

**Miniature Carvings in the Canadian Dorset Culture:
the Dorset Belief 'System'**

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Introduction

If one takes a look at the occupants of the Canadian Arctic during the course of history one can make a distinction between Paleo-Eskimo populations and Neo-Eskimo populations. The term Neo-Eskimo refers to the recent occupants of the Arctic, whereas Paleo-Eskimo pertains to preceding populations and cultures. The term Arctic Small Tool tradition (ASTt) comprises the Denbigh Flint Complex, Independence I, Saqqaq, Pre-Dorset and Dorset cultures. Dorset culture is considered to be a late Paleo-Eskimo culture because of its distinctive technological and artistic achievements enabling more efficient ways of hunting a wide range of species, the almost sedentary way of life and the emergence of an artistic style called Dorset Art.

Around 1500 B.C. deteriorating weather conditions made their influence felt throughout the Arctic impacting crucially on the Paleo-Eskimo way of life. As a consequence of these circumstances, sea animal populations were restricted due to the thicker ice-cover, the movements of migratory animals became unpredictable, and the number of species harvested dropped drastically because the tree line had retreated southward. These harsh conditions forced Paleo-Eskimo populations to leave Greenland and the High Arctic and establish themselves close to the Barrenlands. However, the regions like Baffin Island and Hudson Bay were still inhabited by the Arctic Small Tool tradition peoples; furthermore, they developed more effective hunting techniques and the ability to adapt to the deteriorating circumstances. (McGhee, "The Prehistory and Prehistoric Art of the Canadian Inuit" 14) These populations were known as the Dorset culture named after the remains unearthed at the Cape Dorset Site, which were the first indicators of the existence of this culture. Shortly, this culture spread throughout the Arctic as Dorset people reoccupied the High Arctic islands, Labrador and Newfoundland. Dorset domination lasted for almost two thousand years, and this culture suddenly disappeared from archaeological record around 1000 A.D. It is hypothesized that their disappearance could have been attributed either to the arrival of the Thule people, which could have intensified the competition for limited resources and/ or to the warming weather conditions which affected the availability of animals putting "the Dorset way of life under considerable stress".^[1]

Dorset - Thule contact has been in the focus of long-standing debates which have not yet been resolved since "current evidence provides little proof of contact and claims that nature of interaction would be difficult to detect archaeologically" (S. B. Milne)^[1]. If there was no contact at all, what is it that results in scholars identifying the Dorset people with the so-called *Tuniit* appearing in Inuit oral historical record testifying Dorset - Thule contacts?:

"They used to have winter tents built out of the old *Tuniit* tents. I knew that, when they used winter tents that had been built by the *Tuniit*."

"I have also seen a pot that used to be used by the *Tuniit*, the pot that they have saved. They used to use it to boil meat in; we could not handle it by ourselves." (Bennett and Rowley 148)

Robert Park contends that there was no need for face-to-face contact for the Thule to know that earlier peoples had lived there because Dorset site remains were visible on the surface. The Thule people were able to tell Dorset artefacts were antique and different from their own, thus they created *Tuniit* as a way to explain that these earlier peoples had lived where they had (Park, "The Dorset-Thule Succession in Arctic North America" 232). As far as Inuit oral tradition is concerned, I do not suppose that the uniformity of stories about the *Tuniit* perfectly supports the aforementioned statements unless latter cultures had good communication channels and forums to share their observations and cultural achievements.

With regard to the reconstruction of the Dorset belief system, it is crucial to know whether any of the characteristics survived and were bestowed upon latter cultures by the Dorset because analogies found in Thule culture might help scholars get a more complex picture of Paleo-Eskimo shamanism. If not, then reconstruction ought to be based upon analogies found in ancient cultures inhabiting the core area from which Paleo-Eskimos funnelled out and started colonizing the Canadian Arctic.

Dorset Art: Origins, Dominant Themes and Distinctive Features

Dorset people excelled in harvesting sea mammal populations including larger species like the walrus and narwhal. In addition to these, they harvested caribou populations on a seasonal basis. Caribou was an excellent source of meat and clothing, and caribou bone - along with driftwood - served as a good material for carvings Dorset culture has always been famous for. These miniature artefacts and Dorset art, which might be treated as the continuation of Pre-Dorset art, have been the cause of academic debate and have given rise to numerous speculations on the cosmology, religious beliefs, and healing practices of Dorset people as well as the functions these carvings might have had. In my opinion, these disputes are unlikely to be settled for a number of reasons: firstly, constraints in the archaeological evidence and in ethnographic knowledge (even the diversity of) of northern shamanic practice and secondly, archaeology cannot reconstruct the totality and the complexity of an ancient culture (Sutherland, "Shamanism in the iconography..." 136). Moreover, it is not entirely apparent which cultures (Siberian cultures or Neo-Eskimo

cultures that inhabit or once inhabited the Arctic) would help scholars to explore the Dorset way of thinking, which on the basis of the variability of artefacts does not appear to be a uniform entity as stated by George Swinton and William Taylor in their paper published in 1967 (Sutherland, "Shamanism in the iconography..." 135). Therefore, it is also quite problematic to ascertain the function of the miniature Dorset carvings carved in ivory, driftwood, antler, bone and soapstone.

Most portable Dorset art pieces represent animals, humans and spirits, while the rest can hardly be identified due to the high degree of stylization (like on the spatula-like objects) or simply because those creatures and objects were not present in comparable cultures. The broad consensus is that the vast majority of these artefacts are hypothetically connected to shamanism. Genevieve LeMoine argues that "some Dorset art is specifically shamanic, that is belonging to a shaman as part of his or her ritual paraphernalia, and some is shamanistic, belonging to and created by individuals as amulets" (128).

This would justify the setting up of two categories. However, I suggest that three categories should be set up for Dorset carvings: The first includes ceremonial and ritual objects used by spiritual specialists mainly for preventive (prophylactic) and sympathetic (propitiatory) magic; the second comprises magical objects (amulets mostly worn as pendants in particular) used by individuals in everyday context (this is supported by the distribution of these artefacts within Dorset dwellings); finally, the third is made up of household utensils or other utilitarian objects such as toys, dolls and so on. The first category can further be divided into three subcategories based on the three interrelated shamanic themes displayed on them: 1. human-animal transformation, 2. shamanic flight and 3. skeleton as an avatar of the soul (Sutherland, "Shamanism in the iconography..." 138).

I

Zoomorphic/ Anthropomorphic/ Zoo-anthropomorphic Artefacts

As it was pointed out earlier, most - though not all - of the Dorset artefacts are zoomorphic, anthropomorphic or zoo-anthropomorphic portrayals and have incised skeletal and 'X-ray' motifs on them. Representations of animal species of economic and spiritual significance (polar bear, musk-ox, caribou, fox, falcon, owl, loon, walrus, seal, etc.) either in naturalistic or in abstract ways make up the overwhelming majority of artefacts (The Brooman Point assemblage is a good case in point.)^[2] It is beyond doubt that the figure of the bear is the most domineering, whereas - interestingly enough - the frequency of the portrayals of the walrus declined. As Patricia Sutherland points out in her paper, this phenomenon can be explained by the dispersion of Paleo-Eskimos into different areas where walrus was no longer the primary food resource (Sutherland, "Shamanism in the iconography..." 137). Consequently, Patricia Sutherland concludes that economic, environmental and historical factors must have had an influence on regional and temporal

variants of Dorset art (Sutherland, "Shamanism in the iconography..." 137).

As far as representations of humans (portable and parietal art pieces alike) are concerned, these can be interpreted as portrayals of living persons who may have lived in the close proximity of the 'craftsmen' or most likely different spirits. Most of the time depictions of humans do not portray the full-size person but their face. The most common vehicles of portrayal of faces are masks, maskettes, multiple face carvings (wands or sacred places, for instance, Qajartalik petroglyph site in Québec), sculptures (often representing women) and other schematic carvings. Faces "portrayed on most late Paleo-Eskimo pieces clearly exhibit distinctive Asiatic characteristics" (Helmer 196) such as almond-shaped eyes, high cheekbones, etc. The most peculiar facial type displayed on Dorset artefacts is "triangular shape with rectangular upper face and strongly pointed chin" and "round in outline with accentuated cheekbones and underemphasized chins" on multiple face carvings (Helmer 196).

II

The Skeletal and 'X-ray' Pattern

One of the distinctive features of Dorset (not exclusively bear) carvings is the incised skeletal and X-ray motifs, which shows circumpolar and Eurasian distribution (Sutherland, "Shamanism in the iconography..." 140) testified by analogies ranging from Asia Interior through Siberia (Devlet 43) to Europe. These motifs appear on Siberian shamanic coats (Prokofyeva 138) or even in Asian rock art. Ekaterina Devlet interprets this motif as a way of protecting the individual from evil. She also adds that this could have a lot to do with "the dismemberment occurring during the initiation process" (44). The same idea was coined by William Taylor and George Swinton concerning the dismemberment of the body (Siberian-Aleutian tradition) at the joints, which are marked by X-s to protect one against the evil power of the victim's spirits (Swinton 41). Moreover, Alan McMillan points out in his paper that designs resembling skeletal elements and joints may also represent shamanistic vision: "powerful shamans among the historic Inuit were supposed to be able to divest themselves of flesh and blood, flying through the air as skeletons" (245). Besides these, Patricia Sutherland speculates that the skeleton cannot only be perceived as a remnant of the dead body, but also as a container of the soul spirit (Sutherland, "Shamanism in the iconography..." 138). So the spirit was present in the object, if the skeletal/ 'X-ray' patterns were displayed.

If the Dorset people revered bones (skeleton), "why, then, do we find so many of them in the ruins of houses or in refuse dumps?" - asks Robert McGhee. One possible explanation could be that these carvings were not valuable at all or were lost (especially if having been worn as pendants). Robert Park found out that miniature "implements and carvings were restricted to the midline of the structures to the walls" (Park, "The

Dorset Culture Longhouse..." 245) at Brooman Point Site.^[3] "The way in which miniature items/ carvings are restricted to the midline and walls suggests that these items were discarded or lost in the context of yet another distinct use of the space within the structure." (Park, "The Dorset Culture Longhouse..." 245) In my view, it is likely that people were afraid of the magical power of these discarded carvings, especially if those were possessed by a shaman who had turned malevolent, or people from other cultures relocated them.

All in all, the skeleton usually appears in a highly stylized form, so these can be seen as standardized series of lines and joints using "+" or/and "X" marks as joint or bone markings. Not only carvings with skeletal pattern, but also isolated limbs, parts of the vertebral column and animal skulls hint at the importance of the skeleton in the Paleo-Eskimo belief system.

During the Late Dorset period one can recognize a tendency of increasing abstraction and stylization resulting in "flat and spatula forms of abstract bear figures" (Sutherland, "The Variety of Artistic Expression..." 291). This might imply the mass production of these carvings which quite probably testifies to an increased concern for spiritual life. This increase might have been a response to the unusual weather conditions experienced around 1000 A.D.

Carvings with Unknown Function

Unfortunately, in the Dorset assemblage there are artefacts which are not easy to interpret. This is the problem in the case of the small, flat disks cut from bone. These disks have perforated holes, which serve as a starting point of radiating lines. Objects like these were very popular among Siberian peoples, and were commonly associated with the shaman's clothing (Jochelson 108). Patricia Sutherland suggests that these can be interpreted as representations of a cosmological plane with a central opening, which is actually a channel between different worlds (Sutherland, "Shamanism in the iconography..." 141). We have comparable imagery from Alaskan cultures contemporaneous with Dorset culture. As for the number of radiating lines, one can recognize the importance of the number four and its multiples. This numerological hint may also be justified by multiple-face carvings with e.g. forty faces carved on them (Lantis 98; Weyer 318).

Besides these, there are bone tubes in the corpus, which are believed to be soul catchers (McGhee, "Ancient Animals" 24). This hypothesis is based on Siberian analogies. These tubes - originally unadorned - end in open mouth-like endings frequently representing the mouths of two opposed animal heads with incised skeletal motifs. The presence of opposed forces (represented by the two opposed animal heads) may have increased the efficiency of the tube through which shamans are thought to have sucked the spirits/ malevolent beings which were believed to cause illness out of the body.^[4]

Within this category, one can also find the group of figurative carvings often referred to as spatulas. It is difficult to define what these were intended to depict, but these are likely to represent living creatures (most of the time bears). On the basis of the various combinations of "+" and "X" patterns found on these spatulas could justify this previous statement. The majority of these artefacts have heads which are crudely carved and have "X" markings on the back. There is a spatula though which is made special by the animal head being replaced by a miniature harpoon head. This suggests a "symbolic equivalence between the major predators (jaws of the polar bear) and the harpoon of the human hunter" (McGhee, "Ancient Animals" 24).

These miniature harpoon heads whose function has been in the focus of long-standing debates make up the majority of functionally important artefacts of the Dorset corpus. On the one hand, based upon Inuit analogies, these can be considered toys, whereas other scholars firmly claim that these harpoon heads may have been used as real tools. In William Taylor's opinion, these are too small to be used, hence he prefers the idea that these can be treated as religious objects involved chiefly in healing rituals. The harpoon heads without sockets can be thought to be symbolic representations of pain/ illness which were ritually removed from the sick person's body (Park and Mousseau 267). On the other hand, the rest can be handled as toys. If these were toys, this might explain the regular and gradual increase in the size of the harpoons. As children grew older, they might have been playing and practicing hunting with larger and larger harpoon heads. (For further interpretations, see *Bear Cult and Ceremonialism*.)

Bear Cult and Ceremonialism

As it has been pointed out earlier, in the overall inventory of portrayals those of the bear are numerous. Most of these carvings have etched skeletal patterns on them, but depictions of crouching, swimming, standing, sitting and flying bears are also to be found. These carvings best support the thesis according to which Dorset culture could be classified as an Arctic culture, which puts bear cult or ceremonialism at the focus of their spiritual life. Bear cult is a circumpolar phenomenon, so in my view too, it would prove to be fruitful to examine analogies of bear ceremonialism, such as that of the Inuit culture, in which the omnipresence of the polar bear - not only as an "instrumental and symbolic support of male authority" - "from the very beginning of the cosmogonic myths to the limits of the powers of the shaman, as well as in everyday life" is remarkable (D'Anglure 169). We have to refrain from assuming direct continuity among these cultures, though.

Some of these carvings, for example, the one found by Jorgen Meldgaard near Alarnerk (Igloolik) dating back to 500 A.D., have hollowed out ventral grooves and some traces of red ochre. Helge Larsen came up with a possible interpretation: this aforementioned carving represents a "hanging polar bear skin such as those featured in the bear-cult rituals of Siberian peoples" (qtd. in Sutherland, "Shamanism in the

iconography..." 140). He contends that the "animal represented has been eviscerated", thus only the skin or the skeleton is depicted (qtd. in Sutherland, "Shamanism in the iconography..." 140). His theory is also supported by the skin treatment practice of the *Netsilingmiut*. Larsen also emphasizes the special attention given by the Eskimo to the head and the skin of the bear: for example, on the top of the head there were gifts meant for the bears or other utilitarian objects placed to be imbued by the spirit (Larsen 32). The tiny Dorset harpoon heads analyzed by Moreau Maxwell and Robert Park (Maxwell (1974); Park and Mousseau (2003)) might have been used in the practice of hunting magic in the same way that Larsen described in his account or the way the Ainu did with their ceremonial arrows during the Bear Festival.^[5] Besides these, there is a great deal of evidence from several Dorset sites showing special treatment of the bones (especially the skull and the paws) of bears. On Dundas Island for instance, there were selected bear bones, mostly skulls with a dotted pattern painted on them in the midden and on the rocks around the Dorset settlement, in addition, in the so-called "Maze village" separately treated bear heads and paws were also found (McGhee, "Late Dorset Art from Dundas Island..." 143, 144).

Many bear carvings have perforated holes making it possible to wear them as pendants, possibly as amulets attached to garments or belts. For Dorset culture is known to be a hunting culture, it seems possible that not only shamans, but individual hunters also wore such pendants to ensure a successful hunt or simply propitiate the preys' 'souls' to ward their vengeance off as seen in other Eskimo cultures. The broad distribution of amulets (McGhee, "Late Dorset Art from Dundas Island..." 143) and stylized skeletons found on utilitarian artefacts (Sutherland, "The Variety of Artistic Expression..." 292) are also indicative of their common usage. It is beyond doubt that there are carvings (representing flying bears, in particular) that can exclusively be associated with shamans and shamanic practices like shamanic flight. In the Inuit shamanic complex, bears are not powerful just because of their robust bodies, but they were believed to be the great transformers (C. Trott).^[6] In the Inuit *Nuliajuq* legend (reported by Knud Rasmussen), the magical power of the polar bear skin (spirit) enabled Nuliajuq's father to adapt to aquatic way of life. Thus it seems probable that a polar bear helping spirit would enable a ritual specialist to undertake a flight to distant points of the universe. Sutherland brings up a carving of a flying polar bear as a possible representation of a helping spirit. Referring back to helping spirits, in the Dorset corpus there are other carvings associated with shamanic flight, namely carvings of birds with the faces of humans staring from the abdominal cavity of the birds. One can find analogies for this ornithomorphic nature in Central Asian and Siberian shamanic complexes (Devlet 45).

Conclusion

Taking everything into consideration, the complexity of the Dorset art corpus cannot totally be understood due to several hindrances such as the lack of archaeological evidence and the diversity of analogies from all

over the Arctic. In my paper, I intended to draw one's attention to different analogies other than analogies found in Siberia. There are several remarkable similarities and analogies that cannot be ignored: the skeletal and 'X-ray' design showing Eurasian and American distribution and the act of shamanic flight, in particular.

On the basis of analogies and the archaeological finds one can come to the following conclusions concerning the relationship between the Dorset miniature carvings and the Paleo-Eskimo (mainly Dorset) belief system:

- The broad consensus is that the vast majority of the artefacts outlined previously are connected to shamanic practice, whereas the other half of the artefacts can be regarded as everyday utensils or amulets (if perforated).
- Artefacts with carved 'X-ray' and skeletal motifs can undoubtedly be associated with religious practices. One half of these artefacts were likely to be used by individuals in everyday contexts, while the other certainly belonged to the shaman's paraphernalia.
- As far as the 'X-ray' and skeletal motifs are concerned, these can be interpreted in diverse ways: these might have protected the individuals from evil, or might have represented shamanic vision, or can be considered to be a container of the soul spirit, or can be associated with the Siberian-Aleutian tradition of the dismemberment of the body at the joints.
- Based upon comparable analogies and imagery carvings with unknown function such as flat disks with radiating line designs, bone tubes or spatulas have also got a lot to do with magic. The flat disks and the bone tubes could have been used by ritual specialists whereas spatulas by individuals. The everyday use of spatulas is implied by the high degree of stylization which testifies to the mass production of these artefacts.
- Figurative Dorset artefacts are zoomorphic, anthropomorphic or zoo-anthropomorphic portrayals. The anthropomorphic carvings mainly depict faces and not the full-sized person. The zoo-anthropomorphic artefacts can beyond doubt be connected to shamanic practices best shown by artefacts depicting human-animal transformation. With respect to zoomorphic carvings, in the Dorset art corpus representations of the (polar) bear - which has been known as the most powerful spirit helper - is the most numerous possibly emphasizing the importance of bear ceremonialism in the Canadian Dorset culture. The veneration of certain body parts of the polar bear testified by a series of archaeological finds, remote analogies and the number of carvings depicting bears (perforated items and non-perforated sculptures alike) support the following hypothesis: bear cult was a significant component in the spiritual life of the Dorset people.

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[1] <http://anthropology.uwaterloo.ca/ArcticArchStuff/dorset.html>

[2] Milne, Suzanne B. - personal communication with the assistant professor from the University of Manitoba, Department of Anthropology, Arctic Prehistory course, fall term 2006/07

[3] Robert Park hypothesizes that long houses could have been structures built to accommodate communal events like shamanic rituals.

[4] <http://www.civilization.ca/cmc/exhibitions/archeo/paleoesq/pes01eng.shtml>

[5] <http://www.bears.org/spirit/ainumyth.php>

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