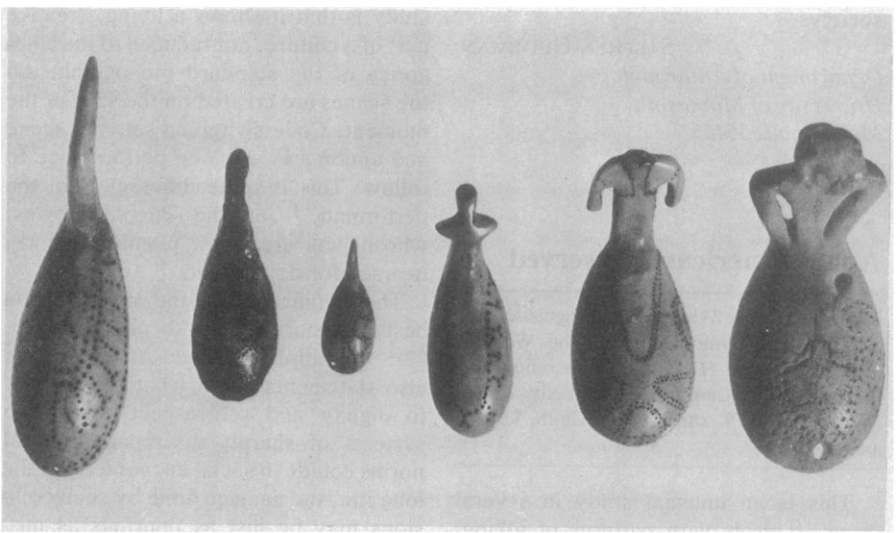
Archeology of the Arctic

Thule Eskimo Culture. An Anthropological Retrospective. Proceedings of a symposium, Ottawa, May 1977. ALLEN P. MCCARTNEY, Ed. Archaeological Survey of Canada, National Museum of Man, Ottawa, 1979. xxii, 586 pp., illus. Paper. Archaeological Survey of Canada Paper No. 88.

About a thousand years ago Eskimos with an ability to hunt large whales migrated from Alaska into the Canadian Arctic and Greenland. Within a few hundred years they replaced the Dorset culture in the area and became the substratum from which modern Inuit (Eskimo) cultures developed. The success of this colonization has been attributed to specialized hunting technology and social organization that led to a more intensive exploitation of Eastern Arctic resources and to other technological improvements like the dog sled, the large skin boat, and the bow and arrow. Although observations and hypotheses had been offered on the origins of the Eastern Arctic Eskimos, archeological investigation of this question did not begin seriously until Therkel Mathiassen began Canadian fieldwork with the Danish Fifth Thule Expedition of 1921–1924. Mathiassen's *Archaeology of the Central Eskimos*, published in 1927, is the most comprehensive report ever written on Canadian Thule culture, which he named and described with such precision that most of his ideas remain intact today. In commemoration of the 50th anniversary of this publication, Allen McCartney organized a Thule symposium for the Canadian Archaeological Association in 1977 with assistance from the National Museum in Ottawa. The result is a volume with 31 contributions covering a range of subjects nearly as broad as the Thule ekumene itself. Owing to the nature of its origin the book is not, as McCartney hastens to point out, a synthesis, for many aspects of Thule culture are not covered. However, it is a successful landmark demonstrating recent findings and new approaches being used by the current generation of Thule scholars, whose numbers today would no doubt gratify Mathiassen.

The title of the volume is, as McCartney also notes, somewhat misleading in that most of the contributions are not specifically retrospective. Excepting de Laguna's warm and insightful keynote paper on the early history and practitioners of Thule research, the papers are bent on applying new data and approaches. Organization is provided by grouping of the subsequent contributions into sections comprising regional syntheses, chronological syntheses (including subsections on Dorset-Thule, Thule-Norse, and Thule-Recent interaction), and topical contributions (whaling and subsistence orientations, northwestern Alaska, physical anthropology, artifact typology, art, environmental impact, and climate). The only overview for the volume is provided in a brief preface by William E. Taylor, Jr., and an introduction by McCartney. Taylor, who also chaired the symposium, notes a "productive and healthy iconoclasm" in the contributions but exhorts us to restrain from stretching the existing data too far in applying interesting approaches and ideas to a very narrow data base. He urges more excavations (badly needed) and, above all, more publication, which has not been a particular strength of recent Arctic archeologists. He also urges attention to the many alternatives available in Thule economy (especially to fish resources) and to the continuing problem of the Dorset-Thule transition and opines (I think unjustly at this point) that archeologists have oversubscribed to climatic explanations of Thule culture change. McCartney cautions about the growing confusion surrounding the definition and use of the terms "Thule" and "Thule culture," noting the lack of agreement on the space-time boundaries they refer to and the need for more refined classifications as we move toward new comparative and developmental studies. He suggests use of Dumond's term "Thule tradition" for broad-scale integration and units like "Thule culture phase" for more precise comparisons, in the hope of defining locally and temporally distinct units comparable to ethnographic place groups or tribes. McCartney also provides a summary of the contributions individually, something this review cannot undertake.



Bird and human swimming figures from the collections of the Archaeological Survey of Canada (National Museum of Man). Origins (left to right): Igloolik, Moffet Inlet, Igloolik, Moffet Inlet, Strathcona Sound, and Mingoogtook, Frobisher Bay. "It is in the Igloolik area that . . . swimming figurines have been found in their greatest numbers and highest artistic development. Most of the figurines with human arms and head refer to females through the form of the upper torso, topknot, or drilled dot pattern on the back, which often resembles the outline of the back of a woman's parka. It is definite that these figurines were used in a dice game, at least in historic times. However, the references made to both birds and females almost certainly have more significance than a simple game." [From J. S. Thomson's paper in *Thule Eskimo Culture*]

The most important contribution of the papers is in showing recent trends in Thule research. Often what is not included is as revealing as what is. For instance, there is no general overview of the eastern Thule tradition. Despite several recent summaries, there has yet to appear a really satisfactory integration for this area to match Mathiassen's pioneering effort. Also significant is the paucity of new information from Greenland, where, in contrast to Canadian efforts of the past decade, field activity has been minimal. A healthy sign is the high level of anthropological interpretation being

used in Thule research, expressed here mostly in speculative models crying for field verification. Also noticeable are trends away from classical typological studies and toward use of new sources of data such as faunal analysis, ethnohistory, European contact records, ecological and environmental studies, ethnology, and physical anthropology. Some of the contributions that draw on such sources puncture previously accepted dogma, and others indicate important new departures. Among the presumptions undermined is the hard-dying notion that Thule economy was based on large whale hunting. The idea of a "broad-spectrum" but opportunistic economy including whales has been with us since W. E. Taylor's paper in 1966, but only recently have midden studies begun to show the extent to which seals and walrus were utilized. This leads, however, to the persistent problem of how to determine the economic and social importance of whale hunting as opposed to utilization of beached or dead animals, since midden evidence rarely exists.

In addition to a more balanced view of Thule economy, a number of papers point to a refreshingly complicated anthropological view of Thule society and regional networks that fits nicely with the idea of a flexible and adaptive economic base. Papers by Amsden on periodic ecological crises in North Alaska and Hickey on regional economic integration models, trade, and political relationships in early historic Alaskan groups provide a promising framework for understanding population movements and spatial organization of local groups. Such a view suggests a regional demographic fluidity that makes arguments like Burch's for an overland Caribou Eskimo migration from the Arctic coast to Hudson Bay, or McGhee's suggestions of West Alaskan-McKenzie Delta contacts, plausible alternatives to the recent predilection of Arctic archeologists for strictly in situ explanations. In fact, recent work in ethnohistory and Eskimo-European contact archeology (a grossly neglected field now beginning to receive attention) is beginning to call into question developmental interpretations based on generalized typological studies and appearances of settlement continuity revealed through overconfident use of radiocarbon sequences. It is becoming apparent, especially in contact situations and where ecological conditions fluctuate unpredictably, that major population shifts occurred and are likely to have taken place in the earlier times as well. For these reasons, new theoretical stances must be combined with detailed studies of artifact attributes, raw material sourcing, and other methods.

These problems pose substantial challenges to Arctic archeologists. It is apparent that studies of Thule development must be pursued from a variety of different viewpoints, most of which cannot easily be reconciled, and that archeological information, no matter how diligently sought and applied, may be insufficient to demonstrate real historical events. However, the visibility and preservation of Thule sites promise to provide Thule students with a unique opportunity to integrate archeological, environmental, and other data toward a variety of goals. If not much success can be shown in proving that Sadlermiut were biologically or culturally different from other Central Eskimo groups, it may be either that our models of culture contact and change have been too simplistic or that the techniques used cannot detect the difference given a probable level of gene flow. This series of papers certainly shows that the view, which has been expressed more than once, that Thule archeology is pat and passé is far from correct. The future research opportunities are clearly great and exploitation of them is hindered only by the slowness of permafrost excavation, conservation problems, manpower, and cost. In some ways Mathiassen might have been depressed to see how little has been accomplished in the past 50 years in acquisition and publication of new field data. However, he would probably have been cheered by the progress in conceptual development and methods. McCartney's volume goes a long way toward pointing out both the weaknesses and strengths of recent Thule studies. One hopes that it will spur new work and that the many excellent speculative and discussion papers presented here can be translated into firm conclusions.

WILLIAM FITZHUGH
Department of Anthropology,
Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, D.C. 20560

Agricultural Adaptations

Farmers in the Forest. Economic Development and Marginal Agriculture in Northern Thailand. PETER KUNSTADTER, E. C. CHAPMAN, and SANGA SABHASRI, Eds. Published for the East-West Center by University Press of Hawaii, Honolulu, 1978. xiv, 402 pp., illus. $24.

The central concern of this book, as the subtitle indicates, is with the economic development of farms outside the mainstream of primary production in Thailand. These farmers inhabit the mountainous northwest, and most belong to tribal minorities. Their agricultural systems, emphasizing the shifting-cultivation or swidden (slash-and-burn) mode of production, are as variable as their social structures, languages, and customs. The variations of these systems, however, are as much adaptations to the environmental mosaic of the region as reflections of cultural imprints.

The four peoples whose agricultures are described are the Northern Thai, the Lua', the Karen, and the Hmong or Meo, who, in ascending order, occupy overlapping altitudinal zones ranging from the lowland valleys 200 meters above sea level to highlands at 2000 meters. The Northern Thai are traditionally cultivators of irrigated rice fields, whose expansion into the hills has required adoption of the swidden mode, but where topography and water sources allow all the groups except the Hmong have incorporated the permanent-field technique into their predominantly shifting systems. The flexibility of swiddening is exchanged for the greater reliability of production of terracing elements, indicating commitment to increased sedentariness. The Hmong, accentuating the commercial cultivation of the opium poppy in their swiddens, have resisted rice irrigation even when the opportunity has offered, for this is a decision that would require more intensive labor and loss of the relatively high cash yields from opium, whose production is a proven adaptation to the higher montane environments.

Since many of the uplanders have occupied the region for hundreds rather than thousands of years, these adaptive transformations must be of recent date. Now further change is in prospect for the area. In an introductory chapter Kunstadter and Chapman describe the constraints of the cultivation cycles of swiddening and the environmental effects of the differentiated systems. Problems of economic development in the region are posed in the familiar formulations of in-