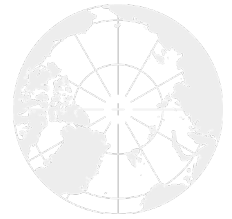




Photo: Ole Magnus Rapp

Signehamna, Svalbard. Photo: Ole Magnus Rapp

Cultural Remains



Stores from the Past

Cultural remains are traces of human history, telling stories of survival, lost cultures, and past times. In the Arctic, they reflect life under harsh conditions shaped by the environment. When exploring these remains, handle them with care to preserve them for future generations.

The Arctic coast gradually became ice-free following the last Ice Age. Alaska and the Siberian coast became ice-free 20,000 years ago, while northern Canada, Greenland, and Svalbard became ice-free 10,000 years ago. The earliest traces of Arctic Indigenous peoples date back 7,000 years in northern Canada and 4,500 years in Greenland.

The first peoples of the Arctic relied on seasonal prey spread over large areas. Hunters had to migrate to take advantage of these resources. Some had a primary community and moved seasonally to different hunting grounds, while others migrated in a yearly circuit depending on the location of their prey.

Indigenous peoples were not the only ones to harvest the Arctic's natural resources. Opportunistic hunters and fishermen from surrounding areas also traveled north. The Vikings established settlements in Greenland in the 10th century, and in the 17th century, West Europeans visited Svalbard for seasonal whaling. Russia sent hunters to Novaya Zemlya for political reasons.

Russian and Norwegian trappers and hunters later overwintered in Svalbard but did not settle permanently. In recent centuries, the Arctic's mineral resources attracted mining companies, and a few explorers and scientists were drawn north by the unexplored regions.





Photo: Ólafur Rafnar Ólafsson

Thule homestead, Greenland.



Photo: Jan Morten Bjørnbakk

Crozierpynten, Svalbard.



Photo: Kelvin Murray

Beechey Island, Nunavut, Canada.



Photo: Ole Magnus Rapp

Smeerenburg, Svalbard.



Photo: Hans Harmsen

The Viking age church at Hvalsey, Qaqortoq, Greenland.



Photo: Georg Bangjord

Skulls and bones from walrus at Kapp Lee, Svalbard.

Characteristics of Arctic Cultural Remains

The diverse use of the Arctic is reflected in the cultural remains we find today. Indigenous peoples, with their nomadic lifestyle, left cultural remains such as rocky home foundations, stone hearths, small cairns to guide reindeer herders, graves marked with stones, and places of religious significance. Some of these early cultural remains still hold religious importance, and should be visited with great respect. The Arctic climate helps preserve organic materials well, and remains of considerable age can even be found on the ground or semi-buried.

The remains from early hunting and trapping activities are modest in size and form, often difficult to see. One reason is that vegetation has covered them over time. Cultural remains from later periods are easier to spot. These are typically found along the shores, while early hunters utilized other ice-free areas. Later remains include standing buildings, ruins, graveyards, mine openings, quays, rail tracks, shipwrecks, and sites of industrial exploitation of natural resources. You may also come across military or abandoned scientific or weather installations from the 20th century

“Buildings were generally simple constructions designed for temporary use and were vulnerable to disintegration over time. However, it was common practice to repurpose them when possible. Human activities tended to concentrate near shorelines, often taking advantage of existing buildings or structures. In Svalbard, for example, 17th-century whaling stations were later used by 20th-century mining companies. Russian hunting cabins from the 18th century, along with scientific stations and mining barracks, were also repurposed by Norwegian hunters in the 20th century.

Guidelines

- Educate guests prior to landings to raise awareness of appropriate behaviour for heritage site visits.
- Keep group size within a manageable number and do not leave guests unattended at the site.
- Always leave cultural remains as they were when you arrived.
- Watch from the perimeter and walk around and not between or on the cultural remains.
- On and around cultural remains: do not touch, move, dig, add, or in any way disturb the ground and what is on it.
- What may look like waste at a cultural heritage site are often cultural remains and should be left untouched as where they are.
- Be mindful of the impact to sensitive vegetation, including wet and moist ground. Avoid making new paths.
- If you do walk on old quays, foot paths, rail tracks, stone dumps at mines, and in all kind of mines, be careful not to start soil erosion or cause harm.

Beware

- Cultural remains will gradually degrade and change over time. Natural phenomenon such as avalanches, landslides, animals and gradually increasing temperatures in parts of the Arctic can represent risks to cultural remains.
- With this in mind it is important to remember that visits to cultural heritage sites can cause harm and speed up natural decay. Stepping on an artefact can break it, and moving an item can reduce its historic value.
- Anyone visiting cultural heritage sites should do their utmost to ensure minimum impact and remember that cultural remains are signs of the life and death of past inhabitants and should be treated with great respect.
- Cultural remains may be buildings, constructions and crafts. They can also be indicative of human graves including crosses and other grave markings, bones and bone fragments. Remains might also include spring guns and animal traps as well as skeleton of animals and more.
- These guidelines are general; additional regulations may apply in some areas, including special permits and archaeologist supervision when visiting sites.



Grave headstones from the 1845 Franklin expedition, Beechey Island, Nunavut, Canada.

Cultural remains may be protected by law, with regulations varying by country. Generally, it is prohibited to damage, dig up, move, remove, alter, cover, conceal, or disfigure structures, sites, or movable historical objects. In some areas, items as recent as 1945 are automatically protected as cultural remains. Protection can also extend to more recent remains through specific laws. Some sites and objects, such as graves, slaughter sites, and crosses, may be protected regardless of their age. To be on the safe side, leave everything as it is when visiting the Arctic.