
Études/Inuit/Studies

GULLØV, Hans Christian 1997 *From Middle Ages to Colonial Times. Archaeological and Ethnohistorical Studies of the Thule Culture in South West Greenland 1300-1800 AD*, Copenhagen, the Danish National Museum.

Claire Alix

Perspectives inuit et qallunaat : points de vue en interaction
Volume 26, numéro 1, 2002

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/009284ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/009284ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Inuksiutiit Katimajit Inc. et Centre interuniversitaire d'études et de recherches autochtones (CIÉRA)

ISSN

0701-1008 (imprimé)

1708-5268 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Alix, C. (2002). GULLØV, Hans Christian 1997 *From Middle Ages to Colonial Times. Archaeological and Ethnohistorical Studies of the Thule Culture in South West Greenland 1300-1800 AD*, Copenhagen, the Danish National Museum.. *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 26, (1), 210–214. <https://doi.org/10.7202/009284ar>

GULLØV, Hans Christian

1997 *From Middle Ages to Colonial Times. Archaeological and Ethnohistorical Studies of the Thule Culture in South West Greenland 1300-1800 AD*, Copenhagen, the Danish National Museum.

Five hundred years of Greenland history: five hundred pages! Given the size and scope of this work, one might be tempted to skip from one section to the next, reading only bits and pieces and making use of the amazing illustrations of artifacts. But this book deserves more and should be read from beginning to end. This is the only way to grasp its full importance and appreciate the enormous amount of work that lay behind it. The enrichment one gets stands on many levels, methodological, theoretical, analytical and foremost historical. Hans Christian Gulløv retraces the cultural history of the Godthåb district in southwest Greenland from AD 1300 to 1800. I know of no other study of Thule culture that reconstructs the development and evolution of the culture by correlating so many different sources of data. In the same time, more than just utilizing available data, Gulløv has produced new data and made it accessible. He has synthesized, in English, most of his work and part of his colleagues' research undertaken since 1945, while at the same time presenting some previously unpublished archaeological material from southwest Greenland.

The analyses of archaeological, ethnological and historical sources together with a scattering of linguistic studies are presented and discussed not only to reconstruct the evolution of the Thule culture into 19th century Greenlandic, but to serve a more general argument, to "re-invent" ethnohistory and recognize tradition as one of its forms. Gulløv's argument is challenging:

My argument is that the cultural traditions which are represented by the Dorset, the Classic Thule and the Norse cultures can all be seen to have been present in the 18th century South West Greenlandic Thule culture as the result of a meeting of cultures and that ethnohistory is this living history, which can transmit its own message about the past, i.e. that ethnohistory is tradition (p. 29).

This use and interaction of sources leads Gulløv to expose a "living archaeology," showing the people behind the finds and the ruins. Thanks to the wealth of historical sources available for southwest Greenland, Gulløv tells a story, a "non-linear" progressive history. Some of the written information dates back to as early as the end of the 16th century when English explorers first set foot in the area. Page after page, Gulløv adds new pieces of data and slowly builds his argument toward the "grand finale:" his interpretation of the origin of Thule culture in Greenland and of the nature and consequences of the cultural interactions that must have taken place between the Dorset, the Thule and the Norse during the early centuries of the second millennium AD. Confronting Mathiassen's view of Greenland as a "cul de sac," he presents this part of the Arctic as a crossroads of cultures. Moreover, he interprets these "primary" interactions on the basis of the mechanisms and patterns he has reconstructed from the Dano-Norwegian colonization of the Godthåb district in 1721:

The postulate of this book is then that the meeting between Dorset, Thule and Norsemen, as it presents itself in the archaeological material from Greenland (*cf.* Arneborg 1991;

Bielawsky 1979; Jordan 1979), happened in the same way as the meeting of cultures in 17th- and 18th-century South West Greenland (p. 26).

If one accepts Gulløv's postulates, then his conclusions about early Thule culture are the following: the cultural development of Greenland is a result of a meeting of cultures, one of these (Dorset with Thule) predating the entrance of Thule culture in Greenland. However, he also accepts that Dorset culture may have continued in southwest Greenland well into the 13th century. The Ruin Island phase is a secondary migration of Thule people in the 14th century, directly and strongly influenced by St. Lawrence Island Penuk culture. However, some Classic Thule people were already occupying the area when the Ruin Islanders arrived. Southwest Greenland was thus populated through at least three migrations, Thule arriving from the North in the 14th century, then again in the 15th / 16th century, and Thule arriving from the South in the 17th / 18th century.

Much of the culture contact Gulløv infers relies on his belief that there was a Thule colonization of Greenland that predates the Ruin Island phase as defined by Holtved (1944) and McCullough (1989). This is a view not widely held and the issue hinges on the presence or absence of a small number of characteristic features (evidence) and on Gulløv's interpretation of the dating of the Ruin Island phase in between "its emergence sometimes during the 13th century until some way into the 15th" (p. 431). This view is argued despite the tight range of 17 dates (most of them lying between AD 1200-1400) on terrestrial material McCullough obtained from the Ruin Island phase sites of Ellesmere Island (McCullough 1989: 240-241; Morrison 1989: 54). Gulløv also suggests that the distribution of Norse metal, the appearance of the flat Thule type 5 harpoon head, and the utilization of the coopering techniques, among other elements, indicate that the meetings of cultures were based on trade relationships as well as on technological exchanges and influences. Although direct evidence of interaction has yet to be found, these meetings, particularly between Dorset and Thule and Thule and Norse are usually widely accepted. Nevertheless, the idea and the proposed model raise questions still in debate today in arctic archaeology: the meeting of the Thule and Dorset cultures and the dating of the first Thule migrations into the Eastern High Arctic. Gulløv's demonstration is based mainly on technological and symbolic transfers or borrowings and on the C-14 dating of these events. The most important element is the occurrence of the Thule type 5 harpoon head, which combines traits of the Thule thin and Dorset flat harpoon heads. Gulløv interprets its distribution and typological variations as cultural parallel traditions. He states that "it is not probable that the latter [Thule type 5 harpoon head] should merely be interpreted as being the result of a simple imitation of found Dorset heads" (p. 424). This position however has been challenged by R. Park (1993) in an article reviewing archaeological evidences of Dorset / Thule interactions where the author argues that this particular Thule type 5 harpoon head did not necessarily require a direct meeting between people of the Dorset and Thule cultures. In fact, where Gulløv mainly sees in this harpoon head a cultural symbol and no functional improvement, Park sees functional as well as symbolic innovations in an experimental form for a culture "extremely concerned with technology and functionality" (Park 1993: 224). In fact, Gulløv gives so little evidence that a position on the question becomes a matter of conviction.

The other key debate in neo-eskimo archaeology is the timing of these events. Gulløv inevitably raises this issue when attempting to date the meeting of cultures, population arrival and movements. Archaeological remains and events that take place after the European contact are quite precisely dated through historical correlations. For previous events, Gulløv makes use of all available C-14 dates, measured on marine mammals as well as terrestrial remains. The dates are calibrated and corrected for marine reservoir effect. On the other hand driftwood dates are considered mostly unreliable. The question of the reliability of C-14 dates is far beyond the scope of this review, but the reader should know that many researchers usually agree not to use marine mammal C-14 dates because of "the marine reservoir effect" (McGhee and Tuck 1976; Morrison 1989; Gerlach and Mason 1992). Since the book was published, many articles have dealt with the dating of the Thule migration and their first appearance in the Eastern High Arctic (Park 2000; McGhee 2000; Morrison 2001). Those should be considered in order to fully appreciate Gulløv's cultural model of Greenland history.

As mentioned earlier, this book is rich on many levels. The quality of the descriptions of artifact should be noted. Two chapters (II and III) present archaeological data (structures and artifacts) from three sites excavated by the author (Illorpaat, Itissaalik and Kangeq) with most of the artifacts relating to 16th and 18th centuries occupations. Each structure or midden excavated is described and its stratigraphy characterized and illustrated. The succession of occupations is reconstructed and the evolution of the structures shown through a series of floor plans. This is followed by some early historical accounts of dwellings for the area. This same approach is used throughout the book. Thus, by matching the record of archaeological features and material to the precise study of ethno-historical sources, Gulløv is able to refine the dating of the occupations, to relate house types to population origins, *i.e.* western / local Greenlanders vs. south Greenlanders, and, in some cases, to identify the names of the occupants of the houses. He is even able to relate the name Singalik to the occupation of Kangeq and Illorpaat. This name does not appear in the church registers but is known from oral historical accounts. Gulløv thus links written sources to oral history to reconstruct the genealogy of his informants, Apollo and Suzanne Tobiassen of Kangeq.

The material found in each archaeological feature is then described and analyzed. All artifact types are drawn, and Gulløv's drawings are outstanding. Such a mode of illustration is uncommon for arctic neo-eskimo artifacts. Except for Ford's 1959 monograph of the Birnirk site in Alaska, and for publications by Larsen and Rainey (1948 among others), one has to go back to early ethnographic descriptions to find such quality of drawings (Murdoch 1892; Boas 1964, among others). Moreover, as a personal interest, I was impressed by the preciseness with which many wooden artifacts were drawn with the direction of the grain of the wood and many other important details.

From Middle Ages to Colonial Times is a truly impressive book, though with such rich and elaborate content an index would have been helpful. Because of the wealth of information analyzed, it could be recommended as a textbook for advanced training in archaeology and ethnohistory. A strong background in arctic prehistory is required to

fully appreciate the innovative theories and model developed. It is a must on the bookshelf of anyone interested in Thule and Eskimo cultures.

References

- BOAS, Franz
1964 *The Central Eskimo* [1888], Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press.
- FORD, James A.
1959 *Eskimo Prehistory in the Vicinity of Point Barrow, Alaska*, New-York, Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, vol. 47 part 1.
- GERLACH, Craig and Owen K.S. MASON
1992 Calibrated Radiocarbon dates and cultural interaction in the western Arctic, *Arctic Anthropology*, 29(1): 54-81.
- HOLTVED Erik
1944 *Archaeological Investigations in the Thule District, I-II*, Copenhagen, Meddelelser om Grønland, 141(1-2).
- LARSEN, Helge and Froelich RAINEY
1948 *Ipiutak and the Arctic Whale Hunting Culture*, New York, Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, vol. 42.
- McCULLOUGH, Karen,
1989 *The Ruin Islanders: Early Thule Culture Pioneers in the Eastern High Arctic*, Hull, Canadian Museum of Civilization.
- McGHEE, Robert,
2000 Radiocarbon dating and the Timing of the Thule Migration, in M. Appelt, J. Berglund and H.C. Gulløv (eds), *Identities and Cultural Contacts in the Arctic*, Copenhagen, The Danish National Museum and Danish Polar Centre: 181-191.
- McGHEE, Robert and James TUCK
1976 Un-Dating the Canadian Arctic, in M. Maxwell (ed.), *Eastern Arctic Prehistory: Paleoeskimo Problems*, Society for American Archaeology Memoir, 31: 4-16.
- MORRISON, David A.
1989 Radiocarbon Dating Thule Culture, *Arctic Anthropology*, 26(2): 47-48.
- 2001 Radiocarbon Dating the Birnirk-Thule Transition, *Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska*, NS 1(1): 74-85.

MURDOCH John

1892 *Ethnological Results of the Point Barrow Expedition*, Washington, Bureau of American Ethnology.

PARK Robert W.

1993 The Dorset-Thule Succession in Arctic North America: Assessing Claims for Culture Contact, *American Antiquity*, 58(2): 203-234.

2000 The Dorset-Thule succession revisited, in M. Appelt, J. Berglund and H.C. Gulløv (eds), *Identities and Cultural Contacts in the Arctic*, Copenhagen, The Danish National Museum and Danish Polar Centre: 192-205.

Claire Alix
Alaska Quaternary Center
University of Alaska Fairbanks
Fairbanks, USA

PELLY, David F.

2000 *Sacred Hunt. A Portrait of the Relationship Between Seals and Inuit*, Seattle, University of Washington Press, xv + 126 p.

Je suis habituellement agacé par les affirmations à l'emporte-pièce que tout est sacré chez les Autochtones. C'est, selon moi, une autre façon — un peu plus subtile peut-être — de les mettre à part de nous et de notre rationalité occidentale et moderne. Je dois reconnaître, toutefois, que l'auteur de ce petit volume n'abuse pas dans son texte de ce genre d'affirmations. Il ne fait directement référence au sacré qu'à la fin de son livre dans un court passage de trois petits paragraphes sous l'intitulé «A sacred link» (p. 106). Il souligne alors, qu'à la différence des Européens, «la croyance traditionnelle inuit est que tous les êtres ont une âme» et «que le succès à la chasse était le résultat du respect envers l'âme de leur proie, de l'adoption de l'attitude appropriée envers le phoque» (p. 106). Par contre, tout le premier chapitre d'une vingtaine de pages porte sur le «Respect envers le phoque» et traite, à travers des citations de mythes et de légendes inuit, de la création des phoques, de la transformation des phoques en humains — le plus souvent des femmes — et des rituels et tabous entourant leur chasse, y compris l'intervention du chaman.

Disons-le tout de suite, ce livre n'est pas un ouvrage scientifique relevant de l'anthropologie, de la géographie, de l'histoire ou de quelque autre discipline académique, mais plutôt une oeuvre de vulgarisation ou même une production artistique en raison des nombreuses illustrations d'oeuvres d'art inuit (sculptures, gravures, dessins) et des nombreuses photographies de qualité exceptionnelle qui occupent environ le tiers des pages. L'auteur situe sa démarche dans la mouvance de l'intérêt actuel pour la connaissance traditionnelle «des peuples dont les vies dépendaient de cette connaissance» (p. xiii). Son matériel «de recherche» été recueilli auprès de 31 informateurs et cinq informatrices résidant principalement dans le