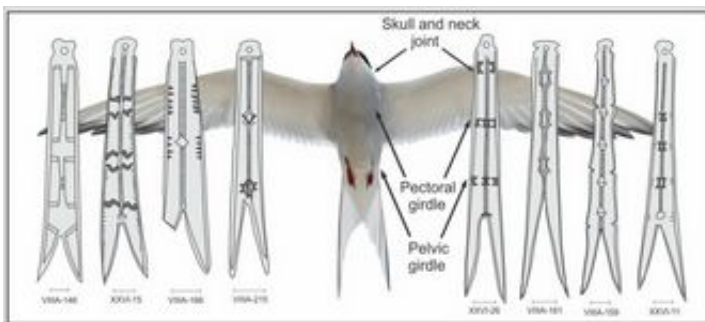


# Birds may have inspired Beothuk beliefs: Discovery sheds light on the spiritual life of an extinct Aboriginal group

April 4 2013, by Jamie Hanlon



This illustration shows how pendants found in Beothuk burial sites in Newfoundland resemble physical features of the Arctic tern. UAlberta researcher Todd Kristensen says the findings suggest the Beothuk believed birds carried the souls of the dead to the afterlife.

(Phys.org) —Digging around historical Aboriginal sites in Newfoundland led a University of Alberta researcher to find clues potentially linking birds to the religious beliefs of a now-extinct First Nations group.

Anthropology doctoral student Todd Kristensen and a colleague originally started searching for remains that would help them understand the [dietary habits](#) of the Beothuk. But a discovery of a significant collection of [bird bones](#) led them to trace a line between the bone piles

and a number of bird-shaped pendants that were also found within burial sites.

"I think it's almost the discovery of a new religion because so little had been known about the Beothuk," says Kristensen.

## **Artwork provides keys**

A collection of pendants representing various bird parts also led the researchers to consider the meaning behind similar bird illustrations. Kristensen suggests that the images, which feature only certain anatomical parts such as wings and webbed feet, may be a symbolic representation of travel. Pendants with bars engraved would be representative of bones and a connection to death, he says—an assertion supported by similar findings among the remnants of other ancient coastal cultures.

"Bones mean death, flesh means life. When you depict both of them together, it implies a transformation stage," says Kristensen. "It's implying this movement from one world to the next, like death."

## **A wing and a prayer**

Studying the burial remains, located on small islands, the researchers noted several items, including the pendants, that led them to believe the Beothuk would transport their dead ancestors to the island resting place as a sort of departure terminal for the soul. Kristensen believes that birds played a significant role in Beothuk culture, including the notion that the feathered creatures ferried the spirits of the dead from the island.

"There's the central hypothesis that birds would have carried souls of the dead to the afterlife," he said. "It's an interesting belief that we hope

brings awareness to the diversity of our thought processes, of human cognition."

## Young country, old history

Kristensen says that outside of Eastern Canada, few Canadians know much about the Beothuk people. He says the stories and history of the country's indigenous peoples in many ways rival the records of human history in the more conventionally popular places such as Europe and the Middle East. As he sees it, it is his role to uncover that history and share his findings with the country and the world.

"I want Canadians to continue to learn about the Beothuk and appreciate who they were."

The study was published in the February issue of the *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*.

**More information:** [journals.cambridge.org/action/ ...  
splayJournal?jid=CAJ](https://journals.cambridge.org/action/splayJournal?jid=CAJ)

Provided by University of Alberta

Citation: Birds may have inspired Beothuk beliefs: Discovery sheds light on the spiritual life of an extinct Aboriginal group (2013, April 4) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-04-birds-beothuk-beliefs-discovery-spiritual.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--