

How the Inuit came to Northeastern Canada

This is the third in a series of summer columns by Dr. Marianne Stopp, an historian at the Historical Research Branch, Parks Canada. She has worked as an archaeologist in southern Labrador for over 20 years and is the author of The New Labrador Papers of Captain George Cartwright.

The Norse established their first settlements in West Greenland just before the year AD 1000. This took place over two hundred years before the arrival of the Thule Inuit in the eastern Arctic and over 400 years before the Inuit began to settle Labrador. Thule (pronounced "TOO-lee") Inuit began to settle the eastern Arctic around AD 1250, arriving in what were probably several migration waves out of Alaska. Their

migration from Alaska and across the Canadian Arctic is one of human history's most remarkable population expansions, which is why in 1978 the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada designated The Thule Migration as an event of national historic significance. Thule settlement of the Arctic was not only rapid, occurring in about a century, but it took place in of the world's most forbidding environments.

The success of the Thule migration is tied to having the right technology and to broad knowledge of the environment. Thule knew how to make clothing that was perfectly suited for Arctic living, with waterproof seams and an inner layer of hide that ensured warmth while also

keeping body moisture from forming on the skin. Their harpoons and the bow and arrow gave them the ability to hunt bowhead whales, walrus, muskox, and smaller species. They were able to travel swiftly and across great distances because they possessed sled dogs, kayaks, and umiaks.

Canadian archaeologists believe that the Thule Inuit were migrating eastward with a purpose. Along with wood, iron was highly valued in the western Arctic. Early Alaskan Inuit were familiar with iron that was traded in from Siberia. Thule Inuit migration parties may have been searching for iron, or may have already known of two key sources of iron to be found in the eastern Arctic. These were the smelted iron possessed by the Norse in Greenland, and a meteoritic iron deposit at Cape York in northwestern Greenland. It is quite possible that they learned of these iron sources from the Dorset Palaeoeskimo, an arctic-adapted people who lived in the Arctic for over two thousand years before the Thule but had largely disappeared at the time of the Thule migration. The Dorset had quarried the Cape York meteor deposit and may have somehow passed this knowledge on to Inuit newcomers. Although very little iron has been found on archaeological sites across the Arctic because it rusts and decomposes, tell-tale evidence of its use is the narrow blade slot of some harpoon heads.

Of all the indigenous people in North America, the Inuit of the eastern Arctic and Labrador have had the longest contact with European objects. The earliest Thule Inuit sites in the eastern Arctic are in Buchanan Bay on Ellesmere Island, only 45 km away from Greenland. These sites date to ca. AD 1250. In the 1980s, Archaeologists Karen McCullough and Peter Schliedermann uncovered plenty of evidence to show that

Norse iron and other Norse goods as well as meteoritic iron were being used by Inuit in Buchanan Bay at this early date - whether through direct contact with Norse or indirect contact through shipwrecks or abandoned Norse camps is unknown. Iron passed through Inuit hands from that time forward following long-distance trade networks. For instance, fragments of meteoritic iron from the Cape York meteor deposit have been found at Thule sites dated between AD 1350 and AD 1700 throughout Arctic Canada. After the end of the Norse settlements in the late 1400s, Inuit scavenged these places for European goods that continue to appear at Inuit sites until the 1700s. Face-to-face contact between Inuit and Europeans in northeastern Canada may have happened a number of times and in several ways. It is certain that the Norse voyaged widely, sailing along Greenland's west coast to hunt, and eastward towards Davis Strait and the coast of Labrador in regular search of precious wood and bog iron deposits. Their voyages probably brought them into contact with Inuit peoples. Ongoing archival research into the history of the North Atlantic fishery also offers the intriguing possibility that very early English were sailing northern waters in the 15th century in search of cod stocks, and could have come in contact with Inuit. By the late 1500s, Inuit in Labrador were in regular contact with Basque and Dutch whalers as well as with successive early European explorers seeking a northwest passage. By the late 17th century, Inuit were meeting French fishermen in southern Labrador and on Newfoundland's Great Northern Peninsula followed by the English from 1763.

This is not to say that all Inuit possessed European goods or had met Europeans. Successive waves of migrating Inuit settled in different parts of the Arctic and Labrador and some did not meet Europeans until the nineteenth century. There are Inuit sites in northern Labrador where no European goods have been found. As early as the 1500s, however, Inuit in southern Labrador began



Eva Luther with a whalebone sled runner at the Inuit site of North Island in St. Michael's Bay. MARIANNE STOPP PHOTO

to acquire iron and ceramics from the different Europeans who fished these waters and used European iron, ceramics, glass, and other objects alongside their traditional tools of bone and wood until the English colonial period. After 1763, with the growing presence of English merchant crews along the Labrador coast, as well as Moravian mission stations in northern Labrador, there is a marked increase in the use of European materials at Inuit sites and by the early 1800s Inuit and mixed Inuit-European families were using all of the same items as European settlers. Influences flowed both ways in Labrador, however, with European settlers adopting the komatiks, seal-skin boots, sod insulation, parkas, sled dogs, food preparation techniques, and settlement patterns of the Inuit.