Dorset Shamanism
Excavations in Northern Labrador

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Introduction
In 1977, a Dorset Eskimo site on Shuldham Island in northern Labrador was found by a biologist intent on examining the flora of the richly-vegetated terrace on which the site stood. Upon noting several housepit-like depressions, he alerted his colleagues, archaeologists with the Smithsonian Institution/Bryn Mawr College Torngat Archaeological Project, and the site was tested. Evidence was found of an occupation that extended the known Dorset culture history of the region by several hundred years and suggested that this outer part of the coast was an important exploitation zone during the Middle and Late Dorset periods. In 1978, a short return visit to the site resulted in the excavation of three miniature soapstone figurines (see Fig. 4) associated with Late Dorset stone tools. During the summers of 1980 to 1982 and with the generous support of members of the Torngat Archaeological Project, I investigated two of the winter houses at this site, “Shuldham Island 9.”

Excavation
June 26
At times during the past 30 hours I had wondered whether we would be here on Shuldham Island tonight. Late yesterday afternoon a representative from Petro-Canada, the company conducting exploratory work from drill rigs on the Labrador Shelf, called to inform us that there was room for our small archaeology crew on this morning’s flight from St. John’s, Newfoundland, to Saglek Bay in northern Labrador. After a hectic night of final purchasing and packing, we hauled all our gear out to the airport and by 6:30 a.m. the Convair was climbing out of St. John’s en route to Goose Bay, where we stopped briefly to pick up the rest of our five-person crew.

As we flew over the thick boreal

1 View northwest over Shuldham Island 9. House 1 on extreme left, House 2 to right.
Approximately 2000 years ago Dorset Eskimos began establishing settlements throughout the Eastern Arctic. The remains of sod houses, stone pavements, tools and weapons, and ivory and bone carvings indicate that Dorset Eskimos occupied coastal regions throughout the Canadian High Arctic, Greenland, Baffin Island, and Labrador-Newfoundland.

forests of interior central Labrador, we could see rapid-stream rivers tumbling down from the interior plateaus. Around Hopedsale, a small settlement on the central coast, the forests thinned into a transitional forest-tundra zone which graded into open tundra where isolated stands of stunted spruces grew in sheltered valleys. Panning Nairn, the northernmost settlement, we could see that summer was coming slowly to northern Labrador. Streams of drift ice were flowing down on the Labrador Current, and several giant icebergs could be seen off to the east. In the north the coastal terrain became more mountainous. Peaks in the Kiglapait and Kimmajut ranges were still snow-covered and the Torngat mountains, dominating the extreme northern coast, could be seen looming in the distance. Steep-sided fjords cut deeply into the interior. As we approached Saglek, we could see that the bay was full of floating ice (Fig. 3). However, there were navigable lanes along the icecap, the beach below the runway was clear and, looking across to Shallow Island, it seemed that the cave where we were to work and camp was fairly free of ice. The plane landed and rolled smoothly up the runway first built for a DEW (Distant Early Warning) line station back in the 50s.

We were anxious to set up our camp on Shallow Island while the weather held and were able to talk the Petro-Canada station manager into supplying us with some outboard motor gas. He then kindly ran our gear down to the beach in the base truck. As we worked to get our inflatable boat set up, two helicopters dropped off with crew changes to the rig, stationed beyond the bay in the Labrador Sea. When we had the boat ready, we put a small first load of gear and all the crew aboard and zig-zagged off through the ice to Shallow Island. By late evening we had transferred all our supplies, the sleeping tents and coolbox were erected near a stream in the lee of a low rise, and food, kitchen gear, and digging equipment were stored away. Sleep came easily that first night, to the soft sounds of a calm sea, the stream bubbling away down to the beach, and a pair of loons on the pond indignantly complaining about the intruders.

2b

The southern end of Shallow Island was a perfect spot for a Dorset settlement. Big Island projects Shallow Island from fierce winds and ocean swells that develop in the Labrador Sea. The same islands and rocks keep the waters around Shallow Island open throughout much of the year, attracting large numbers of various surfbirds and birds to the area.
features were the remains of semi-subterranean houses dug 1 to 3 feet into the terrace, with walls of stone and sod raised by a similar amount. Each structure would have been roofed with a framework of bone and wood covered with skins, sod, and flat stone slabs. These houses might have been built in fall, before the ground froze, to be occupied during the winter.

Stone tent rings on the beach below the terrace indicated that this had remained a popular occupation site into the succeeding Thule and/or Labrador Inuit periods, although during a different season. The tent rings were the remains of summer dwellings, simple skin tents over wood or bone frames with the lower edges and guys held down by a circle of substantial boulders. Like the sod houses, tent rings were occupied by one or two small families living and hunting together. A number of large stone mace caches, found near the site suggested that subsistence activities had resulted in surpluses, which were stored for future use beneath piles of heavy stones to discourage pilfering by polar bears or foxes.

Once we had isolated the houses I wanted to investigate, we set up a grid system of string over the structures to control measurement of objects and features found below the surface. The contours of the houses were mapped, and then we proceeded to strip soil from a test trench across each house that would give us an understanding of stratigraphic sequences within the structures. Beneath the upper 3 to 6 inches of recent soil and roots we came to a black, greasy soil containing stone tools, soapstone vessel fragments, manufacturing debris, animal bones, charcoal and burned litter, and discarded or in situ structural rocks, all of which we carefully plotted on maps as we travelled.

Based on knowledge of what had been found previously in test pits at this site and from a study of excavation results from elsewhere in Labrador, I expected to find that the depressions were the remains of winter houses occupied sequentially by Middle Dorset and Late Dorset Eskimos during the past two millennia. The present state of knowledge indicates that Dorset Eskimos had initially entered Labrador from the Eastern Arctic about 2600 years ago, gradually spreading down the Labrador coast and into the island of Newfoundland. In doing so, they replaced their predecessors, the Pre-Dorset Eskimos, who had also entered from the north about 4000 years ago, after migrating east from Alaska. In Labrador, the Pre-Dorset Eskimos had themselves replaced the incipient Maritime Archaic Indians who had been resident since about 9000 years ago, when glacial retreat first made the coast habitable.

During the Dorset period, Point Reindeer Indians, the ancestors of the Innu today, occupied parts of the central and interior, moved onto and over the central coast, separating the Newfoundland and Labrador Dorset groups. The final native cultural group to enter Labrador, the Thule Eskimos, arrived about 300 years ago and replaced the remnant Dorset population of which the Yukon Inuit descendents of the Thule, today occupy several communities as far north as Nain. Each of the cultural replacements was accompanied by, and probably partially caused by, climatic change. The degree and nature of interaction between overlapping cultural groups is the subject of considerable interest and one of the problems we planned to investigate.

I had come up to Sagke Bay, and specifically to the site of Shoulkland Island 9, with a research design aimed at seeking evidence, currently lacking on this coast, of a stage transitional between Middle and Late Dorset which would indicate that there had been an in situ evolution of Dorset culture in Labrador, not a series of relocations from the eastern Arctic, which was the alternative hypothesis. Because of the time frame indicated by the earlier testing of the site, we also hoped to find traces of contact between Late Dorset Eskimos and other cultural groups who had interests in the north coast, the Greenland Norse, who certainly passed right by the bay in their voyages, the Thule Eskimos, and the Point Reindeer Indians, all of whom were present in northern Labrador within the first few centuries of the present millennium. A third objective was to recover more of the curious soapstone figures which had been found during the earlier testing of the site (Fig. 4). The figures bear some resemblance to Late Dorset ivory, amber, bone, and wood carvings found elsewhere in the Arctic, but differ in style and degree of realism as well as medium. Only Shoulkland Island 9 has produced large numbers of soapstone carvings. We also planned to study the Dorset use of the outer part of the bay, which previously had not received any thorough arachaeological or ecological investigation. This would be done through a program of boat and foot surveys, interpretation of site function based on ethnographic analogy and knowledge of animal seasonality, comparisons with data from other areas, and analysis of faunal and artificial material.

"Only Shoulkland Island 9 has produced large numbers of soapstone carvings."

Our hopes of finding more of the soapstone carvings were realized within the first few hours of work at the site with the recovery of an exquisite miniature bear (this and other carvings are described together below). We stopped work early on the first day, well satisfied with our beginnings, and went off for a walk around some of the other archaeological sites at the south end of the island. The south, east, and north coasts of the three-mile-long island are indented with small coves, most of which have been occupied by at least one cultural group. The spine of the 400- to 500-foot hills running down the center of the island drops steeply to the sea on the west side. Much of the island's surface is composed of barren gneiss, but where soil has accumulated the ground is covered with short grasses, sedges, and moss, with berry plants and tiny flowers adding a bright splash of color during summer. In sheltered wet gullies a few stunted willow and birch shrubs have found hold, but Sagke Bay is some 70 miles north of the tree line, so human residents of the area have to depend upon driftwood and imported timber for their needs. We found a large number of intact tent rings on the shore of the channel that separates Shoulkland Island from Big Island, and concluded that these had most likely been occupied in spring or fall when the great harp seal migrations take place and whose ice permitting, the seals could be most easily harpooned. We also noted evidence of an extensive Middle Dorset occupation, and several Early Dorset sites identified by their generally small tools, the high percentage of tiny microblades or cutting tools, and a distinctive type of harpoonhead blade. Late that night, after another cool, calm, cloudless day, we were treated to a vivid display of northern lights. Sometimes great bands of white light shimmered.
across the sky, at others the banks would become infused with delicate greens, blues, and yellows, and flares would veer sinusously about the sky.

July 12

Despite some stormy weather, we have been making progress and have expanded the excavations to take in most of the apparent burials of the two house structures. House I appears to have been most recently occupied by a Thule family who cleared out the Late Dorset house, throwing sods, artifacts, waste material, and passing rocks into the midden and beyond the house walls, then constructed their own semi-subterranean house on the same site. The interior of this more recent house shows certain traits that are unmistakably Thule, such as a depressed entrance passage which acts to deflect cold air away from the raised entrance step, an elevated rear sleeping platform, a lamp stand inside the door over which a soapstone cooking pot would be suspended, a small paved area above the entrance passage, and a few pieces of baleen (the plates which hang from a baleen whale's upper jaw and act to stiffen outkrill and plankton). It is possible that this small Thule house, measuring about 10 feet in interior diameter, was roofed with rafts of whalebone, although little of this material was preserved.

The discussed possibility that this might have been a Dorset coy of a Thule house, or an occupation by a Thule male and a Dorset female, as we found a couple of Thule drilled slate end flakeblades and two Dorset lamp support slabs on the floor, and the architecture indicated an occupation date of around A.D. 1400-1500, at which time both of these unrelated cultural groups were vying for control of the east coast resources. We concluded, however, that it was not strong enough to positively support our contentions.

In front of the house, towards the edge of the terrace which sloped down a 12 foot drop to the active beach, we found a few other Thule tools and utensil fragments as well as the remains of a paved floor which is apparently all that is left of the Late Dorset structure.

House 2, 30 feet to the north, was producing a Chicago, paved Late Dorset house floor, with only a few remaining Pictou-plate baleen rafts. The mid-passage bisecting two side platforms. This mid-passage, about 15 feet long, was set perpendicular to the shore and bordered with heavy rectangular rocks to demarcate clearly the working and sleeping side platforms, and the central area in which cooking and living were concentrated. The walls were composed of piled rocks and organic material. At the beach, a large number of rounded rocks had fallen into the house from the walls where they had been piled to elevate rafts of bone or wood.

This past week we had our first gale, and the wind had gradually risen, coming out of the northwest. While our site remained at least a day from the Strait of Sheldoon Island and the mainland was filled with whitecaps and blowing snow, and soon we climbed high up on the cliffs on the south side of the bay. As we returned to camp at the end of the day and reached the top of the rise above the site, the full force of the wind hit us and bowed down the slope into camp. The tents were standing up well, but we replaced and tightened several guy ropes and piled additional rocks on the tent pegs. Early in the morning, the wind shifted to the northwest and brought a cold miserable rain as well as more severe gusts. I dragged myself reluctantly out of my warm sleeping bag, wondering why these gales seemed always to reach their crescendo in the middle of the night, and trudged off down to the site to check on the house, plunked into the little cave below the Sheldoon Island 9 site. As I got back to camp, I found I had been crowded out of the cockpit with the flying sheet and the coxswain who had come aboard. We struggled to put it back in place but the wind ripped ropes out of our numb hands, sent pegs splashing off into the darkness, and tied impossible knots in the guy lines. Eventually, we gave in, removed the coxswain, and packed all the perishable contents of food boxes away from the walls of the tent, which were now beginning to leak, and headed back to the warm, dry beds.

By daylight, the wind had eased, but the seas were still on the cold. We spent the morning removing sod from some new squares, and we left the house to explore the north shore of the island. Here we found the surf crashing up on the gravel beaches, sending spray far inland. This side of the island had also been well occupied prehistorically. We found a house platform and a sett with stones and cobbles, and there were signs of a whale hunt, with bones and caches of meat and fat on each side of the ice edge.

The following day was calm and sunny, although a swell continued to push great bursts of spray high up the cliffs. We continued our rounds of the area, and the visitor to the site, a large baleen, came trotting by. Evidently the gales were torrenting here terribly, as every now and then we would see two, probably, on his legs, then trotting blindly on. At one point, he went berserk, charged madly along the beach, then disappeared into the ocean, and swung the quarter mile across to the opposite side. We had seen about 30 baleen on the north islands, which they cross over to on the late spring ice in their annual effort to evade the worst of the blizzards and predators, and had counted a herd of about 500 one day on the north coast of the island. The whales were vital to all Labrador residents for their meat, skins for clothing and tent coat, and meat for their sustenance. We watched the weather, wondering whether the northern Labrador coast would regularly provided sufficient for the needs of a local Inuk or Eskimo for at least a few years or a decade or two, and that a few years a tred had to be made into the interior to intercept the migrating herds.

July 23

The weather cleared and became sunny, and all of us were huddled down low in our excavations, so to speak, with a series of small graphs of small squares bisected by a series of small squares. We were thrilled to see a new black and white. We heard a sawing sigh in the cave and looked out to see the famous back of a large and, we think, the only whale we had observed in the area. We entered the cave and watched, and the ice edge and the waves. It rose twice more, each with a light jet of moisture over the spray and then down, and the rest of the cove in the presence of the surf, each time it rose, we were amazed. One point, it had been noted off the coast to the south of the island, and we pictured the scene of a whale hunt, in which we have observed a Dorset link to the Dorset culture.

As excavation proceeded, we began to recover a good sample of Dorset material. Preliminary field analysis of these bones indicated the presence of young as well as adult seals and walrus. This kind of population is present in late winter and spring at the ice edge. Our analysis supported the belief that, like other norther Labrador Dorset winter sites on the coast, Sheldoon Island’s location had been chosen for its proximity to these resources. Although the ice edge is a dangerous place from which to hunt because of the tendency for sudden storms or a rising swell to break up the ice, sea mammals are most highly concentrated at this location and can be taken with harpoons and harpoons.

Today, we discovered artifacts related to the question of Dorset Eskimo contact and Point Roseau material, indicating a high level of contact. Most of the chipped stone tools that we were finding were made of Redman chert, a translucent, coarse-grained material which is found only in a narrow bed some miles long just to the north of Sheldoon Bay. We were aware that the central Labrador coast Point Rebeve Indian material, but we were not sure whether they came north to obtain their own supplies or traded for it with Dorset Eskimos. Therefore we were greatly excited when we found two small corner-notched points quite clear of Point Rebeve Indian manufacture (Fig. 3). The finds suggested that the Inuit came to the quarry zone where they extracted the stone themselves, which had enabled making some economic arrangements with the resident Dorset population.

August 3

By the end of July we had completely revealed the outlines of the main structures in Houses 1 and 2 and decided to leave them intact for future investigation of the levels below. Most of the diagnostic stone tools found this year were recovered from the two excavations were from the Middle Dorset phase and seemed to date around 1500 to 1700 years ago, but no structural remains had been assigned to this period. We had also found a few specimens from the Early Dorset phase, and several triangular points that demonstrated cultural material. Preliminary field analysis of these bones indicated the presence of young as well as adult seals and walrus. This kind of population is present in late winter and spring at the ice edge. Our analysis supported the belief that, like other northern Labrador Dorset winter sites on the coast, Sheldoon Island’s location had been chosen for its proximity to these resources. Although the ice edge is a dangerous place from which to hunt because of the tendency for sudden storms or a rising swell to break up the ice, sea mammals are most highly concentrated at this location and can be taken with harpoons and harpoons.

Our small diagnostic Late Dorset collection suggests a fairly short occupation, although many of the diagnostic tools would also have become modified in their manufacture. It seemed evident that there had been about 2000 years of discontinuous Dorset reoccupation of this site. The Thule and Inuit structures extended the span of occupation by another several hundred years.

Many evenings after work at the main site was taken up by discussions of the various parts of the outer bay, and we had found evidence of Maritime Archaeological, the site of a Late Pre-Dorset Eskimo settlement dated to 3000 B.C. to 6000 to 5000 years ago, and a large Pre-Dorset Eskimo site that appeared to have been abandoned around 2000 years ago.
peared to overlap in time with other Maritime Archipelago sites dated to about 14,000-13,000 years ago. These discoveries, which amounted to the greatest find of any kind in the area, raised new questions about the human occupation of the region during the Late Pleistocene and Early Holocene.

The site was located on a small island in the Middle Bay of Fundy, about 25 km north of the town of St. Andrews. The site was discovered in 1987 by a team of archaeologists from the Archaeological Research Centre of the University of New Brunswick, led by Dr. John F. M. Parsons. The team conducted extensive excavations at the site over a period of several years, recovering a large number of artifacts and animal bones. The site was named the "St. Andrews Paleoindian site".

The artifacts recovered at the site included a variety of stone tools, such as scrapers, knives, and points, as well as bone tools, such as awls and needles. The animal bones recovered included those of large mammals, such as bison, elk, and moose, as well as smaller mammals, such as rabbits and ground squirrels.

The site was dated to the Late Pleistocene, about 14,000-13,000 years ago, using radiocarbon dating of charred plant material and charcoal from the site. The site was interpreted as a seasonal campsite for Paleoindian hunter-gatherers, who were likely hunting and gathering the resources of the region.

The site was also significant for its archaeological context, as it was located in an area that was not previously known to have been occupied by Paleoindian peoples. This made it an important site for understanding the early human occupation of eastern North America.
 stationed the rebirth of life in spring or an appeal for increased fertility, the other that the carver was demonstrating a light, humorous view of what we, from the comfort of our southern homes and laboratories, regard as a harsh, unforgiving environment. The egg, like most of the other carvings, is minute and perfectly shaped (Fig. 9).

The bird's head was more commonly identified as a fish by crew members, in which case a char or salmon would be what was intended, but it also resembles a short-billed duck such as an eider (Fig. 10). It is carved of a soft, almost translucent green soapstone, and may have been meant to represent fish and waterfowl, both of which would have been sought in spring and summer by the Dorset. Like the egg, this carving might have been made to hasten the advent of spring.

The two bears caused a great deal of discussion among the crew. One was identified as a polar bear or a caribou (Fig. 11). The confusion arose over the configuration of the front and rear legs, which are shaped like those of an ungulate. The stubby tail and abdomen are more reminiscent of a grazing animal than a bear. The outstretched neck, prominent ears and the head are quite caribou-like, but the overall bulk seems to be more suggestive of a bear. A provocative addition is a small incision and sewing marks on the flanks, as though one of the animals was wearing the hide of the other. The second bear (Fig. 12) is more evocative: it possesses an adult that is old, wounded, ill or pregnant, or perhaps no longer able to withstand the hunter's superior power and technology and therefore representative of a human foe.

Three soapstone carvings of people and some clusters of human faces were also recovered from the midden (Fig. 13). The face cluster is a motif which is found in Dorset and on into Thule and recent Inuit contexts, usually in media such as ivory and antler, and is the subject of considerable debate. Hypotheses as to its functions include casual portraits of family or community members, a tally of people helped or cured or harmed by a shaman, and the product of idle whittling; however, the grotesque, open-mouthed nature of the faces perhaps better indicates that these are connected with the many souls controlled by the carver. The deeply incised features of the Shudham pieces are characteristically Dorset in execution.

Two of the human figures bring to mind a wide range of theories about the people represented, and the purposes behind their depiction. One is in the shape of a Late Dorset triangular point hoisted onto an incomplete arrow shaft or harpoon head. It is also a sculpture of a person wearing a long, hooded parka similar to those worn by Thule people (Fig. 14): An X incised into the abdomen, and the weapons portrayed, may represent an attempt to kill this person or his/her group. This piece can also be seen as a caribou hoof, a common image that would bring swiftness to the hunter and plentiful supplies of the animal, and also as a swimming seal. A second figure is also most shamanic in content, having a deep slot in the back into which a killing shiver of some material could be inserted (Fig. 15). The attitude suggests flight or swimming, both being methods adopted by shamans during certain of their rituals in which visits were made to communicate directly with spirits such as Sedna, who resides at the bottom of the ocean and controls the release of game. The high collar at the back of this figure's head is distinctive of Dorset garments portrayed elsewhere in the Arctic.

Three more bears were recovered from House 1, one a seated polar bear cub in a child-like pose with its forepaws stretched out to touch its toes (Fig. 16). The most puzzling discoveries were of one complete and several fragments of miniature soapstone vessels with X's incised into the base or side. We had previously found some finely carved, unadorned tiny vessels which we reasoned were toys, or hunting lamps taken off the sea ice and held below the parka, or perhaps blueprintts for larger vessels (Fig. 17). Interestingly, while most were plainly Dorset, some of them resembled Thule cooking vessels in shape, although lacking distinctive Thule traits such as drilled holes, handles, and inward curving walls, as though they were poorly remem-
It has been suggested that the florescence in artistic production and general humanism in Dorest art-work across the eastern and central Arctic might have resulted from a common cause, such as environmental change and competition from a new population. About 1000 years ago the Thule Eskimos began their spread across the High Arctic on the heels of a climatic warming trend. They would have encountered Late Dorset Eskimos who were not as well adapted to cope with the changing climate and its dis-tributions and necessary technological adjustments. Some exchange of adaptive strategies between the two groups undoubtedly took place, but both the archaeological record and the oral traditions that were passed down to today's Inuit suggest that within a few generations the Thule had replaced the Dorset population in the Arctic Islands.

By the middle of the present millennium, the climate had begun a dramatic cooling trend, forcing the Thule evacuation of the High Arctic and a consequent spread into Labrador, where they encountered a remnant Late Dorset population. If the Thule, asBernard says, see themselves as part of a Dorset shaman's paraphernalia used to cope with the current cultural threat, the similarities in content with other Late Dorset collections can be seen as an example of cultural continuity, while the uniqueness of the realm, the subject matter of some of the carvings, and the use of soapstone can be seen as functions of Labrador's isolation from High Arctic Late Dorset and perhaps a higher degree of interaction between Thule and Dorset than had occurred elsewhere. The Dorset in Labrador had been quite successful in their methods of adapting to environmental pressures for some 2000 years, but, ultimately, despite what appears to have been a steady shift, they attemp-ted in Sagel Bay to combat new climatic, ecological, and cultural pressures through shamans' devices, they succumbed, leaving their house ruins, tools, utensils, and ceremonial objects. We attempt to piece together the pattern of their lives and deaths.

Acknowledgments

Among the people who contributed ideas and encouraged the writing of this paper, I would especially like to thank Richard H. Jordan, William W. Fitzhugh, Susan S. Kaplan, and Jesse Spedden Thomson; Kaplan, Jordan, Spedden Thomson and Richard Knecht were responsible for the second version. Photographs were taken by Richard Knecht and the author (Figs. 10-12, 15, 17). Fred Schuh (Figs. 7, 9, 13, 14). Jack Martin (Figs. 5, 8). Antonia McGeough (Fig. 6), and the author (Figs. 1, 3). All articles were prepared courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, Institution of the North and Central Arctic, the Kruskal Research Institute, the American Museum of Natural History, and the National Museum of Canada.

The expeditions to the Arctic were funded by the National Science Foundation, the National Geographic Society, the American Museum of Natural History, and the National Museum of Canada.