

THE FIRST PEOPLE IN THE AVANERSUAQ/THULE REGION. By MIKKEL SØRENSEN and TORBEN DIKLEV. Odense, Denmark: Syddansk Universitetsforlag. Series: Publications from the National Museum, Studies in Archaeology and History Vol. 31, 2025. ISBN 978-87-408-3623-3. 266 p., colour illus. Hardbound. Cdn\$75.00.

Pikialasorsuaq (the North Water Polynya) is a place where science and policy increasingly converge, particularly in emerging discussions of bilateral governance between Greenland and Canada. In this context, Sørensen and Diklev's volume constitutes a timely and important contribution to representing the development of Indigenous lifeways in this region. Their main objective is to assess the state of knowledge on the Paleo-Inuit period by combining new data generated through their own fieldwork in Avanersuaq (northwest Greenland) with a critical re-evaluation of the existing datasets and a synthesis of earlier interpretive models. While the book is primarily oriented toward an audience of Arctic archaeologists, it also holds clear relevance for adjacent fields across the environmental sciences by providing an important resource for aligning cultural and environmental histories of the High Arctic.

The book follows the established tradition of Danish National Museum volumes: empirically rich, well illustrated, and grounded in both retrospective synthesis and the presentation of new data. The substantial archaeological record it assembles draws on decades of work, including Torben Diklev's tenure as curator of the Qaanaaq Museum in the early 1990s, when extensive site records and local knowledge were developed. This is complemented by Mikkel Sørensen's expertise in lithic analysis and flintknapping, evident in the detailed treatment of stone tool assemblages throughout. Since 2018, the authors have integrated these strengths through a coordinated program of survey, documentation, and community collaboration.

A primary strength of the volume lies in its spatial presentation of Paleo-Inuit site distributions, with particular emphasis on the early period. Chapter 3 serves as the core presentation of data, organized through a site-by-site approach supported by detailed descriptions of features and associated artefact assemblages, as well as extensive photographic plates and architectural drawings. Complemented throughout by maps and satellite imagery, this material underpins the authors' key demonstration that Early Paleo-Inuit sites are widely distributed across diverse environmental settings. These interpretations are grounded in a source-critical discussion of survey history (particularly in Chapters 4 and 5), which addresses uneven research coverage and the complicating effects of isostatic rebound in submerging much of the southern areas. Despite these limitations, the authors argue convincingly that the currently documented distribution of sites is broadly representative of past settlement patterns. In this respect, the volume also offers clear value beyond archaeology, as its spatial representations provide

a basis for comparison with sea-ice dynamics and animal movement, and thus for interdisciplinary research on the polynya's historical dynamics.

A further achievement of the volume is its treatment of lithic technology, particularly in the detailed reconstruction of reduction strategies, raw material procurement, and technological repertoires. This level of analysis is especially significant in the context of Pikialasorsuaq, where multiple Early Paleo-Inuit traditions appear to have overlapped and potentially coexisted, followed by later occupations spanning the Tunit (Dorset) to Late Dorset periods. Within this complex cultural landscape, Mikkel Sørensen's ability to identify subtle variations in reduction techniques, material selection, and tool morphology enables a nuanced understanding of Paleo-Inuit technological systems, and one that is rarely presented in one publication or supported by such extensive illustration. While lithic analysis is integrated throughout the site-based descriptions in Chapter 3, it is synthesized most effectively in Chapter 4, where assemblages from Ellesmere Island are used comparatively to situate the Avanersuaq material within a broader regional framework. As a result, the volume stands as an important resource for Arctic archaeologists, particularly those concerned with variability within the Arctic Small Tool tradition and can serve as a key reference well beyond the High Arctic.

This technological framework is further strengthened by the compilation and recalibration of radiocarbon dates from multiple projects across Greenland and Ellesmere Island, extending the volume's chronological contribution. In dialogue with the lithic evidence, these data reveal broader patterns, affirming apparent temporal discontinuity between early and later expressions of Paleo-Inuit for the region. However, a persistent lack of well-constrained dates across Paleo-Inuit periods is identified, with the authors specifically highlighting Pre-Dorset as both a major gap and a key to understanding one of the most dynamic phases in the polynya's early history. This chronological uncertainty, combined with a need for further integration of archaeological data from the Greenlandic and Canadian sides of the polynya, remain obstacles to refining cultural sequences in the region. At the same time, the authors engage critically with existing models of cultural development, assessing interpretations that range from processes of amalgamation to in situ transformation. In this way, the volume not only consolidates available chronological data but also advances a more robust framework for understanding cultural change in the High Arctic, while clearly delineating priorities for future dating and refinement.

The volume also identifies key archaeological sites that can serve as focal points for future research in the Avanersuaq region, particularly in the context of rapid environmental change. By highlighting rare keystone localities characterized by repeated occupation and strong assemblages, the authors provide a practical framework for prioritizing fieldwork and developing new research and

training opportunities. Among these, the Qorluulasupaluk site, located near the present-day settlement of Qaanaaq, stands out as especially significant. Its extensive lithic assemblage and evidence for overlapping occupations—including Independence I, Saqqaq, Pre-Dorset, and Greenlandic Dorset components—offer a unique opportunity to examine long-term cultural trajectories within a single locality.

Overall, *The First People in Avanersuaq* provides a comprehensive and carefully constructed synthesis of Paleo-Inuit archaeology in the Avanersuaq region, with clear relevance for Arctic research more broadly. Significantly, the volume demonstrates that, from the earliest formation of Pikialasorsuaq, Early Paleo-Inuit communities were widespread and deeply embedded across diverse environmental settings—a perspective that remains underrepresented in many non-archaeological accounts of the polynya as an evolving system. By documenting the scale and distribution of early human activity in such detail, the book establishes a new resource for understanding long-term human–environment relationships in the High Arctic. It will serve as an essential reference for scholars working in and beyond the North Water Polynya system, including those in marine biology, paleoecology, and environmental science seeking to better integrate cultural and environmental histories.

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