

Marginal No More: Introduction to a Special Issue on the Archaeology of Northern Coasts

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The idea for this special issue developed out of conference session that I coorganized with Dr. Anne Jensen for the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) Annual Meeting in Vancouver, British Columbia in 2017. During that session we heard from a number of researchers—several of whom have contributed to this volume—about the important contributions that coastal archaeology in the Arctic and Subarctic could make to our understanding of a wide variety of anthropological issues, past and present. This contribution will not be a surprise to regular readers of this journal and archaeologists who work in the north. We have long recognized the importance of coastal landscapes and the littoral and marine resources to which they provide access as key to our understanding of northern cultures and their histories. Even Arctic and Subarctic cultures that live significant distances from the coast often have complex relationships and histories associated with them and their peoples. What we have been a bit slower to recognize, or at least publicize, is their importance to our understanding of larger global scale issues, particularly climate change and its impacts on coastal peoples and world heritage sites and, by extension, everyone else.

Nothing made this more obvious than when I was listening to a variety of presentations at the most recent SAA meeting in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I noticed how frequently Arctic peoples are relied upon as analogs for a wide variety of topics: from hunter-gatherer architecture to technological innovation, but perhaps most often, as a canary in the coal mine for climate change and

its impact on coastal and island cultures around the world. Those of us who work in the north have long been discussing human-environment interaction in northern landscapes and how much they have been influenced by regional and global scale climate fluctuations. But now the cultures we have studied are increasingly recognized as having much broader lessons that extend well beyond the north and, therefore, a special journal issue like this could not be more timely. The regions that many people view as the margins of human civilization are becoming more central to our understanding of the evolution and development of humanity and are providing information about directions forward in a world with increasing cultural interactivity and global climate unpredictability. Understanding the role that northern coasts and marine ecosystems play in this is crucial.

In the last couple of decades, coastal research has been grabbing a larger part of the archaeological spotlight. This can be seen in the growing number of coastal-focused edited volumes, monographs, articles, and even an entire journal solely dedicated to the archaeology of islands and coasts. Coasts and islands are seen as important study locations that are crucial to our understanding of human evolution, social complexity, and ecological theory, and they have often been conceptualized as “laboratories” to examine regional and continental-scale social and cultural processes. The coasts of the Arctic and Subarctic were (and are) attractive places that provide all that northern communities needed and more, and the surrounding

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seas served to connect communities and facilitate interaction rather than acting as barriers. Northern communities acknowledged and faced the challenges of living on them in incredibly innovative social and material ways. The reasons that these adaptations are often relied upon as archaeological analogies for hunters and gatherers around the world is because of their deep history and connections to modern peoples, but also because they are still often erroneously considered representatives of more “primitive” times, although people have gotten better at concealing those philosophical roots by making such associations more implicit. What northern anthropologists understand is that Arctic and Subarctic coastal peoples have always been pioneering and inventive cultures that have created some of the most sustained cultural traditions known on Earth.

The articles in this volume are just a small glimpse into the variety of ways that northern peoples have found to live and thrive along Arctic and Subarctic coasts and some of the modern challenges to understanding and preserving their heritage. They do not just focus on a single aspect of coastal lifeways in the north. Instead, they showcase the variability in how cultures from southwestern Alaska to Greenland to southern Quebec and Newfoundland have interacted with coastal and marine ecosystems, each other, and growing colonial pressures and have created elaborate ideologies and technologies that allowed them to cope with enormous challenges such as climate change and its associated effects. They have much to teach us all.

Moving in order from west to east, the Hillerdal, Knecht, and Jones article perhaps is the article that most explicitly takes on the impacts of historical climate change. This community-based examination of the Nunalleq site in Southwestern Alaska offers a significant step forward in our knowledge of late precontact Yup'ik settlement strategies, but the site is also facing major threats due to modern climate change, as are many northern coastal sites. They provide an interesting summary of this project and also an important discussion of why communities must be engaged and invested in the study of their past and the preservation of increasingly threatened coastal heritage sites.

The Mossolova and Knecht article also discusses the site of Nunalleq, but it more intently focuses on the distinct mask-carving tradition of the coastal Yup'ik peoples at Nunalleq through a combination of archaeological and ethnographic research that examines how they are part of larger regional interactions and have changed over time. It also gives us a fuller picture of the complex and elaborate ceremonial life of the Yup'ik, helping to dispel myths of marginal, simple hunter-gatherers in

the north, and how they are part of a long resilient history in the region.

West and Yeshurun's article discusses interaction of a different kind, one between foxes and humans on Kodiak Island, Alaska. Applying zooarchaeological, taphonomic, and isotope analyses on fox remains from the Uyak site, West and Yeshurun discuss how those data suggest fox populations had dependent relationships with the human occupants of the site and were integrated into their subsistence system as they scavenged marine and insular food resources discarded by the Kodiak islanders.

On the other side of the continent, Fitzhugh's article discusses the complex historical interaction sphere on Quebec's Lower North Shore and how Arctic Inuit peoples were drawn there both for its natural resources as well as its accessibility to valued European commodities and connections, particularly with the Basque/French whaling industry. It also details how the Inuit presence was problematic for the indigenous Innu peoples who had lived there for millennia and fought to maintain access to the coast during Inuit and European encroachment in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Across the Strait of Belle Isle, my and my co-authors' (Holly, Erwin, Nomokonova, and Swinarton) article discusses the history of Dorset research at the multicomponent Stock Cove site in South-eastern Newfoundland. Our paper investigates the nature of that large site and how the occupants' economic practices were likely influenced by a combination of broader climatic trends that affected sea-ice distribution and the biogeography of seal species in the region, as well as by sociocultural limitations that shaped the Dorset occupation of the site. Our article examines those dynamics and how they contributed to Dorset colonization and abandonment of the island and the broader implications that knowledge of changing ecological and cultural systems can have on interpretations of the past.

The Darwent, LeMoine, Darwent, and Lange paper is also explicitly an examination of a multicomponent site at Iita site in northwestern Greenland. They outline the ecological factors that have long brought people to such an attractive coastal location for more than 1,000 years and include a discussion of the impact of historic and modern expeditions to the site. They have documented the accelerated loss of the site due to rising sea levels associated with climate change and discuss their tremendous effort to learn as much about the various coastal peoples that inhabited the site before that information is lost. This article details much of this unique site's deposits, their formation, and their problematic future.

Finally, Madsen's article brings us farther south into the fjord systems of southwestern

Greenland and examines the importance of marine resources among Norse peoples who are primarily thought of as more sedentary and reliant on domestic animals and agriculture. His examination utilizes archaeological and documentary records to investigate the integration of sea-mammal products for domestic use and as key commodities in long-distance trade networks with European Norse populations and beyond. He identifies key site types that are related to this marine resource

extraction and its importance and places them into the larger Norse context, both socially and economically, in innovative ways that I believe will be incredibly instructive for the future of Norse research in the North Atlantic.

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