

North America's First Contact: Norse-Inuit Relations  
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## **Introduction**

Before the arrival of the Columbus or the Basque fishermen to the Americas, the Norse made an island-hopping journey from Norway to the Orkneys and Faroe Islands and from there to Iceland. Then, in 982, Erik the Red crossed the North Atlantic with his fourteen ships to become the first European to reach one of the North American islands: Greenland (McGhee 1984:4). From their base in Southern Greenland the Norse were able to explore other areas of North America including lands that they termed Stone-Slab Land (Baffin Island) (Kristjánsson 2005:19), Markland (Labrador) (Kristjánsson 2005:25), and Vinland, which most scholar today believe to be Newfoundland (Kristjánsson 2005:25). These discoveries made the Norse the first European explorers of North America. And, like the European explorers five centuries in the future, the Norse encountered and had to contend with the native populations both where they lived and where they exploited the natural resources. While the colony in Vinland only lasted ten years due to its extreme isolation (Sutherland 2000:239), the marginal yet viable settlements in Greenland persisted for half a millennium where they remained in relative close proximity to the Inuit populations. While the evidence the relations between these two people is sparse, it can be said that, unlike much of European-Native contact to come, the interaction between the Norse and Inuit was sparse, at times hostile, and could have possibly doomed the Greenland colonies to extinction.

## **The Inuit Groups**

What makes the analysis of the Norse and Inuit contact interesting is that the Norse, through five hundred years of Greenland's history, dealt with two different Inuit groups – the Dorset and the Thule. Hypothetically they could have seen the transition from the Dorset to the Thule where one group shrank in land territory and was gradually replaced by the other. At one

time, around 1300, the Norse could have had contact with both groups at the same time where-as before they would only have contact with the Dorset (Odess et al. 2000:198).

The first group, the Dorset, were the Palaeoeskimo descendents of the Arctic Small Tool tradition that moved east out of Alaska around 4000 BP and occupied all of what is now the Canadian Arctic that stretched south a few places in Newfoundland (McGhee 1984:8). This culture was beginning to disappear by the 1100 CE though it continued on in places like Labrador where the last settlement is dated to be only five hundred years old (McGhee 1984:9). Unlike the Thule, the Dorset apparently did not use dogs nor hunt whales and thus could not support a large population. Their settlements were limited to one or two houses of eight to ten people and thus could not have posed a threat to the Norse who would have had a numerical and technological advantage over them (Odess et al 2000:184).

The later group, the Thule Inuit, reached northern Greenland by around the twelfth century CE and spread into Labrador by the thirteenth (McGhee 1984:9). Compared to the Dorset, the Thule could have posed a much bigger threat to the Norse if the Norse chose to see them as such. Like the Dorset, the Thule originated from Alaska where they mastered adaptation to the cold but rich environment. The Thule used larger skin-clad boats and harpoons for whaling, they used dogs for quick travel, and they had adopted the use of bows. This would have made the Inuit very formidable to the small Norse settlements in Greenland (Odess et al. 2000:198). Their relationship to the existing Dorset peoples is not perfectly understood but it has been suggested that their presence led to their decline and eventual disappearance (McGhee 1984:9).

### Recorded Evidence of Contact

The recorded evidence for contact between the Norse and these two groups was extremely limited. The first indirect contact occurred with Erik the Red's initial exploration of Greenland where he saw the remains of houses, stone tools, and boats which were later attributed to the "Skraelings" by the author of the *Islendingabok* (McGhee 1984:9). These items were most likely the remains of the Dorset.

The accounts of direct contact between the Norse the Inuit are few and often written centuries after the fact and may not be completely reliable (Sutherland 2000:239). The first account of such contact came in the late eleventh century in *Historia Norvegiae* and is the second earliest known Norse source on Greenland (Gulløv 2000:320). The line, while brief, illustrates a not particularly friendly contact:

On the other side of Greenland, toward the North, hunters found some little people whom they call "Skraelings;" their situation is that when they are hurt by weapons their sores become white without bleeding, but when they are mortally wounded their blood will hardly stop running. They have no iron at all; they use missiles made of walrus tusks and sharp stones for knives. (Jansen in Gulløv 2000:320)

While the article does not go into the interaction between the hunters and the "Skraelings" (who were most likely the Dorset), it is safe to say that it was not a friendly meeting if we consider the derogatory term used in referring to these people and the account of the effect of deadly weapons upon them. The next account of contact occurs in 1350 the smaller Western Settlement in Greenland is reported to be abandoned and occupied by "Skraelings" while the horses, goats, cattle, and sheep roam wild (Gulløv 2000:321). The last recorded instance of

contact dates to 1379 where the Norse and the Inuit engaged in a skirmish killing 18 men and enslaving two boys (Gulløv 2000:322).

On the other side, there are no Native American accounts of encountering the Norse. This is not surprising considering that the main Inuit groups they had contact with have left us no written or oral records (McGhee 1984:12). However, some legends have been collected from the Inuit in Greenland though over time which, however have become mixed into the Inuit folklore (McGhee 1984:12). What is interesting about one such story of a Thule girl becoming a servant on a Norse farm was that it was first collected in Iceland during the mid-nineteenth century, told from a Norse point of view, and included some Inuit words like *innuk* (man) and *kayak* suggesting a shared traditional story (McGhee 1984:12). Regardless, such an account, even if valid, does little to paint a clear picture of between the relations between the Thule or the Dorset and the Norse.

### **Archaeological Evidence of Contact**

Because of the limited number of records pertaining to this interaction, it's necessary to rely on the archaeological record to supply most of our information. Much of the contact between the Norse and the Inuit was probably unrecorded either in the sagas. They were most likely to have taken place on hunting or woodcutting expeditions to the north or southwest of Greenland settlements (Odess et al. 2000:196).

Through most of the occupation of Greenland, Norse made many trips to Markland (most likely Labrador) for wood that was so essential to their way of life, especially boat building. During this activity, the Norse would have been in relatively close proximity to the Dorset and the Thule and it is reasonable to assume that some contact would have occurred (McGhee 1984:14). The archaeological evidence for this is limited. Only two distinctively Norse objects

have been found in a Dorset context – a copper amulet with small amounts of iron and nickel impurities suggesting of smelting, and a similar piece of copper with iron and nickel in a Dorset longhouse (McGhee 1984:14). One very tantalizing artefact is a Norse penny minted in Norway between 1065 and 1080 and found in a midden in Maine in association with Woodland ceramics and a few Dorset stone tools (Sutherland 2000:241). These objects could very likely suggest some trading contact with the Norse; however these objects might have well been scavenged by Inuit from temporary landing sites. It may well have been that after a few hostile clashes with the Norse the stories of the fierce foreigners spread through the Dorset communal networks and they would have fled once they saw a Norse ship approaching (Odess 1984:196). Regardless, the Norse, at least in Labrador probably had contact with the Dorset for over three hundred years. Over that time period, three artefacts do not suggest much in the way of interaction.

The contact with the Thule was much more involved. In a sense, they had much more to offer for the Norse occupants in Greenland. They were skilled whalers that were successful in surviving in the Arctic environment, as opposed to the Norse who attempted to transplant their entire Scandinavian culture to a very different environment in Greenland (McGovern 1980:246). The Thule lifeway and economy allowed them to be flexible and survive the Little Ice Age that doomed the Norse (Odess et al. 2000:200). Learning from them it would have greatly helped Norse to survive in the harsh environment. More over, trade with the Inuit could have helped the Norse pay their tithes to the church in Rome, a very taxing cost o an already strained lifestyle (McGovern 1980:264).

However, this interaction was not the case as they remained in relative isolation. While the number of Norse artefacts found in Inuit contexts has increased in recent years with greater archaeological work, there still remains only a scattering of pieces of smelted iron, smelted

copper and copper sheets, pendants, and knife blades on Thule sites in both Greenland and Arctic Canada, most dating to the thirteenth and fourteenth century (McGhee 1984:15). One of the most interesting artefacts of Norse-Inuit contact, however, is a Thule carving from southern Baffin Island displaying what has been interpreted as an individual in European clothing. While it is carved in the typical Thule silhouette the carving displays a long robe with a cross incised on the chest resembling the European clothing of the period (McGhee 1984:17). It has been suggested by others that this could be a Christian priest or a costume worn by a Teutonic knight that could have come to the Americas in defence of Greenlandic Christianity (Sutherland 2000:245).

Some of the tantalizing information on contact between Norse and the Thule comes from the far north on Ellesmere Island where dozens of Norse artefacts were uncovered like a knife, ship rivets, spear blades, iron wedges, a carpenter's plane, chain mail, and even woollen cloth (Schledermann 2000:250). However, it is unknown whether or not these came from prolonged contact between the Norse and the Inuit in the region or it came from a single site like a shipwreck. It is interesting to note that many of these objects were discarded after the Thule moved out of the site (Schledermann 2000:250). Such an event would not have occurred if the objects were in some way valuable to them.

To put the situation into perspective, it is also important to analyze the reverse, of just how many Inuit artefacts have been found on Norse sites. As of 2000, 170 Norse artefacts were recovered from Inuit sites, in return only one Inuit object was found during an excavation of a Norse farmstead (Gulløv 2000:325). While this does not account for trade in perishable goods like meat and walrus tusks which have been suggested to be traded to help pay for tribute, tithes, and crusade taxes to Rome (McGhee 1984:21), the evidence clearly shows that over three

hundred years of contact between the Norse and the Thule the artefact count is that of almost one artefact per two years of living in close proximity to each other. Clearly it's obvious that contact was minimal but the ultimate question is why.

### **Reasons for Lack of Communication**

Numerous hypotheses have been suggested and the reason can lie with both sides. For the Thule a notion has been put forth that they wanted nothing that the Norse had. Meteoric iron was relatively abundant (Schledermann 2000:249), so much so that McGhee declared the Thule to be an "iron age" culture (McGhee 1984:15). Even if they did desire smelted iron, the material was in dangerously low supply for much of Greenland's history (Schledermann 2000:254). Neither wool nor the Norse way of building boats seemed to attract the Thule (Schledermann 2000:253). The causal discard for Norse goods seems to support this hypothesis (Schledermann 2000:251).

The Norse cultural and religious conservatism carries the bigger blame. The Norse would have undoubtedly seen themselves as expert hunters and would not have been as inclined to learn from people they considered inferior from first contact (Schledermann 2000:253). When the Inuit advanced further south to hunt close to the fjords occupied by the Norse, they would have been seen as direct competitors (McGovern 1980:265). Further, contact with the Thule could have been forbidden by the church. During the Middle Ages, foreign gods and spirits were not considered harmless but active, malevolent agents against whom Christians must guard against. It would have been against the deepest sanctions of the church to communicate and interact with the shamanistic people with their egalitarian morality (McGovern 1980:266). Thus, for almost five hundred years no contact between the Norse and the Thule was carried out.



## Conclusion

In the end, the Norse suffered in the place where they could have learned so much from the local Inuit populations. What made the settlement of Greenland possible, a global warm period (McGovern 1980:246), expired around 1450 ushering in a time known as the Little Ice Age (McGovern 1980:270). The meagre existence the Norse managed to scrounge out from their settlements in Greenland up to that point and their ventures around the Canadian Arctic, Labrador, and Newfoundland were doomed due to the increasing harshness of the long winter season. The Norse, through limited contact, and the refusal to adopt the Inuit lifestyle were doomed to a slow extinction with the cooling period. The Inuit, unlike preceding contacts with the Europeans, continued to live their life unimpeded with no visible cultural change – casually discarding Norse artefacts which they might have traded or scavenged from their sites and settlements.

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