Birds, Burials and Sacred Cosmology of the Indigenous Beothuk of Newfoundland, Canada

Todd J. Kristensen and Donald H. Holly Jr

The Indigenous Beothuk of Newfoundland disappeared as a cultural entity in the early nineteenth century. Prior to this, the Beothuk had few direct interactions with Europeans, and those that occurred were generally of a hostile nature. As a result, very little is known about Beothuk religious life. Drawing on available ethnohistoric records, an analysis of burial site locations and funerary objects, we offer an interpretation of Beothuk sacred cosmology that places birds at the centre of their belief system.

The island of Newfoundland, in northeastern Canada (Fig. 1), was home to the Indigenous Beothuk at the time of European voyages to the region in the late fifteenth century. By then, the Beothuk had been living on the island for over a thousand years. In the intervening time they had forged a mobile, primarily coastal way of the life that was centred on island archipelagos located in protected bays and inlets (Holly 2002; 2005; Kristensen 2011; Rast et al. 2004; Reader 1998; Renouf & Bell 2009; Rowley-Conwy 1990; Schwarz 1994). From these locations they procured an assortment of marine, terrestrial and avian resources while making seasonal forays into the interior for beaver and caribou (Cridland 1998; Cumbaa 1984; Gilbert 2002; Kristensen 2011). Accordingly, the coast played a central role in Beothuk subsistence. We argue in this article that the coastal landscape (particularly small islands) and its fauna (particularly seabirds) were also central to Beothuk belief systems. The Beothuk, for instance, buried their dead in coastal enclaves accompanied by bird remains and artefacts that we interpret as representations of birds. We hypothesize on the basis of burial goods, burial distribution and ethnohistoric records, that birds served as spiritual messengers who conveyed souls of the dead to an island afterlife.

Initial European interest in the island of Newfoundland was focused on the coast. Lured by the region's abundant fish stocks, fishermen from western Europe came each spring and spent the summer fishing in Newfoundland's waters before returning home in early autumn (Cell 1969; Pope 1997; 2004). While in Newfoundland, Europeans sporadically encountered the Beothuk, although the nature of the early engagements is poorly understood. Surviving historical records and archaeological evidence suggest a complex encounter experience, marked by a mix of hostile and friendly engagements (Gilbert 2011; Holly et al. 2010). By the late seventeenth century, however, relations had clearly soured to the point that the Beothuk began to abandon key areas of their traditional coastal realm. The retreat continued throughout the next century as European encroachment and competition over key resources (such as salmon and bird colonies) led to further violence (Cartwright 1792, 7; Marshall 1996, 67–8). Eventually the Beothuk were compelled to turn away from the coast and adopt a more specialized caribou-hunting lifestyle

in the interior (Le Blanc 1973; Holly 2008). This way of life proved unsustainable, however, and plagued by disease and continued harassment by Europeans (Marshall 1981; Upton 1977), the Beothuk dwindled in number. The last recorded Beothuk is Shanawdithit who lived for a short time among Europeans before succumbing to tuberculosis in 1829.

The surviving ethnohistoric record is mostly a series of brief observations and encounters owing to the transitory nature of early European interest in the island and poor relations with the Beothuk in later periods. Early accounts offer very little information that bears directly on Beothuk social life and even less on religious beliefs. Extant records have been mined extensively (Howley 1915; Marshall 1996) and the search for new ethnohistoric documents is unlikely to reveal new dimensions of Beothuk ideo logy. Consequently, the greatest potential sources of new insight into Beothuk beliefs are archaeological research and re-evaluations of material records.

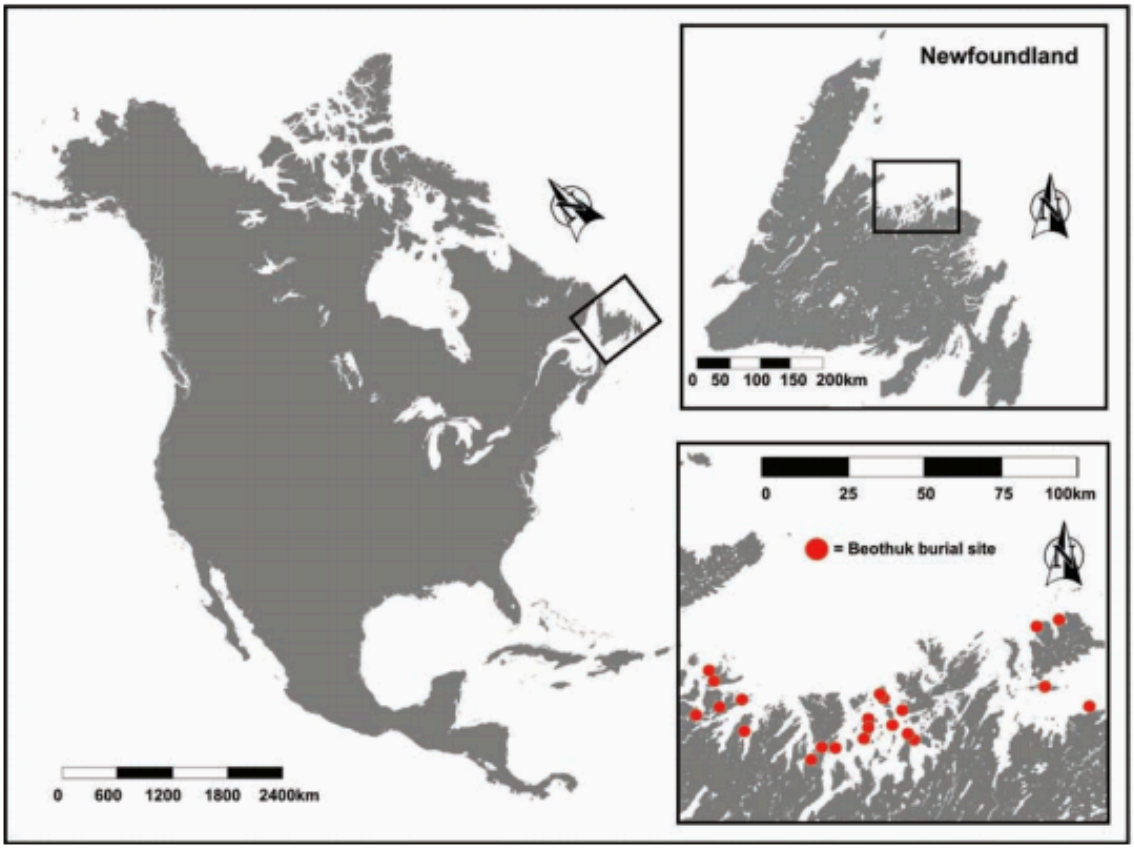

Figure 1. Location of Newfoundland, Canada. The lower-right inset depicts island archipelagos off the northeast coast of Newfoundland where the majority of Beothuk burial sites are located.

This article revisits the Beothuk pendant, a funerary object that we suggest links seabirds to broader Beothuk beliefs about the dead and the afterlife. Many Beothuk pendants appear to depict aspects of seabird anatomy, including feathers, webbed feet and bodies in flight. We argue that such representations of avian movement relate to a belief that seabirds were spiritual messengers capable of navigating through upper (sky) and lower (sea) worlds en route to the Beothuk's 'happy island' afterlife briefly mentioned by Shanawdithit (McGregor 1836, 322). The association of Beothuk pendants with the dead supports this view, as do skeletal motif engravings on the pendants that allude to the transformative role of birds in the life–death journey. We also reconsider the distribution of Beothuk settlements and burials on the island in light of this interpretation. Land-use patterns suggest that coastal areas and archipelagos were the focus of Beothuk subsistence efforts and ceremonial activity. Small islands in particular are associated with the Beothuk dead (Fig. 1). They are also home to Newfoundland's abundant seabird colonies that loomed large in Beothuk diet (Kristensen 2011). Accordingly, we suggest that the close proximity of the Beothuk living and dead to seabirds is indicative of both the importance of seabirds as food, and food for thought.

Birds in Beothuk subsistence

The distribution of archaeological sites attributed to the Little Passage complex — the late prehistoric ancestors of the Beothuk — attests to the coastal orientation of these people (Holly 2002; 2005; Rast et al. 2004; Renouf & Bell 2009; Schwarz 1994). In particular, there appears to have been a preference for sheltered bays, inlets and archipelagos that offered strategic access to a range of resource environments. That the Beothuk took advantage of this is evident in the archaeological record and in accounts of observers in the early contact period. Both indicate that the Beothuk procured a wide variety of foods and that birds made important dietary contributions.

Bird remains are common in faunal assemblages from late prehistoric and Beothuk sites (Kristensen 2011; Kristensen & Curtis 2012). Furthermore, over one quarter of all prehistoric and historic Beothuk sites are located directly on small islands and half are within one kilometer of an island (Kristensen 2011, 308). These small island archipelagos were and are ideal habitat for seabird colonies because they provide critical protection from terrestrial predators. No Newfoundland animal is as strongly associated with islands as birds: roughly 95 per cent of Newfoundland's 340 largest seabird colonies, for example, are located on small islands. We presume that late prehistoric and Beothuk settlements were positioned in and near archipelagos to capitalize on the spatially and temporally predictable abundance of bird meat and eggs provided by seabird nesting colonies. Burial sites are even more strongly associated with islands, the significance of which will be explored in the following section.

Ethnohistoric documents clearly convey the importance of birds to the Beothuk (Crout 1613, in Marshall 1996, 67, 305; Kristensen 2011; Whitbourne 1971, 21–2).

Early observers, for instance, noted that the Beothuk spent a great deal of the summer paddling through archipelagos in search of seabirds and eggs (Cartwright 1826, 36; Chappell 1818, in Howley 1915, 63; Lloyd 1875, 29; Whitbourne 1971, 21–2). It was apparently a time of plenty; Cartwright (1826, 314) states that the Beothuk 'fed luxuriously during the egg season'. They also boiled and dried bird meat and eggs for winter use (Crout 1613, in Marshall 1996, 67, 305; Chappell 1818, in Howley 1915, 63; Cartwright 1826, 314; Whitbourne 1971, 21–2).

Site	Borden no.	Pendant no.	Associated burial	Date of find
Rencontre Island	CjBj-02	Several	Yes (MNI = 1)	1847
Yellow Fox Island	DiAr-09	1	Yes (MNI = 1)	1886
Swan Island	DiAs-09	Many	Yes (MNI = 1)	1886
Burnt Island (Big Island)	DjAw-17	32	Yes (MNI = 1)	1886
Comfort Island	DiAr-01	Several	Yes (MNI = 4)	1888
Hangman's Island	CjAn-02	24	Yes (MNI = 1)	Late 1800s
Launch Cave 1, Long Island	DjAv-01	30	None found	1912
Carved Bone Burial, Long Island	DjAw-20	30	None found	1927
North China Head, Long Island	DjAw-01	41	None found	1942
Long Island 6, Bay of Exploits	DiAr-06	15	Yes (MNI = 3)	1927
Triton Island	DjAv-09	5	Yes (MNI = 1)	1875
High Greco Island	DiAt-03	12	Yes (MNI = 1)	1933
Devil's Cove Robert's Arm	DjAw-16	6	Yes (MNI=2)	1960s
Fox Bar	DeAk-02	31	Yes (MNI = 3)	1972

Table 1. List of recorded sites where Beothuk pendants have been recovered (adapted from Marshall 1978).

The Beothuk made long-distance voyages to obtain birds and eggs from island rookeries. These expeditions included trips to Funk Island, located 60 km off the northeast coast of Newfoundland (Blake 1888, 913; Cartwright 1792, 10; Lloyd 1875, 29; Montevecchi & Tuck 1987, 42). With six thousand breeding pairs of gannets and four hundred thousand murres, the island supports the largest seabird colony in the province today. At the time the Beothuk visited Funk Island, the island was also home to the now extinct great auk. Indeed, Funk Island supported the largest known colony of these birds in the Northwest Atlantic, if not the world

(Montevecchi & Kirkam 1987, 147). The potential food yield from bird eggs alone on Funk Island is staggering. Kristensen (2011, 294) estimates that there is as much edible egg on the island today (over 39,000 kg) as there is meat in a herd of 800 caribou or a pod of 100 beluga whales. This estimate includes neither the potentially significant yield of great auk eggs nor the decrease in bird populations as a result of European exploitation. Although some 35 million seabirds visit Newfoundland's 700 breeding sites annually today, far more birds must have visited the island in the past before seasonal fishermen and local settlers eradicated numerous bird colonies and caused the extinction of the great auk (Montevecchi & Tuck 1987; Montevecchi et al. 2007; Pope 2009).

Given the sheer presence of birds in the environment, their importance in Beothuk diet, and the unique role of birds in Beothuk activities — such as dangerous voyages to rookeries — we suggest that birds provided a plethora of source material for Beothuk belief systems. The ethnographic record of northern hunter-gatherers demonstrates that people often make deep spiritual connections with animals in their environment, particularly with those on which they depend for food, occupy unique ecological niches, or exhibit remarkable behaviour. Notwithstanding the probable significance of other animals to the Beothuk, we suggest that seabirds commanded a prominent place in Beothuk ideology.

Pendants

Perhaps no other object is as closely associated with the Beothuk today as the enigmatic bone pendant. Pendants were often fashioned from caribou bones that were split, ground down into thin tabular forms and then exquisitely carved, engraved and coated with red ochre. Over 400 of these objects (Table 1) have been found on the island (Marshall 1978, 139). The largest public collection is housed at The Rooms Provincial Museum Division in St John's, Newfoundland and Labrador (over 150 specimens) while additional smaller collections are at the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the McCord Museum.

Beothuk pendants are typically very thin (less than 0.5 cm) and range from 2.5 to 16.9 cm in length with an average of 6.9 cm (Marshall 1978, 139). Most exhibit bi-conically gouged holes on one end, suggesting that they were attached to clothing or worn as necklaces. This interpretation is strengthened by the occasional thread of associated sinew (Cartwright 1826, 321). Some pendants appear to have been reworked following breakage indicating that they were worn or handled during their use-life and therefore played some role among the living (see Marshall 1973, 22–3; Patterson 1891, 155; Speck 1940, 225). This is supported by the recovery of pendants from a Beothuk settlement (Pastore 1992, 32).

The great majority of pendants, however, are associated with the dead (see Blake 1888, 913; Carignan 1973, 12; Dawson 1860; Howley 1915, 291, 328, 334; Jenness

1929, 37; Kirwin et al. 1997, 225–6; Locke 1974, 29; Marshall 1973, 23; Patterson 1891, 157–8; Ryan 1948). Of the 28 recorded Beothuk burial sites in Newfoundland, 11 are known to have yielded bone pendants and numerous other burials likely housed pendants prior to extensive looting. Pendants also have been found at three sites that lack human remains, but that are otherwise typical of burial locations (rockshelter features and caves on islands). Since each of these sites had been looted, it is possible that skeletal material was removed at an earlier date. Alternatively, these pendants may have been buried in the absence of the individuals they belonged to; for example, in cases where bodies were lost at sea or could not otherwise be recovered.

Pendants are often found in clusters (Table 1). In at least one case, several pendants were attached to a burial shroud of a single individual (Howley 1915, 331). Plausibly, some of the pendants represented in clusters may have once belonged to other individuals who offered them to the deceased at the time of burial. This seems unlikely however, given the personal character of grave goods often found with burials. Unfortunately, no undisturbed Beothuk burial has ever been professionally excavated. The precise provenience of pendants relative to skeletal material, therefore, is largely unknown (Marshall 1973, 18).

The antiquity of pendants is often difficult to assess. Looting and a history of unsystematic excavation make it a challenge to date graves, since reported assemblages could contain material from multiple burials or different eras. Owing to the uncommon and sensitive nature of these objects, it is also unlikely that pendants will be subject to destructive radiometric dating in the near future. We are only aware of one burial that has been radiocarbon dated. The date was obtained from the body tissue of a child who was wrapped in a leather shroud that had been smeared with red ochre and to which 'Several carved bone ornaments and a couple of birds feet …' were attached (Howley 1915, 331). The child was also buried with a wooden doll, an extra set of moccasins, two miniature birch bark canoes, miniature bows and arrows, red ochre, and a package of dried or smoked fish (Blake 1888, 914; Howley 1915, 331). The burial was discovered in the late 1800s, and was long thought to date to the historic period, given its proximity to another individual who was buried nearby with iron objects. The child's burial, however, has since yielded a late prehistoric date (549±62 bp; ad 1311–1443) (Jerkic et al. n.d.) which confirms that pendants pre-date the arrival of Europeans.

Beothuk pendants come in a variety of shapes and designs (see Marshall 1978). We suggest that many (but not all) pendant types resemble aspects of avian anatomy. Some bone pendants, for instance, represent primary wing feathers based on their shape and the presence of a centralized vertical tube or feather rachis (Fig. 2). Such feather-shaped specimens are typically 7.0 to 13 cm long. Virtually all of the feather-shaped pendants are asymmetrical like distal-tip bird wing feathers, in contrast to symmetrical body and tail feathers. Some pendants exhibit feather design engravings but are blunt-ended and appear distally truncated (e.g. VIIIA-495 and VIIIA-492 in Fig. 2 and VIIA-455 in Fig. 3). We posit that these pieces began as

asymmetrical feather representations but were reground and modified when the distal tip broke.

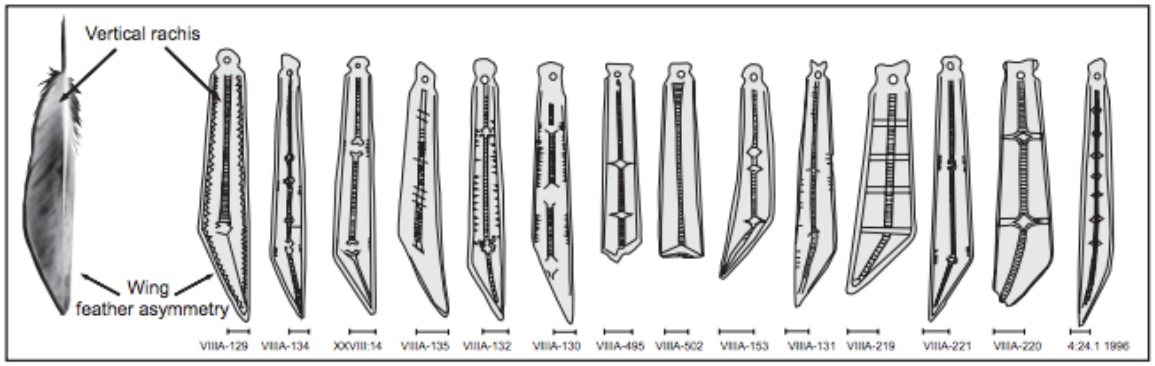

Figure 2. Representations of Beothuk feather-shaped bone pendants. The scale bar below each image is 1 cm and catalogue numbers refer to specimens from The Rooms Provincial Museum Division or images from Howley (1915) or Marshall (1978; 1996). We drew specimens with CAD software to enable visualization of often obscured engravings. The image at left is a photograph of a tern primary wing feather.

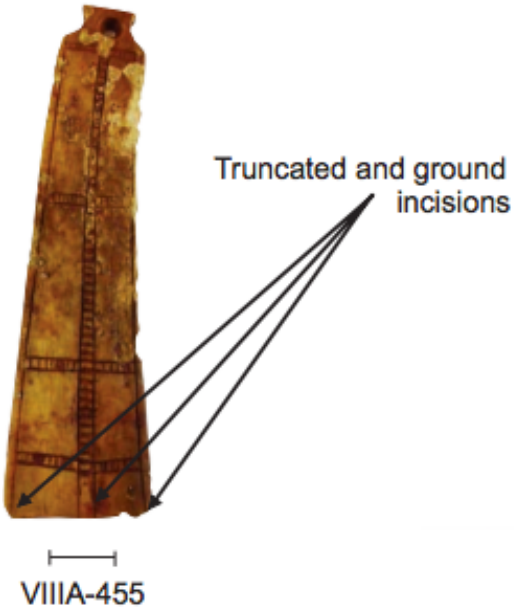

Figure 3. Photograph of truncated feather-shaped pendant with ground incisions at distal tip. Scale bar is 1 cm. (Photograph courtesy of The Rooms Corporation of Newfoundland and Labrador, Provincial Museum Division.)

Other pendants appear to be abstractions of bird feet (Fig. 4). These pendants are typically smaller, measuring between 2.75 and 5.5 cm in length. An association between pendants and bird feet was initially proposed by Marshall (1978, 152; 1996, 388) on the basis of their tri-pronged shape. We extend this hypothesis by arguing that the engravings are designed to mimic toe joints and that tri-pronged pendants constrict after the junction of the three toes, as do bird feet (Fig. 4).

Sinusoidal outlines, hatch marks and circular engravings on these pendants also appear to depict scales commonly found on bird feet. Furthermore, three-toed animals in Newfoundland are limited to aquatic birds. Newfoundland mammals have either five toes (e.g. bear, seal and beaver), four toes (e.g. wolf), or two distinct toes (e.g. caribou). The pendants most strongly resemble the webbed feet of diving seabirds based on shape and the presence of a central area from which three toes extend (the 'sole' of the foot). We hypothesize that smaller two-pronged pendants (Fig. 4) may represent stylized bird feet or, in some cases, specimens that had been repaired after the third prong broke off (Fig. 5). The interpretation that these pendants represent bird feet is strengthened by the fact that actual seabird feet (from three-toed black guillemot - Cepphus grille) have been recovered from a grave garment of at least one Beothuk burial (Howley 1915, 331–2; Marshall 1996, 346).

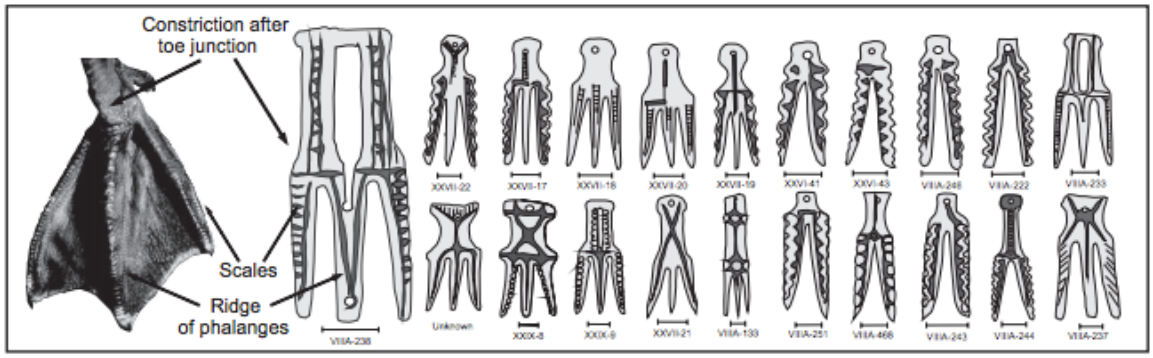

Figure 4. Representations of Beothuk foot-shaped bone pendants. The scale bar below each image is 1 cm and catalogue numbers refer to specimens from The Rooms Provincial Museum Division or images from Howley (1915). The image at left is a photograph of a goose foot (Branta sp.).

A final class of pendants resemble the outstretched tails of flying birds (Fig. 6). They deviate from the aforementioned two-pronged carvings in the lack of constriction after the prong junction and the absence of engravings that mimic the scales on bird feet (Fig. 7). Forked-tail carvings are typically 6.0 to 9.0 cm in length (3.0 to 4.0 cm longer than feet pendants) and exhibit a central notch (between the two prongs) that extends less than half way up the pendant (Fig. 7). The forked-tailed pendants strongly resemble the flying outline of an arctic tern (Sterna paradisaea), which commonly breeds in coastal Newfoundland. The pendants may also depict species of cave-dwelling swallows from the island. Bird skulls have been reported from Beothuk burial sites, including one instance where several skulls (Macdougall 1891, 102) were found together in a 'medicine bag'. Only one skull (that of an arctic tern) has been positively identified (Howley 1915, 331–3, pl. 35).

The beak of the arctic tern is bright red (Fig. 8), as are the aforementioned guillemot feet (Fig. 9). Given the significance of the colour symbolism of bird parts in other cultural contexts (Jackson & Scott 2003; Jones & MacGregor 2002; Krech 2009; Mannermaa 2008, 60), we suggest that the representation of these parts at Beothuk burial sites is not coincidental. The Beothuk are famous for their prolific use of red

ochre, which was smeared on their skin and clothing, used to coat pendants, deposited with the dead, and was associated with special architectural features (Holly et al. 2011, 78; Marshall 1996, 409–10, 417). All of which has led to the assertion that the colour red had special ideological significance for the Beothuk (Black et al. 2009, 661; Holly 2000, 89–90; Marshall 1996, 384–5; Speck 1922, 58, 62–4). Given its association with the dead, perhaps the colour red was believed to have life-renewing qualities (see Hamell 1986–87, 75–6; Wreschner et al. 1980).

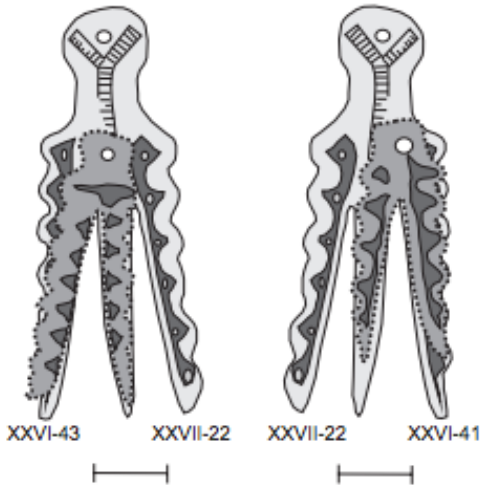

Figure 5. Overlay of smaller two-pronged pendants on a larger three-pronged pendant to illustrate potential that smaller pieces have been reworked after one of the three prongs was broken. Scale bar is 1 cm.

Flight

An association between birds and shamans was common in northern North America and Eurasia (Balzer 1996; Fitzhugh 2009; Hayden 2003, 77–80; Jordan 2003, 217–20; Morrow & Volkman 1975, 148; Pavlinskaya 1994; Pearson 2002, 134; Prokofyeva 1963; Ridington 1978; Salls & Hale 2004; Serov 1988; Webber 1977), as was the notion of a tiered cosmology (Armitage 1992; Balzer 1996; Brightman 1993; Hornborg 2008, 32; Jordan 2003; Ridington 1978; Serov 1988, 242). A fundamental feature of this ideological pattern was the believed ability of individuals to transcend worlds through a spiritual journey akin to flight (Balzer 1996; Hayden 2003, 77–80; Pearson 2002, 70–73). Logically, birds were often enlisted as spiritual messengers on such journeys. Among the Evenk of eastern Siberia, for instance, eagles, cuckoos and ducks served as messengers to the upper world while loons and cormorants were sent to the lower world (Grusman & Konovalov 2006). Waterfowl and seabirds were believed to be particularly adept guides because of their ability to move through opposing realms of water and air (Balzer 1996, 311; Hornborg 2008, 42; Morrow & Volkman 1975, 149).

Bird remains, particularly feet and feathers, are often found in northern hunter-gatherer burial sites (Fitzhugh 2009, 77; Hoppa et al. 2005; Jochelson 1975, 178;

Larsen & Rainey 1948, 121–7; Mannermaa 2008, 44, 62; Tuck 1976). Their presence in this context further supports a generalized association of birds with soul flight and suggests that birds had a part to play in conveying souls of the dead to the afterlife. We suggest that this was the case among the Beothuk based on art motifs and burial patterns.

Actual and symbolic bird parts (pendants) used as grave goods clearly link birds to the Beothuk dead. Many pendants also include vertebrae or skeletal ladder motifs (Marshall 1978, 151), that may reference internal bone structures and major bone articulations such as the pelvic girdle, pectoral girdle and skull/ neck joint (see Meldgaard 1960; Sutherland 2001a, 16; Tanner 1984, 95). Skeletal ladders appear on all of the pendant types (Fig. 10), but are most common on the forked-tail types.

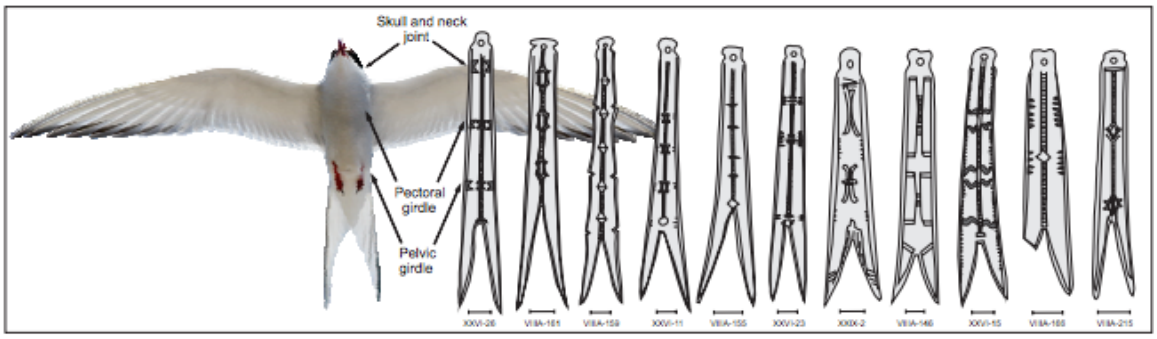

Figure 6. Representations of Beothuk forked-tail pendants. The scale bar below each image is 1 cm and catalogue numbers refer to specimens from The Rooms Provincial Museum Division or images from Howley (1915). The image at left is a photograph of an arctic tern (Sterna paradisaea: reproduced with kind permission from photographer Arthur Morris).

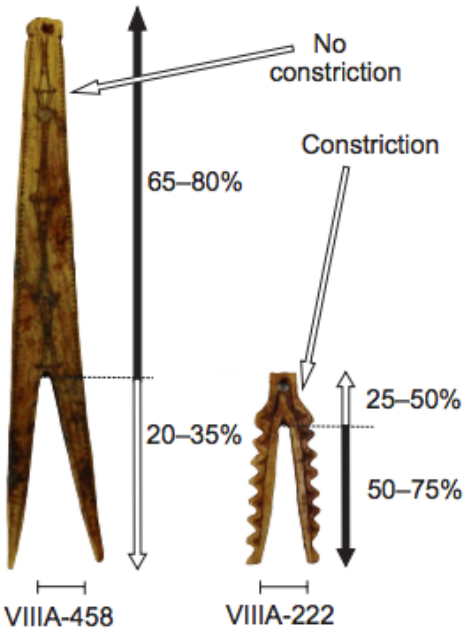

Figure 7. Stylistic differences between forked-tail (left) and feet pendants (right). Scale bar is 1 cm. (Photograph courtesy of The Rooms Corporation of Newfoundland and Labrador, Provincial Museum Division.)

Figure 8. Photograph of arctic tern depicting red beak and feet. (Reproduced with kind permission from photographer Nigel Pye 2012.)

Figure 9. Photograph of black guillemot depicting red feet. (Reproduced with kind permission from photographer Mikko Vihtakari 2012.)

Bones are often associated with death which has led researchers to the interpretation that skeletal features or X-ray motifs depict transformations from life to death (Hayden 2003, 53; Rasmussen 1929;Taçon 1989, 245; Taylor 1989, 374–7). X-ray motifs are found in the Arctic (Sutherland 2001b) but are largely unknown among the Beothuk's northern neighbours, the Innu of Labrador and Québec. Tanner (1984, 95), however, observed an Innu ceremonial hide marked in places

that corresponded to the key anatomical parts of the animal. Examples of skeletal art among the Mi'kmaq, the Beothuk's neighbours to the southeast, are equally sparse. We are only aware of one example, which depicts a serpent messenger to the underworld (Lenik 2002, 21).

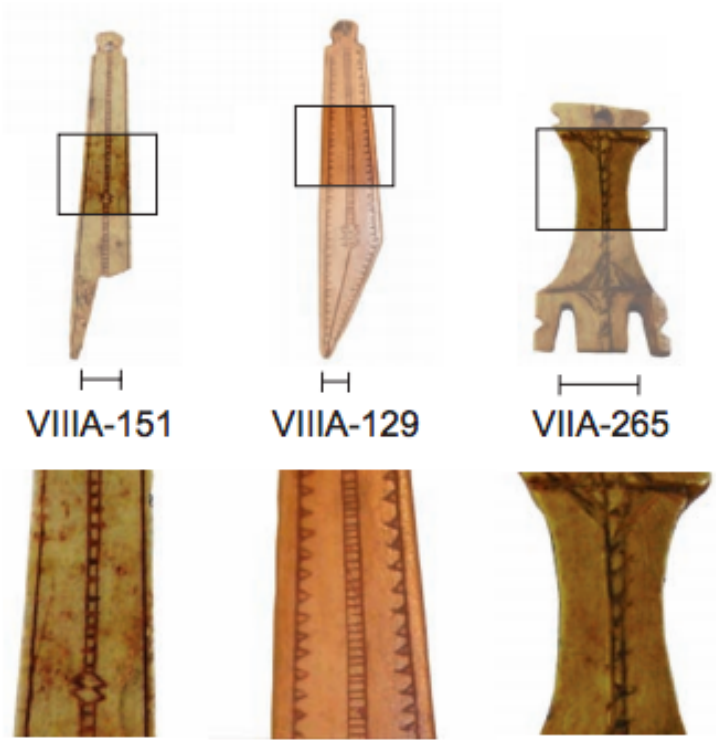

Figure 10. Beothuk skeletal ladders on bone pendants. Scale bar is 1 cm. (Photographs courtesy of The Rooms Corporation of Newfoundland and Labrador, Provincial Museum Division.)

The appearance of skeletal motifs in Dorset Palaeoeskimo art has led researchers to suggest a shared artistic tradition and possible historical connection with the Beothuk (Marshall 1978, 151). Dorset Palaeoeskimos and the Beothuk's ancestors both occupied Newfoundland at the same time (Renouf et al. 2000) therefore it is possible that Dorset symbolism (see Renouf 2000) influenced Beothuk artistic traditions. Fitzhugh (1985, 103) argued on the basis of stylistic similarities of pendants for an historical relationship between Beothuk and the much older Maritime Archaic of Newfoundland and Labrador. According to this historical continuity model, Beothuk pendants represent bears and seals (Marshall 1978) and are part of an ideological/artistic tradition that links the ethnographic period to the first human occupants of Newfoundland and Labrador (Fitzhugh 1985, 105).

Unlike skeletal motifs, artistic and ethnohistoric records of multi-tiered cosmologies among the Beothuk's neighbours are well known. The Mi'kmaq and Innu had complex tiered cosmologies that involved islands and aquatic realms (Armitage 1992; Hornborg 2008). Wavy lines and zigzag motifs in indigenous art of the greater Northeast and Great Lakes region have been connected to water, sky, lightning, serpents and thunderbirds (Lenik 2010; Oberholtzer 2007; Penney 1989; Phillips

1984). Both design types appear on Beothuk pendants and in other art of the eastern Subarctic (Fitzhugh 1985, 92–5; Speck 1977; Tanner 1984, 93–4; Webber 1973–74; 1982) and may be read in conjunction with the skeletal motifs as symbolic references to spiritual journeys and a tiered cosmology.

Each of the three bird parts depicted in Beothuk pendant carvings (Figs. 2, 4 & 6) are logical representations of different forms of avian transportation. We argue that wing feathers and outstretched tails represent flight, while seabird feet represent movement through water. We further hypothesize that artistic references to avian movement through air and water are symbolic of a type of soul flight through a multitiered cosmology.

Ethnohistoric evidence supports the notion that the Beothuk believed in soul flight and conceptualized death as a journey. Shanawdithit stated that souls of the deceased abided on a 'happy island' to the west (McGregor 1836, 322) and she expressed concern about being buried with things that she would need to make the journey to the land of the dead (Marshall 1996, 384). This statement is corroborated by the presence of provisions and travel equipment in other Beothuk burials (Blake 1888, 914) including miniature birchbark canoes, extra clothing and dried food (Cormack 1873; Howley 1915, 129, 290–93, 331–4; Patterson 1891). Canoes, in particular, indicate that such travel included an aquatic component (see Blackman 1984 for ethnographic records of miniature canoes in Haida burials), which is also consistent with the close proximity of burials to the sea.

Figure 11. Depiction of Beothuk burial scene (painted by Rae Braden 2012). Pendants are being placed next to an ochre-coated skeleton.

Given that the Beothuk conceived of the afterlife as an island, it is perhaps not surprising that with one exception, all known Beothuk burial sites occur on the

coast — a sensible departure point for journeys to a distant happy island. Furthermore, a great majority of coastal burials are located on small islands. Of the 28 recorded coastal burial sites, 22 are located on small islands. Significantly, this is not simply a reiteration of late prehistoric/early historic settlement patterns. We performed a chi-square goodness of fit test to compare the ratio of island burial sites to island non-burial sites ($\chi^2 = 45$; df = 1, 61; p = 0.01,), which supports the hypothesis that the Beothuk specifically buried their dead on islands, rather than simply in areas where they were also foraging and living. In addition, most burials and pendants have been found in caves or under rock overhangs (Marshall 1996, 416) on these islands. This could suggest that subterranean chambers might have been conceptualized as portals to other realms (Earle 2008), with islands functioning as the nexus of upper (aerial) and lower (aquatic) worlds (Hamell 1986–87, 77–8; Pearson 2002, 71).

The ideological significance of this sacred landscape can be read in the continued Beothuk practice of burying the dead on coastal islands even after these people had been pressed into the interior (Holly 2003). Cormack (1829, 325), for example, asserts that the Beothuk transported the dead over great distances to bury them on the coast. The only known non-coastal burial site is a cemetery established in the early nineteenth century when the Beothuk were largely confined to the interior (Holly 2003, 61–2). This cemetery included burial scaffolds and wooden crypts (Cormack 1829, 323–5), which could indicate that it was intended only as a short-term burial place until bodies could be brought to the coast (Le Blanc 1973, 46; Holly 2003, 62; Marshall 1996, 405).

Food for thought

Ridington (1978) provides an insightful ethnographic model for understanding how peoples' observations and experiences in the natural world inform religious beliefs (see also Brightman 1993; Nelson 1983; Tanner 1979). The Dunne-za (Beaver) of northwest Canada interpret the annual flight paths of swans as heavenly trails to and from unknown realms. These trails are believed to be accessible to humans through ritual acts, dreaming, and the harnessing of swan medicine (Ridington 1978). Thus, observations of birds provided raw material for the construction of a cosmological journey.

Similarly, the Beothuk had ample opportunities to witness the aerial, diving and swimming feats of seabirds in their daily life and in the course of subsistence pursuits. Such observations plausibly led the Beothuk to enlist birds as partners in multi-realm soul flights. Observations of annual bird migrations and daily bird movement may have provided raw material for the basis of cosmological journeys while seabird nesting colonies (the target of bird migrations) fostered belief in a happy island of the afterlife.

Modes of seabird access and the unique ecological niche of birds may have also inspired the Beothuk to elevate their spiritual importance. During late spring and summer the Beothuk visited seabird colonies to obtain meat and eggs. Depending on skill and weather these expeditions surely involved varying degrees of difficulty and

danger. They involved scaling cliff-faces, landing fragile canoes on rocky shores, and navigating Newfoundland's often foggy shorelines. In particular, 60 km voyages to Funk Island would have entailed great risk and required navigational acumen (Montevecchi & Tuck 1987, 42). But once there the Beothuk encountered an island teeming with birds and covered with eggs. It was perhaps just the sort of trip and destination that provided ideological inspiration. The island rookeries were places where birds came to give birth to new life before departing for distant points beyond the horizon — but perhaps not beyond the imagination. We envision that the Beothuk hitched the souls of their dead to this great mystery of bird migration; they buried their dead in places where birds created life (islands) and hoped that when the birds departed they took the souls of their dead with them to their island afterworld (Fig. 11).

Conclusion

Some Beothuk likely sought refuge in Indigenous communities in Labrador, Québec, or Nova Scotia but by the middle of the nineteenth century the Beothuk ceased to exist as a cultural entity. Today, there remain some outstanding historic accounts of Beothuk life (Howley 1915; Marshall 1996) but the archives are largely silent regarding the complexities of Beothuk cosmology. Accordingly, advancements in our understanding of Beothuk belief systems are apt to emerge from new archaeological research and from re-evaluations of the material record.

Belief systems are among the most elusive dimensions of ancient life and are best approached within the context of lived-experience and with multiple lines of evidence. Our interpretation of the role of birds in Beothuk cosmology is based on archaeological records of subsistence, burial goods, burial distribution, bird ecology and surviving ethnohistoric accounts.

There is ample archaeological evidence that the Beothuk were a coastal people at the time of contact. Settlement patterns clearly indicate an emphasis on sheltered bays and the small island archipelagos that seabirds frequent. Historic observations and faunal evidence also indicate that birds and bird eggs played an important role in Beothuk diet. Through these experiences the Beothuk must have acquired an intimate knowledge of daily bird movement (flying, diving and swimming), and the cyclical nature of bird migration to and from their nesting grounds. We argue that Beothuk belief systems regarding the dead were informed by these experiences.

One manifestation of bird cosmology is the bone pendant, which depicts avian anatomy, movement and skeletal motifs suggestive of a transformative state between life and death. Pendants and bird parts are associated with burials, which we suggest connects birds to a belief in soul flight. The distribution of Beothuk burial sites on small coastal islands — places strongly associated with seabirds — further link the dead to birds. We conclude that birds were spiritual messengers enlisted to bring the dead to the Beothuk 'happy island' afterlife.

Acknowledgements

Elaine Anton graciously provided images of pendants in possession of The Rooms Provincial Museum Division. Many thanks to Nigel Pye, Arthur Morris and Mikko

Vihtakari, who graciously granted permission to reproduce their photographs. Jack Ives, Jack Brink, Mariane Hardenberg, Kristiina Mannermaa and Cathy Cmita offered advice, and Stephen Hull provided site-record information from the Provincial Archaeology Office of Newfoundland and Labrador. John Kristensen provided valuable advice. The following funding agencies provided financial support for this project; the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Canada Research Chairs Program, Killam Trust, the Provincial Archaeology Office of Newfoundland and Labrador, Memorial University School of Graduate Studies, the Marine Archaeology Society, and the Canadian Fulbright Program. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 2011 meetings of the American Anthropological Association and the 2012 meeting of the Canadian Anthropology Society/ La Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie.

References

Armitage, P., 1992. Religious ideology among the Innu of eastern Quebec and Labrador. Religiologiques 6(4), 63–110.

Balzer, M.M., 1996. Flights of the sacred: symbolism and theory in Siberian shamanism. American Anthropologist 98(2), 305–18.

Black, S.M., I.C.L. Marshall & A.C. Kitchener, 2009. The skulls of Chief Nonosabasut and his wife Demasduit— Beothuk of Newfoundland. International Journal of Osteoarchaeo logy 19(5), 659–77.

Blackman, M., 1984. Haida: traditional culture, in Handbook of North American Indians, vol. 7: Northwest Coast, ed. W. Suttles. Washington (DC): Smithsonian Institution, 240–60.

Blake, E., 1888. The Beothucks of Newfoundland. The Nineteenth Century 24, 899–918.

Le Blanc, R., 1973. The Wigwam Brook Site and the HistoricBeothuk Indians. Unpublished MA thesis, Anthropology Department, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St John's, N.L.

Brightman, R., 1993. Grateful Prey: Rock Cree Human–Animal Relationships. Berkeley (CA): University of California Press.

Carignan, P., 1973. Archaeology of Bonavista Bay: Salvage Report-1973. Manuscript on file, Provincial Archaeology Office, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, St John's.

Cartwright, F., 1826. The Life and Correspondence of Major Cartwright. London: Henry Colburn.

Cartwright, G., 1792. A Journal of Transactions and Events, During a Residence of Nearly Sixteen Years on the Coast of Labrador; Containing Many Interesting Particulars Both of the Country and Its Inhabitants Not Hitherto Known. Newark: Allin and Ridge.

Cell, G., 1969. English Enterprise in Newfoundland 1577–1660. Toronto (ON): University of Toronto Press. Chappell, E., 1818. Voyage of His Majesty's Ship Rosamond to Newfoundland and the Southern Coast of Labrador, of Which Countries No Account Has Been Published by

Any British Traveller since the Reign of Queen Elizabeth. London: J. Mawman. Cormack, W., 1829. Report of Mr Cormack's journey in search of the Red Indians in Newfoundland. Edinburgh New Philosophical Journal October 1828–March 1829, 318–29.

Cormack, W., 1873. Narrative of a Journey across the Island of Newfoundland. St John's (NL): Morning Chronicle. Cridland, J., 1998. Late Prehistoric Indian Subsistence in Northeastern Newfoundland: Faunal Analysis of Little Passage Complex Assemblages from the Beaches and Inspector Island sites. Unpublished MA thesis, Department of Anthropology, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St John's.

Crout, H., 1613. Letter to P. Willoughby. MG 260, Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador, St John's, Newfoundland.

Cumbaa, S.L., 1984. 'Divers furres and deeres flesh' — Animal Use by a 17th-century Beothuk Population at Boyd's Cove, Notre Dame Bay, Newfoundland. Manuscript on file, Archaeology Unit, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St John's.

Dawson, J., 1860. Notes on the relics of the Red Indians of Newfoundland, collected by Mr Smith McKay, and exhibited to the Natural History Society. Canadian Naturalist and Geologist 5, 462.

Earle, D., 2008. Maya caves across time and space: reading related landscapes in K'iche' Maya text, ritual, and history, in Pre-Columbian Landscapes of Creation and Origin, ed. J. Staller. New York (NY): Springer, 67–93.

Fitzhugh, W., 1985. The Nulliak pendants and their relation to spiritual traditions in Northeast prehistory. Arctic Anthropology 22(2), 87–109.

Fitzhugh, W., 2009. Stone shamans and flying deer of northern Mongolia: deer goddess of Siberia or chimera of the steppe? Arctic Anthropology 46(1–2), 72–88.

Gilbert, W., 2002. Russell's Point (CiAj-01): A Little Passage/ Beothuk Site at the Bottom of Trinity Bay. Unpublished MA thesis, Department of Anthropology, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St John's.

Gilbert, W., 2011. Beothuk-European contact in the 16th century: a re-evaluation of the documentary evidence. Acadiensis 40, 24–44.

Grusman, V. & A. Konovalov, 2006. Between Worlds: Shamanism of the Peoples of Siberia, trans. V. Bittner. Moscow: Khudozhnik i Kniga.

Hamell, G., 1986–87. Strawberries, floating islands, and rabbit captains: mythical realities and European contact in the northeast during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Journal of Canadian Studies 21(4), 72–94.

Hayden, B., 2003. Shamans, Sorcerers, and Saints. Washington (DC): Smithsonian Books.

Holly, D., Jr, 2000. The Beothuk on the eve of their extinction. Arctic Anthropology 37, 79–95.

Holly, D., Jr, 2002. From Space to Place: an Archaeology and Historical Geography of the Recent Indian Period in Newfoundland. Unpublished PhD dissertation, Department of Anthropology, Brown University, Providence (RI).

Holly, D., Jr, 2003. Places of the living, places of the dead: situating a sacred geography. Northeast Anthropology 66, 57–76.

Holly, D., Jr, 2005. The place of 'others' in hunter-gatherer intensification. American Anthropologist 107, 207–20.

Holly, D., Jr, 2008. Social aspects and implications of 'running to the hills': the case of the Beothuk Indians of Newfoundland. Journal of Island and Coastal Archaeology 3, 170–90.

Holly, D., Jr, C. Wolff & J. Erwin, 2010. The ties that bind and divide: encounters with the Beothuk in Southeastern Newfoundland. Journal of the North Atlantic 3, 31–44.

Holly, D., Jr, C. Wolff & J. Erwin, 2011. Excavations at Stock Cove West (CkAl-10). Provincial Archaeology Office 2010 Archaeology Review 9, 75–80.

Hoppa, R., L. Allingham, K. Brownlee, L. Lavcombe & G. Monks, 2005. An analysis of two Late Archaic burials from Manitoba: the Eriksdale Site (EfLl-1). Canadian Journal of Archaeology 29, 234–66.

Hornborg, A.-C., 2008. Mi'kmaq Landscapes: from Animism to Sacred Ecology. Abingdon: Ashgate Publishing Group.

Howley, J., 1915. The Beothuks or Red Indians: the Aboriginal Inhabitants of Newfoundland. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jackson, H. & S. Scott, 2003. Patterns of elite faunal utilization at Moundville, Alabama. American Antiquity 68, 552–72.

Jenness, D., 1929. Notes on the Beothuk Indians of Newfoundland. National Museum of Canada Bulletin 56, 36–9.

Jerkic, S., P. Horne & A. Aufderheide, n.d. Biology and History: Studies of a Beothuk Mummy. Manuscript on file, Provincial Archaeology Office, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, St John's.

Jochelson, W., 1975. The Yukaghir and the Yukaghirized Tungus. New York (NY): AMS Press.

Jones, A. & G. MacGregor (eds.), 2002. Colouring the Past: the Significance of Colour in the Archaeological Record. Oxford: Berg.

Jordan, P., 2003. Material Culture and Sacred Landscape: the Anthropology of the Siberian Khanty. Walnut Creek (CA): AltaMira Press.

Kirwin, W., G. Story & P. O'Flaherty (eds.), 1997. Reminiscences of James P. Howley: Selected Years. Toronto: The Champlain Society.

Krech, S., III, 2009. Spirits of the Air: Birds and American Indians in the South. Athens (GA): University of Georgia Press.

Kristensen, T., 2011. Seasonal bird exploitation by Recent Indian and Beothuk hunter-gatherers of Newfoundland. Canadian Journal of Archaeology 35, 292–322.

Kristensen, T. & J. Curtis, 2012. Late Holocene huntergatherers at L'Anse aux Meadows and the dynamics of bird and mammal hunting in Newfoundland. Arctic Anthropology 49, 68–87.

Larsen, H. & F. Rainey, 1948. Ipiutak and the Arctic Whale Hunting Culture. (Anthropological Paper 42.) New York (NY): American Museum of Natural History.

Lenik, E., 2002. Picture Rocks: American Indian Rock Art in the Northeast Woodlands. Hanover (NH): University Press of New England.

Lenik, E., 2010. Mythic creatures: serpents, dragons, and sea monsters in Northeastern rock art. Archaeology of Eastern North America 38, 17–37.

Lloyd, T., 1875. On the 'Beothucs' a tribe of Red Indians, supposed to be extinct, which formerly inhabited Newfoundland. Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland 4, 21–39.

Locke, D., 1974. Beothuk Artefacts. Grand Falls (NL): Robinson-Blackmore.

Macdougall, A., 1891. The Boeothick Indians. Transactions of the Canadian Institute 2, 98–102.

Mannermaa, K., 2008. The Archaeology of Wings: Birds and People in the Baltic Sea Region during the Stone Age. Unpublished PhD dissertation, Faculty of Arts, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland.

Marshall, I., 1973. A study of Beothuck decorated bone pieces. Aspects 6, 17–24.

Marshall, I., 1978. The significance of Beothuck carved bone pendants. Canadian Journal of Archaeology 2, 139–54.

Marshall, I., 1981. Disease as a factor in the demise of the Beothuck Indians. Culture 1, 71–7.

Marshall, I., 1996. A History and Ethnography of the Beothuk. Montreal (QC): McGill-Queen's University Press.

McGregor, J., 1836. Sketches of savage life. Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country 13, 316–23.

Meldgaard, J., 1960. Eskimo Sculpture. London: Methuen.

Montevecchi, W. & I. Kirkham, 1987. Funk Island, the first exploited seabird colony in the New World, in Newfoundland Birds: Exploitation, Study, Conservation, ed. R. Paynter Jr. (Publications of the Nuttall Ornithological Club 21.) Cambridge (MA): Nuttall Ornithological Club, 145–59.

Montevecchi, W. & L. Tuck, 1987. Newfoundland Birds: Exploitation, Study, Conservation, ed. R. Paynter Jr. (Publications of the Nuttall Ornithological Club 21) Cambridge (MA): Nuttall Ornithological Club.

Montevecchi, W., H. Chaffey & C. Burke, 2007. Hunting for security: changes in the exploitation of marine birds in Newfoundland and Labrador, in Resetting the Kitchen Table, eds. C. Parish, N. Turner & S. Solberg. St John's (NL): Nova Science, 99–116.

Morrow, P. & T. Volkman, 1975. The loon with the ivory eyes: a study in symbolic archaeology. Journal of American Folklore 88, 143–50.

Nelson, R., 1983. Make Prayers to the Ravens: a Koyukon View of the Northern Forest. Chicago (IL): University of Chicago Press.

Oberholtzer, C., 2007. Propitiation, instruction, commission: survival arts of the James Bay Cree, in Three Centuries of Woodland Indian Art, eds. J. King & C. Feest. Altenstadt, Germany: ZKF, 92–102.

Pastore, R., 1992. Shanawdithit's People: the Archaeology of the Beothuks. St John's (NL): Atlantic Archaeology.

Patterson, G., 1891. The Beothiks or Red Indians of Newfoundland. Proceedings and Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada 9, 123–71.

Pavlinskaya, L., 1994. The Shaman costume: image and myth, in Ancient Traditions, Shamanism in Central Asia and the Americas, eds. G. Seaman & J. Day. Niwot (CO): University Press of Colorado and Denver Museum of Natural History, 257–64.

Pearson, J., 2002. Shamanism and the Ancient Mind: a Cognitive Approach to Archaeology. New York (NY): AltaMira Press.

Penney, D., 1989. Great Lakes Indian art: an introduction, in Great Lakes Indian Art, ed. D. Penney. Detroit (MI): Wayne State University Press and the Detroit Institute of Arts, 9–20.

Phillips, R., 1984. Zigzag and spiral: geometric motifs in Great Lakes Indian costume, in Papers of the Fifteenth Algonquian Conference, ed. W. Cowan. Ottawa (ON): Carleton University, 409–24.

Pope, P., 1997. The 16th-century fishing voyage, in How Deep is the Ocean? Historical Essays on Canada's Atlantic Fishery, eds. J. Candow & C. Corbin. Sydney (NS): University of Cape Breton Press, 15–30.

Pope, P., 2004. Fish into Wine: the Newfoundland Plantation in the Seventeenth Century. Chapel Hill (NC): University of North Carolina Press.

Pope, P., 2009. Early migratory fishermen and Newfoundland's seabird colonies. Journal of the North Atlantic 2, 57–70.

Prokofyeva, Y., 1963. The costume of an Enets Shaman, in Studies in Siberian Shamanism, ed. H. Michael. (Arctic Institute of North America, Translations from Russian Sources 4.) Toronto (ON): University of Toronto Press, 124–56.

Rasmussen, K., 1929. Intellectual Life of the Iglulik Eskimos. (Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition 1921–24, VII[1].) Copenhagen: Nordisk Forlag.

Rast, T., M.A.P. Renouf & T. Bell, 2004. Patterns in precontact site location on the Southwest Coast of Newfoundland. Northeast Anthropology 68, 41–55.

Reader, D., 1998. Early Recent Indian interior occupation at Deer Lake Beach: implications for theories of Recent Indian and Beothuk resource use, settlement, and social organization in Newfoundland. Northeast Anthropology 55, 47–70.

Renouf, M.A.P., 2000. Symbolism and subsistence: seals and caribou at Port au Choix, northwestern Newfoundland, in Animal Bones, Human Societies, ed. P. Rowley-Conwy. Oxford: Oxbow-Books, 65–73.

Renouf, M.A.P. & T. Bell, 2009. Contraction and expansion in Newfoundland prehistory, ad 900–1500, in The Northern World ad 900–1400, eds. H. Maschner, O. Mason & R. McGhee. Salt Lake City (UT): The University of Utah Press, 263–78.

Renouf, M.A.P., T. Bell & M. Teal, 2000. Making contact: Recent Indians and Palaeo-Eskimos on the island of Newfoundland, in Identities in the Arctic: Proceedings from a Conference at the Danish National Museum, Copenhagen, eds. M. Applet, J. Berglund & H.C. Gulløv. Copenhagen: Danish National Museum and Danish Polar Center, 106–19.

Ridington, R., 1978. Swan People: a Study of the Dunne-za Prophet Dance. (Canadian Ethnology Service Paper 38.) Ottawa (ON): National Museum of Man.

Rowley-Conwy, P., 1990. Settlement patterns of the Beothuk Indians of Newfoundland: a view from away. Canadian Journal of Archaeology 14, 13–32.

Ryan, D., 1948. Relics of a lost race. Atlantic Guardian 5(7), 41–4.

Salls, R. & A. Hale, 2004. Messenger to the Great Spirit: the Panes ceremony on San Clemente Island. Pacific Coast Archaeological Society 36(4), 95–101.

Schwarz, F., 1994. Paleo-Eskimo and Recent Indian subsistence and settlement patterns on the Island of Newfoundland. Northeast Anthropology 47(spring), 55–70.

Serov, S., 1988. Guardians and spirit-masters of Siberia, in Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska, eds. W. Fitzhugh & A. Crowell. Washington (DC): Smithsonian Institution Press, 241–55.

Speck, F.G., 1922. Beothuk and Micmac. New York (NY): Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation.

Speck, F.G., 1940. Eskimo jacket ornaments of ivory suggesting function of bone pendants found in Beothuk sites in Newfoundland. American Antiquity 5, 225–8.

Speck, F.G., 1977 [1935]. Naskapi, the Savage Hunters of the Labrador Peninsula. Norman (OK): University of Oklahoma Press.

Sutherland, P., 2001a. Bear imagery in Palaeo-eskimo art, in North Atlantic Studies: Shamanism and Traditional Beliefs, ed. T. Vestergaard. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 13–16.

Sutherland, P., 2001b. Shamanism and the iconography of Palaeo-Eskimo art, in The Archaeology of Shamansim, ed. N. Price. New York (NY): Routledge, 135–45.

Taçon, P., 1989. Art and the essence of being: symbolic and economic aspects of fish among the peoples of Western Arnhem Land, Australia, in Animals into Art, ed. H. Morphy. London: Unwin Hyman, 236–50.

Tanner, A., 1979. Bringing Home Animals. St John's (NL): Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Tanner, A., 1984. Notes on the ceremonial hide, in Papers of the Fifteenth Algonquian Conference, ed. W. Cowan. Ottawa (ON): Carleton University, 91–105.

Taylor, L., 1989. Seeing the 'inside': Kunwinjku paintings and the symbol of the divided body, in Animals into Art, ed. H. Morphy. London: Unwin Hyman, 371–89.

Tuck, J., 1976. Ancient People of Port au Choix: the Excavation of an Archaic Indian Cemetery in Newfoundland. (Newfoundland Social and Economic Studies 17.) St John's (NL): Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Upton, L., 1977. The extermination of the Beothucks of Newfoundland. Canadian Historical Review 58, 133–53.

Webber, A., 1973–74. The healing vision: Naskapi Natutshikans. ArtsCanada December–January, 150–53.

Webber, A., 1977. The healing vision: Naskapi Natutshikans, in Stones, Bones, and Skin: Ritual and Shamanic Art, eds. A. Brodzky, R. Danesewich & N. Johnson. Toronto (ON): The Society for Art Publications, 118–21.

Webber, A., 1982. Ceremonial robes of the Montagnais-Naskapi. American Indian Art Magazine 9(1), 60–69, 75, 77.

Whitbourne, R., 1971. A Discourse and Discovery of New-foundland. New York (NY): Da Capo Press.

Wreschner, E.E., R. Bolton, K.W. Butzer et al., 1980. Red ochre and human evolution: a case for discussion [Comments and Reply]. Current Anthropology 21, 631–44.