



BIOARCHAEOLOGY, BIOETHICS, AND THE BEOTHUK: BALANCING THE INTERESTS OF JUSTICE AND KNOWLEDGE

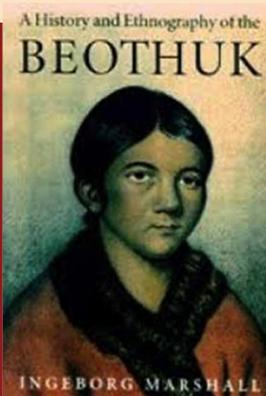
Meghan Ryan, MHE (candidate); Daryl Pullman, PhD

ABSTRACT

The Beothuk of Newfoundland and Labrador are believed to have become extinct in the 19th century. However, skeletal remains of a number of Beothuk individuals are housed in various museums. The most famous are the skulls of Chief Nonosabasut and his wife Demasduit which reside currently in the National Museum of Scotland.

There has been an on-going debate in recent years about whether all these remains should be repatriated to Newfoundland for burial, or whether they should be preserved for future study. The interests of justice would seem to favour the former course, while the interests of knowledge favour the latter. In any case, who should speak for the Beothuk if they are in fact extinct?

We argue for a compromise position that would see the famous skulls repatriated to the current native peoples of Newfoundland and Labrador but which would nevertheless preserve some ancient remains for future study.



WHO WERE THE BEOTHUK?

- The Beothuk were hunter-gatherer inhabitants of Newfoundland who, through illness and conflict with European settlers throughout the 17th-18th century, became virtually extinct
- Shanawdithit, the last known member of the Beothuk died in 1829 of tuberculosis



Proclamation of Governor John Byron, 8 July 1769

"Whereas it has been represented to the King, that the subjects residing in the said Island of Newfoundland, instead of cultivating such a friendly intercourse with the savages inhabiting that island . . . do treat the said savages with the greatest inhumanity, and frequently destroy them without the least provocation or remorse. . . I do express his abhorrence of such inhuman barbarity, and I do strictly enjoin and require all His Majesty's subjects to live in amity and brotherly kindness with the native savages of the said island of Newfoundland."

"Of all forms of cultural appropriation practiced in the last century or two, it would be hard to think of any that has caused greater pain or offense to subaltern communities than the removal and retention of their human physical remains for purposes of study or exhibition."

~ Geoffrey Scarre, philosopher/ethicist

Justice

"Repatriation is just the right thing to do" --Misel Joe (current Chief of the Conne River Mi'kmaq of Newfoundland)

Excerpt from John Harries':
" . . . all agree that by the afternoon, the Beothuk, maybe 14 of them, maybe more, were running and the Englishmen were running after them. Demasduit was falling behind and the younger Peyton . . . made after her. Then Nonosabasut, described as a 'powerful looking fellow' . . . came up to them. . . The details of what happened bend, twist and fracture. Shots were fired. We know that. How many and by whom, well that is disputed. But shots were fired and the man [Nonosabasut] fell and died on the ice."

Knowledge

"Repatriation would be a mistake as it would result in a tremendous loss to science." Ingeborg Marshall (world authority on the Beothuk)

"We should be learning from skeletons, not reburying them—they are the remains of people still contributing to humanity and its knowledge of itself."

Dr. Richard Foley, Leverhulme Centre for Human Evolutionary Studies, University of Cambridge

"...we need to promote the long-term preservation of skeletal collections and in this way ensure that future generations will have the opportunity to learn from them and in this way know about and understand that history."

– Phillip Walker (archaeologist)



WHO SPEAKS FOR THE BEOTHUK?

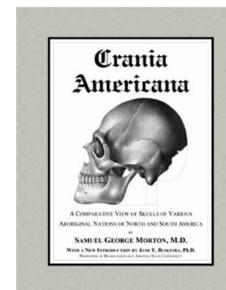
New rules for NAGPRA now give tribes authority to claim unaffiliated remains that cannot be linked to an existing people. However, Canada has no such legislation.

A POTENTIAL COMPROMISE

- Beothuk extinction
 - Repatriation of all remains would effectively curtail any future investigations as to the Beothuk past and relations to other peoples
- Many aboriginal representatives acknowledge there is room for negotiation with regard to repatriation and reburial
 - Willie Ermine's notion of an "ethical lodge" that occupies the space between the values at tension
 - Sarah Tarlow: ". . . providing materials for the cultural after-lives of past peoples."

WHY TAKE ONLY THE SKULLS?

- Demasduit captured March 1819
- She died of tuberculosis in January of 1820
- Her body was returned to the place of her capture where a funeral hut containing the remains of several others including her husband was found
- William Cormack (founder of the *Beothick Institution*) retrieved the skulls of Nonosabasut and Demasduit in 1827, and shipped them to his mentor at the University of Edinburgh
- Perhaps only the skulls were taken to be used in the new study of phrenology and craniology which was popular in the early 19th century
- American physician Samuel G. Morton, the most influential proponent of this pseudo-science had studied at Edinburgh around the time when Cormack had studied there
 - " . . . Races are not varieties of humankind, but rather separate inferior species." - Morton
- Such thinking helped to justify both slavery and the extermination of native peoples



TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

- Federal and provincial governments should be making formal appeals to the government of Scotland for repatriation of the skulls of Nonosabasut and Demasduit
 - Return to local aboriginal representatives to be treated in a manner deemed appropriate
- Establish a process for negotiation with regard to the disposition of remaining skeletons that gives due weight to the continuing scientific interests



Statue of Shanawdithit