

Plano culture which evolved on the high plains drifted northward around 8,000 years ago to exploit the caribou and bison herds that were gradually occupying the territory being released by the continental glacier. In Keewatin District the Plano culture retained a relatively pure form but further to the west it appears to have intermingled with indigenous northern cultures. In the southern half of Keewatin District and southeast Mackenzie District the descendants of the Plano caribou hunters were forced out of the area around 1500 B.C. by a climatic deterioration that pushed the treeline as much as 200 miles further south. The area was largely unoccupied except for a transient appearance of an interior-adapted caribou-hunting Eskimo culture that had penetrated the south in conjunction with the cooling climate. With this minor exception the southern half of the area was unoccupied until shortly before the beginning of the Christian era when a central Mackenzie District complex, that would eventually give rise to the historic eastern Athabaskan bands, occupied the region as well as the northern portions of the Prairie Provinces.

With the exception of the aforementioned penetration of Eskimo hunters deep into the interior around 1000 B.C., these cultures were Indian. In the west they gave rise to the Athabaskan-speaking Kutchin, Han, Tutchone, Tagish, Inland Tlingit and Kaska of the Yukon. Their linguistic and cultural kinsmen to the east in Mackenzie and Keewatin Districts included the Hare, Mountain, Bear Lake, Slave, Dogrib, Yellowknife and Chipewyan.



Canada's oldest artifact. This serrated scraper, found in northern Yukon Territory, was made by whittling and notching the upper end of a caribou leg bone. It was used to work animal skins. Since it was deposited the specimen has completely fossilized. A sample cut from the shaft was dated to around 27,000 years ago by the radiocarbon method. (*Archaeological Survey of Canada*)

The cultures that occupied the northern coastal regions of northern Canada are believed to be Eskimo. By approximately 3000 B.C., a distinctive Alaskan culture based on the seasonal exploitation of sea mammals and caribou spread eastward to occupy the northern coastal regions of the Yukon and Northwest Territories, Greenland, northern Manitoba and Quebec, and Labrador; their descendants eventually occupied the entire Newfoundland coast. As already mentioned, during the climatic deterioration following 1500 B.C. some of these Eskimo hunters, referred to collectively as the Arctic Small Tool tradition, penetrated the interior in search of the barrenland caribou herds and their distinctive tools have even been recovered from the northern fringes of Saskatchewan.

By 900 A.D., warming trends altered the ecology to favour the rapid migration of an Alaskan group of Eskimos called Thule and the Arctic Small Tool tradition population (Dorset) was replaced and absorbed by the newcomers. The Thule Eskimos were capable of exploiting the rich whale and other sea mammal resources and were eventually distributed across the northern coastal areas of the Yukon and Northwest Territories, Greenland, northern Manitoba and Quebec, and Labrador. With the gradual rise of land in the north and a shallowing of the water, the large whales disappeared and the Thule Eskimo developed into regional groups that represent the Central, Labrador, and Greenland Eskimos of the historic period. The Eskimos who historically occupied the mouth of the Mackenzie River, though related to this Thule expansion, show their closest connection with groups from the interior of western Alaska.