

Ph.d.-defense – Emma Vitale

Thursday, October 22nd, 2026, at 13:00 Emma Vitale from the Institute of Health & Nature, Ilisimatusarfik, and Globe Institute, University of Copenhagen will defend her PhD thesis: *"Pulling together: The history of Arctic sled technology and human-dog interactions"*

Assessment committee:

- Rector, associate professor, Mari Kleist, Ilisimatusarfik, Greenland
- Associate Professor, Luise Ørsted Brandt, Globe Institute, University of Copenhagen, Denmark
- Professor, Peter J. Whitridge, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada

Supervisors:

- Professor, Morten Meldgaard, Ilisimatusarfik and Globe Institute, University of Copenhagen
- Assistant professor, Tatiana R. Feuerborn, Globe Institute, University of Copenhagen
- Research Professor Emeritus, Bjarne Grønnow, Arctic Institute, Denmark
- Anders J. Hansen, Globe Institute, University of Copenhagen

Program:

Auditorium at Campus Ilimmarfik, Thursday October 22nd, 2026, at 13:00 (Greenland time)

- Introduction and welcome by the moderator of the Defence (max. 10 min.)
- Presentation of the PhD thesis by Emma Vitale (max. 1 hour)
- Break (15 min.)
- The Assessment Committee:
 - Luise Ørsted Brandt (max. 25 min.)
 - Peter J. Whitridge (max. 25 min.)
 - Mari Kleist (max. 25 min.)
- Ex auditorio – Questions from the audience (max. 15 min.)
- Conclusion of the PhD defence
- The Assessment Committee's evaluation of the defence, followed by a reception

The defence will be conducted in English.

Please note that the doors will be closed during the defence proceedings, and it will not be possible to enter or leave the auditorium during this time.

The defence can be accessed online via the following [Teams Link](#)

Copies of the dissertation are available at the Ilisimatusarfik Library.



Summary

The thesis contributes a comprehensive, multidisciplinary understanding of the Arctic dog sled technocomplex, by providing new methodological tools, experimental insights, and theoretical perspectives that illuminate how humans, dogs, materials, and environments have co-shaped mobility, technology, and cultural development in the Arctic over the long term. This thesis investigates the prehistoric and historical development of Arctic dog sled culture, with particular emphasis on Greenlandic sled traditions.

Through this focus, the thesis examines the origins, technological evolution, and cultural significance of dog sledding in the Arctic. The study aims to trace how human–dog cooperation, mobility systems, and sled technologies have developed from early Arctic migrations to the present, by using archaeological, historical and technological analysis, ethnographic comparison based on interviews and observations of contemporary sled dog practices, and experimental reconstruction. The research examines how material culture, technological knowledge, and interspecies relationships shaped dog sledding practices across Greenland and how these systems evolved through shifting ecological and socio-economic conditions.

The findings demonstrate that sled related artefacts can be systematically identified through a methodological framework that defines technological markers connecting dog equipment, sled components, and dog remains, and reveal that reconstructing a historical sled makes visible the embodied knowledge, workload, and technological principles required for its construction. Additionally, a case study of a sled from 1818 CE made of bones shows that the sled reflects a unique episode of Inughuit isolation in the High Arctic and material scarcity; that changes in sled construction correspond to shifts in resource strategies following the establishment of the Thule trading station. Generally, in Greenland dog sled material culture played and plays a central role in sled dog domestication, interspecies collaboration, and co-evolution, with sled dogs functioning as living technologies embedded in Arctic human–environment systems. The thesis contributes a comprehensive, multidisciplinary understanding of the Arctic dog sled technocomplex, by providing new methodological tools, experimental insights, and theoretical perspectives that illuminate how humans, dogs, materials, and environments have co-shaped mobility, technology, and cultural development in the Arctic over long term.

