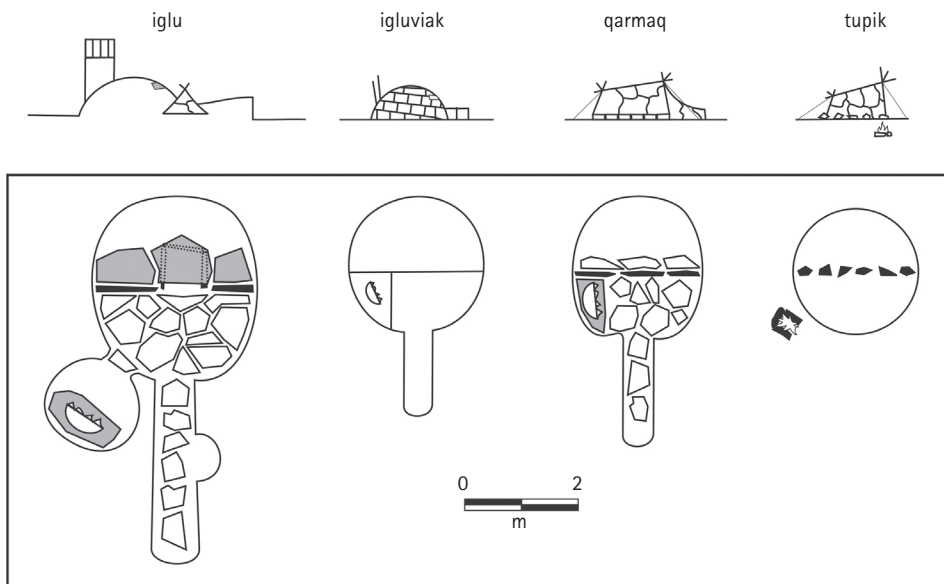


FIGURE 35.1 Principal precontact Inuit dwelling types.

Illustration by Peter Whitridge

probes) in precontact contexts hints that snow houses were an important part of seasonal travel technology (the sophistication of this complex—including dogs, komatiks, kayaks, and umiaks (large open skin boats) —is a key technological divide between Inuit and earlier groups), even where sod houses were the primary winter dwellings.

Large late summer or early fall villages composed of tents (sing. tupik), or more durably constructed qarmat (sing. qarmaq, a hybrid of iglu and tupik consisting of an excavated foundation and skin roof), were occupied during periods of intensive sedentary harvesting of whales, caribou and fish (Savelle 1987). Although preservation of organic artifacts and faunal remains is sometimes marginal at such sites, the spatial arrangement of features can be revealing of settlement organization. For example, the late-summer whaling village of PaJs-4, on southeast Somerset Island, preserves clusters of qarmat joined by visible paths leading to a central qargi (pl. qariyit, a ceremonial or men's house), suggesting that affiliated households, perhaps aligned with individual whaling crews, were nested within a larger organizational grid (Savelle and Wenzel 2003).

Small travel camps, consisting of one or a few tents or snow houses, were periodically occupied by individuals or small numbers of families while on the move, and during periods of the year when larger aggregations were unsustainable. Tent rings occur throughout the North American Arctic, but unfortunately are relatively uninformative about their occupants' lives; short-term occupations produced little refuse, and the absence of a sediment cap results in poor organic preservation. Nevertheless, they represent an important phase of some groups' seasonal round, and point to the antiquity of an essential seasonal periodicity to Inuit social life that Marcel Mauss recognized more than a century ago. Only recent historic versions of small-scale snow house camps have been reported (Savelle 1984), but precontact versions are plausibly identifiable. A variety of other settlement forms occur less consistently, such as camps consisting of individual winter houses, mixed tupik-qarmaq and iglu-qarmaq villages, and ephemeral camp sites represented by stray hearths or "hunter's beds."

Neighborhoods within larger settlements, composed of closely adjoining and sometimes internally communicating residences, constitute a distinct scale of sociospatial integration that does not occur at all large sites, but has perhaps not been attentively sought out. PaJs-4 provides a somewhat exceptional example from a warm-weather site, but clear groupings of two, three, or more sod houses are not uncommon at winter sites (e.g., Skraeling Island [McCullough 1989], Learmonth [Taylor and McGhee 1979], Porden Point [Park 1989], Silumiut [McCartney 1977]). At Qariaraqyuk (PaJs-2), for example, seven such clusters account for 22 of the site's 59 heavy semisubterranean features, including 18 dwellings and four qariyit (Whitridge 1999a). For North Alaska, Burch (1981) notes that this sort of house group, termed upsiksui, consisted of closely affiliated households (e.g., headed by parent and children, siblings, or other kin) that acted together in various economic and social capacities. Savelle and Wenzel (2003) similarly assign the house clusters at PaJs-4 to ilagiit, or extended family groups. Although merely subdivisions of the largest settlements, ilagiit could compose the entire population of small ones.

Families, or groups of families, occupied a seasonally varying array of dwelling types that were perhaps the most symbolically intricate of all settlement settings (Whitridge 2008).

The subdivision of iglu, igluviak, qarmaq, and tupik into distinct spaces for cooking, working, sleeping, and housing food and equipment is reflected in the outline of dwellings visible on the ground surface, and internal features revealed by excavation. The precontact tupik typically had a circular floor plan, divided in the middle by a row of stones that delimited sleeping and work spaces, the latter sometimes including a simple stone hearth or lamp stand. Conical elevations are typically depicted in precontact engravings (e.g., Maxwell 1983), though historic versions were sometimes joined in pairs or had extended entryways.

The precontact iglu in the Eastern Arctic typically included a slab-floored entrance tunnel, sometimes with shelves and alcoves, a paved floor, and an elevated semicircular sleeping platform edged with stone slabs and underlain by a central storage compartment. Some precontact houses consist of two or, more rarely, three platforms (arranged in an L or cloverleaf shape, respectively) facing onto a large paved floor, and paired houses with their own floor areas, sharing only part of a tunnel, also occur. The earliest houses, dating to the exploratory movement and early Classic settlement period, often have a circular kitchen area joined to the house by a short tunnel (e.g., Arnold 1986; Whitridge 1999a). Later Classic houses have shallower kitchen alcoves bulging from the house wall near the tunnel mouth, and the latest precontact houses sometimes have elaborate lamp stands abutting the sleeping platform and no cooking alcove (Whitridge 2008). Consumption of the abundant driftwood likely encountered by early colonists (suggested by the skewing of early Classic radiocarbon dates on driftwood) likely made a detached kitchen progressively less sensible.

Important varieties of occasional dwelling that likely exist but have not been identified are the relatively ephemeral structures reported ethnographically to be used by menstruating women and women in childbirth (Burch 2006). Large sod house settlements are often associated with a variety of non-iglu features, sometimes (as at PaJs-2) including large ovoid depression that might represent the excavated foundations of such lightly constructed skin- or snow-roofed menstrual structures. Burial cairns also often occur near villages, usually inland of the primary residential zone (i.e., in sight of, but apart from, everyday activities). More occasional constructions include paired stone columns for elevating umiaks and kayaks beyond the easy reach of dogs (Savelle 1987), simple cobble hearths that supported a soapstone lamp, and features utilized in play, such as lines of hopping stones and cobble outlines of houses and boats (Hardenberg 2009; Walls 2012). Inuksuit (cairns which served a wide variety of functions; Hallendy 2000) could consist of only one or a small number of stones placed strategically so as to be visible from a distance. Features grade almost imperceptibly into the portable, manufactured things that we would consider material culture.

## MATERIAL CULTURE

Precontact Inuit (and allied Yupik) sites with extensive permafrost likely produce the most highly differentiated hunter-fisher-gatherer assemblages in the world. The profusion of distinct varieties of sometimes delicate manufactured objects (gut parkas,



bird-wing whisks, sinew cord) is only partly due to exemplary taphonomic conditions. More profoundly perhaps, Inuit inhabited a space that was thoroughly and deliberately saturated with the fruits of their own creativity. Whereas many small-scale—and especially mobile—societies have prized technological simplicity, striving to minimize the work of perpetually fabricating their world and hauling it from place to place (Ridington 1982), the Inuit adjustment to the lunar challenge of the Eastern Arctic was premised on the opposite choice: foresee every eventuality and multiply the layers of material buffering between humans and a sometimes malevolent nature. The origins of this cultural pattern lie in northeast Asia, since the Old Bering Sea (OBS) precursor of the Inuit cultural tradition appeared at Bering Strait with a complex material culture already in place that closely resembles that of its Classic descendant.

These elements include the equipment and skills to utilize a wide range of animal materials, which was particularly critical in light of the scarcity of usable plant fibers: bone, antler, ivory/tooth, horn, skin, hair, sinew, baleen, feather, gut, and fat. All of these occur in permafrost assemblages, both in finished forms and as manufacturing detritus (even including rendered animal fat, which can take the form of a slippery congealed layer on house floors). Wood, often harvested from beaches as driftwood that originated either in the North American Subarctic or, via the Transpolar Drift, in northern Eurasia, was an essential component of some technologies, such as boat frames and weapon shafts, and was spliced into composites of suitable size. Although useful plant materials are scarce in most areas, they were sometimes important; heather was used as bedding and sphagnum for diapers and menstrual pads, and cut slabs of sod were a key component of winter house construction. Unworked stone was used abundantly in iglus and other features (tupiks, inuksuit, boat rests), and minerals—nephrite, slate, native copper, meteoritic iron—were gathered from beaches or quarried for tool bits and blades. Clay was sunbaked or lightly fired into oil lamps and pots for boiling liquids in the Western Arctic, but these functions were rapidly assumed by steatite (soapstone) following the colonization of the Eastern Arctic (its value perhaps learned from Dorset groups, or from encounters with abandoned Dorset material culture). Seasonal movements that often seem aimed at food harvesting should be thought of as being partly oriented to acquiring these materials, especially the animal skins (for clothing) and oils (for fuel) that were as essential as food to arctic survival.

Functionally, precontact material culture is conventionally sorted into classes that map major categories of often gender-specific everyday activity. Mathiassen (1927) provides the primary archaeological template for reading the Eastern Arctic record, but there are numerous valuable ethnographic sources from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g., Boas 1964 [1888]). Although the particular groupings vary, the following is a serviceable breakdown of an enormously complex material culture: harvesting, food preparation, household maintenance, men's manufacturing, women's manufacturing, transportation, ornament, ritual, and play. Harvesting gear alone includes various specialized toolkits, such as ones for pursuing marine mammals from watercraft and from sea ice, including toggling harpoons, darts, and lances. Each of these weapons in turn represents a sophisticated equipment complex in its own right

(Whitridge 2004b). For example, the open water harpoon assembly was composed of a harpoon head (often with separate end blade, rivet, and sinew lashing across the socket), moveable foreshaft, socket piece, shaft (sometimes a composite, made up of segments lashed or pegged together), butt piece (sometimes in the form of a composite flight stabilizer), finger rest (for grasping and propelling the shaft), line, line tension piece, float, float toggle, float mouthpiece, float mouthpiece stopper, and float repair piece. The breathing hole sealing harpoon complex included a fixed foreshaft, ice pick at the butt end of the shaft, indicator for the seal's presence, probe (with a replaceable ferrule) for testing the depth of the snow and lie of the hole, scoop for removing slush, and even a stool (composed of a bone or wood seat and stubby wooden legs) for the waiting hunter.

As complicated as these assemblies sound, they are not comfortably segregated from still larger technological complexes related to boat (kayak and umiak) and dog-sled (komatik) travel, since sea mammal harvesting frequently relied on one or the other. By extension, amulets and other ritual gear were likely conceptualized as essential harvesting appurtenances, and the disposition of households within communities (e.g., as members of discrete house groups) expressed a social technology of group living that was eminently concerned with everyday economic arrangements. The tendrils of “sea mammal harvesting technology” penetrate everywhere. Other distinct harvesting assemblages can be delineated—land mammal hunting, trapping, birding, fishing—each with its seasonal variants, regional specialties, and temporal trends, and these wider sorts of cultural entailments as well. As noted below, however, sea mammal hunting was the foundation of most Eastern Arctic economies, and its equipment seems to have varied in somewhat more meaningful ways than other harvesting gear. In particular, harpoon heads carried an unusual semantic burden, their form and decoration shifting repeatedly over the millennium between the appearance of OBS in the west and the arrival of Inuit groups at the eastern margin of their range, and so enacted, at a microstylistic level, a larger societal discourse on human–sea mammal relations.

Mathiassen (1927) influentially sorted precontact harpoon heads into a number of recurrent types. With a few additions and adjustments, this typology has persisted to the present (Figure 35.2). The major Classic varieties are Thule 2, 3, 4, and Nuwuk, but the earlier Natchuk occurs at a handful of sites, the Sicco is a widely distributed early Classic version of the Thule 3, and the Clachan a widespread variant of the Thule 2. The Thule 5 is a special case, appearing at the end of the Classic period and becoming the dominant Eastern Arctic type by later precontact times. Interestingly, in some variants it closely resembles a widespread pre-Inuit type (Dorset Parallel; Maxwell 1985), but with a round rather than flat foreshaft socket (the Thule 1 similarly overlaps in plan with the Dorset type J), and so presumably represents the deliberate emulation of found objects (their absence in early Classic assemblages makes any direct adoption from Dorset groups unlikely). Of even greater analytic utility than these gross types, specific harpoon head attributes vary in patterned ways across the precontact period. The flexible sinew lashing that closes the open socket passes through painstakingly gouged slots in earlier variants, but these are replaced by simpler drilled lashing holes in later ones. In early examples of slotted harpoon heads the end blade was wedged into its slot with the help of converging

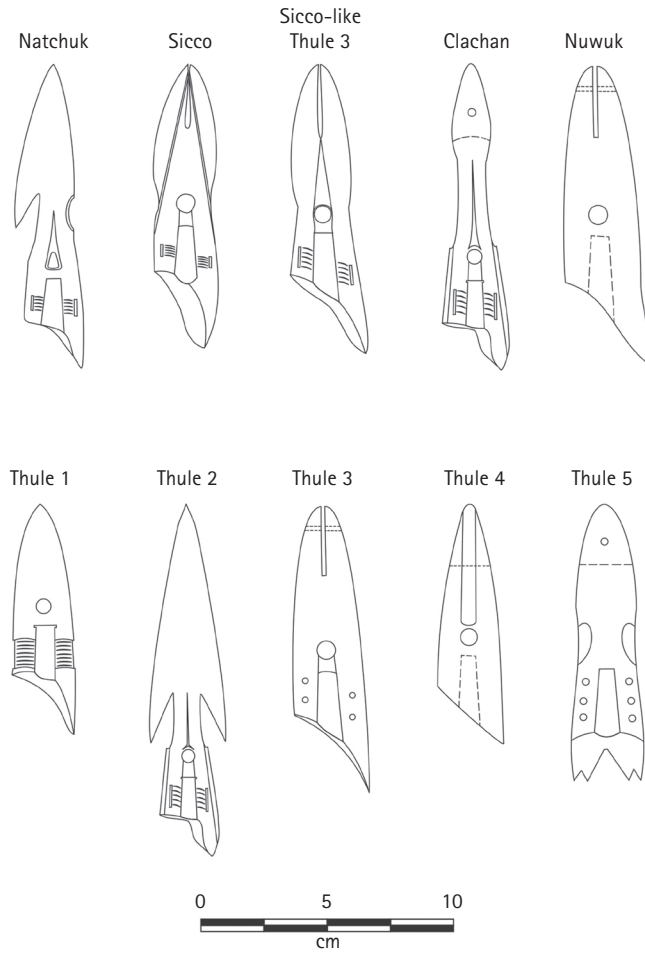


FIGURE 35.2 Principal precontact Inuit harpoon heads.

Illustration by Peter Whitridge

prongs whereas in later ones a rivet was often fixed through a hole drilled in the prongs and the end blade. Geometrically complex tangs, sometimes with decorative spurs, are replaced by simple conical ones. Raised lines, Y-motifs, residual side slots and other decorative flourishes on early Thule 2s and 3s (and characteristic of the early winged Sicco variant of the Thule 3) progressively disappear. Although there is a functional logic to some of these shifts (unadorned late Thule 3s with drilled lashing holes must have been much quicker to manufacture than Siccoss), they represent not merely deletions of stylistic elements but also the positive adoption of a novel Shaker-like aesthetic that favored parsimony over ornament (late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Shaker material culture is distinctive for its self-conscious simplicity).

Some other varieties of material culture harbored similarly rich meanings and long-running technical histories. Bone, antler and ivory arrowheads were beautifully

manufactured and sparsely, but deliberately, ornamented, sometimes (especially in the Western Arctic) with ownership marks, and the conical tang for fixing the arrowhead in the wooden shaft evolved into an elegantly minimalist self-tapping screw. Needle cases were among the most intricate, symbolically laden objects in the toolkit. Often made of ivory, winged and decorated like the Sicco archetype of Eastern Arctic harpoon heads, they protected a leather strip into which needles were threaded when not in use. A toggle at one end functioned as (and resembled) a miniature drag handle that pulled the needles from their housing. At the other end a narrow, flattened hook held depilated sealskin thimbles—small leather triangles with a slit through which the tip of the thumb could pass (impressively, a design that is still in widespread use). The entire array evokes a seal being hauled up through its breathing hole. Clothing is unfortunately a rarity in Classic assemblages (e.g., McCullough 1989), although the negative castoffs from patterns were common on Qariaraqyuk house floors and provide evidence of both garment design and styles of hide preparation (Whitridge 1999a). Based on these assemblages, occasional finds like the clothed bodies from Qilakitsoq (Hansen et al. 1991) and Utqiagvik (Hall and Fullerton 1990), and historic evidence, precontact clothing technology and artistry are presumed to have been at least as sophisticated as for any other domain of Classic material culture and deserving of more concerted research.

As astonishing as the thought and labor that went into manufacturing this extraordinary range of objects is the apparent carelessness with which they were discarded. Recovered Classic assemblages are frequently large and diverse, and include not only the expected manufacturing refuse and badly damaged tools, but also unusual quantities of lightly damaged and apparently intact items. Two processes likely contribute to this phenomenon. In the first place, sod winter houses must have offered an ideal environment for object loss, in muck and snow. It was sometimes easier to lay new flagstone floors than clear frozen debris left over from the previous occupation (McGhee 1984). Second, many of the sites and features that shape our understanding of this period were abandoned in late Classic times, as part of the social, economic, and demographic reorganization attendant on the onset of the Little Ice Age. Items that might have been salvaged under normal conditions became *de facto* refuse (analogous processes likely account for the rich assemblages of complete or mostly complete objects at many Late Dorset sites). A third possibility, however, is that Classic households disposed of some equipment before it was clearly exhausted, for culturally idiosyncratic reasons. Certainly, the “tolerable deterioration” of material culture seems to have been exceptionally low. Perhaps the intensity of social interaction, and mutual evaluation, in larger communities fostered the accelerated renewal of personal gear; the currency of one’s clothing and equipment represented part of an ongoing social performance. A readiness to discard slightly used objects would in turn have promoted the economic overproduction realized through the sophisticated cooperative harvesting setups so characteristic of Classic communities (see below).

## ECONOMY

Classic precontact Inuit life was organized around the schedule of game harvesting, many of the details of which can be assembled from zooarchaeological evidence, the harvesting gear itself, and ethnographic and ethnoarchaeological reports of more recent Inuit harvesting practices (Betts 2008; Savelle and McCartney 1988). After the fall whaling and caribou hunting season, people moved out of qarmat and into sod iglus. Early winter was a harvesting downtime, as sea ice gradually formed a stable platform for travel and sealing. Ringed seals scratch breathing holes (sing. aglu) in the thin early winter ice, especially along recently refrozen leads, maintaining them as the ice thickens throughout the winter (in zooarchaeological assemblages their osteoarthritic phalanges are a testament to this adaptation). Scanning the ice and the clouds for polynyas (in the latter case revealed as black patches reflecting open water below), reading the ice for recent leads, spotting the actual breathing holes, recognizing the subtle snow mounds that form over them, employing dogs to scent the holes, and inspecting and smelling them themselves to ensure they were still active, hunters identified suitable holes over which to watch and listen for a seal surfacing.

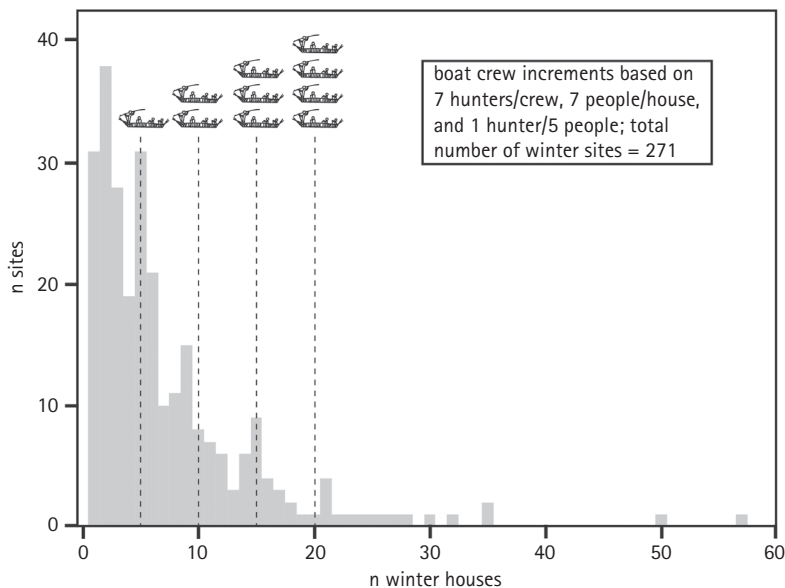
The hole would be cleared of slush and a mechanical or down indicator put in place, though the sound of bubbles breaking the surface might be enough to indicate a seal rising to breathe. The visual and auditory warnings gave the hunter time to raise the harpoon so that it could be slammed down at the correct moment (broken hands, incurred when the hunter contacted the icy dome that sometimes formed over the aglu, were reportedly common). The harpoon head toggled beneath the seal's skin, providing enough purchase for the seal to be held in place as the hunter chipped away the ice and then hauled its 60 kg carcass up onto the surface. Punctures in the seal's hide were closed with special wound pins to prevent the loss of edible blood, a thong strung through the jaw, and the seal dragged to the komatik or back to camp by a bone handle attached to the thong. In this manner the Eastern Arctic was made a habitable place; in a sampling of 18 Classic winter site faunal assemblages from Cape Parry to southeast Baffin Island (Whitridge 2001) small seals (the vast majority ringed) average 76.7 percent NISP (number of identified specimens), and sealing paraphernalia dominate the harvesting assemblages. Bearded seals could sometimes be taken in similar fashion, and walrus were taken at polynyas or the floe edge. Polar bears were hunted when they were encountered pursuing the same quarry, arctic foxes trapped in beehive-shaped cairns, and arctic char and lake trout fished through holes cut in lake ice. Caribou and muskoxen may occasionally have been pursued on their wintering ranges, but their declining fat levels over the winter made them progressively less attractive.

Late winter, as the sun returned and the sea ice continued to thicken, was the ideal season for breathing hole sealing and travel that ranged further from the iglu village. Ringed seal were likely pursued at greater removes from land at this time, as animals were hunted out of village neighborhoods. Dental annuli evidence suggests much more extensive late

winter or spring than early winter seal harvesting (Woollett et al. 2000). The historic pattern among some Central Arctic groups, of wintering in a series of snow house villages on the sea ice while pursuing ringed seal, must have originated in at least occasional Classic late winter practices. Coastal and inter-island travel, for hunting, social visiting, and trade, was greatly facilitated by the sea ice platform. Although regional groups were largely self-sufficient, a brisk trade was carried on in locally scarce or exotic commodities such as iron, copper, amber, ivory, and perhaps soapstone (and probably also perishables such as hides, oil, and wood). The residents of Qariaraqyuk, for instance, seem to have been heavily reliant for tool blades and bits on native copper and meteoritic iron obtained from sources several hundred kilometers distant (McCartney 1991; Whitridge 2002a).

In spring and early summer ringed seals move onto the sea ice to bask in groups next to the collapsing breathing holes, and historically were approached by crawling hunters who imitated seal sounds and movements. Migratory waterfowl (common eider, snow geese) returned in abundance in some areas. Char were occasionally fished as they left their wintering lakes, but their fat levels are low before a summer of feeding in the ocean. In late summer and early fall they gather at the mouths of streams, and then ascend them. This was the season for harvesting char at stone weirs. It was also the season during which caribou became most desirable, having fattened up and regrown a coat punctured by warble fly larvae in early summer. As they moved en masse from summer to winter ranges, kayakers armed with lances hunted caribou at water crossings, and archers intercepted them on land, sometimes deploying massive drive systems composed of regularly spaced stone inuksuit, with women and children beaters helping out (Brink 2005; Whitridge 2013). This was one of the most important annual harvests, since not only were stores of dried caribou put up, but the hides considered essential for winter clothing were obtained (Stenton 1991). Indeed, the full suite of caribou products—meat, fat, antler, bone, sinew, and hide—represented an essential component of precontact food and material culture.

Ringed seal and caribou, with regional complements such as walrus, beluga, harp seal, and muskox, represented the cornerstones of historic economy, but Classic precontact groups throughout the Eastern Arctic were distinguished by an organizationally complex effort to harvest bowhead whales, usually during summer and early fall as they migrated into and through their summering grounds. Bowheads were taken historically in North Alaska, Greenland, the Mackenzie Delta region and Labrador, and sporadically elsewhere, but before about A.D. 1450 were consistently and successfully pursued along the Central and High Arctic channels, in northern Hudson Bay and Hudson Strait, and around Baffin Bay and Davis Strait (Savelle and McCartney 1988, 1994; Whitridge 1999b). Savelle (2010) provides a conservative estimate of over 18,500 bowhead whales harvested by Inuit in the Eastern Arctic between A.D. 1200 and 1500. The ice-choked channels between Amundsen Gulf and northern Peel Sound, occupied by various Copper Inuit groups, and the Gulf of Boothia, may have been the only areas where resident Classic groups did not pursue bowheads. In other areas, communities and groups of communities launched umiaks manned by a seven- to eight-person crew, including paddlers, boat steerer, and harpooner. A streamlined boat crew of this size



**FIGURE 35.3** Precontact winter settlement sizes in the Canadian Eastern Arctic, with modes corresponding to increments of boatloads of hunters (Whitridge 1999a).

Illustration by Peter Whitridge

appears to be expressed in the modal sizes of winter settlements, which markedly peak at demographic increments corresponding to boatloads of hunters (Figure 35.3).

Whaling boat crews are well described ethnographically for North Alaska (Spencer 1959), where they have remained in operation up to the present, and are clearly (if schematically) depicted in Classic art (Maxwell 1983). An Alaskan-style organization based around an entrepreneurial boat captain (umialik) who assembled the equipment and crew, rewarding crew members with gifts and shares of the harvest (Sheehan 1985), appears also to have obtained in the Eastern Arctic (Whitridge 1999a, 2002b). Bowheads represented enormous packages of food, oil, baleen and bone: an 18–20 m adult bowhead might weigh over 60 tonnes, although the most avid Central Arctic groups successfully targeted primarily the smaller (~7 m) yearlings (Savelle and McCartney 1994). Meat and fuel generated by the bowhead harvest was cached in pits dug into gravel beaches, thousands of which dot the coastline of the “core” (Savelle and McCartney 1994) Central Arctic whaling zones. Whale bone was a key raw material for some groups, used for everything from the structural members of sod houses to the scores of varieties of small and medium-sized objects that fill their middens. Baleen was shaved into strips to use as a rugged cordage for house, boat, and komatik frames and a whipping for tool handles, and cut and stitched into more complex shapes, from drinking containers to sleds.

Whaling was potentially so rewarding that it created a distinct scheduling conflict with late summer or fall caribou hunting and char fishing in some areas. This conflict was resolved through thriving regional trade networks (Whitridge 2002a) and, likely, status-based divisions of harvesting effort within large communities (as amongst historic

Mackenzie Delta Inuit). The crystallization of a tightly interconnected social network throughout the Eastern Arctic in Classic times was arguably an effect of successful bowhead whaling; its winter sites (and probably total population) were larger than earlier or later ones, its material culture richer and more carefully realized. The insult to bowhead stocks and accessibility brought about by the deteriorating sea ice conditions of the Little Ice Age was catastrophic. Much of the Central and High Arctic was abandoned to year-round settlement, and even nonwhaling areas were impacted through the collapse of interregional trade. Some areas were newly colonized at this time, including the Barrengrounds west of Hudson Bay, Labrador, and South and East Greenland. The Modified (or Postclassic) pre-contact Inuit world was substantially different from the Classic, and is largely recognizable as the one encountered by post-Norse Europeans in the sixteenth century.

## SOCIAL LIFE AND BELIEF

Precontact social life played out through a nested series of networks corresponding to the tiers of the settlement system. Historically, the larger world was composed of Inuit—“people”—and various other human groups and nonhuman beings with whom the Inuit had more or less tense relations. Stories refer to both friendly interactions and conflicts with Tuniit (presumably Dorset), Norse, Gwich'in, Dene, Chipewyan, Innu, and other neighbors, and occasional evidence of interethnic violence occurs (e.g., at the fourteenth-century Saunaktuk site [Melbye and Fairegreave 1994]). Neighboring Inuit societies (and many precontact groups had only Inuit neighbors) likely feuded and raided to some extent as well, but the widespread evidence of substantial long-distance exchange implies maintenance of the sorts of extended social ties that are attested in many areas historically, such as the formal exchange partnerships that were activated during trade fairs in Alaska (Burch 1988) or the spouse sharing arrangements that occurred throughout the Inuit world.

At the regional level, contemporaneous winter villages sometimes occur within sight of each other, such as the Somerset Island communities that faced each other across Hazard Inlet, southern Creswell Bay, and Aston Bay (Savelle 1987). These and other settlement clusters were undoubtedly in frequent close contact, joining forces in bowhead whaling and caribou drives, participating in each other's feasts, festivals, and shamanic performances, and forming close bonds based on marriage, blood relation, and friendship. The largest communities must have sustained an internal social dynamic comparable to that of the networks of smaller settlements in economically marginal areas, as suggested by the former's spatial compartmentalization into neighborhoods composed of closely spaced or adjoining house clusters (likely equivalent to the Alaskan *upsiksui*), as at PaJs-4 (Savelle and Wenzel 2003). Large winter and late summer or fall villages represent the periodic aggregation of local groups that dispersed at other times (e.g., for summer fishing) into smaller kin groups of varying sizes, from individual households to extended family household clusters. An archaeological challenge in interpreting the larger aggregations is



assessing the extent of houses' occupational contemporaneity (Park 1997). Although arguments about community size can be advanced on the basis of such things as radiometric dates, artifact styles, site structure, and whaling success (e.g., Whitridge 1999a), their confirmation perhaps awaits more extensive sampling and finer-resolution dating.

A distinctive feature of Classic and later precontact sites is the occurrence of large structures with a paved floor and encircling stone bench, either in direct association with individual house clusters (Friesen and Stewart 1994; Habu and Savelle 1994; McCullough 1989; Savelle 1987; Whitridge 1999a) or at a less partisan remove from residences (Savelle and Wenzel 2003). These were clearly communal gathering places, but in an important respect many resemble the qariyit of North Alaska more than the dance or festival houses of historic Central Arctic groups. The former were used not only for periodic community celebrations and shamanic rites but also for daily work and socializing by men. The combination of ornaments, ritual paraphernalia, and dense accumulations of wood- and bone-working debitage at a Classic qargi bears out this dual usage (Whitridge 2004a). Large communities housed multiple qariyit, typically in association with house clusters, implying their construction and maintenance by the most powerful kin groups. An informative exception to this pattern is the singular, topographically elevated qargi at PaJs-4, which seems to signal a symbolic effacement of the partisan kin blocs that are reflected in the site's discrete qarmat clusters.

Qariyit arguably evince the important economic, social, and ritual roles of male hunters, constituting a space to which women may have had only partial access. On the other hand, while the domestic residence was shared between women and men, it was the principal locus of women's indoor activity (clothing manufacture, food preparation, child care), and hence a space over which they exercised practical and symbolic mastery (Whitridge 2004a). Indeed, a progressive feminization of household space unfolded over several hundred years, as the external kitchen of early Classic winter dwellings was drawn to the edge of the living floor, and then into the center—both literal and figurative—of everyday house life (Whitridge 2008).

Just as gendered activities were segregated in time-space, women and men utilized distinct toolkits for everyday tasks, as evinced most iconically by the *ulu* (women's knife) and *sapik* (men's knife). It is not surprising then that distinctly gendered forms of symbolic practice are recognizable in women's and men's material culture. In particular, depictions of the human form, which are rare in Classic art and design, fall into two distinct camps. Complex representations of (mostly) harvesting activities with schematic stick figures, sometimes assembled into composite designs that must be read from multiple perspectives, as well as three-dimensional representations of animals or animal parts, occur on everyday equipment used by men (drill bows, knife handles, harpoon toggles, etc.). Three-dimensional representations of the human form, however, are mostly of women. These include a distinct variety of bead or pendant consisting of one or more female figures standing atop a cylindrical bead (where multiple figures occur, the women are joined arm in arm in collegial rows), simple ivory figurines with female bodies, a flat-bottomed ivory figurine with a bird's body and woman's head and shoulders (used in the game of *tingmiujaq*), and the ubiquitous wooden doll (a girl's plaything that usually depicts

girls, although infants and adult women and men also occur). Whoever manufactured the objects, women and men were represented in distinct material settings using distinct graphical idioms. It would be rewarding to explore the discursive undercurrents of clothing manufacture, as a genre peculiar to women (Hansen et al. 1991 outline an elaborate symbolic vocabulary for the complete garments that clothed the Qilakitsoq mummies). In any case, contrasting realms of belief and ritual practice are implied, with women's sphere centered on the family dwelling and served by portable sculptures of women, and men's centered on the qargi and bound up with the pursuit of game.

Kin and gender groups are perhaps the most striking and archaeologically accessible social categories, but others can be recognized. The role of shaman or angagok was at the core of ritual practice before the widespread conversion to Christianity that began in the late eighteenth century, and represented a distinctive social persona. Miniature weapons occur like those that adorned historic angagoks' amulet belts, as well as suggestions of more widespread protective magic in the form of amulet straps (which held amulets next to the wearer's person) depicted on some dolls. The latter also implicate angagoks, who made and sold personal amulets historically (Spencer 1959). Curved wooden and baleen bands interpreted as drum rims, with a central groove for the cord that held the drum head tight, as well as plausible batons for striking the rim, suggest the drum dancing and singing that accompanied both shamanic practice and performances by non-angagoks.

Childhood and old age represent distinct moments of the life course that were variously marked and named ethnographically. Miniature tools (Park 1998), simple wooden animal figurines, games (hopping stones, playhouses, boat outlines), and toys (buzzes, tops, and pierced seal bones used for *ajaggaq*, the Inuit cup-and-pin game) point to children's play, enskilment, and socialization into adult activities, and clothing points to a sartorial discourse that enveloped children's bodies. Two-dimensional depictions on drill bows sometimes show diminutive figures who must be children, as well as individuals with bent backs walking with canes, who are presumably elderly, and whose lifetimes of hunting, boating, sledding, and clothing manufacture are reflected bioarchaeologically in distinctive patterns of osteoarthritis (Merbs 1983) and dental wear (Hansen et al. 1991). The material evidence exists to support archaeologies of a wide variety of precontact Inuit social roles and identities (Whitridge 2010).

## CONCLUSION

Understanding the transformations of Inuit society during the past 450 years of intensive interaction with Europeans depends on a fuller understanding of the Classic precontact archaeological baseline. Archaeologists sometimes seem to imagine contact between indigenous groups and Europeans as a momentary encounter that precipitated wholesale cultural change, like a Midas touch that instantly and irrevocably transformed the world, but this was not the case. Northern Europeans (Norse) occupied the northeastern margin of North America for almost 500 years to relatively minor effect

on the Classic and later Inuit groups who encountered them, and eventually were themselves out-competed by Inuit as the latter expanded into southwest Greenland in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Elsewhere in northern North America, post-Norse European exploration, economic exploitation, and settlement were piecemeal before the twentieth century. Rather than a world-defining event horizon, Inuit-European contact was a slow, erratic progress that touched different Inuit groups at different times to differing effect. While our understanding of the historic period is muddied by a complex contact history and a patchy (and poorly explored) archaeological record, the Classic precontact episode stands out as a startlingly vivid cultural florescence in the Eastern Arctic. The scale of settlement, harvesting activity, interregional trade, social differentiation, technological complexity, and (arguably) aesthetic accomplishment was unequaled before or afterwards, and remains archaeologically accessible thanks to a superbly well-preserved record.

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