Instruments of Change: Late Dorset Palaeoeskimo Drums and Shamanism on Coastal Bylot Island, Nunavut, Canada

Abstract: The only known evidence of Dorset Palaeoeskimo drum use ever documented was salvaged decades ago along with thousands of other Late Dorset Palaeoeskimo artifacts from an eroding coastal site (PiFm-1) at Button Point on Bylot Island, Nunavut (Figure 1) (Mary-Rousselière 1976, Taylor 1971-1972). These finds consist of two nearly complete wooden drums and various other drum frame fragments that date to the centuries surrounding A.D. 1000 (Taylor 1971-1972). In the spring of 2014, the authors and Lori White re-examined all of the wood fragments recovered from Button Point, documenting the known drum pieces and discovering nearly a dozen previously unidentified drum fragments. These fragments represent instruments in a range of sizes, but with a consistent and uniquely Late Dorset Palaeoeskimo style that has not been identified prior to our research. In this paper, we discuss a proposed typology of the Dorset drums and drum fragments, and contrast their stylistic attributes with subsequent historic Inuit drum morphology in the region. We will also discuss some of the functional aspects of how the drums were manufactured and the use of foraged coastal resources in their construction. Finally, we offer an interpretation of the driftwood-constructed drums as part of what we believe to be elements of Late Dorset shamanism.

Keywords: Arctic, Drums, Shamanism, Palaeoeskimo

1 Introduction

The focus of the research presented here is on two drums found at Button Point on the coast of Bylot Island in Nunavut, Canada (Figure 1). These drums were found in association with what have been interpreted as shamans’ masks (Mary-Rousselière 1976), along with other small, carved objects of wood, ivory, and bone that resemble articles known to be part of northern rituals and beliefs from Northeast Asia, Scandinavia, and the North American Arctic. For this reason, the Button Point drums are thought to have been associated with at least one, but perhaps multiple, shamans or spiritual practitioners, and for reasons discussed below we believe them to belong to the Late Dorset culture.

The Late Dorset culture was the final expression of the Palaeoeskimo peoples who spread east out of Alaska into the Canadian Arctic and Greenland beginning more than 5000 years ago (Maxwell 1985; McGhee 1996). Because their lithic industry was largely composed of relatively tiny tools, it became known...
as the Arctic Small Tool tradition (ASTt) (Maxwell 1985). Earlier Dorset peoples had a geographical range that spanned much of the Canadian High Arctic and parts of the western Greenland Coast, and extended as far south as the island of Newfoundland; however, in the centuries preceding the disappearance of the Late Dorset culture around AD 1,300, much of that range had diminished to the northern Arctic coasts of Canada, its northern islands, and northwestern Greenland. Shortly after AD 1,200, the ancestors of the historic Inuit arrived from the Western Arctic, leaving traces that archaeologists refer to as the Thule culture (Maxwell 1985; McGhee 1996). Recent analysis of Palaeoeskimo and Inuit DNA indicate that there was no gene flow between the two groups and that the disappearance of the Late Dorset culture from the archaeological record also marks the extinction of the Palaeoeskimo people (Raghavan et al. 2014; Rasmussen et al. 2010).

Despite a contraction in the range of Dorset peoples in the centuries leading to their disappearance—or perhaps because of it—the Late Dorset period is known for a fluorescence of art and symbolism in the form of carvings in wood, antler, bone, ivory, and soapstone. Many of these artistic objects and their symbolic motifs are frequently thought to be associated with some form of shamanistic behavior (Auger 2005; Betts et al. 2015; LeMoine et al. 1995; Taçon 1983; Taylor 1971-72). Swinton (1967:39) goes so far to suggest that most, if not all, Dorset art is not only magical but probably highly professional specialized shaman’s art (see also MacRae 2013:177). If shamanism was an important part of Late Dorset cultural traditions, than it should not be surprising that the most ubiquitous and essential material components associated with northern shamanism, drums, would be found in Late Dorset archaeological deposits. Indeed, the use of drums for shamanic purposes likely has a deep history among northern peoples. Archaeologist Bjarne Grønnow (2012:65) has recently reanalyzed wood fragments possibly associated with the Saqqaq culture (ca. 2,400-900 B.C.) at sites in Disko Bay, Greenland, that he has identified as drum fragments because they share attributes with ethnographic Arctic drum traditions. Although the context of the Disko Bay drum fragments is equivocal (Grønnow 2012:65), if they were made by the Saqqaq people, it would demonstrate that some of the drum manufacturing techniques seen in the construction of the Button Point drums (discussed below) may have more ancient roots in the High Arctic, as does the importance of drums in Arctic cultures.
2 Arctic Drums and Shamanism

Drums and drumsticks play important roles in public and private performances by shamans across the Arctic and Subarctic, with significant variability in their purpose, design, and how they are played. It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a complete survey of shamanic use of drums in the north; however, use of drums in that context could include; communication with spirits that inhabited the animals and inanimate objects in their world, enlisting the aid of spirits for hunting or healing, traveling to other spiritual realms, engaging in spiritual combat with spirits or other shamans (Gessain and Victor 1973; Hultkrantz 2014:13; Price 2001:3), or even serving as models for the universe (Devlet 2001: 47; Pentikäinen 1998:26-48). While there were other material components to these actions of mediation and negotiation with the living and the dead and the spiritual world, the drum and drumstick were the most vital components (Hultkrantz 2014:11; Price 2001:3). Honko (1964:169) goes as far as to state that in much of northern Eurasia, “the drum is the liturgical handbook of shamanism,” and Eliade (1964:168) suggests more broadly that, “the drum has a role of the first importance in shamanic ceremonies.” Indeed, among some Siberian peoples, shamans and their drums are so completely interconnected that they are considered to be a single entity (Basilov 1986:38; Devlet 2001:49; Hultkrantz 2014:16) and the central symbol of shamanism (Siikala 1978: 45), and the death or destruction of one could mean the death of the other (Devlet 2001: 49). In some cases following the shaman’s death, the drum of that shaman would be broken and placed upon their grave during their funeral, allowing it to travel with the shaman to the “Other World” (Tein et al. 1994: 119). This could potentially give meaning to the broken fragments of drums at Button Point. In other societies, the shaman’s drum was thought to be a symbol of their guardian spirit, or even a vessel in which a shaman could collect guardian spirits (Hultkrantz 2014:15-16). Prior to various Christianization efforts in northern indigenous societies, drumming was even more integrated into daily life because of its vital importance to shamanic practice, which is not a religion in the western sense, but rather a body of beliefs that permeated daily existence, and still does in many places (Pentikäinen 1998: 61,87; Price 2001:4). Therefore, while there remains considerable discussion about where shamanism lies in the theological spectrum (see e.g. Diózegi and Höppal 1978; Dubois 2011; Höppal 2007; Takasami 1998), the significance of drums to northern peoples—prehistoric, historic, and modern—cannot be overstated.

Unfortunately, when we examine prehistoric relationships between drums and shamanism we must recognize that in many cultures past uses of drums have been greatly transformed by missionization and subordination tactics, such as the Stalinist purges in Siberia in the 1930s (Hultkrantz 2014:10; Kerttula 2000:27; Pentikäinen 1998; Price 2001:4; Thomas and Humphrey 1994; Znamenski 1999) or Christian missionization in Greenland (Gessain and Victor 1973:152; Petersen and Hauser 2004:11). This often hinders direct historical approaches to our understanding of drum manufacture and use. Yet, within early historic accounts there are many well-documented examples of drum use. Moreover, among some modern Siberian and Central Asian peoples, and in places among indigenous peoples of northern North America, Greenland, and Scandinavia, shamanism still thrives, as does its relationship with drums. These documents and observations give us the best view of possible ways that northern prehistoric and protohistoric societies may have manufactured and used drums within the context of shamanism prior to large-scale religious conversions. A northern shaman’s drum was made of various types of wood, but often above the treeline it was driftwood bent into a circle. The handle of an Arctic shaman’s drum can be made from a variety of materials, including wood, antler, bone, or ivory. The drums of an Arctic shaman are most often played by striking the frame of the drum, rather than the drumhead, with a wooden drumstick (Gessain and Victor 1973; Tein et al. 1994:120), much in the same way that many modern North American and Greenlandic Inuit play their drums. The use wear on the interior rim of the drums from Button Point suggests they were played in the same manner. When we play our replica of one of these drums in this way, a deep resonant sound is produced along with the wooden clicking of the drumstick striking the rim, even though they are relatively small drums and covered with caribou hide, rather than the traditional, thin, walrus or bearded seal stomachs used widely in northeastern Siberia (Tein et al. 1994:120) and the western North American Arctic (Fienup-Riordan 2007: xii; Gessain and Victor 1973:134-135), which may provide an even deeper resonant sound. This would be particularly effective within a small enclosed space like a single-family dwelling or hut.
Among many historic Siberian groups, the drum of a shaman is similar to those used for dances and other events, but the shamans’ drumsticks would be more substantial and thicker than those used for those other performances (Tein et al. 1994: 120). The reason for this is unknown and might be either ideological or acoustical, or both. Drum specimens from the North American Western Arctic that we examined in the collections of the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) in Washington, D.C. frequently have faces of humans, animals, or human-animal hybrids carved onto the proximal end of the handle, a trait also known among some historic Greenland Inuit drums (Gessain and Victor 1973:132-134). These faces are often in the interior of the drum and would not be visible to the audience watching a performance, only to the drummer. They may have served as fetishes to protect the shaman/drummer from evil spirits and the diseases with which they battled (Tein et al. 1994:119), doubled the power of the shaman against their adversaries (Gessain and Victor 1973:134), or as among some Siberian groups, the faces may represent the spiritual master of the drum or the shaman’s guardian spirit (Hultkrantz 2014:15). A series of incised chevron markings in the larger of the Button Point drums that are also in the interior of the drum and would have been obscured by the drum head, may have served similar functions.

One of the most often described functions of drum use by shamans in the ethnohistoric and ethnographic literature is to drive out sickness and heal people (Jordan 2001:91; Tein et al. 1994:119). Often it was the drumstick that was the vital component in these rituals. In fact, drumsticks were so important among some Siberian shamans they were passed from generation to generation along their male line, and served as protection against evil spirits in their dwellings. Among some groups in northeastern Siberia, as part of a healing ritual the shaman would wave their drumstick several times toward the exit of the house so that any illness would be driven from the dwelling in which the affected resided (Tein et. al. 1994:119). If a shaman was unsuccessful in healing the inflicted—or arrived too late—and a person died, the shaman would then sometimes “interrogate the body” with a strap and a drumstick to ascertain the cause of death. The head of the deceased would be bound with the strap and the drumstick tied to its free end. The head would then be raised by lifting it with the drumstick to represent the responses of the deceased to the shaman’s questions. Following this interrogation, because spirits of the dead are often considered evil among indigenous northern peoples, such as the Yup’ik of the eastern Chukotkan coast, the soul of the departed would often be driven away with a drumstick by waving it in various directions in association with singing or chanting (Tein et. al. 1994:120-121; Tein 1995:211).

Many northern shamans also used their drums to perform séances, where they would sing or shout along with quick rhythmic beats in an attempt to develop a state of ecstasy among the listeners (Jordan 2001: 91). These performances could have profound effects on the audience, who believed the shaman would commune with spirits during this time. It is the drum that gave shamans the ability to leave this world and travel to the spirit world (Devlet 2001:47; Jordan 2001:92; Tein et al. 1994:122). This can be seen in some images of Western Arctic drum use that portray images of a drummer connected by an ethereal rope or implied spiritual connection to a floating figure that transcends the walls of a structure. It is even believed that some northern shamans could transform themselves into their guardian spirits or their likeness, acting as a mediator between different spiritual realms (Devlet 2001: 44).

 Shamanic drums and drumsticks were also instrumental in rituals associated with increased efficacy of various hunts. In some Siberian groups, before the sea mammal hunt in the spring, a shaman would ask his spirit-helpers about how successful the hunt would be and who should participate, all with the aid of wooden drumsticks fastened by a strap to the head of the boat captain (Tein et al. 1994:123). Ritual activity in Siberia would also sometimes include the use of wooden human masks by shamans, such as in the celebration of the whale festival among Siberian “Eskimos” (Arutyunov and Sergeyev 1975:180). It is important to mention here that the drums at Button Point were found in a context that contained two carved wooden masks, which are discussed further below, and have been interpreted as shamanic objects (Taylor 1971:35). All of this demonstrates the integration of drums within larger ideological, particularly shamanic, belief systems and related activities of many northern societies. Moreover, because of some of the physical characteristics of the Button Point drums and how they were manufactured (see below), we believe those drums belonged to the Dorset culture and, therefore, give us good reason to believe that similar beliefs and activities were also important to the Dorset.
3 The Button Point Drums

Two nearly complete drums (Figures 2 and 3) were recovered from a multicomponent site (PfFm-1) at Button Point, a small peninsula on the eastern coast of Bylot Island, in Nunavut, Canada (Mary-Rousselière 1976; Taylor 1971-1972). Button Point is an eroding site containing Palaeoeskimo and Thule artifacts (Mary-Rousselière 1970; Maxwell 1985; Taylor 1971-72). The site was originally investigated by Mathiassen in 1923 and then systematically by Father Guy Mary-Rousselière in the 1960s and 70s, who noted the difficulty of establishing a firm stratigraphic profile of the site due to extensive cryoturbation and erosion (Maxwell 1985:82; Taylor 1971-72). Despite the complex stratigraphy at the site, most Arctic archaeologists believe that many of the wooden artifacts are consistent with Dorset art and shamanistic paraphernalia recovered in more securely dated sites across the region (Maxwell 1985; McGhee 1996; Taylor 1971-72). This includes the drums discussed here, with their distinctive design motifs and manufacturing techniques, which are peculiar to the Late Dorset Palaeoeskimo culture. Despite the turbulent effects of frost action, Maxwell suggests that based on artifact typology, the site was “a favoured springtime hunting base from Pre-Dorset times to the present, with its largest population concentration in Late Dorset” (Maxwell 1985:228).

Figure 2. Button Point driftwood drum frame (PfFm-01:1750). This is the underside of the drum. Note the sets of incised lines located around the frame. Photo by Tim Rast. Canadian Museum of History.

Figure 3. Button Point driftwood drum frame (PfFm-01:1749). This frame is complete and the gap between the two scarfed ends is the result of taphonomic processes. Sets of incised lines are visible on this frame as well. Photo by Tim Rast. Canadian Museum of History.

Currently, the Button Point drums are the only known drums thought to be identified with the Dorset culture. They are curated at the Canadian Museum of History (CMH), which generously allowed our re-examination of them. The drums are missing their skins and the lashings that would have held their various elements in place, but the frame and handles are intact and in relatively good condition, which is rare in sites dating to this period. Using the morphology of the complete drums as reference points, it was possible for us to identify other drum rim fragments in the collection, providing enough data to build
Instruments of Change

an incipient typology of Dorset drums that other researchers may be able to use to identify drums and

drum fragments belonging to that culture. This is particularly important at the many multicomponent

sites throughout the North American Arctic that contain evidence of mixed Dorset and ancestral Inuit
deposits.

3.1 Description of the Drums

The two complete drums from Button Point have relatively small diameters compared to many other
documented Arctic drum styles, although within the range of prehistoric and historic drums found in the
Western Arctic and in Greenland. The largest (PfFm-1:1750, Figure 2) has a diameter of a little over 17 cm and
the other (PfFm-1:1749, Figure 3) is slightly smaller with a diameter of just under 15 cm. The frame of the
smaller of the two drums has opened and expanded slightly so the diameter is an estimate based on where
the original joint overlapped. The gap in the frame makes it appear incomplete, but both ends of the bent
wood frame are present and terminate in scarf joints that would overlap with each other to complete the
loop. The larger complete drum has a similar joint. There is a pattern of incised marks on the underside of
the smaller frame that at first glance appears random, but that becomes sequential and symmetrical if the

drum frame were to be pulled tightly back together. A similar sequence is incised on the larger drum. These
are discussed in more detail below.

Both complete drum frames are made from a single piece of wood that has been bent into a circular
hoop. The larger drum was made from a piece of wood 59.3 cm in length, and the smaller drum 46.4 cm. The
wood grain of the drums suggest that they are made from what was once relatively large diameter driftwood
logs, rather than the dwarf arctic willow that grew locally in the site area. Future analysis of the wooden
artifacts from Button Point will reveal the species of wood used in the drum construction. Each end of the
hoop was carved to a long, slanting scarf join that was notched so that it could be bound firmly in place
using lashing. The rim of the smaller drum is about 6.5 mm thick, while the larger drum is more variable
with a rim thickness ranging between 6.1 and 7.6 mm. Both drums have an incised, v-shaped groove running
around the outside circumference of the frame, approximately halfway between the top and bottom of the
frame. Inuit drums employ a similar groove to tie down the drum skin and we infer that the Dorset drums
skins were attached in a similar fashion.

There are additional holes gouged into the complete drum frames, which is characteristic of Dorset
manufacturing techniques as opposed to drilled holes as you see among later Thule and historic Inuit
specimens. This is one of the main reasons we believe these to be Dorset rather than later Thule or Inuit
origin. In each drum, one hole is placed directly opposite the drum handle. The larger drum has a second
hole in the same general area of the frame, but offset slightly. The holes either pass directly through the
frame from the inside to the outside or they are angled so that they pass diagonally through two faces of
the frame that meet at 90 degree angles. We are not certain what the function of these holes might be. They
are smaller in size than the holes for the drum handles; therefore, if something was inserted into them it
would have to be smaller than the width of the handles. They do not have any obvious grooves or channels
running from them that suggest they were lashing points for threads or cords for the suspension of other
objects, or to hang the drums when not in use, but these are possible functions for the holes.

The handles for the complete drums are very slight wooden sticks with square or rectangular cross
sections. They are very simply carved and one of them undecorated. The handles are inserted through
gouged slots that perforate the wood frame. There is no trace of lashing grooves on the handle or frame
to suggest that the handles were attached by any means other than friction, or perhaps an adhesive
that left no clear trace. It is possible that the handles are designed to be removed to make the drums
easier to store or transport between use. The handle that fits into the gouged hole of the larger drum
displays markings of an incised chevron design on its distal end, so that when the handle is put in place
it is in the interior of the drum frame. It is also interesting to note that the handles, unlike many other
drums in the Arctic (Gessain and Victor 1973:137-138), are not placed in the position where the frame is
joined to form a hoop. Among the several dozen Inuit drums we documented at the CMH, and scores
of other Western Arctic and Northern Eurasian drums we examined at the National Museum of Natural
History in Washington, D.C., we observed that handles are most often used to provide extra support at the frame joint (see also Gessain and Victor 1972:130-131). This difference helps to differentiate the Dorset drums from most other types of Arctic drums, although similar characteristics have been documented in other contexts, albeit rarely (e.g. Gessain and Victor 1973:131). However, the simplicity of the drum handles makes it very difficult to recognize Dorset drum handles if they become separated from their drums, unlike the often extravagantly carved handles created in other parts of the North American Arctic. Perhaps due to the simplicity of Dorset drum handle design, we were not able to positively identify any of the other wood or ivory fragments in the Button Point assemblage as handles. Of course, ethnographic examples of Arctic drum frames and handles have been known to have been made of other materials, such as baleen; therefore, it is quite possible that if the Dorset used other materials to construct drums we may have failed to identify them in Button Point assemblage.

In addition to our examination of the complete drums, we searched through all of the other wood fragments in the Button Point collection at the CMH and identified a total of 13 more drum fragments, which based on their varying dimensions represent several more drums that had been broken (Figure 4). Many of these were previously identified by earlier researchers and museum staff as drum parts, but we documented additional wooden fragments that were not recognized as such. We believe that even very short fragments can be positively identified as Dorset drum pieces based on the carefully constructed cross section of the frame. In cross section, Dorset drum frame fragments are rectangular with a flat base opposite a peaked and bevelled edge (Figure 5) where the frame articulates with what was likely a skin—the drum head—made from animal stomach, gut, or hide. The beveled edge may have been used to reduce surface contact with the drum head to produce a more resonant sound in such a small drum. The drum frames have a flat interior surface, while the flat exterior surface has a lashing groove that circumscribes the entirety of the drums with the exception of the area of the scarf joints.

The Button Point drum frame fragments showed some variability in size, but no matter how slight or substantial the frame, the unique cross section was present and all perforations were made by gouging rather than drilling; therefore, to the best of our knowledge, large and small drums did not differ significantly in construction methods, only in size. These characteristics were not seen in any of the historic Inuit drums at the CMH, and we believe it to be the best way to identify Dorset drums when drum fragments are found without good context.

3.2 Description of the Drum Markings

As mentioned in the previous section, several sets of incised lines were observed on the underside—defined as the side opposite where the drum skin was lashed—of both of the complete Dorset drum frames and four of the fragments (Figure 6). These marks were primarily roughly parallel sets of lines running perpendicular across the frame. In the case of the two complete drums, the marks are arranged in symmetrical patterns running clockwise and counterclockwise from the handle to the opposite edge of the frame. The sequence of marks count up from the handle and then back down again as you travel around the drum frame in either direction, with the exception that on both drums where the handle perforates the rim there is a set of three parallel incised marks.

On the larger drum, there are 13 sets of tick marks incised into the drum frame. They are spaced evenly around the circular frame like the numbers on a clock. The pattern does not appear to be random, instead it counts up from the handle towards the top of the drum, where two sets of eight tick marks are carved with a central line running through them, a design element reminiscent of the patterns seen on Dorset carvings of animals to suggest the spinal column or backbone of an animal. The pattern is symmetrical on both halves of the drum frame (Figure 7). Starting just above the handle, there are three tick marks. If you go clockwise or counterclockwise, the next mark is a single tick mark, then a gap and two tick marks, a gap and three tick marks, a gap and four tick marks (probably), a gap and six tick marks, a gap and eight tick marks with a perpendicular line running through them, and then the pattern counts down again, eight ticks with a spinal column, six ticks, four ticks (probably), three ticks, two ticks, one tick, and then you are back at the handle.

The point where four tick marks may be located is damaged on one side of the drum and overlaps the scarf joint on the opposite edge. This damage is likely due to use wear from being struck with a drumstick. At least three tick marks can be seen in the damaged area and the reason that four marks is suggested here is because we think it would fit the sequence most harmoniously. If you count up from the handle by ones, then the sequence of marks expected is 1, 2, 3, and then 4. If you count the marks down from the top of the frame by twos, then the pattern would be 8, 6, and then 4. Both sequences suggest that 4 is a plausible number to fill in the sequence at that point.

On the smaller drum, we observed a similar ascending/descending sequence of incised lines, although the sequence only led to five tick marks, with a line running perpendicular through them rather than eight as on the larger drum. Beginning at the handle, we again saw three marks, then a gap and one mark, a gap and two marks, a gap and five marks with a line through and a gap, then another five marks with a line, another gap, two marks and a gap, then one mark and gap and we are back at the handle.
Figure 6. Detail of incised lines on the back of a Button Point Drum (PfFm-01:1749). Photo by Christopher B. Wolff. Canadian Museum of History.

Figure 7. The sequence of incised marks on the back of the drum frames. The main image is PfFm-01:1750 and the inset image is PfFm-01:1749 as it would appear with the opened ends overlapping and scarfed together.

3.3 Differences between Dorset and Inuit Drums

During the same visit to the Canadian Museum of History, we examined all of the Inuit drums in the Ethnographic collection. Due to time constraints, we did not measure every drum and instead focused on the general similarities and differences in their design and construction. The impression that we were left with after viewing both the archaeological and ethnographic collections was that the drums were clearly related, but like many other aspects of Dorset and Thule cultures, they developed independently along diverging paths.

The similarities between the ethnographic Inuit and Dorset drums we examined included the use of bent wood for the frame, the general circular shape of the drum frame, a single offset handle, the groove along the outside perimeter of the drum frame to lash the skin in place, the use of scarf joints to secure the ends of the frame together, and the presence of holes in the frames. These same features can be seen in the
possible Saqqaq drums from Disco Bay, Greenland (Grønnow 2012:65), suggesting these features are the result of relatively ancient drum manufacturing techniques, although the Saqqaq drums are more similar to the historic Canadian Inuit examples in diameter. Interestingly, more recent Greenland drums are generally closer in size to the Dorset drums rather than the ethnographic Canadian Inuit drums we examined. More research into the diachronic nature of this variation is needed to better understand how these differences arose. The differences that we observed were in the specifics of design and construction of each of these elements (Table 1). This is a non-metric analysis, however our cursory inspection suggested a few aspects of the Canadian Inuit drum forms which would benefit from a systematic analysis in the future.

Table 1: Characteristics of Dorset and Inuit Drum elements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drum Feature</th>
<th>Dorset</th>
<th>Canadian Inuit</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bent Wood Frame</td>
<td>Rectangular cross-section with bevelled edge</td>
<td>Rectangular cross-section with rounded edges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circular shape</td>
<td>Small diameter</td>
<td>Large diameter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single offset handle</td>
<td>Inserted through a gouged hole in the frame</td>
<td>Lashed to the outside of the frame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scarf Joints</td>
<td>Placement of the scarf joints around the edge of the frame, away from the handle</td>
<td>Overlapping and often reinforced joints directly under the handle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holes in the Frame</td>
<td>Gouged holes</td>
<td>Drilled holes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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4 Interpretation of the Button Point Drums

The Dorset drums of Button Point raise many questions concerning Late Dorset life. One aspect of the Button Point drums that has largely been overlooked in previous work is the site location. We believe that the coastal setting of the site is significant for two reasons; first, coastal erosion is what initially revealed the site to local people and, secondly, the primary source of wood in the area would have been driftwood. Button Point is the southeasternmost point of Bylot Island and is located at the confluence of three driftwood carrying ocean currents; the Greenland current in the east carries wood north from Europe and would also pick up wood carried south through Smith Sound from the Beaufort gyre. In the vicinity of Bylot Island, this current meets the east flowing current carrying wood from the western arctic through Lancaster Sound (Dyke et al. 1997). These currents transport driftwood into the region from North America, Europe and Asia (Dyke et al. 1997).

In the context of much of the Arctic, wood can be conceptualized by its peoples as a marine resource rather than a terrestrial resource. Indeed, archaeologist William Taylor (1971-1972) and art historian Emily Auger (2005:74) have suggested that driftwood may have played a central role in crafting religious objects, not only because of how easily it can be worked, but because of its association with the sea. In discussing Taylor’s assessment of the importance of the marine context of wood used to create drums and other shamanistic paraphernalia found at Button Point, Auger (2005:75) says, “This fact may well have caused the Dorset to consider wood as a material specially provided for religious objects.” This does not mean that other materials, such as ivory and certain types of stone did not have religious significance (see e.g. Betts et al. 2015; MacCrae 2013; Swinton 1967; Taçon 1983), but only suggests the possibility that driftwood had particular importance for certain types of religious objects among the Dorset that lived so far north of the treeline and that may have never seen a standing tree.

In addition to the importance of the coastal location of the Dorset drums, it is important to consider the roles that drums play in ritual and shamanism among many northern societies. As discussed above, drums have likely been a central component of northern shamanic traditions for millennia, perhaps at least as early as the Saqqaq culture (ca. 2,400-900 B.C.) in Greenland (see Grønnow 2012), and continue to be so today. In the Canadian Arctic, artifacts belonging to the Dorset Palaeoeskimo culture, especially the carvings and other artistic pieces left by the Late Dorset culture, are often interpreted as holding important clues to the shamanistic nature of the society. Many of these artifacts contain design elements that suggest greater symbolic meaning. Specifically, Maxwell suggested that Button Point was a ceremonial centre and painted the following picture;
“In the springtime as the warm sun was returning, the seals basking on drifting ice waiting to be stalked, and the narwhal returning, it is easy to imagine nighttime ceremonies where rhythmic chants and drumbeats restored the sacred balance of nature. In the dimly lit houses, shamans, frighteningly masked, would manipulate little figures for magical protection from the only predators dangerous to humans - the giant polar bear and humans who were not part of the kinship web.” (Maxwell 1985: 228).

One of the most common design elements that appears in Dorset artistic traditions is the incised representation of a skeleton, which archaeologists refer to as the X-ray skeletal motif (see e.g. Betts et al. 2015; Maxwell 1985:162, Schledermann 1990:248,277). It has been suggested that some of the Late Dorset use of these skeletal motifs are connected with transformations between death and rejuvenation of humans and animals. These skeletal motifs, sometimes thought to be an abstract representation of the spinal column (Grønnow 2012:63; Meldgaard 1959:13-14), are found on naturalistic animal carvings, but also on abstract carvings and other objects. It is commonly thought that many Dorset carvings were religious or shamanistic in nature and some of the representations suggest that humans, most likely shamans, could transform themselves into animals or vice versa, or could somehow embody the abilities or characteristics of certain animals. There are figures in Dorset art that appear to depict people transforming into animals (LeMoine et al. 1995), most notably polar bears (Betts et al. 2015). Moreover, the skeletal motif widely used as a design element by many northern societies has often been linked to this transformation and described as a symbolic representation of how a shaman could enter a trance-like state, strip off their own skin down to their skeleton, and then redress themselves in the skin of the animal that they want to change into. Such transformative processes are a common part of spiritual beliefs among small-scale hunting-gathering groups around the world (Guenther 1999). Moreover, we know by analogy with later Inuit groups and other cultures with shamans that rhythmic drumming and chanting can be used to induce a trance-like state. Dorset drums could have filled a similar role.

As described in a previous section, the undersides of the complete Button Point drum frames, as well as some of the drum fragments, have incised lines ornamenting the frame. The patterns of marks on each complete drum frame are slightly different, but they both create a sequence that counts up symmetrically from the handle (marked with 3 lines) around the left and right edge of the frame towards the far side of the drum, culminating in an incised set of lines that resemble a skeletal motif of either eight (large drum) or five (small drum) tick marks. It is unclear whether this was meant to be two separate sequences that lead up to the opposite side of the drum, or if it was meant to be ‘read’ by circumnavigating the frame up to the skeletal motifs and then back down to the handle. How can we interpret this sequence?

One literal interpretation could be to read the markings musically or mnemonically, either as counting out drum beats or a cycle of songs to be played during a ceremony or ritual. Within the context of shamanism, the marks could be marking out a progression from a normal (human) state of being to a trance-like state where the shaman or the audience is transported or transformed. We find it intriguing that the three marks on the drum frames are placed just above the handle at the point where the drummer makes contact with the instrument. Is it just coincidence that on the wooden face masks from Button Point there are similar sets of three incised lines where the strap to hold the mask in place would have been attached (Figure 8)? It is possible that the three parallel lines are associated with the point of contact between the sacred object and the practitioner. Perhaps the three lines represent the humanness of the shaman. Opposite the handle of the drum frames, we see the skeletal motif represented on the frame rim, perhaps marking that moment of transformation, spiritual travel to another plane, or some other sort of climax of ritual or song. Perhaps in between we have a sequence counting up from a normal state of being to the moment of transformation and then back down again to the human realm. The fact that similar skeletal motifs found on Dorset polar bear and other animal effigies are found on the drums’ frames and along the sides of the masks from Button Point, could suggest some connection between Dorset shamans and animal transformations. Clearly, polar bears are important animals with spiritual connotations based on their frequent representations within Dorset artistic traditions where they can be seen in poses that suggest human-animal transformation and/or connectivity (Betts et al. 2015; LeMoine et al. 1995). Likewise, the incised chevron design on the handle of the larger of the two drums can be seen repeated on polar bear effigies from other Dorset sites across...
Instruments of Change

the Canadian Arctic (Betts et al. 2015; LeMoine et al. 1995; Taçon 1983). These images and designs make it tempting to suggest that the masks and the drums were part of a set of objects used in shamanistic rituals involving polar bears; however, as intriguing as this possibility is, we acknowledge that they are just one animal that is represented in Dorset art that are decorated with similar x-ray motifs. More study is needed to connect the drums with a particular religious practice.

Figure 8. Incised marks on the left lateral edge of one of two complete masks (PFm-01:1772-1777) found at Button Point. There are sets of five marks with a perpendicular line running through them, similar to the skeletal motifs seen on animals and the marks seen on the drums. Three incised lines mark the gouged hole that would have been fit with a leather thong to attach the mask to the wearer’s head. Photo by Christopher B. Wolff. Canadian Museum of History.

5 Conclusions

The Button Point drums and drum fragments from Bylot Island, Nunavut, Canada have distinct attributes that we believe identify them as Late Dorset drums, despite some problems with site context. What appear to be simple instruments at first glance become imbued with possible religious symbolism on closer examination. Within the context of a shamanistic society, the markings on the drums from Button Point may take on a transformative meaning and even the simple driftwood that they are constructed from, a gift foraged from the sea, takes on possible religious significance beyond a simple building material. It is unfortunate that more Dorset drums have not been recovered; however, with this new study we have begun to understand the distinct attributes of Dorset drum construction that will help future researchers identify them more securely if found. We do, however, acknowledge that the vast range of the Dorset people and the documented variation within their material culture, both chronologically and geographically, may indicate variation among Dorset drum manufacturing techniques as well. Therefore, much more research is needed to test our nascent typology. In the near future we are planning further research on roughly contemporaneous examples of drum traditions from throughout the North American Arctic, Greenland, and Northeast Asia to examine how they compare and contrast with the Dorset drums in order to better understand historical relationships between the Dorset and other cultures.

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