

DNA evidence of bowhead whale exploitation by Greenlandic Paleo-Inuit 4,000 years ago

The demographic history of Greenland is characterized by recurrent migrations and extinctions since the first humans arrived 4,500 years ago. Our current understanding of these extinct cultures relies primarily on preserved fossils found in their archaeological deposits, which hold valuable information on past subsistence practices. However, some exploited taxa, though economically important, comprise only a small fraction of these sub-fossil assemblages. Here we reconstruct a comprehensive record of past subsistence economies in Greenland by sequencing ancient DNA from four well-described midden deposits. Our results confirm that the species found in the fossil record, like harp seal and ringed seal, were a vital part of Inuit subsistence, but also add a new dimension with evidence that caribou, walrus and whale species played a more prominent role for the survival of Paleo-Inuit cultures than previously reported. Most notably, we report evidence of bowhead whale exploitation by the Saqqaq culture 4,000 years ago.

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