

The Globe and Mail (Canada)

January 24, 1998

Saturday

The Troy of the North Archeologists in Siberia have uncovered signs of an astounding civilization that may unlock secrets about an ancient people who eventually became the Canadian Inuit.

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SECTION: SCIENCE; MISSING PEOPLES; Pg. D5

LENGTH: 1386 words

DATELINE: Ekven, Siberia

THE dead whale hunter, draped in a polar-bear skin, was ready for his journey to the next world. Like an ancient pharaoh in the Nile Valley, his soul would travel to the underworld in a wooden boat. But in this 2,000-year-old Arctic civilization, the burial boat was fashioned from reindeer antlers and walrus skins.

By sheer luck, Russian archeologists had stumbled on a burial rite of the ancient sea-hunting ancestors of today's Canadian Inuit. It was just another of their extraordinary discoveries in one of the remotest inhabited places on Earth -- the Chukotka peninsula of Siberia, across the Bering Strait from the western tip of Alaska.

The ancient town known as Ekven, located almost precisely at the crossroads of Asia and America, is emerging as one of the greatest archeological meccas of the north. Some experts are already suggesting that Ekven could become an "Arctic Troy" -- the remains of an ancient civilization with profound significance for our understanding of northern cultures.

The archeologists were stunned by what they saw. "I was on the edge of our world, but I felt that I was at the centre of another world," says Mikhail Bronshtein, a Russian scientist on the international team of archeologists at the Ekven site.

Exploring the links between the Canadian Inuit and their Asian ancestors was neglected for decades. But now, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, international scientists are free to study the historic connections.

What they are discovering, buried in permafrost, is a 2,000-year-old Arctic culture that produced objects of exquisite beauty and technological genius.

"The closer we look at the cultural tradition of the Bering Sea hunters, the more clearly we recognize traits that put it in the ranks of ancient cultures conventionally termed civilizations," Mr. Bronshtein and a colleague wrote in a Russian academic journal last year.

Despite the brutal climate, the people of Ekven created "an economically viable society and practiced an advanced material, spiritual and social culture," the scientists concluded.

More than two millennia ago, the ancestors of the Inuit moved north from the Pacific Rim and learned to hunt the great whales of the Arctic. "They were the first peoples on Earth to become successful hunters of large whales," says Robert McGhee, an archeologist with the Canadian Museum of Civilization. Their ability to take their Pacific maritime way of life and adapt it to the cold seas of the Arctic was "the central genius" of their culture, he says. They developed light skin boats and sophisticated harpoon equipment to hunt the grey whales and bowheads of the northern seas. From the dawn of the Christian era to about 1000, they lived at Ekven and other communities in what is now Russia and Alaska.

Until recently, Western archeologists tended to focus on the Alaskan roots of the ancestral Inuit. But this emphasis has been criticized as excessively "American-centred." In fact, archeological evidence suggests that the ancestors of

the Inuit may have originated from the Asian side of the Bering Strait.

Russian archeologists began excavating in the area around Ekven in the 1960s and 1970s. Struggling to dig through layers of frozen soil and ice, they eventually discovered a cemetery with a wealth of artifacts, including artistic masterpieces of carved walrus tusk. By 1987, the cemetery became the focus of a research mission from the State Museum of Oriental Art in Moscow, headed by Kirill Dneprovsky and Mikhail Bronshtein.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, an international team of scientists started to study the Ekven archeology. Members of the team include Robert McGhee and other experts from Canada, Switzerland, Germany and Denmark.

"Ekven is remarkable in terms of the abundance, esthetic qualities and preservation of the grave goods," says Yvon Csonka, a Swiss archeologist who co-ordinates the international team. "The site is very rich. There is nothing comparable on the American side, since the Ekven cultures that produced the grave goods are not represented outside Asia."

By 1995, however, aboriginal people in Chukotka were objecting to the archeological work in the cemetery. So the researchers switched to a new site -- a half-buried

1,500-year-old dwelling on the edge of an ancient settlement at Ekven. Its walls were made of turf bricks, its roof fashioned from whale ribs, wooden beams and walrus skins. The whole structure was supported by vertical posts of whale jawbones.

The house is being excavated "with much more detail than most houses have been anywhere in the Arctic, at any period," Mr. Csonka says. "The work we're doing at Ekven is very significant since it is the first time that a prehistoric Eskimo settlement is being excavated on the Asian side of the strait."

Among the fascinating objects uncovered by the archeologists at the ancient dwelling are a water container of double-stitched whalebone and a rounded drum frame, the first ritual musical instrument that has survived intact from this era.

More important, perhaps, is the new evidence that Ekven was inhabited by the so-called Punuk people -- hunters of the great whales before 1000 -- as well as the Birnirk people, who hunted smaller mammals such as seals and caribou. This suggests that both the Punuk and Birnirk cultures helped shape the famed Thule whale-hunting people -- the direct ancestors of today's Canadian Inuit.

Anthropologists believe that after the 10th century, a gradual warming of the climate allowed large whales to

move into new feeding grounds in the Arctic Ocean, and the hunters followed the whales. By the 14th century, the Thule culture of the Bering Strait had swept eastward across the Canadian Arctic, where they became the Inuit of today.

The Ekven archeology has confirmed strong links between the Ekven culture and the historic Inuit culture of the Canadian Arctic. The harpoon technology at Ekven, for example, is remarkably similar to the Inuit harpoons of recent centuries. Their sleds, kayaks, arrows and knives are also similar. "There are some very close parallels, despite the great distances involved," Mr. Csonka says.

Most astonishing is the Ekven art. The expressive beauty of the walrus-ivory carvings and amulets was revealed in a small display of Ekven objects at the Oriental Art Museum in Moscow. Engraved with complex geometric patterns, the ivory is shaped into powerful images of polar bears, walruses, seals and birds. Often the images merge, transforming themselves from a bear to a walrus in the same object. Many of the items were functional too -- serving as harpoon socket pieces, knife handles and other tools.

Some of the most beautiful artifacts, dubbed "winged objects," have puzzled archeologists for years. After much study, they concluded that the mysterious objects are stabilizers for the ends of harpoons, to assist their flight.

"Obviously the Ekvenians felt deeply the need for art, as we can conclude from the infinite diversity and high originality of their artwork," Mr. Bronshtein and Mr. Dneprovsky wrote in the article they published last year on their findings. "Nearly every one of them has a striking singularity."

Despite the significance of the Ekven findings, the archeological site faces various threats. Because of erosion on the coastline, the ancient dwellings are slowly disappearing into the sea. Poachers are looting some of the objects. And financial shortages in the Russian government have hampered the research.

Most of the Ekven archeology today is financed by the Swiss government and foreign scientists are increasingly influential in Ekven research. The international committee has insisted that half of the foreign financing should go to local institutions in Chukotka, including aboriginal people, who will be hired wherever possible. An aboriginal ethnographer is now accompanying the archeologists in their fieldwork.

In another sign of the growing east-west co-operation, the Canadian Museum of Civilization is sending an exhibit of pre-Inuit artifacts to the Oriental Art Museum in Moscow this year. The exhibit, called *Lost Visions, Forgotten Dreams*, focuses on the Paleo-Eskimo people who lived in the Arctic before the Inuit.

The exhibit, the first ever from Canada to be shown at the Moscow museum, is scheduled to open in June.