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Assembling Arctic Lifeways

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1. The prehistory of Greenland witnessed several waves of human colonisation and subsequent abandonment. Defining and affiliating these different cultural traditions have been a central theme in Greenlandic archaeology. While there remains a consensus that the first wave of human colonisation became divided into the Independence I in northern Greenland (ca. 2500 – 2200 cal. BC) and Saqqaq in western Greenland (ca. 2500 – 1200 cal. BC), the second wave of colonisation that followed a ~ 400-year hiatus has been more contentious. Recently, the chaîne opératoire approach was applied by Mikkel Sørensen to lithic assemblages previously assigned to the Dorset I of western Greenland and the Independence II in northern Greenland to grapple with the tenuous distinction between the two cultural traditions. This led to the conclusion that they together formed the Greenlandic Dorset (ca. 800 – 200 cal. BC), a regional extension of the wider Early Dorset culture that emerged in the Canadian eastern Arctic. The thesis begins with the argument that this research development created solutions to culture-historical debates but also reproduced problematic interpretations of Arctic lifeways.

2. The Greenlandic Dorset tradition is currently viewed as inherently conservative. This thesis argues that such a view is the result of a range of factors, including the Mind-on-Matter framework of the chaîne opératoire approach that seeks the action of fixed mental templates on inert materials, and a persisting culture-historical research agenda. This has created standardised taxonomies that has informed interpretations emphasising spatiotemporal uniformity. In fact, this is a circular argument that maintains a modernist view of prehistoric Arctic societies as static and ahistorical.

3. The chaîne opératoire approach was useful in refining older cultural historical frameworks. However, its principle use of a Cartesian Mind-on-Matter dichotomy as part of a culture-historical research agenda has reproduced interpretative problems in Arctic archaeology. Specifically, it has done so by overlooking the active role played by materialities in prehistoric lifeways.

4. This thesis argues that a collection of theory referred to as “relational thinking” offers new ways to explore the deeper social significance of materialities during the Greenlandic Dorset tool kits. A relational perspective on how lithics and composite tool kits structured Greenlandic Dorset lifeways is here operationalised by a Relational Approach that harness the descriptive power the chaîne opératoire methodology while re-tooling and upgrading its interpretative potential with concepts from Assemblage Theory.

5. In three in-depth regional case-studies set in western, northernmost, and northeastern Greenland, this thesis applies the Relational Approach to highlight how the Greenlandic Dorset tradition of lithic production was embedded in the curation of composite tool kits. This demonstrates that the materiality of lithics and composite tools exerted major demands on human decision-making and strategies, which in turn impacted their lifeways.

6. The thesis concludes that Greenland Dorset lifeways can best be understood as emerging out of historically situated relationships between people and things, and that these relationships also varied within Greenland. These dynamic insights replace and disproves the lingering assumption that Greenlandic Dorset lifeways were uniform over vast regions and inherently conservative.