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GLOBAL CULTURE CHANGE: NEW VIEWS OF CIRCUMPOLAR LANDS AND PEOPLES

by William W. Fitzhugh

For many years anthropologists believed that Eskimos were the isolated descendants of Ice Age hunters, marginal refugees whose Paleolithic cultures had been preserved for thousands of years in a kind of cultural deep freeze.

In recent years, a quite different view of arctic cultures has emerged, challenging this "relic of the past" theory with a new view of circumpolar history as a unique and dynamic adaptation to a relatively "friendly" arctic--if you know how to live there. The cultural similarities among native peoples on either side of the Pacific Basin, from Siberia to Alaska and the Columbia River, and across the North American arctic to Canada and Greenland, demonstrate a long and complex history of culture contact, migrations, and exchange in arctic regions, and provide a new perspective on the question of the "independent" history of the Americas. Seen from a global, circumpolar perspective, arctic and subarctic regions and their adjacent coasts are increasingly perceived as longstanding "highways" rather than as barriers to the flow of plants and animals, peoples and cultures. Today we recognize Siberian influence in several early Alaskan cultures, and Bering Strait sources are known for many features of Eskimo cultures found across the Arctic.

First Contact

Slightly more than one thousand years ago, Norsemen from Scandinavia crossed the North Atlantic and discovered Greenland and North

America. They found these new lands cold and bleak and were surprised to discover them inhabited by "skraelings," whom they described as semi-human creatures with one leg and screeching voices. Five hundred years later Englishman Martin Frobisher reached Greenland and Baffin Island (1576-78) while searching for the Northwest Passage. Frobisher too met native Inuit, but despite their skin clothes and animal-like sod house dwellings, he noted they were shrewd traders and crafty warriors, not afraid to die for their homes or their freedom. Frobisher managed to capture several Inuit, bringing them home to present to Queen Elizabeth I as "tokens of possession" of new lands claimed for England. Lacking resistance to European diseases, these people soon died, but their Asian features and metal tools suggested Frobisher had, indeed, discovered the threshold of the fabled Northwest Passage to Asia.

Early descriptions of arctic peoples also were recorded in the European arctic. According to an Old English text, Ohthere, an intrepid Norse chieftain of the late ninth century, described the Saami (Lapp) peoples of northern Scandinavia in fearsome terms. He and other travelers reported meeting Russian arctic peoples with powerful sled dogs and boats made from the skins of seals.

Today we know these northern peoples as Inuit (Eskimos) in North America and the western side of Bering Strait; Chukchi, Yukaghir, Dolgans, and Nenets inhabiting Siberia; and Saami (Lapps) living

in Scandinavia. Occupying similar arctic lands for thousands of years, these various peoples developed similar cultures, using skin and feather clothing, harpoons, dog and reindeer sleds, oil lamps, underground houses and skin boats. Many of these people shared shamanistic beliefs and nearly identical folktales of Raven and the aurora borealis.

Who were these arctic peoples who so fascinated European explorers and travelers? What was their origin and history? Did they come from a single people who spread eastward from northern Europe around the northern rim of the globe, or did they undergo convergent development following independent origins in different areas of the North?

Early anthropologists explored these questions in two ways. The first was by trying to connect the cultures of living arctic peoples to the early hunting cultures of Paleolithic Europe; the second was by exploring similarities and differences among living arctic peoples, in the hope of identifying living traces of the earliest "original" arctic people.

Eskimo Origins

The search for Eskimo origins began with Martin Frobisher and Europe's introduction to Frobisher's Inuit. Northern lands were indeed hostile to inexperienced arctic navigators like Frobisher, and they were decidedly so for Sir John Franklin, who lost his life, his ships, and his crew exploring the Northwest Passage in Arctic Canada in the 1840s. Such events influenced how Euroamericans imagined arctic lands -- as hostile to human life -- and the history of its peoples as remote from the centers of developing civilizations. Generations of scholars came to view the Arctic as a refuge, where Ice Age peoples with their cultures had migrated and then survived down to the present, in a kind of cultural and biological deep freeze.

Encouragement for this view came from the mid-19th-century discovery of European Paleolithic sites containing harpoons for hunting sea mammals, throwing sticks for hurling spears, ivory figurines, pictographic art, and shaft-straighteners -- all nearly identical to tools known from historic Eskimo cultures and their Thule culture archeological

ancestors in Greenland, Canada, and Alaska. It seemed logical to archaeologists that the Eskimos, for whom these similarities were most striking, were the direct descendants of European Paleolithic reindeer hunters who had retreated north, following the melting ice and the northward movement of animals at the end of the Ice Age. The discovery of cave paintings depicting Ice Age hunters whose prey included reindeer and other arctic animals only confirmed this view. The Eskimos, it was believed, had preserved the remnants of an ancient Ice Age culture even to the modern day, hunting sea mammals, caribou, musk-ox, polar bears and other arctic game.

But not all arctic peoples lived this way.

The peoples of the Russian arctic in historical times were reindeer herders, not sea mammal hunters, and they practiced a northern variant of animal domestication. Even though their reindeer were not completely tame, and could easily be lost if a herder was not attentive, reindeer herding provided a margin of safety for Eurasian arctic peoples missing in the North American arctic. The implications of this new economy were enormous. A careful herding family did not need to worry where their next meal would come from and could devote energies to other activities, like trading furs for European or Chinese goods, metal-working, and exchanges with far-flung tribes. In time the reindeer herding culture expanded from central Eurasia west into Scandinavia and east to Bering Strait, transforming cultures in its path, exterminating wild reindeer (caribou), and imposing a near mono-culture economic system throughout much of the Eurasian arctic.

Interestingly, reindeer herding reached Bering Strait about 1000 years ago but never entered Alaska. Some Eskimo peoples on the Siberian side adopted reindeer breeding, while others continued to live as sea mammal hunters. In this instance, Bering Strait was both a geographic as well as an ethnic barrier, for none of the American Eskimos adopted reindeer breeding. The rich maritime economy of Bering Strait offered a hearty subsistence for Eskimo peoples who lived there, and when reindeer fur was needed for clothing it could be obtained from the

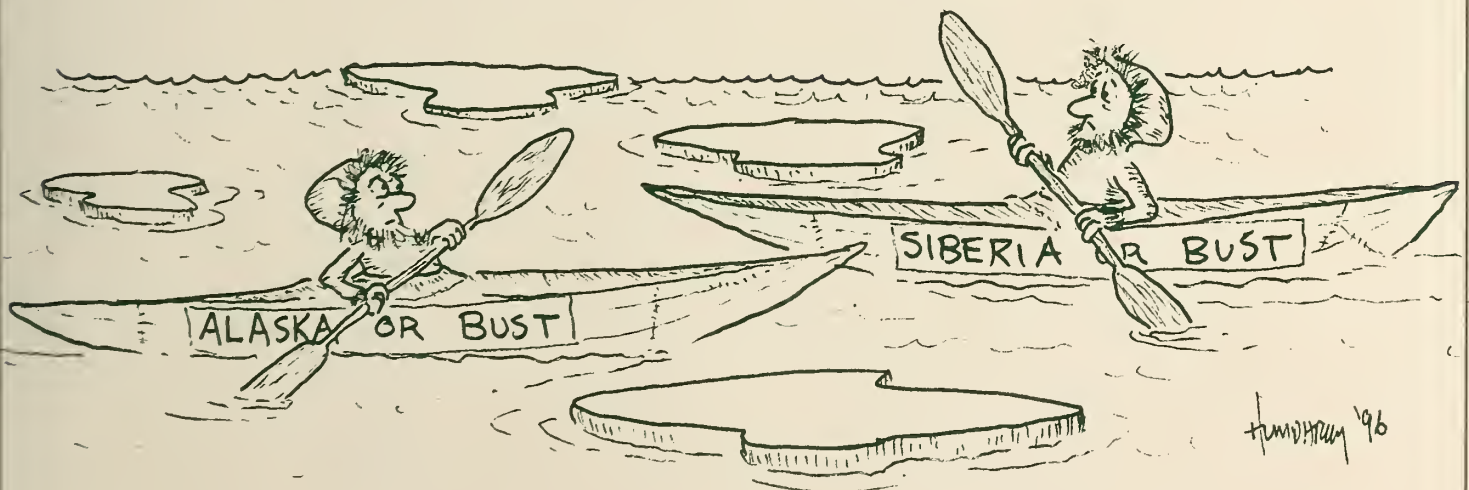
Siberian Chukchi. The spread of reindeer herding peoples and the revolution of reindeer herding that spread through the Eurasian arctic never entered the New World, and the Eskimo and northern Indian peoples there continued to hunt wild animals as they had for thousands of years. It is only in this sense that North American arctic peoples can be said to have preserved an ancient hunting tradition and religious beliefs whose roots can indeed be traced to Ice Age times.

Today, archaeological methods have replaced ethnographic parallels in determining the history of arctic peoples, including Eskimos. At the same time, archaeological interpretations of the evidence of extinct cultures are influenced by the description and analyses of ethnographic (both historical and modern) cultures around the world, as knowledge of known cultural systems help fill in the inevitable gaps in archaeological evidence. After nearly one hundred years, archaeologists are confident that the Bering Sea region was the birthplace of Eskimo culture. But beyond this, there is disagreement as to exactly where this culture first developed; eastern Siberia, Kodiak Island, the Alaska Peninsula and Western Alaska are all still in the running. Resolving this question will not be easy because post-glacial submergence, tidal waves, and earthquakes have destroyed much of the coastal zones inhabited by these early cultures, making archaeological investigation of many key areas impossible.

North Pacific Rim Peoples

The distinction across the North Atlantic between the herding Eurasian and the hunting North American arctic peoples stands in marked contrast to the cultural and economic similarities among the peoples living along both shores of the North Pacific Rim. The North Pacific Rim peoples, furthermore, provide a fascinating case study of culture contact and change through time. Ironically, it was along the Pacific Rim, where Native peoples had been in contact for millennia before Europeans arrived, that the recent 20th-Century history of political antagonisms masked the very real and very long continuities of cultures. Due to 19th-century Russian exploring expeditions to Russian America (Alaska), early ethnographic collections from Alaska ended up in museums in St. Petersburg, Russia, while eastern Siberian collections made by Franz Boas' Jesup Expedition of 1897-1902 ended up in New York, at the American Museum of Natural History. Fortunately, now there are few physical or political barriers to the exchange of information, peoples, and materials across the Bering Strait, and joint exhibition projects like the Smithsonian's 1988 "Crossroads of Continents" could reassemble these collections from their places of origins.

The Smithsonian's "Crossroads" exhibition combined cultural materials from northeastern Siberia and northwestern North America into a single joint traveling exhibition seen by peoples on



both sides of the Bering Strait. A smaller version of the "Crossroads" exhibit, with strong local education components and many miniature artifacts made originally as toys and models, toured villages throughout Alaska in 1993-95, and a Russian language version now is traveling in the Russian Far East.

Peopling the New World

Archaeologists investigating the history of cultures around Bering Strait have found clear evidence of the movement of Asian peoples into northeastern Siberia and their subsequent migration into Alaska and the Americas. Dates from stratified cave sites along the Aldan River, a tributary of the Lena, in the Sakha Republic (formerly Yakutia) begin as early as 35,000 years ago. Comparable dates are known from sites in northern Japan. Confirmation of the northeastern movement of peoples and acquisition of arctic adaptation is seen in the trend of archaeological dates upward toward 12,000 BP as one approaches Bering Strait. At about this time, settled riverside fishing villages also appear on the lower Amur River and in Kamchatka. In both cases data indicate seasonally settled villages, and sites on the Amur contain some of the earliest ceramics in the world---fired clay animal figurines and grit-tempered pottery have been recovered.

At about this time, ca. 12,000 years ago, the first well-dated stratified sites appear in Alaska on the Nenana River and in a number of other locations, both on the interior and on the coast. Almost instantaneously, sites of this age also appear at many sites in North and South America, indicating a very rapid southward movement of peoples from Alaska. Although pottery and pithouse villages have not been found in the earliest Alaskan sites, the presence of sites at both coastal and interior locations document adaptation to a wide range of environments.

The cultures of these earliest Siberian and Alaskan peoples were very similar. Although the early fluted (Clovis-like) points known from northwestern Alaska have not been found in Siberia, these early Siberian-American Paleoarctic peoples employed similar bifacial and microblade (core and blade)

technologies and clearly shared a common cultural tradition. Unlike the earliest Siberian ancestors, who followed a more nomadic hunting way of life, post-12,000 BP coastal peoples had already begun to turn their attention to the more abundant and stable resources of the sea.

By 10,000 years ago this maritime-focused economy was present along both the Siberian and American sides of the North Pacific from Japan to Alaska, and to British Columbia and Washington State, in a giant arc connecting the two continents. The northernmost section of this North Pacific culture area was occupied by the ancestors of present-day Yupik Eskimos and Aleuts in Western Alaska and of several Native nations in northeastern Siberia: Koryak, Itelmen, Chukchi, Nivkh, and Asiatic or Siberian Eskimos. Ancestral cultures leading to these ethnographic peoples have been documented throughout this region. Although details of this development are best known from North American sites, a comparable sequence is emerging as archaeological work expands in Siberia. Throughout the region, the trend in coastal regions was toward increasing sedentism and intensive exploitation of marine resources, and reached its peak in the early historical period.

These North Pacific developments also appear to have stimulated adaptation of peoples to the icy coasts and arctic interior regions north of Bering Strait. One prominent theory holds that early Eskimo-like cultures, originating as maritime-based cultures in Kodiak and the Aleutian Islands, spread north along the Alaskan coast as the land bridge was inundated after 11,000 years ago, and became adapted to arctic regions. About 4500 years ago the North Alaska hunting peoples received impulses from Siberian Neolithic cultures, resulting in the Alaskan Denbigh and Arctic Small tool tradition cultures. These groups, in turn, expanded eastward into the recently ice-freed Canadian Arctic, reaching Greenland and Labrador by 4000 years ago, making this the last major area of the New World to be colonized permanently by humans.

As Igor Krupnik has described in his essay "Native Peoples of the Russian Far East," in the catalog *Crossroads Alaska*, the historic Siberian Eskimo

and Chukchi inhabitants of the Bering Strait region shared a number of cultural adaptations growing out of an economy based on hunting for sea mammals, either from boats or on ice, hunting for land mammals and birds, and fishing. They mastered the art of dog-sled driving and built sophisticated boats of skin and wood propelled by paddles and sails. When they settled on the coast they gathered in permanent villages, consisting of sod houses or dugouts in winter, skin or birch-bark tents and wooden plank houses in summer. Evidence of ancient origins for their elaborate rituals and community festivals, which included decorated fur and gutskin clothing, skin drums, wooden masks, and ivory carvings, have been found in the Old Bering Sea cultures of this region as early as 2000 years ago.

In Siberia, about 2000 years ago, those peoples who did not move to the coast preserved their original nomadic lifestyle of hunting and fishing, and developed a distinct cultural pattern focusing on the domesticated reindeer. "Mastering reindeer herding was the second most important economic revolution for Siberian Native people, after mastering the resources of the sea" (Krupnik, p. 23). As should be clear by now, cultural similarities abound on either side of the Pacific Basin. Sites from both Siberia and Alaska contain early forms of microblade technology. Sites from later times show similarities in Neolithic microblades, ceramics, and architecture. Many of these similarities, like whalebone-semi-subterranean housing, can be traced eastward into Canada and Greenland. Others, like the distinctive Old Bering Sea, Okvik, and Ipiutak art styles, remain rooted in the Bering Strait region. What is less clear is whether these similarities developed from deep cultural strata accumulated from the cultural residues of shared history before the peopling of the New World, or are they, instead, the result of more recent contact and exchange?

Detailed archaeological comparisons and dating have revealed that many of these similarities resulted from historical contacts. As noted above, we can trace the eastward spread of Paleolithic core and blade technology into Alaska from Siberia about 12,000 years ago. Similarly there appears to have

been a dispersal of Siberian Neolithic blade industry into Western Alaska, Canada, and Greenland at 4500 BP, and of Asian ceramics into Alaska ca. 2000 years ago. But, are the advent of intensive maritime adaptation and the use of seasonal pithouse villages local adaptations or introduced phenomena? And what can be said of Old Bering Sea burial ritual and art? While many of these developments reflect local adaptations and trends, external impulses often had dramatic effects, as seen by dramatic Siberian shamanistic influences in Ipiutak burial ritual at Point Hope, Alaska, ca. A.D. 500.

Global Aspects of Culture Contact and Exchange

Exploration of culture contact and exchange in arctic regions provides a new and different perspective on the question of the "independent" history of the Americas. As new data begin to emerge from these relatively unknown northern lands (especially from Northeast Asia), evidence for a continuing history of Beringian exchange is mounting.



The circumpolar region can be seen as a natural pathway for the movement of peoples and ideas between Asia and the Americas. Before A.D. 1000-1500, it was the only conduit we can document through which Asian and American populations interacted. Whether such interaction was initiated by historical and cultural forces of evolution, technological development, population growth, or from the indirect influence of climatic change or animal movements, the circumpolar region with its Bering Sea zone has been the sole point of contact and transmission between the New and Old Worlds. In this sense northern regions have played a unique role as buffer and transmitter of trans-continental historical forces. Most of these seem to have flowed from the centers of more complex cultural development in Asia into the New World. Few, if any, traces of American cultures seem to have influenced Siberian or East Asian culture history.

The Latitudinal/Longitudinal Perspective

The circumpolar distribution of clothing styles, blubber lamps, harpoons, skin boats, shamanism, bear ceremonialism, and mythology are striking reminders of common elements in the ethnographic cultures of northern peoples. A comparable suite of common features has been identified in archaeological cultures of this region: persistence of early core and blade industries; ground slate technology; wrench-like shaft straighteners; hunting art employing skeletal and joint-mark art, and others. Mechanisms of culture contact and exchange are visibly recognizable; migration and diffusion in the sparsely-populated expanses of northern regions are well documented in historical literature, in ethnographic and linguistic continuities, and in

archaeological evidence. The Eskimo peoples and cultures rapidly expanded into the Canadian Arctic, first about 4000 years ago, and later with the whale-hunting Thule migration at A.D. 1000. Reindeer breeding and herding occurred throughout the Eurasian arctic and boreal regions during the last 1500 years. Cultural features---including art styles, iron technology, glass beads, and tobacco---moved rapidly from Siberia into North America. All of these exemplify the existence of latitudinal global conduits and channels for forces of culture contact and change.

Contrasting the circumpolar latitudinal homogeneity is the longitudinal, environmental, and cultural diversity that occurs in both Eurasia and North America on the north-south axis. Throughout history we have seen the increasing divergence in levels of cultural development and complexity between the tropical and temperate regions on the one hand and boreal and arctic regions on the other. State development processes and formation of civilizations have been at work in southern Eurasia and Central America for thousands of years, always expanding northwards, transforming northern peoples. In the North, environmental conditions and the persistence of a "big game hunting" tradition encouraged the persistence of Paleolithic and Mesolithic hunting traditions and technology into the 20th century.

One of the more remarkable features of this persistence is the recent discovery that dwarf mammoths existed in some regions of the Eurasian arctic nearly 5000 years longer than elsewhere in the world. Paleontological remains of a miniature type of mammoth on Wrangel Island, one hundred miles



north of the Chukotka coast, demonstrate a Pleistocene "refugium" until 4500 years ago or even later. The discovery by Russians of archaeological sites at Chertov Ovrage (Devil's Gorge) on Wrangel dating to 4000 years ago raises questions of possible human intervention in the ultimate demise of this great Ice Age mammal.

Impact of the Modern World

Several dramatic changes have taken place in recent years in the Arctic. Indigenous populations have expanded, but while growing rapidly, they are now a minority in their homelands in all but a few locations. Native subsistence economies have changed under the pressure of modernization, commercial exploitation and governmental policies. A number of ethnic groups described by 19th century anthropologists, including the Sadlermiut of Hudson Bay, the Eyak of southeast Alaska, and the Aliutor of Kamchatka have become extinct. Of the eight North American Eskimo languages known historically, only three---Greenlandic, Inuktitut, and Yupik--- will survive into the mid-21st century. The cultural diversity and integrity of much of the region is equally threatened.

As the world approaches the end of the 20th century and faces a new millennium, scholars and the public alike are concerned with the dramatic outcomes of the past century and the legacy it will leave to future generations. Environmental degradation, pollution, and loss of species and ecosystem integrity are issues of major concern. A similar set of concerns is expressed by both the general public and social scientists regarding human cultural diversity and the rights of indigenous people. Paternalistic governmental policies, industrialization and the spread of consumerist values have damaged indigenous subsistence and languages and distorted their cultural continuity and ethnic diversity.

During this century thousands of Siberian, Alaskan and Northwest Coast Natives abandoned their traditional lifestyles and joined the modern workforce in increasingly industrialized urban settings. Huge numbers of outsiders immigrated into their territories, bringing demographic, social and political change. Entrepreneurism, business

interests and military policies have made major impacts on both human and natural environments. While many groups continue to live in their homelands, most have lost their Native languages, adopted imported religious beliefs, and rely on modern technology.

In Siberia equally dramatic changes have taken place. State-controlled hierarchies have dictated policy; floods of recruited and imprisoned outsiders have arrived; and some Native groups have been deprived of traditional livelihoods, while others involved in state-owned reindeer herding, peltfarming and fishing have been artificially subsidized. Official policies of "russification" and relocation have reduced the viability of Native life and economy. State-controlled industrial development has had a devastating impact on land and resources over which Native people have had little control.

Despite differences in political systems, in many respects the results of 20th century developments in Siberia and northwest North America have produced surprisingly similar results. In both areas Native people have lost much of their ability to direct their own futures; languages have been weakened or lost; poverty has increased; subsistence economies have been weakened; and alcoholism and social disorders have become serious problems. In both areas cultural and language survival, Native rights, education policy, and economic and political issues loom as major problems for the future.

Conclusion

After five centuries of a dominant "Atlantic" perspective on world history and politics, we are entering an era in which Pacific resources and relations are assuming an ever more important role in world affairs. Viewing the globe from a circumpolar perspective becomes ever more important, while understanding the lands, peoples and cultures of the North Pacific Rim can provide immense benefits to northern peoples, and to public and scientific understanding of a little known but increasingly important part of the world. As our understanding increases through scientific research and public dissemination, new perspectives on the

Circumpolar Arctic in general, and the North Pacific Rim specifically, should help prepare younger generations to live in an increasingly global world. Arctic regions and peoples are part of that world. In fact, they may be the most "global" of all!

For Further Reading:

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William W. Fitzhugh is the Director of the Arctic Studies Center and Curator in the Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution.