During the 1960’s, many arctic archaeologists felt that the end of the Dorset period was associated with the arrival of the Thule, an Alaskan whaling tradition, which entered the Canadian arctic about AD 900 to 1000. This explanation was reexamined in the 1970’s, especially in light of newly acquired paleoclimatic evidence. Archaeologists began to speculate that the arrival of the Thule, which had occurred during the Mediaeval Warming Period or Neoclimatic Episode of the first millenium AD, would have had the effect of pushing Dorset peoples into more and more marginal environments, until they eventually disappeared. Evidence for this explanation comes from our understanding of Dorset versus Thule subsistence strategies. While Dorset people exploited animals using carefully planned scheduling to maximize the quantity and quality of animals, Thule people appear to have exploited animals using a much more opportunistic strategy based on when they were encountered. This likely reflects the use of sleds and large skin boats called *umiaks* by Thule people. If the presence of Thule people in Dorset hunting locations upset the tight pattern of seasonal scheduling of Dorset people, then it is easy to understand how Dorset economics could have been negatively affected. Another possibility is
Inuit Contact and Colonization
Readings - The Possibility of Contact Between Dorset and Thule

that Dorset people may have been absorbed into the Thule groups they encountered, or wiped out by disease, perhaps of a Siberian origin, and introduced by Alaskan Thule people. While the first scenario is possible, the second is highly unlikely, given that we do not have any evidence mass graves or die offs at the end of the Dorset period.

If Thule people did come into contact with Dorset people, then what would have been the nature of this contact? Assessing the evidence for Dorset-Thule contact, as well as defining the nature of that contact remains one of the most contentious issues in arctic prehistory. The famous Canadian anthropologist Diamond Jenness (1925) originally suggested that Dorset Culture had preceded the arrival of Thule Inuit groups in some areas of the Canadian Arctic, but may have briefly co-existed with it in other areas before its disappearance.

Archaeologist Henry Collins (1937) later suggested that Canadian Thule harpoon heads were stylistically more reminiscent of Dorset harpoon heads than those associated with Alaskan assemblages. Other culture traits shared between Dorset and Canadian Thule, but lacking among Alaskan Cultures, included snow house construction, breathing hole sealing, soapstone vessels, bone sled shoes, some clothing styles, and a more extensive use of iron. This prompted many Arctic archaeologists to speculate that Dorset peoples had probably come into
contact with Thule groups in some regions of the Canadian Arctic and Greenland. Thus, Canadian Thule Culture was presented as developing from an amalgamation of Alaskan and Paleo-Eskimo Culture traits. Alternatively, Robert Park (1993) has suggested that Dorset and Thule peoples did not come into contact with one another, and that Canadian Thule Culture developed many of the aforementioned features independently, without the influence of Paleo-Eskimo Cultures. Park bases his argument on a reinterpretation of radiocarbon dates, which seem to indicate a gap between Late Dorset and early Thule archaeological sites.

Did the Dorset people influence the pioneering Thule families that traveled to the Canadian arctic and Greenland, or vice versa? And if so, were these influences the result of face-to-face contact, or Thule people stumbling across Dorset artifacts during their travels? These are both interesting questions to which there are no clear answers. This is because most Thule villages are built over top of late Dorset sites. There are two reasons for this. First, Dorset sites were located in areas, which would have also afforded good hunting in Thule times. Dorset sites were also excellent areas to find sod, which was used by Thule people to insulate semi-subterranean houses. The use of sod blocks cut from Dorset middens had unfortunate consequences for archaeologists. Upon collapse, the sod blocks, usually laden with Dorset
artifacts, would collapse into the house pit, where they would be mixed in with Thule materials. Thus, the recovery of Dorset artifacts in Thule houses alone does not indicate evidence for contact.

Architectural similarities between Dorset and Thule houses, especially in areas of Northern Quebec, where Thule sites are rarely superimposed on top of Dorset ones, provide some of the most convincing evidence for contact. At the Diana Bay site in Ungava, for example, Patrick Plumet excavated an unusual house that shared both Thule and Dorset traits. The house, which dated to AD 1480, contained a northern part which had the stone box lamp support, lateral sleeping spaces and midpassage typical of a Dorset house, and a southern part which contained a well paved floor and cold trap entrance passage typical of a Thule house. Furthermore, a bowhead whale skull had been paced in the entryway of the dwelling. As the bowhead whale was an integral part of Thule culture, and Thule winter houses commonly used whalebone as construction material, this was interpreted as a Thule influence.

One of the central questions in Dorset-Thule contact is the direction by which traits were transferred between cultures. For example, would Dorset technology have left more of an impression on Thule people, given their newness to the eastern arctic environment? Snow knives, soapstone lamps, sled shoes,
clothing styles, breathing hole sealing, and harpoon head styles have all been suggested as being transferred to Thule from Dorset, rather than being independently invented by Thule people. With the exception of breathing hole sealing, all of these traits could have been acquired indirectly, simply by finding and examining Dorset artifacts. Likewise, architectural features such as cold trap entrance tunnels and rear rather than side placed sleeping platforms in some Late Dorset houses may simply reflect the emergence of similar ideas simultaneously in Alaska and the Canadian Arctic.

While many arctic archaeologists have focused on the distribution of these types of traits between Late Dorset and Thule culture sites, the fact remains that information may have been the most important commodity exchanged. If one plots the earliest Thule archaeological sites across the eastern arctic, one realizes that Thule people followed a more or less direct route to Greenland over a very short period of time. This almost seems to suggest that Thule people knew where they were going. Perhaps Thule people were able to acquire geographic information from Dorset peoples they encountered in much the same way that 19th century European explorers in search of the Northwest passage consulted historic Inuit they encountered. The problem here, however, is that
we don’t know if Dorset and Thule peoples spoke a language that was mutually understandable.

Did any Dorset survive beyond the 11th century AD? The answer would appear to be “yes”. Late Dorset seems to have lasted until the 15th century in Northern Quebec, and perhaps as late as the 16th century in Newfoundland and Labrador. The Sadlermiut provide an interesting twist to the fate of Dorset in the Eastern Arctic. The Sadlermiut were a group of Inuit who remained isolated, by choice, from other Inuit groups for several hundred years. They appear to have refused to participate in copper, iron, and soapstone trade networks circulating in the area. Instead, they continued to manufacture chipped stone. When Inuit from other parts of the eastern Arctic first contacted them, they remarked that the Sadlermiut spoke a language they described as “baby talk” and that they smelled of rancid blubber. Unlike other Inuit groups in the area, the Sadlermiut also lived in semi-subterranean houses constructed from sod and stone. Sadly, the Sadlermiut were wiped out by a small pox epidemic in 1902, following contact with the Scottish whaling ship Active. Were the Sadlermiut the last surviving members of the Dorset culture? Archaeological excavations have been inconclusive because the houses selected were occupied too late into the 19th century to be of any use. The excavation of very Dorset-like stemmed
and broadly side notched flint end blades, however, leave the question open until earlier houses can be excavated. The Angmagssalik Eskimo of the southeastern coast of Greenland, separated from contact with other Polar Eskimo groups due to drift ice from the Greenland current, also show signs of Dorset culture traits. Their concern with flying bear spirit helpers, an elaborately developed shamanic complex and secret shamanic language, and unusual artistic carvings all seem to suggest Dorset origins. Again, however, this remains pure speculation.

Archaeological evidence from Baffin Island, Labrador, and Newfoundland has been used to argue that there may have been contact between Dorset and Norse people. The site of L’Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland indicates that the Norse did venture into North America sometime after AD 870. The Dorset would have been present in all three locations at this time, but did they encounter one another? And if so, what kind of interactions would have occurred? Dorset artifacts, such as lamp fragments, have been discovered in the Norse occupation layers of a house at L’Anse Aux Meadows, but Norse people could have scavenged such objects from Dorset archaeological sites. Perhaps the most compelling evidence for Norse Dorset contact comes from the Nunguvik site on northern Baffin Island, where such items as spun yarn or cordage, and carvings with European facial features have been recovered in
Inuit Contact and Colonization

Readings - The Possibility of Contact Between Dorset and Thule

Dorset contexts. Patricia Southerland, an archaeologist from the Canadian Museum of Civilization, has argued that spinning was not a part of the technology of northern aboriginal peoples. Therefore, Dorset people must have acquired knowledge of how to spin yarn from the Norse. Equally compelling are the carvings, which appear to show individuals with European facial features. Unfortunately, radiocarbon dates are unclear as to whether these items pre-date the establishment of Norse colonies in Greenland and Iceland. As a result, the Dorset may have either acquired these traits from earlier European visitors, or the invented them themselves. To date, this controversy remains unresolved.