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Research Article

The Meaning Behind Unearthed Polar Bear Teeth and Seal Skin Underpants in Northern Greenland

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Abstract

This article argues for an integrated archaeological methodology that prioritizes the initial consultation of indigenous oral histories to enrich the interpretation of material culture in Arctic contexts. Using archaeological evidence from Ruin Island and Nuulliit in Northern Greenland, we demonstrate how Greenlandic Inuit oral traditions can illuminate symbolic and ritualistic practices that might otherwise be overlooked in the archaeological record. At Ruin Island, the presence of polar bear hair in house entrances gains new interpretative depth when contextualized by oral accounts of protective spiritual practices. Expanding this approach to the settlement level, our analysis of Nuulliit, particularly the qassi (community house) and associated finds like seal skin thongs, is directly informed by Greenlandic Inuit narratives about adolescent girls and traditional whaling. These narratives, which symbolically link women, whales, and the house/settlement, suggest ritualistic roles for women in whale hunts and potentially explain architectural forms.

By presenting tangible connections between oral narratives and archaeological remains, this research highlights how such an interdisciplinary framework can reveal nuanced cultural meanings, interconnected elements of belief systems, and the underlying rationale for material expressions, thereby moving beyond purely functional interpretations of Arctic archaeological sites.

Keywords: Arctic archaeology; Inuit; Oral history; Greenland; Thule culture; Rituals; Whaling; Material culture; Indigenous knowledge; Settlement archaeology

Introduction

Ruin Island, the eponym for the Ruin Island phase, is a small, archaeologically significant site located approximately 3 kilometers offshore from Inuarfissuaq in Northern Greenland. Despite its modest dimensions (250 m wide, rising 12 meters above sea level), the island is readily identifiable by a prominent erratic boulder [1]. The island hosts six house structures, including a double house, all attributed to the earliest Thule culture.

Topographically, the island features steeper northeastern and southeastern slopes, with a gently ascending western side conducive to hauling large whales ashore for processing. Winter settlements are concentrated in the central and eastern parts, while the northern and southern shorelines feature meat caches and a single fox trap. Two tent rings are situated on the northwestern side. Holtved classified Houses 1-5 as winter dwellings [2], designating House 6 as the qassi (assembly house) due to its lack of a distinct platform and kitchen niche. Four of the house structures exhibit a north-northwest to south-southeast alignment. Regarding entrance orientation, only House 3B faces the island's natural beach; Houses 1 and 3A face east, and the remaining structures face northeast.

Construction primarily utilized stone, moss, grass, and willow, with a notable scarcity of flagged stones. Holtved remarked on the difficulty of procuring suitable building stone, suggesting that material for flagged floor areas was likely transported to the island [3].

Symbolic Meanings in Archaeological Finds

Holtved's excavations at Ruin Island yielded several intriguing discoveries that suggest a potential interplay between material culture and Inuit oral traditions, particularly regarding symbolic or ritualistic practices.

One compelling find was the presence of "much bear hair" in the lower part of House 2 [4]. Given that winter houses of this period were typically dug less than half a meter into the turf, "the lower part of the house" likely refers to the entrance tunnel. While polar bear hides are expected in Arctic winter houses, an alternative interpretation aligns with Inuit oral sources. These traditions describe the practice of hanging polar bear skin, jaws, or bones in the entrance as an alarm system against intruders or enemies [5]. This practice is documented in both the Thule and Tasiilaq regions of Greenland, areas with significant polar bear presence near human settlements. The archaeological presence of polar bear hair in the house entrance could therefore represent a tangible manifestation of this security-oriented ritual.

Further evidence of potential symbolic activity comes from House 3, where a "curious" walrus ivory scraper adorned with a human head was discovered [6]. Additionally, in House 3B, an excavated handle with carved animal heads was found "inserted between two stones on the north side [of the structure]" [7]. While the precise context of the latter find is less clear, both items raise questions about their purpose. Oral sources suggest possibilities such as offerings for hunting luck or remnants of ritualistic activities were in fact a thing [8]. Although the exact significance of these carved ivories remains elusive, the human head motif, in particular, may carry symbolic weight that transcends purely utilitarian interpretations.

These examples from Ruin Island highlight the potential for Greenlandic Inuit oral stories to illuminate symbolic or ritualistic practices that may be physically evident in the archaeological record. Traditionally, rituals, beliefs, and practices embedded in oral traditions often leave no material traces, posing significant challenges for identification through conventional archaeological methods. However, these specific discoveries suggest that tangible material evidence for such practices might exist if archaeologists adopt a more integrated approach that considers indigenous knowledge. This methodology opens new avenues for interpretation at the house level, allowing for a deeper understanding of past Inuit life beyond mere subsistence activities. While this analysis merely demonstrates the potential connections, it underscores the critical need for a closer examination of how oral traditions can inform and enrich archaeological interpretations.

Our previous discussion on Ruin Island demonstrated how specific archaeological finds, like polar bear hair in house entrances, can gain profound interpretative depth when viewed through the lens of Greenlandic Inuit oral traditions. Building upon this methodological approach, we now explore how consulting indigenous oral histories can proactively shape the questions we ask of the archaeological record. This section will focus on the archaeological site of Nuulliit in northern Greenland, analyzing its material remains in the context of Greenlandic Inuit stories featuring adolescent girls and traditional whaling practices. This approach underscores how pre-existing oral narratives can guide archaeological inquiry, revealing subtle yet significant cultural connections that might otherwise remain undiscovered.

The Qassi and Whaling Narratives at Nuulliit

The archaeological site of Nuulliit offers compelling insights into the interplay between oral tradition and material culture, particularly concerning Inuit whaling practices and their ceremonial aspects. While Alaskan stories of Raven and the Whale, which emphasize the vital role of the whale's soul-lamp [9,10], do not appear in recorded Greenlandic folklore, Greenlandic narratives nonetheless feature 151 stories involving ravens and whales, either individually or together. Significantly, ten variations of a specific Greenlandic tale, recorded between 1823 and 1937, bear striking resemblances to the Alaskan narrative.

These Greenlandic stories consistently depict two (occasionally three) young girls engaging in a pretend family scenario. Crucially, the first girl consistently "marries" a whale, while the second marries a prominent bird (raven, eagle, seagull, or falcon). The third girl, if present, typically marries a deceased individual. In these narratives, the whale exhibits possessive, human-like traits, closely monitoring its young wife and showing arousal when she discards her clothes. The whale's dwelling is described with human features, including a "hand" (and sometimes an "armpit"), an entrance tunnel, and a sleeping platform, reflecting an Inuit understanding of a human living space. A pivotal element involves the young woman strategically luring the whale to pursue her and her family's umiaq (skin boat), ultimately leading the whale to their settlement, where it strands and dies, leaving its skeleton.

One version from Nuuk, id 1391 collected in 1902 [11], notably states, "The family travels out in an umiaq as they were whaling after her," where 'her' likely refers to the daughter needing rescue. We propose that these narratives, portraying a whale marrying a young woman, symbolically link the woman, the whale, and the house or settlement. These stories may have served as a foundational narrative for young women, imparting knowledge about their critical, symbolic role in whaling. Women likely remained at the settlement during actual whale hunts, potentially tasked with symbolically "luring" the whale back through specific movements or rituals performed within the house while recounting

this story. Connecting these narratives to archaeology is highly pertinent, given the extensive historical evidence of Inuit whaling along Greenland's coasts.

A Case Study in Narrative Archaeology

To explore potential archaeological traces of these symbolic connections, we turn to House 30 at Nuulliit [12], the largest Thule culture structure on the site, located approximately 20 meters north of House 28. Its detached placement and substantial size (estimated 6x6 meters compared to other dwellings ranging from 2x2 to 4.5x4.5 meters [13]) strongly suggest its interpretation as the settlement's qassi [14,15] (assembly house). Unlike typical winter dwellings, House 30 lacks a kitchen niche and sleeping platforms, consistent with the communal function of a qassi.

Intriguingly, House 30 was not dug into the ground turf layer, a common feature of other winter ruins, but was instead built directly on the surface. This construction method would have necessitated more building materials and a robust roof structure, evidenced by a stone pillar protruding 1.4 meters above ground in the east part of the structure, with a similar 1.5-meter stone found overturned on the floor, both undoubtedly serving as roof supports [16]. Holtved noted difficulty in discerning wall and floor boundaries due to collapse and lack of burial, but the entrance tunnel undeniably points southwest, towards both the beach and nearby houses.

A potentially significant archaeological discovery at Nuulliit is the presence of five pairs of seal skin thongs excavated from four distinct house ruins, including the qassi (House 30), and Houses 10, 26, and 29. These skin undergarments hold particular significance due to their potential connection to the oral story of "Two Sisters, Who Played Family," where one of the women strategically discards garments, including underpants with an "enticing scent" that distracts the whale during their escape.

Considering these underpants as potential remnants of ritual activities associated with whale hunting aligns with the concept of Inuit women's symbolic participation in these hunts [17]. Rituals surrounding whaling are well-documented, encompassing practices such as the use of ivory chains, whale-tail figurines, engraved architectural elements depicting whaling scenes, and the ceremonial distribution of prized whale parts [18,19]. Therefore, interpreting the seal skin thongs within this framework suggests they could be material traces of whaling ceremonialism, underscoring how oral tradition can reveal connections easily overlooked. While the gender attribution of the thongs in the excavation protocols is absent, and undergarment styles varied historically [20], their presence across multiple houses, including the qassi, remains noteworthy.

Although Holtved's lack of specificity regarding the exact find locations within the ruins introduces uncertainty, hindering definitive conclusions about ritual deposition, it is crucial to recognize that ritual acts are often defined by intention as much as context [21,22]. The underpants could have been intentionally left, inadvertently lost, or ritually deposited by the wives of the hunting crew in their homes or within the qassi itself.

Beyond the undergarments, a further potential link between the oral narratives and the archaeological record emerges in the form of the house itself imitating a whale. Early Inuit houses, constructed with stone, turf, and curved whale bones, would have possessed an organic form reminiscent of a stranded whale. In the "Two Sisters" narrative, the young woman leads the whale to the beach, where it strands and transforms into whale bones. While the use of curved bones might have been practical, it raises the question of whether early Inuit deliberately designed their houses—particularly the qassi as a men's workshop—to possess a predetermined organic shape reflecting their deep connection to large marine mammals. This practice finds parallels in historical Alaskan Native and Canadian Arctic Inuit communities who integrated white skins into their anoraks to emulate walrus tusks [23].

What these examples from Nuulliit powerfully illustrate is that oral histories can profoundly extend our comprehension beyond what material artifacts alone reveal. By proactively engaging with these narratives, archaeologists gain a vital cultural context that illuminates symbolic meanings, rituals, and spiritual significance connected to specific sites or objects. This enriches our understanding of the cultural landscape, providing insights that transcend the tangible. Furthermore, these examples emphasize the interconnectedness of cultural elements: stories, rituals, natural features, and social hunting economies. This interconnectedness is often not apparent solely from the archaeological record, thereby compelling archaeologists to adopt interdisciplinary approaches that integrate oral history, anthropology, and other fields. While the identification of ritual activities in the archaeological record presents a persistent challenge, the historical prevalence of whaling among Arctic Inuit groups makes the existence of associated rituals highly plausible. By starting with the oral traditions, we can formulate more targeted and nuanced questions when engaging with the material remains of the past.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the transformative potential of integrating Greenlandic Inuit oral histories directly into archaeological inquiry, moving beyond their traditional role as supplementary data. By proactively engaging with indigenous narratives, we have shown how archaeologists can formulate more targeted questions, identify previously overlooked connections, and unlock deeper cultural meanings embedded within material remains. The examples from Ruin Island illustrate how seemingly mundane finds, such as polar bear hair in house entrances or carved ivory, can be reinterpreted as tangible evidence of protective rituals or symbolic practices, directly informed by specific Inuit oral traditions.

Extending this methodology to the settlement scale, the analysis of Nuulliit further highlights the profound insights gained when

archaeology is guided by oral history. The compelling narratives of adolescent girls and their symbolic roles in whaling, particularly the "Two Sisters, Who Played Family" story, provide a rich context for understanding finds like the seal skin thongs in the qassi and other dwellings. These connections suggest that Inuit women may have played crucial, ritualistic roles in whaling, potentially through practices performed within the community house. Furthermore, the very architecture of early Inuit houses, especially the qassi, might intentionally mirror the organic forms of whales, reflecting a deep symbolic relationship between humans, marine mammals, and the built environment—a connection brought into focus by the oral traditions themselves.

The challenges of identifying ritual activity in the archaeological record are well-known. However, by establishing a framework where oral histories inform the initial stages of archaeological investigation, we are better equipped to recognize the subtle traces of belief systems and ceremonial practices that transcend purely functional interpretations. This interdisciplinary approach not only enriches our understanding of past Inuit lifeways but also emphasizes the sophisticated interplay between cultural narratives, spiritual beliefs, and material expressions in Arctic societies. The potential of this methodology is vast: it encourages a more holistic view of cultural landscapes, fosters a collaborative dialogue between archaeological science and indigenous knowledge, and ultimately allows for a more profound and culturally sensitive reconstruction of human history in the Arctic and beyond. This research serves as a call for archaeologists to recognize the invaluable role of oral traditions as primary sources that can proactively shape, rather than merely supplement, our understanding of the archaeological record.

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