

Jeff Oliver  
Neil Curtis

## Contemporary and Historical Archaeology of the North: An Introduction

Few regions of the world are changing so dramatically, with so little public attention or policy debate, as the global north. Recent media headlines characterize the more notable changes from a region of the world more commonly known for its stilled icescapes, silent seas, and limited human intervention. As the modern north is rolled out, it increasingly becomes a space where international companies vie to explore and develop new mineral, oil, and gas claims. Global shipping routes move ever northward as previously frozen waters release their grip over sea-lanes that promise to economize world trade routes or open previously remote northern ports. At the same time that global capitalist interest focuses on new northern opportunities, northern states jockey for control of tenuously known terrestrial and submerged landscapes to guarantee national geopolitical interests.

Viewed through television, newspapers, and the Internet, these rapid changes appear to be a recent phenomenon, particular to 21st-century globalization; yet, the north has always been a dynamic place with a long and complex human and environmental history, a history that we archaeologists have played an important role in telling. Human colonization of the higher latitudes of Eurasia and north America date from the early Holocene, while later migrations helped to establish the cultural diversity we are more familiar with today. For example, as early as the 16th century, the Russian state pushed eastward into western Siberia, a process that witnessed the commingling of peoples across Asia (Forsyth 1992). In North America, what archaeologists refer to as the Thule culture

migrated eastward, from modern-day Alaska, across the Canadian Arctic to Greenland and Labrador (McGhee 2001). In about the same period, Norse sailors traveled westward, colonizing islands in the North Atlantic, including parts of the British Isles, Iceland, and southern Greenland (Barrett 2003). Within archaeological circles, such histories are well known, and they have even enjoyed a certain degree of popularity across a range of media.

In contrast to these better-established fields of interest, the later-historical archaeology of the global north has seen, comparatively, far more limited attention. As northern worlds have always suffered from stereotyping, and with few later-historical archaeologists working in the “Global North,” it is all too easy for caricatures to stifle intelligent debate on the recent history of this region. This special issue of *Historical Archaeology* stems from the 2010 Contemporary and Historical Archaeology and Theory (CHAT) Conference held in Aberdeen, Scotland, with the north as its theme. CHAT 2010 set out, partly, to address this perceived lacuna. What is more, given Aberdeen’s role as an historical gateway to the region and a contemporary center of northern studies (Price 2011), we archaeologists hoped the conference would provide a context, not only to showcase new research and to help promote an understudied subject, but also to challenge some of our more cherished preconceptions about our own relationships to northern histories and geographies. What we found was often unsettling and challenging to certain familiar assumptions. Above all, it became painstakingly apparent that north, far from simply being hard geography, exists through a series of permutations derived from complex forms of human experience. In the remainder of this introduction, a brief review of research on the historical archaeology of the global north is provided as a means of introducing the unique contribution made by the papers brought together in this issue.

### Historical Archaeology *in the North*

The historical archaeology of the “Global North” is an extremely recent field of study. While it is difficult to generalize for such a substantial area (not least because its spatial extent is easily contested, as discussed below), more often than not the work that has been done has tended to be in the form of unpublished reports, with little attempt to link evidence to broader research questions (Gullason 2004/2005:27; Lucas 2012b:440). Research has begun, nonetheless, in certain parts of this vast region. According to Gullason’s (2004/2005) comprehensive review of research in the Canadian Arctic, studies can be roughly divided into two broad thematic areas: the archaeology of European expansion and exploitation, and the archaeology of culture contact and colonialism. To these we would add the archaeology of the modern world, an area of investigation probably less than a decade old.

Some of the earliest historical archaeology of the north revolved around the documentation of known historical figures. Celebrated voyages of exploration have provided historical archaeologists with a window into the difficult conditions of the respective travels, during a period that saw increasing interest in pushing the limits of scientific knowledge. Well-known projects include Beattie and Geiger’s (1987) research into the fate of Sir John Franklin’s crew from his doomed exploration of the Northwest Passage, or the Meta-Incognita Project’s work on Martin Frobisher’s encampment and mining activities around Frobisher Bay at Baffin Island (Fitzhugh and Olin 1993).

Meanwhile, others have focused more on the economic opportunities provided by the north, from the history of fisheries and whaling in the North Atlantic to the histories of the terrestrial fur trade and mineral exploitation, which cross the higher latitudes of North America and Eurasia. Indeed, in some places, such as the previously uninhabited islands of Svalbard, the archaeology of early capitalist exploitation represents the earliest evidence of human occupation (Jorgensen 2005). In a context in which northern spaces became tied into regional and even global economies, one of the earliest forms of European occupation in this region was in the form of seasonal

camp and other kinds of transient settlement—see the papers in Pope and Simpson (2013). Distributed from the high Arctic to the more temperate waters of Newfoundland, they supported the growing demand for food and fuel sources taken from the sea, spurring developments, such as the North Atlantic cod fishery (Pope 2004) and whaling industry (Tuck and Grenier 1989). Land-based activities developed on the heels of maritime capitalists, perhaps, most famously, with the fur trade, prosecuted initially from Hudson Bay. The archaeology of the fur trade has a substantial literature, though fewer published works deal with the Arctic and subarctic; but see, for example, Burley et al. (1996) and Ray (1978). In comparison, the archaeology of northern land-based mineral exploitation is still in its infancy; but see Holder Spude et al. (2012).

Alongside research focused primarily on European expansion and resource exploitation, others have examined the increasing cultural contacts and colonial entanglements that came to characterize the history of the global north, particularly as Europeans and their descendants came into regular contact with northern indigenous populations. Now an established subfield in its own right (Murray 2004), this area has seen significant growth in North America, though Eurasian archaeologists have increasingly begun to focus on these issues also. Some of the most interesting and sustained work being done has focused on areas with longer-term contacts and colonial relations. One such region is modern-day Labrador, where sustained interactions in the context of fishing stations and related settlements encouraged prolonged and ambiguous outcomes; for example, Auger (1993), Whitridge (2008), Beaudoin (2013), Rankin (2013). And, in other northern regions, from Siberia to the north Pacific Coast of North America, historical and contemporary archaeologists are beginning to document how cultural entanglements produced varied outcomes, from those that encouraged routine and transformative face-to-face contacts (Martindale 2009), to those that held indigenous peoples at a distance, artificially shielding social norms, allowing more traditional practices to survive until the present (Jordan 2001).

Most recently, historical archaeologists have begun to question how “modern” forms of

living and control over northern environments have influenced life in the north, a process fraught with tensions between aspects of continuity and change (Dalglish 2003; Lucas 2010; Edwald 2012). A bewildering range of influences began to make its presence felt within northern spaces beginning in early modern period. While this included regulatory infrastructure to control minds and bodies according to prevailing “improvement” discourses; for example, Ylimaunu (2013), modernization did not nearly always introduce clear breaks with tradition. From the introduction of Christianity (Herva and Ylimaunu 2009) to modern exchange systems (Herva et al. 2012), to modern architecture (Dawson 1994; Herva 2010), northern populations experimented with modern concepts in a range of confusing and sometimes unexpected ways. Even the archaeology of the very recent contemporary past, particularly of the last century, is beginning to refocus the expectations of modern culture. For example, on the remote island of Svalbard, the abandoned late-20th-century Soviet mining town of Pyramiden has provided historical archaeologists with much food for thought, not only in terms of how abandoned mundane objects help to give presence to past histories (Andreassen et al. 2010), but perhaps even more powerfully, how they challenge the received wisdom of modern history’s upward-swinging narrative plotline, requiring a reassessment of some of the most unquestioned assumptions about the future of the modern north.

### **From North as Objectified to Interconnected**

Even a cursory review, such as this, underlines a number of points. It demonstrates that, while studies of the historical archaeology of the north are few and far between (though increasing in popularity), their thematic foci can and should be linked to broader themes in global historical archaeology, among them issues, such as European (and later Western) expansion, capitalism, culture contacts, colonialism, and modernity. Yet, despite a generally positive outlook for the future of historical archaeology in this context, one can also sometimes detect a persistent sense of Othering in relation to the treatment of northern archaeologies. We do not feel that it is going too far to

suggest that the north is often treated as if it is physically distant from everywhere else, at worst symbolically divided, a separation that *can* arbitrarily keep the north exotic: forever the unequal partner within a pernicious core-periphery relationship.

One way of thinking about the north is less as a distant, objectified space “out there,” determined by environmental or geographical variables, and more as a subjective geography and set of common concerns created through the interconnections of human activities in a variety of landscape settings. Such a view of the north means moving from studies *in* or *about* the north and toward a broader understanding of global historical archaeology; not simply one that is undertaken in different parts of the globe, but, rather, one that “thinks of global systematic relationships beyond our local sites” (Mullins 2012); for good examples, see papers recently published in Lucas (2012a). It is, therefore, a view that can put archaeologists on the path of reconciliation, helping to bridge the conceptual and geographical gap between archaeology and the north. The north and the issues affecting it—most recently the 21st-century race to carve up its remaining physical assets—may seem remote, but they can also be shown to play a central role in the development of what is referred to as modernity, a central theme that touches almost every aspect of the archaeology of the recent and contemporary past. This is why a special issue of *Historical Archaeology* devoted to the north is of such great importance. Taking the north seriously means placing it within a global perspective, a standpoint that not only connects it to the modern world, but shows how the north is implicated in creating that world as well.

### **Introduction to the Special Issue**

It is with these thoughts in mind that the present issue seeks to build on the historical and contemporary archaeology of the global north. Together, the articles presented here represent a series of original case studies and broader critical synthesis that place the northern archaeology of the recent past in a variety of contexts: geographically they range from French Newfoundland and imperial Sweden

to the early-20th-century Arctic and Scotland in the Age of Improvement; and, thematically, they take in themes as diverse as the development of antiquarian and scientific knowledge, capitalist expansion, and the legacies of colonial entanglements.

The issue opens with two articles that play significantly on the idea of the inherent dialectic that connects north with south. In our own contribution to the volume, we begin with an article that seeks to lay out the historiography of the concept of the global north, demonstrating the provisional nature of its boundaries in different historical moments. Ultimately, it shows how the modern north gained a certain degree of fixity through modern, southern-based systems of circulation and consumption, though this perspective is also open to challenge. With an important element of context established, we briefly outline the role that historical archaeology can help play. In the following article, Oscar Aldred starts with 19th-century British literary imaginations of Viking-saga histories to inform his own phenomenological exploration of the medieval and later landscape of Iceland. Capturing the inherent intangibility of the north, he illustrates how northern places, even when inhabited, never match southern representations. The north is always someplace else and invariably coincides with the Other, Other people, or, more commonly, as a place devoid of humans. This reflective account also invites us to rethink more traditional modes of archaeological inquiry as a means of capturing some of the sensual aspects of northern landscapes.

Articles three and four underline how northern places and people are commonly constructed in distant colonial centers, focusing in various ways on how the Otherness of the north is created. Emily Button Kambic deconstructs the representation of the north through a critical examination of museum collections of *ulus* gathered by whalers and ethnographers, showing how the objects served to construct stereotypical impressions of Alaskan Eskimos. Starting with a similar premise, but focusing on the experience of living in the “marginal” landscape of the French colony of Plaisance, Amanda Crompton shows how colonists were not the impoverished and dependent population historical sources often make them out to be.

Reactions of “Northerners” to various systems of southern control, influence, and regulation are issues addressed by the next two articles, focused on case studies in the far north of Europe. James Symonds and colleagues provide an account of colonial relations within northern imperial Sweden, demonstrating how notions of time were modified through north-south cultural entanglements. Similarly, Tiina Äikäs and Anna-Kaisa Salmi explore the long-term continuity and change in ritual depositions at *sieidi* and show how many of the changes are linked to interactions with the broader world. Their conclusions offer a novel argument around how Sámi religious views were influenced both locally and by southern colonizers.

Marginality is another core issue of the north. While not necessarily the product of historical misrepresentation, representations of marginality can also be used as a tool of political discourse and policy. Alongside Crompton’s earlier challenge to marginality commonly associated with early colonial Newfoundland, in the seventh article Laura McA-tackney begins by pointing out how Northern Ireland has shifted in more recent years from a place at the very core of the British Empire to a marginal geography. Focusing on the history of the Troubles, she examines how the issue of abnormality, a common trope applied by southern colonizers to northern peripheries, is tied to the material culture of “peace walls” and sites of memorialization.

Last, but not least, in an article focusing on the archipelago of postmedieval Orkney, Dan Lee reminds readers that northern experiences are not only created through a north-south dialectic, but that the social and cultural character of certain locales can also be bound up with earlier northern traditions of placemaking. Focusing his analysis on a postmedieval landscape with its own antiquities, he discusses the incredible temporal depth of the Orcadian landscape to show how the past was linked to other northern regions in the past, in particular to Norse Scandinavia.

### Acknowledgments

First, we would like to thank the special issue contributors for their enduring patience

during the long and winding editorial journey this issue has taken. We would also like to extend our thanks to the external peer reviewers of this special issue, Doug Bolender and Gavin Lucas, for their perceptive comments and helpful suggestions on the articles assembled here. Finally, we would like to acknowledge Ana Jorge for help with proofreading.

## References

- ANDREASSEN, ELIN, HEIN BJARTMANN BJERCK, AND BJØRNAR OLSEN  
2010 *Persistent Memories: Pyramiden—A Soviet Mining Town in the High Arctic*. Tapir Academic Press, Trondheim, Norway.
- AUGER, RÉGINALD  
1993 Late-18th- and Early-19th-Century Inuit and Europeans in Southern Labrador. *Arctic* 46(1):27–34.
- BARRETT, JAMES H. (EDITOR)  
2003 *Contact, Continuity and Collapse: The Norse Colonization of the North Atlantic*. Brepols, Turnhout, Belgium.
- BEATTIE, OWEN, AND JOHN GEIGER  
1987 *Frozen in Time*. Western Producer Prairie, Saskatoon, SK.
- BEAUDOIN, MATTHEW  
2013 A Hybrid Identity in a Pluralistic Nineteenth-Century Colonial Context. *Historical Archaeology* 47(2):46–64.
- BURLEY, DAVID V., J. SCOTT HAMILTON, AND KNUT FLADMARK  
1996 *Prophecy of the Swan: The Upper Peace River Fur Trade of 1794–1823*. UBC Press, Vancouver, BC.
- DALGLISH, CHRIS  
2003 *Rural Society in the Age of Reason: An Archaeology of the Emergence of Modern Life in the Southern Highlands*. Kluwer Academic/Plenum, New York, NY.
- DAWSON, PETER, C.  
1994 “Unsympathetic Users”: An Ethnoarchaeological Examination of Inuit Responses to the Changing Nature of the Built Environment. *Arctic* 48(1):71–80.
- EDWALD, AGUSTA  
2012 From Iceland to New Iceland: An Archaeology of Migration, Continuity and Change in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. Doctoral dissertation, Department of Archaeology, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK.
- FITZHUGH, WILLIAM, AND JACQUELINE OLIN (EDITORS)  
1993 *Archaeology of the Frobisher Voyages*. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC.
- FORSYTH, JAMES  
1992 *A History of the Peoples of Siberia: Russia's North Asian Colony 1581–1990*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.
- GULLASON, LYNDA  
2004/2005 Canadian Arctic Historical Archaeology in Review. *Revista de Arqueología Americana* 23:7–93.
- HERVA, VESA-PEKKA  
2010 Buildings As Persons: Relationality and the Life of Buildings in a Northern Periphery of Early Modern Sweden. *Antiquity* 84(234):440–452.
- HERVA, VESA-PEKKA, RISTO NURMI, AND JAMES SYMONDS  
2012 Engaging with Money in a Northern Periphery of Early Modern Europe. *Journal of Social Archaeology* 12(3):287–309.
- HERVA, VESA-PEKKA, AND TIMO YLIMAUNU  
2009 Folk Beliefs, Special Deposits, and Engagement with the Environment in Early Modern Northern Finland. *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 28(2):234–243.
- HOLDER SPUDE, CATHERINE, ROBIN O. MILLS, KARL GURCKE, AND RODERICK SPRAGUE (EDITORS)  
2012 *The Archaeology of Gold Mining in the Far North*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.
- JORDAN, PETER  
2001 Cultural Landscapes in Colonial Siberia: Khanty Settlements of the Sacred, the Living and the Dead. *Landscapes* 2:83–105.
- JORGENSEN, ROGER  
2005 Archaeology on Svalbard: Past, Present and Future. *Acta Borealia* 22(1):49–61.
- LUCAS, GAVIN  
2010 The Tensions of Modernity: Skalholt during the 17th and 18th Centuries. *Journal of the North Atlantic* 2(S1):75–88.  
2012b Later Historical Archaeology in Iceland: A Review. *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 16(3):437–454.
- LUCAS, GAVIN (EDITOR)  
2012a *Later Historical Archaeology in Iceland*. Thematic issue, *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 16(3).
- MARTINDALE, ANDREW  
2009 Entanglement and Tinkering: Structural History in the Archaeology of the Northern Tsimshian. *Journal of Social Archaeology* 9(1):59–91.
- MCGHEE, ROBERT  
2001 *Ancient Peoples of the Arctic*. UBC Press, Vancouver, BC.

- MULLINS, PAUL  
2012 Defining a Global Historical Archaeology, SHA President's Corner Blog. Society for Historical Archaeology <<http://www.sha.org/blog/index.php/2012/12/defining-a-global-historical-archaeology/>>. Accessed 22 August 2014.
- MURRAY, TIM (EDITOR)  
2004 *The Archaeology of Contact in Settler Societies*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.
- POPE, PETER  
2004 *Fish into Wine: The Newfoundland Plantation in the Seventeenth Century*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.
- POPE, PETER E., AND SHANNON LEWIS-SIMPSON (EDITORS)  
2013 *Exploring Atlantic Transitions: Archaeologies of Transience and Permanence in New Found Lands*. Boydell Press, Woodbridge, UK.
- PRICE, NEIL  
2011 Researching the North at Aberdeen. *Journal of Northern Studies* 1:75–78.
- RANKIN, LISA  
2013 The Role of the Inuit in the European Settlement of Sandwich Bay, Labrador. In *Exploring Atlantic Transitions: Archaeologies of Transience and Permanence in New Found Lands*, Peter E. Pope and Shannon Lewis-Simpson, editors, pp. 310–319. Boydell Press, Woodbridge, UK.
- RAY, ARTHUR J.  
1978 History and Archaeology of the Northern Fur Trade. *American Antiquity* 43(1):26–34.
- TUCK, JAMES, AND ROBERT GRENIER  
1989 *Red Bay, Labrador: World Whaling Capital A.D. 1550–1600*. Atlantic Archaeology, St. John's, NL.
- WHITRIDGE, PETER  
2008 Reimagining the Iglu: Modernity and the Challenge of the Eighteenth Century Labrador Inuit Winter House. *Archaeologies* 4(2):288–309.
- YLIMAUNU, TIMO  
2013 Discipline, Churches and Landscape: The Material Culture of Social Hierarchy in Northern Finland from the Seventeenth to the Eighteenth Centuries. In *Historical Archaeologies of Cognition: Explorations into Faith, Hope and Charity*, James Symonds, Anna Badcock, and Jeff Oliver, editors, pp. 28–42. Equinox, Sheffield, UK.
- JEFF OLIVER  
DEPARTMENT OF ARCHAEOLOGY  
SCHOOL OF GEOSCIENCES  
UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN  
ST. MARY'S, ELPHINSTONE ROAD  
ABERDEEN, UNITED KINGDOM AB24 3UF
- NEIL CURTIS  
KING'S MUSEUM  
UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN  
OLD ABERDEEN TOWN HOUSE, HIGH STREET  
ABERDEEN, UNITED KINGDOM AB24 3EN