

The Last Imaginary Place

A Human History of the Arctic World

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July 22-24, 2006

The author is a Canadian archeologist professing to have entertained a fascination for the North since early age. The book constitutes a brief survey of the human history of the Arctic regions, with only marginal references to the polar expeditions on which the fascination of the public is normally focused. The main thesis of the book is that the tenure of the Eskimo is of a far more recent vintage than has traditionally been assumed. Far from being a peaceful tribe pushed to the margins of human habitation, and as a consequence perfectly adapted to its harsh conditions, the Eskimo, or Inuit to use the current politically more correct denomination, voluntarily transversed the North American tundras, in the process dispelling the aboriginal population - referred to as the Tuniit, with a presence archeologically documented to stem from the retreat of the Ice sheet, by virtue of technological superiority and a more aggressive mentality. The remarkable uniformity¹ of the Eskimo languages, in spite of their wide geographical spread, certainly points to a recent dispersion². The rather striking theory for that dispersion setting out from the coastal lands of what is now known as the Bering Sea is that the presence of Norsemen on the western coast of Greenland with their access of superior metallurgy made the impetus for the extended trecks. I must say that I find this assumption a bit fanciful if suggestive and gratifying to the sense of importance of my fellow Scandinavians.

In addition to a discussion of the boreal tribes of the North American continent, during great swabs of the geologically recent past being connected to the eastern Siberia, of which the author has the more intimate knowledge, for sake of completeness also the various Siberian tribes are being mentioned, including the Saami of the European north. In fact standard maps of the polar regions exaggerate their extents³, in reality the arctic regions are geographically quite compact, and if humans would not be pushed to its perimeter by climactic constraints, travel would be quite short, as it is for its recent denizen - the intercontinental ballistic missile, and even further human mixing would have been the case.

The existence of the extreme north (and by symmetry of the extreme south, but the latter played far less a hold on the imagination of our forefathers ensconced on the northern hemisphere) and its peculiar property of great variability as to the lengths of day and night⁴ would have been known as soon as the picture of the earth as a sphere

¹ They are more or less dialects of each other, meaning mutually understandable without the benefit of systematic study

² Still it is hard to translate change in language to specific time intervals

³ How many people realise the simply verifiable fact that half of the surface of the earth is within the tropical zone ($\pm 30^\circ$).

⁴ actually a more invariant feature of the polar regions than their harsh climates

had been properly understood. Yet for most of human recorded history the boreal regions have been poorly known and thus subject to much mythology, hence the title of the book. The European north being the most accessible and climactically most clement due to the (relatively temporary) presence of the Gulf stream ⁵. Iceland was settled by the Norse, but the Irish may have been there before. Greenland already sparsely visited at least by the Tuniit entertained a Norse colony far longer than the United States has so far existed providing the most peripheral outpost of Medieval Catholic Europe. The archeological evidence, not least in the form of church ruins, being overwhelming. The colony eventually died out as climactic conditions became too harsh during the 15th century⁶. Whether lineages actually died out or were absorbed by interbreeding with the Eskimos might in principle be settled by extensive DNA analysis among contemporary Inuit populations. The fact that one has not heard of such investigations more likely indicate that they have been negative than never been undertaken in the first place.

On the other hand the archipelago of Svalbard in the far north Atlantic, as well as the similarly placed islands of western Siberia (Novaja Zemlja etc), seem never to have been visited by humans until historical times. Svalbard was discovered by the Dutch in the 16th century and exploited by those and the English initially until their exploitation was taken over and greatly intensified by the Norwegian, who somehow managed to wrangle sovereignty in the process⁷. The virginal Svalbaard was an Eden sustaining a rich fauna. Caribous roamed the interior, the coasts were jammed with herds of walrus, and the waters around the home of whales. In fact the eco-system of the north is very simple compared to the tropics. There are few species, but on the other hand, the species which exist may periodically swell greatly in number (cf the lemmings), a fact to be taken advantage of by a necessarily nomadic population at their peril. The profusion of the Svalbard was quickly depleted, and what now remains is but a shadow of what once was. The same familiar story over and over again, with the added twist that the arctic eco-systems are more vulnerable than the temperate and tropical with their greater diversity. Fittingly the chapter is called the rape of Svalbard. But extinction is not the prerogative of modern civilization, only that the latter have been far more efficient about it, even the relatively gentle harvesting of small aboriginal populations steady but surely exerts its toll. The occurrence of plenty is a rare phenomenon, so you have to take full advantage of it, hence the propensity of the over-kill. The rich pleistonic mega-fauna of the Americas were hunted to extinction by primitive tribes over spans of millenia (meaning that from the limited perspective of an individual, depletion was not particular apparent). The mastodonts are gone, as are

⁵ An oceanic current of warm tropical water 1000 km wide, and 1 km deep, as the book relays, failing to give some more vital statistics which would have enabled the curious reader to at least make some rough estimates as to its effect of raising the air-temperature.

⁶ The interglacial period in which we now live has seen many fluctuations in climate, but unlike the global warming, those fluctuations have been local and not world-wide, so the harshened climates of Greenland at the period were not necessarily reflected by a similar freeze on the European continent.

⁷ The Norwegian presence on the islands have by strange political arrangements been shared by the Soviets implanting on far away Scandinavian lands a mini-Soviet. Also the Swedes have had mining concessions, but never really exploited, having not had, unlike the Soviets, any strategic interests in so doing.

the woolly mammoths, supposedly preserved in oral Inuit history. The last refuge of the mammoth was the Wrangel Island off the coast of Siberia, when it was reached by humans the fate of the animal was sealed.

Whaling has been a rapacious pursuit in recent years practiced almost exclusively by the Norwegians and the Japanese. The result is the hunting to the brink of extinction, and a species that totters too long in its vicinity inevitable falls off. But the greatest threat to Arctic life is global warming, long a controversial concept, due to the confusion of natural noise of climactic variability. Global warming pushes off ecosystems inexorably towards the poles, actual movements having been observed in recent decades. But the arctic system has nowhere to go, latitudes stop at ninety degrees away from the equator. Changes do not have to be big but can be quite subtle and still have far-reaching effects. A few degrees milder and ice may not form, or not for as long or as extended. This drastically curtails the ability of the Polar Bear to hunt.

At the collapse of the Soviet Union the Siberian Arctic was opened to outsiders. To some extent many of the aboriginal populations had enjoyed a relatively unharrassed, yet protective existence under the old regime. Their life-styles were considered as primitive forms of communism, only needed to be nudged towards the more developed variety. But means of control in those peripheral lands were limited, so life could go on as traditional, with the added comfort of hand-outs. When life is now free, meaning market-oriented, those populations face new tribulations.

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