

MINIATURE CARVINGS IN THE CANADIAN DORSET CULTURE: THE PALEO-ESKIMO BELIEF SYSTEM

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Abstract

In this paper, I attempt to present the current academic hypotheses related to the origins and the functions of the art of the last Paleo-Eskimo culture of Arctic Canada and Greenland, and, in addition, draw attention to a couple of remarkable analogies, and give a complex picture of the Paleo-Eskimo shamanism and the Dorset bear cult. The topics like the origins of magic-related Dorset Art, Pre-Dorset and Dorset transition, and possible Dorset-Thule contacts

are fundamental in the reconstruction of the Dorset belief system. However, on the basis of archeological finds and remote ethnographical analogies, the totality of Paleo-Eskimo belief system and shamanic complex can never be understood. This does not necessarily mean that comparisons and analogies cannot prove to be fruitful in deciphering the meaning of the tiny Dorset artifacts, though.

Key words: Canada, Dorset culture, Paleo-Eskimo culture, miniature carvings.

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Resumen

En este estudio, intento resumir los debates relacionados con la última cultura paleoesquimal de Canadá Ártica y la de Groenlandia, y llamar la atención sobre las analogías culturales desde Asia, además de crear un cuadro complejo sobre el chamanismo y el culto al oso de los Dorset. Los temas como el origen del arte de los Dorset, la transición Pre-Dorset-Dorset, y los contactos entre los Dorset y los Thule son relevantes para reconstruir el sistema de creencias de los Dorset. Sin embargo, la totalidad del sistema de creencias de los paleoesquimales no se puede comprender sobre la base de los hallazgos arqueológicos y las analogías etnográficas remotas.

Palabras clave: Canadá, cultura Dorset, cultura Paleoesquimal, miniaturas talladas.

1. Introduction

If one takes a look at the occupants of the Canadian Arctic during the course of history, it is possible to make a distinction between Paleo-Eskimo and Neo-Eskimo populations. The term *Neo-Eskimo* refers

to the recent occupants of the Arctic, whereas Paleo-Eskimo pertains to preceding populations and cultures. The term *Arctic Small Tool Tradition* (ASTT) comprises the Denbigh Flint Complex, Independence I, Saqqaq, Pre-Dorset and Dorset cultures. Dorset culture is considered to be a late Paleo-Eskimo culture because of its distinctive technological and artistic achievements, enabling more efficient ways of hunting a wide range of species, the almost sedentary way of life and the emergence of an artistic style called Dorset Art.

Around 1500 B. C., deteriorating weather conditions made their influence felt throughout the Arctic, impacting crucially on the Paleo-Eskimo way of life. As a consequence of these circumstances, sea animal populations were restricted, due to the thicker ice-cover, the movements of migratory animals became unpredictable, and the number of species harvested dropped dramatically since the tree line had retreated southward. These harsh conditions forced Paleo-Eskimo populations to leave Greenland and the High Arctic, and establish themselves close to the Barrenlands. However, the regions like Baffin Island and Hudson Bay were still inhabited by the Arctic Small Tool tradition peoples; furthermore, they developed more effective hunting techniques and the ability to adapt to the deteriorating circumstances.¹

¹ Robert McGhee, "The Prehistory and Prehistoric Art of the Canadian Inuit," in *Inuit Art - An Anthology*, ed. A. Houston (Winnipeg: Watson and Dwyer, 1988), 14.

These populations were known as the Dorset culture, named after the unearthed settlement remains at the Cape Dorset Site, which were the first signs of the existence of this culture. Shortly, this culture spread throughout the Arctic, as Dorset people reoccupied the High Arctic islands, Labrador and Newfoundland.

Dorset domination lasted for almost two thousand years, and the culture suddenly disappeared from archaeological record around one thousand A. D. It is hypothesized that their disappearance could have been attributed either to the arrival of the Thule people, which could have intensified the competition for limited resources, and/or to the warming weather conditions, which affected the availability of animals putting “[...] the Dorset way of life under considerable stress”²

Dorset-Thule contact has been in the focus of long-standing debates, which have not been yet resolved since: “[...] current evidence provides little proof of contact and claims that nature of interaction would be difficult to detect archaeologically [...]”³ If there was no contact at

all, what is it that makes scholars identify the Dorset people with the so-called *Tuniit* in Inuit oral historical record testifying Dorset-Thule contacts?⁴

They used to have winter tents built out of the old *Tuniit* tents. I knew that, when they used winter tents that had been built by the *Tuniit*. [...] I have also seen a pot that used to be used by the *Tuniit*, the pot that they have saved. They used to use it to boil meat in; we could not handle it by ourselves.⁵

Robert Park contends that there was no need for a face-to-face contact for the Thule to know that earlier peoples had lived there, because Dorset site remains were visible on the surface. The Thule people were able to tell Dorset artifacts were antique and different from their own, thus they created *Tuniit* as a way to explain that these earlier peoples had lived where they had.⁶ As far as Inuit oral tradition is concerned, I do not suppose that the uniformity of stories about the *Tuniit* supports perfectly the aforementioned statements, unless latter cultures had good communication chan-

² s. d., <http://anthropology.uwaterloo.ca/ArcticArchStuff/dorset.html>.

³ Suzanne B. Milne, personal communication with the assistant professor of Arctic Prehistory course, Department of Anthropology, University of Manitoba, fall term 2006/07.

⁴ John Bennett and Susan Rowley, *Uqalurai: An Oral History of Nunavut* (Montréal: McGill-Queen University Press, 2004), s. p.

⁵ Bennett and Rowley, *Uqalurai*, 148.

⁶ Robert W. Park, “The Dorset-Thule Succession in Arctic North America: Assessing Claims for Culture Contact,” *American Antiquity* 58(2) (1993): 232.

nels and forums to share their observations and cultural achievements.

With regard to the reconstruction of the Dorset belief system, it is crucial to know whether any of the characteristics survived and were bestowed upon latter cultures by the Dorset, because analogies found in Thule culture might help scholars get a more complex picture of Paleo-Eskimo shamanism. If not, then reconstruction ought to be based upon analogies found in ancient cultures, inhabiting the core area from which Paleo-Eskimos funneled out and started colonizing the Canadian Arctic.

1.1. Dorset Art: Origins, Dominant Themes and Distinctive Features

Dorset people excelled in harvesting sea mammal populations, including larger species like the walrus and narwhal. In addition, they harvested caribou populations on a seasonal basis. Caribou was an excellent source of meat and clothing, and caribou bone –along with driftwood– served as a good material for carvings, which Dorset culture has always been famous for. These miniature artifacts and Dorset art, which might be treated as the continuation of Pre-Dorset art, have been the cause of academic debate and have risen nume-

rous speculations about the cosmology, religious beliefs and healing practices of Dorset people, as well as the functions these carvings might have had. In my opinion, these disputes are unlikely to be settled for a number of reasons: firstly, constraints in the archaeological evidence and ethnographic knowledge (even the diversity of) of northern shamanic practice, and secondly, archeology cannot reconstruct the totality and the complexity of an ancient culture.⁷ Moreover, it is not entirely apparent which cultures (Siberian cultures or Neo-Eskimo cultures that inhabit or once inhabited the Arctic) would help scholars to explore the Dorset way of thinking, which, on the basis of the variability of artifacts, does not appear to be a uniform entity as stated by George Swinton and William Taylor in their paper published in 1967.⁸ Therefore, it is also quite problematic to ascertain the function of the miniature Dorset carvings carved in ivory, driftwood, antler, bone and soapstone.

Most portable Dorset art pieces represent animals, humans and spirits, while the rest can hardly be identified due to the high degree of stylization (like on the spatula-like objects), or simply because those creatures and objects were not present in comparable cultures. The broad

⁷ Patricia Sutherland, "The Variety of Artistic Expression in Dorset Culture," in *Fifty Years of Arctic Research, Anthropological Studies from Greenland to Siberia*, ed. Gilberg and H. C. Gulløv (Copenhagen: The National Museum Ethnographical Series, 1997), 136.

⁸ George Swinton, "Prehistoric Dorset art: the magico-religious basis." *The Beaver* 298 (1967): 32-47.

consensus is that the vast majority of these artifacts are hypothetically connected to shamanism. Genevieve LeMoine argues the following: “[...] some Dorset art is specifically shamanic, that is belonging to a shaman as part of his or her ritual paraphernalia, and some is shamanistic, belonging to and created by individuals as amulets [...]”⁹

This would justify the setting up of two categories. However, I suggest that three categories should be set up for Dorset carvings: the first includes ceremonial and ritual objects used by spiritual specialists, mainly for preventive (prophylactic) and sympathetic (propitiatory) magic; the second comprises magical objects (amulets mostly worn as pendants in particular) used by individuals in everyday context (this is supported by the distribution of these artifacts within Dorset dwellings); finally, the third is made up of household utensils or other utilitarian objects such as toys, dolls and so on. The first category can further be divided into three subcategories, based on the three interrelated shamanic themes displayed on them: 1. human-

animal transformation, 2. shamanic flight and 3. skeleton as an avatar of the soul.¹⁰

2. Zoomorphic/Anthropomorphic/ Zoo-anthropomorphic Artifacts

As it was pointed out earlier, most –though not all– of the Dorset artifacts are zoomorphic, anthropomorphic or zoo-anthropomorphic portrayals, and have incised skeletal and ‘X-ray’ motifs on them. Representations of animal species of economic and spiritual significance (polar bear, musk-ox, caribou, fox, falcon, owl, loon, walrus, seal, etc.) either in naturalistic or in abstract ways make up the overwhelming majority of artifacts (The Brooman Point assemblage is a good case in point).¹¹ It is beyond doubt that the figure of the bear is the most domineering, whereas –interestingly enough– the frequency of the portrayals of the walrus declined. As Patricia Sutherland points out in her paper, this phenomenon can be explained by the dispersion of Paleo-Eskimos into different areas where walrus was no longer the primary food resource.¹² Consequently, the authoress concludes that economic, envi-

⁹ Genevieve LeMoine, “Woman of the House: Gender, Architecture, and Ideology in Dorset Prehistory,” *Arctic Anthropology* 40(1) (2003): 128.

¹⁰ Sutherland, “Shamanism in the iconography,” 138.

¹¹ The Dorset assemblage recovered at Brooman Point comprises 81 pieces of Dorset sculptural art. The proportion of the artifacts is as follows: representations of animals (48 %), representations of humans and human-like spirits (17 %), and the rest include spatula-like objects, unadorned plaques, carvings of animal bones and unidentifiable objects.

¹² Sutherland, “Shamanism in the iconography,” 137.

ronmental and historical factors must have had an influence on regional and temporal variants of Dorset art.¹³

As far as representations of humans (portable and parietal art pieces alike) are concerned, these can be interpreted as portrayals of living persons who may have lived in the close proximity of the ‘craftsmen,’ or most likely different spirits. Most of the time depictions of humans do not portray the full-size person but their face. The most common vehicles of portrayal of faces are masks, maskettes, multiple face carvings (wands or sacred places, for instance, Qajartalik petroglyph, site in Québec), sculptures (often representing women) and other schematic carvings. Faces: “[...] portrayed on most late Paleo-Eskimo pieces clearly exhibit distinctive Asiatic characteristics [...]”,¹⁴ such as almond-shaped eyes, high cheekbones, etc. The most peculiar facial type displayed on Dorset artifacts is: “[...] triangular shape with rectangular upper face and strongly pointed chin [and...] round in outline

with accentuated cheekbones and underemphasized chins [...]” on multiple face carvings.¹⁵

3. The Skeletal and ‘X-ray’ Pattern

One of the distinctive features of Dorset (not exclusively bear) carvings is the incised skeletal and X-ray motifs, which shows circumpolar and Eurasian distribution,¹⁶ testified by analogies ranging from Central Asia through Siberia¹⁷ to Europe. These motifs appear on Siberian shamanic coats,¹⁸ or even in Asian rock art. Ekaterina Devlet interprets this motif as a way of protecting the individual from evil. She also adds that this could have a lot to do with: “[...] the dismemberment occurring during the initiation process [...]”.¹⁹ The same idea was coined by William Taylor and George Swinton, concerning the dismemberment of the body (Siberian-Aleutian tradition) at the joints, which are marked by X-s to protect one against the evil power of the victim’s spirits.²⁰ Moreover, Alan McMillan points

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ James W. Helmer, “A face from the past: an early Pre-Dorset ivory maskette from Devon Island, NWT,” *Études Inuit Studies* 10(1-2) (1986): 196.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Sutherland, “Shamanism in the iconography,” 140.

¹⁷ Ekaterina Devlet, “Rock art and the material culture of Siberian and Central Asian Peoples,” in *The Archeology of Shamanism*, ed. Neil S. Price (London: Routledge, 2001), 43.

¹⁸ Yekaterina D. Prokofyeva, “The Costume of an Enets shaman,” in *Studies in Siberian shamanism*, ed. H.N. Michael (Toronto: Arctic Institute of North America, 1963), 138.

¹⁹ Devlet, “Rock art,” 44.

²⁰ George Swinton, “Prehistoric Dorset art: the magico-religious basis,” *The Beaver* 298 (1967): 41.

out in his paper that designs resembling skeletal elements and joints may also represent shamanistic vision: “[...] powerful shamans among the historic Inuit were supposed to be able to divest themselves of flesh and blood, flying through the air as skeletons [...]”²¹ Besides these, Patricia Sutherland speculates that the skeleton cannot only be perceived as a remnant of the dead body, but also as a container of the soul spirit.²² So the spirit was present in the object, if the skeletal/ ‘X-ray’ patterns were displayed. If the Dorset people revered bones (skeleton), why, then, do we find so many of them in the ruins of houses or in refuse dumps? —asks Robert McGhee—. One possible explanation could be that these carvings were not valuable at all or were lost (especially if having been worn as pendants). Robert Park found out that miniature “[...] implements and carvings were restricted to the midline of the structures to the walls [...]”²³ at Brooman Point Site.²⁴ “The way in which miniature items/ carvings are restricted to the midline and

walls suggests that these items were discarded or lost in the context of yet another distinct use of the space within the structure [...]”²⁵ In my view, it is likely that people were afraid of the magical power of these discarded carvings, especially if those were possessed by a shaman who had turned malevolent, or people from other cultures relocated them.

All in all, the skeleton usually appears in a highly stylized form, so these can be seen as standardized series of lines and joints using “+” or/and “X” marks as joint or bone markings. Not only carvings with skeletal pattern, but also isolated limbs, parts of the vertebral column and animal skulls hint at the importance of the skeleton in the Paleo-Eskimo belief system.

During the Late Dorset period one can recognize a tendency of increasing abstraction and stylization, resulting in “[...] flat and spatula forms of abstract bear figures [...]”²⁶ This might imply the mass production of these carvings, which quite probably testifies to an increased concern

²¹ McMillan, Alan D., “The Arctic,” in *Native Peoples and Cultures of Canada*, ed. Alan D. McMillan (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1988), 245.

²² Sutherland, “Shamanism in the iconography,” 138.

²³ Robert Park, “The Dorset Culture Longhouse at Brooman Point, Nunavut,” *Études Inuit Studies* 27 (1-2) (2003): 245.

²⁴ Robert Park hypothesizes that long houses could have been structures built to accommodate communal events like shamanic rituals.

²⁵ Robert Park, “The Dorset Culture,” 245.

²⁶ Patricia Sutherland, “The Variety of Artistic Expression in Dorset Culture,” in *Fifty Years of Arctic Research, Anthropological Studies from Greenland to Siberia*, ed. R. Gilberg and H. C. Gullov (Copenhagen: s. e., 1997), 291.

for spiritual life. This increase might have been a response to the unusual weather conditions experienced around 1000 A. D.

3.1. Carvings with Unknown Function

Unfortunately, in the Dorset assemblage there are artifacts which are not easy to interpret. This is the problem in the case of the small, flat disks cut from bone. These disks have perforated holes which serve as a starting point of radiating lines. Objects like these were very popular among Siberian peoples, and were commonly associated with the shaman's clothing.²⁷ Patricia Sutherland suggests that these can be interpreted as representations of a cosmological plane with a central opening, which is actually a channel between different worlds.²⁸

We have comparable imagery from Alaskan cultures contemporaneous with Dorset culture. As for the number of radiating lines, one can recognize the importance of the number four and its multiples. This numerological hint may also be justified by multiple-face carvings (e. g. forty faces carved on them).²⁹

Besides, there are bone tubes in the corpus, which are believed to be soul catchers.³⁰ This hypothesis is based on Siberian analogies. These tubes —originally unadorned— end in open mouth-like endings, frequently representing the mouths of two opposed animal heads with incised skeletal motifs. The presence of opposed forces (represented by the two opposed animal heads) may have increased the efficiency of the tube, through which shamans are thought to have sucked the spirits/ malevolent beings which were believed to cause illness out of the body.³¹

Within this category, one can also find the group of figurative carvings, often referred to as spatulas. It is difficult to define what these were intended to depict, but these are likely to represent living creatures (most of the time bears). On the basis of the various combinations of “+” and “X” patterns, found on these spatulas, it is possible to justify this previous statement. The majority of these artifacts have heads which are crudely carved and have “X” markings on the back. There is a spatula which is made special by the animal head

²⁷ Waldemar Jochelson, “The Yakut,” *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* 33 (1933): 108.

²⁸ Sutherland, “Shamanism in the iconography,” 141.

²⁹ Margaret Lantis, *Alaskan Eskimo Ceremonialism* (New York: J. J. Augustine, 1947), 98; Edward Moffat Weyer, *The Eskimos: Their Environment and Folkways* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932), 318.

³⁰ Robert McGhee, “Ancient Animals: The Dorset Collections from Brooman Point,” in *Uumajut: Animal Imagery in Inuit Art*, ed. B. Driscoll (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1985), 24.

³¹ “The Realm of the Shaman,” accessed November 19, 2008, <http://www.civilization.ca/cmce/exhibitions/archeo/paleoesq/pes01eng.shtml>.

being replaced by a miniature harpoon head. This suggests a “[...] symbolic equivalence between the major predators (jaws of the polar bear) and the harpoon of the human hunter [...]”.³²

These miniature harpoon heads, whose function has been in the focus of long-standing debates, make up the majority of functionally important artifacts of the Dorset corpus. On one hand, based upon Inuit analogies, these can be considered toys, whereas other scholars firmly claim that these harpoon heads may have been used as real tools. In William Taylor’s opinion, these are too small to be used; hence, he prefers the idea that these can be treated as religious objects, involved chiefly in healing rituals. The harpoon heads without sockets can be thought to be symbolic representations of pain/illness, which were ritually removed from the sick person’s body.³³

On the other hand, the rest can be handled as toys. If these were toys, this might explain the regular and gradual increase in the size of the harpoons. As children grew older, they might have been playing and practicing hunting with larger and larger harpoon heads.³⁴

Bear Cult and Ceremonialism

As it has been pointed out earlier, in the overall inventory of portrayals those of the bear are numerous. Most of these carvings have etched skeletal patterns on them, but depictions of crouching, swimming, standing, sitting and flying bears are also to be found. These carvings best support the thesis according to which Dorset culture could be classified as an Arctic culture, which puts bear cult or ceremonialism at the focus of their spiritual life. Bear cult is a circumpolar phenomenon, so, as well as from my point of view too, it would prove to be fruitful to examine analogies of bear ceremonialism, such as that of the Inuit culture, in which the omnipresence of the polar bear –not only as an “[...] instrumental and symbolic support of male authority [...]”–, “[...] from the very beginning of the cosmogonic myths to the limits of the powers of the shaman, as well as in everyday life [...]”, is remarkable.³⁵ We have to refrain from assuming direct continuity among these cultures, though.

Some of these carvings, for example, the one found by Jorgen Meldgaard near Alarnerk (Igloodik), dating back to 500 A. D., have hollowed out ventral grooves and

³² McGhee, “Ancient Animals,” 24.

³³ Robert Park and Pauline Mousseau, “How Small is Too Small? Dorset Culture ‘Miniature’ Harpoon Heads,” *Canadian Journal of Archeology* 27(2) (2003): 267.

³⁴ For further interpretations, please see “Bear Cult and Ceremonialism”.

³⁵ Bernard S. D’Anglure, “Nanook, super-male: the polar bear in the imaginary space and social time of the Inuit of the Canadian Arctic,” in *Signifying animals: human meaning in the natural world*, ed. Roy Willis (London: Routledge, 1994), 169.

some traces of red ochre. Helge Larsen came up with a possible interpretation: this aforementioned carving represents a “[...] hanging polar bear skin such as those featured in the bear-cult rituals of Siberian peoples”.³⁶ The author says: “[The] animal represented has been eviscerated [...]”, thus only the skin or the skeleton is depicted.³⁷ His theory is also supported by the skin treatment practice of the *Netsilingmiut*. Larsen also emphasizes the special attention given by the Eskimo to the head and the skin of the bear; for example, on the top of the head there were gifts meant for the bears or other utilitarian objects placed to be imbued by the spirit.³⁸ The tiny Dorset harpoon heads, analyzed by Moreau Maxwell and Robert Park,³⁹ might have been used in the practice of hunting magic, in the same way that Larsen described in his account, or the way the Ainu did with their ceremonial arrows during the Bear Festival.⁴⁰ Besides these, there is a great deal of evidence from several Dorset

sites showing special treatment of the bones (especially the skull and the paws) of bears. On Dundas Island, for instance, there were selected bear bones, mostly skulls with a dotted pattern painted on them, in the midden and on the rocks around the Dorset settlement. In addition, in the so-called “Maze village”, separately treated bear heads and paws were also found.⁴¹ Many bear carvings have perforated holes, making it possible to wear them as pendants, possibly as amulets attached to garments or belts.⁴² Dorset culture is known to be a hunting culture, and it seems possible that not only shamans, but individual hunters also wore such pendants to ensure a successful hunt, or simply propitiate the preys’ souls towards their vengeance off, as seen in other Eskimo cultures. The broad distribution of amulets⁴³ and stylized skeletons found on utilitarian artifacts⁴⁴ are also signs of their common usage.

It is beyond doubt that there are carvings (representing flying bears, in particu-

³⁶ Helge Larsen, “Some examples of bear cult among the Eskimo and other northern peoples,” *Folk* 11-12 (1970): 32.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁹ Moreau Maxwell, “An Early Dorset Harpoon Complex,” *Folk* 16-17 (1974): 258-271; Park and Mousseau, “How Small is Too Small?” 268.

⁴⁰ “The Bear Ritual of the Ainu,” accessed November 19, 2008, <http://www.bears.org/spirit/>.

⁴¹ Robert McGhee, “Late Dorset Art from Dundas Island, Arctic Canada,” *Folk* 16-17 (1974): 143-144.

⁴² Prokofyeva, “The Costume of an Enets shaman,” 127-128.

⁴³ McGhee, “Late Dorset Art,” 143.

⁴⁴ Sutherland, “The Variety of Artistic Expression,” 292.

lar) that can exclusively be associated with shamans and shamanic practices, like shamanic flight. In the Inuit shamanic complex, bears are not powerful just because of their robust bodies, but they were believed to be the great transformers.⁴⁵ In the Inuit *Nuliajuq* legend (reported by Knud Rasmussen), the magical power of the polar bear skin (spirit) enabled *Nuliajuq*'s father to adapt to the aquatic way of life. Thus, it seems probable that a polar bear helping spirit would enable a ritual specialist to undertake a flight to distant points of the universe.

Sutherland brings up a carving of a flying polar bear as a possible representation of a helping spirit. Referring back to helping spirits, in the Dorset corpus there are other carvings associated with shamanic flight, namely carvings of birds, with the faces of humans staring from the abdominal cavity of the birds. One can find analogies of this ornithomorphic nature in Central Asian and Siberian shamanic complexes.⁴⁶

4. Conclusion

Taking everything into consideration, the complexity of the Dorset art corpus cannot totally be understood due to several hindrances, such as the lack of archaeological

evidence and the diversity of analogies from all over the Arctic. In this paper, I intended to draw the attention to different analogies, other than analogies found in Siberia. There are several remarkable similarities and analogies that cannot be ignored: the skeletal and 'X-ray' design, showing Eurasian and American distribution, and the act of shamanic flight, in particular.

On the basis of analogies and the archaeological finds, it is possible to conclude the following points, concerning the relationship between the Dorset miniature carvings and the Paleo-Eskimo (mainly Dorset) belief system:

The broad consensus is that the vast majority of the artifacts outlined previously are connected to shamanic practice, whereas the other half of the artifacts can be regarded as everyday utensils or amulets (if perforated).

Artifacts with carved 'X-ray' and skeletal motifs can undoubtedly be associated with religious practices. One half of these artifacts were likely to be used by individuals in everyday contexts, while the other certainly belonged to the shaman's paraphernalia.

As far as the 'X-ray' and skeletal motifs are concerned, these can be interpreted in diverse ways: these might have protected

⁴⁵ Christopher Trott, personal communication with the assistant professor of Inuit Culture and Society course, Department of Native Studies, University of Manitoba, fall term 2006/07.

⁴⁶ Devlet, "Rock art," 45.

the individuals from evil, or might have represented shamanic vision, or can be considered to be a container of the soul spirit, or can be associated with the Siberian-Aleutian tradition of dismemberment of the body at the joints.

Based upon comparable analogies and imagery carvings with unknown function, such as flat disks with radiating line designs, there is a strong relation between bone tubes or spatulas and magic. The flat disks and the bone tubes could have been used by ritual specialists, whereas spatulas by individuals. The everyday use of spatulas is implied by the high degree of stylization, which testifies to the mass production of these artifacts.

Figurative Dorset artifacts are zoomorphic, anthropomorphic or zoo-anthropomorphic portrayals. The anthropomorphic

carvings mainly depict faces and not the full-sized person. The zoo-anthropomorphic artifacts can, beyond doubt, be connected to shamanic practices, best shown by artifacts depicting human-animal transformation. With respect to zoomorphic carvings, in the Dorset art corpus representations of the (polar) bear—which has been known as the most powerful spirit helper—are the most numerous, possibly emphasizing the importance of bear ceremonialism in the Canadian Dorset culture; the veneration of certain body parts of the polar bear, testified by series of archeological finds, remote analogies and a number of carvings depicting bears (perforated items and non-perforated sculptures alike), support the following hypothesis: bear cult was a significant component in the spiritual life of the Dorset people.

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