

THE 2011 FIELD SEASON AT NORTH ISLAND-1 (FeAx-3)

Marianne Stopp

Historical Research Branch, Parks Canada

The site of North Island-1 is at the mouth of St. Michael's Bay, southern Labrador, and consists of two Inuit sod houses and their middens. The houses were inhabited beginning from sometime in the late 1500s /early 1600s until the mid-1700s. This year's field season was a success but it was nevertheless compromised by more stormy weather than in previous years. The focus of my work at North Island has been to examine my 2002 proposition that Inuit presence in southern Labrador was year-round and not dictated solely by access to European goods. Inuit subsistence during the very early contact period is also of interest as is the nature of Inuit-European relations. A complex picture of all three is emerging as analysis moves forward.

In 2011, I was particularly interested in learning more about structural aspects of House B. Although only the lowermost levels remain, what became evident was that forethought and planning had gone into the house's construction. An entrance passage was finally confirmed after several years of wondering whether the entrance was a traditional passage or a European-style door. By the end of the season, a line of beach stones extending from the main living area to the midden area was fully uncovered. The stones are laid directly on bedrock and form a feature approximately 3 m in length that slopes towards the east. The downslope would have created a cold-trap effect to prevent cold air from reaching the house interior. Remains of a passage tunnel were not discernable on the surface and it is possible that the last occupation of the house had a shorter sod entrance or a European-type door while the passage way uncovered this summer dates to an earlier occupation.

A small activity area or alcove was also

identified to one side of the entrance passage. From the amount of charcoal found in one corner, this may be where cooking took place. Many scattered wood fragments in the alcove test units are difficult to interpret they appear too small to be structural, and may be non-cultural intrusions.

To learn more about wall construction, test units were placed into what remains of the lower courses of the house walls. The south and east walls of the house consist of sods placed onto bedrock. The bedrock slopes upwards on these sides to create a natural bowl into which the sod house was fitted. Along the north side of House B, the wall again consists of densely packed sods that appear to have been supported on the inside by vertical wood uprights. The east wall, however, was slightly different from the others. Its lower course, on either side of the entryway, consists of sods into which beach rocks was placed, probably as a form of buttressing to prevent collapse. Because the natural downward slope of the bedrock is towards this wall, any water run-off and gravitational pull is in that direction. We had ample evidence of flow direction after several rainfalls during the season when the house floor remained wet but not sodden but the end of the entrance passage and the midden were constantly marshy.

House floor construction was also of interest. The rock jumble overlying the house floor was removed in one section of the interior to reveal carefully laid flooring. This too was removed to show that much of the floor paving, which is all of beach rock, was originally laid directly atop the bedrock, except for flooring stones near the entrance that were levelled with a thin layer of soil. The fact that house floor rests on bedrock also illustrates that a quantity of soil was first removed from the house area before the house interior was



Figure 1 House B, North Island-1 Inuit sod house, 17th-18th century (photo M. Stopp).

constructed.

One aspect of the house that will always remain a puzzle is its roofline. Descriptions and photos of 19th century sod houses in Labrador confirm that at this later period there is no single roofing style. Some early sod houses have a gabled roofline, while others are hipped or rounded. All seem to have wooden beams covered by substantial peat sods. In some parts of the Arctic, Inuit used whale ribs and other parts of the whale skeleton to support and shape the house roof. The St. Michael's Bay sod houses give no clues on how the roof was built. The thin layer of soil over the entire house suggests that roofing sods were not very thick. No wooden struts or beams have been found although these may have been salvaged at some time in the past. The wood uncovered to date is short and appears to have collapsed inwards from mainly the north wall. One very unusual piece of wood in the southwest corner of the house is

a nearly complete plank resting atop the sloping bedrock. It may have formed part of the sleeping platform but could also have been part of the roof or wall construction. An initial identification by D. Teasdale, MUN, suggests that this piece is of softwood, which raises the possibility that Inuit were planing local wood.

Although the artefacts found this year were fewer, there were some unique pieces. We now have two European spoon bowls from the house that represent cultural transformative processes. A small hole pierced through the edge of each bowl indicates that it was suspended as decoration, possibly from a women's amauti. Such artefacts illustrate the changing symbolic meaning of material objects as they move from one culture to another. Another artefact of great interest is a translucent, oval bead with a pale opalescent or lavender colour tone. It is a type known as a wound bead, made by winding a strand of molten glass around a heated wire until the

desired shape was reached, then slipped off the wire once cool. Bead expert K. Karklins, Parks Canada, has confirmed that it fits within the time of house use, dating to around AD 1740 and possibly as early as AD 1670.

A series of surveys were completed this season in an attempt to locate more Inuit sod houses in St. Michael's Bay. Many islands at the mouth of the bay were checked following tips from local residents and by re-visiting places first examined during my 1991 survey. Most puzzling, and quite unfortunate, is the fact that no new sod houses were found. At the very end of the field season, a revisit was made to putative sod house depressions first recorded in Pinware Cove during the 1986 survey of the coast from Point St. Charles to Cape Charles. Although an extremely rich early 19th century occupation was recorded, test pits in the depressions could not confirm that these features were even cultural.

In 2009, I sought the help of a shellfish analyst with the intent of learning more about the rich mussel shell middens associated with each of the houses at North Island. These middens are unique for southern Labrador and demonstrate an intensive exploitation of mussels. The analysis was also unique and represents the first time that stable isotope and growth line analysis have been attempted with mussels in the Atlantic region. The recently completed analysis of archaeological specimens was done in collaboration with M. Burchell, McMaster University, and B. Schoene, Johannes Gutenberg University. The work required systematic collection of living species in the North Island region as well as collection of complete archaeological specimens where the shell edge was intact, which was a challenge due to the relatively friable nature of mussel shells, which are softer than clams. This study has shown that the collected specimens are reliable seasonality indicators and that they were harvested in the spring and in the autumn.

Faunal analysis of the 2011 collections

has recently been completed, again with the expert help of L. Swinarton, Laval University. The bones collected in 2011, as with the 2009 and 2010 samples overwhelmingly illustrate that the Inuit who lived at North Island exploited a wide-ranging, diverse range of species from the land, sea, and air. Seal species and birds, moreover, point to cold season occupation of the site. Swinarton has also noted that codfish remains are from extremely large fish, one of them at least 20 years old based on growth lines of the centrum. Cut marks are found on a range of bones, especially from seals and on the few caribou bones from the site and are, of course, indicators of butchery.

Finally, I am collaborating with C. Morris and D. Innes, MUN, in a study of codfish DNA and isotope analysis with the purpose of understanding changes in North Atlantic codfish populations and palaeoclimate. Most of the cod operculi from North Island have been sent for DNA analysis as part of this work. Communication and education are key elements of this CURA-SSHRC project. As in other years, I made all efforts to relay the results of my work and broader research to the residents of the coast through a series of nightly VHF radio broadcasts, also via a weekly column called "Field Notes" in *The Northern Pen*, and a talk during heritage celebrations at the L'Anse Amour lighthouse. A delightful movie of the field season was completed in the spring of 2011 by crewmember and doctoral student C. Arbour, MUN, which movie buffs can find at http://www.mun.ca/labmetis/cura_movies.html.

