CHOICE, SUBJECTIVITY, AND CONSEQUENCES IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

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THE REALITY OF ARCHEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

The archaeological site, as it frequently exists within the public imagination, is something isolated and confined to a discrete point in the past. Similarly, the excavating archaeologist is routinely thought of as impartial, inherently scientific, and comprehensively thorough. However, in the field, it is immediately clear that the reality is far more complicated. Decisions about what data is collected, its interpretation, and how its subsequent conclusions are presented, are a complicated product of logistical, methodological, and even ethical concerns. Choices made at any point in this process may have lasting outcomes potentially affecting not only future research possibilities, but also all present and future stakeholders. Using the Labrador Inuit site of Avertok as its case study, this poster explores these ideas and their implications. While definitive answers to such complicated issues are beyond its scope, this poster aims to educate on and encourage thinking about the process of how archaeological knowledge is collected, created, and shared.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE -- AN ISOLATED PLACE FROM A DISCREET POINT IN THE PAST?

The archaeological record – the traces left behind by past human activities – exists virtually everywhere; even under our feet right now. It is also always changing. This may be because a given group continues to use a certain place, because others have come to use it, or even because of natural environmental processes.

EXCAVATION -- HAS ARCHAEOLOGY ALWAYS BEEN DONE THE SAME WAY?

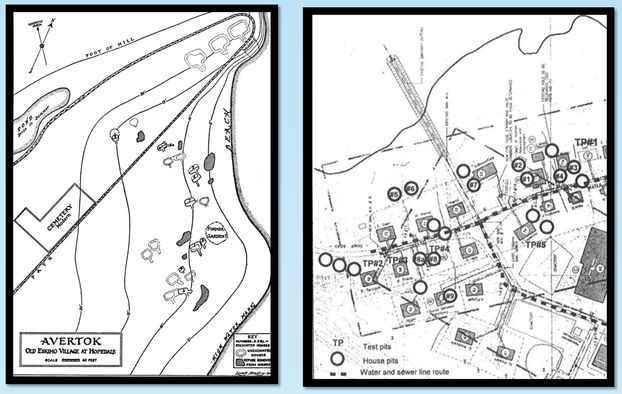
Archaeology is evolving. New technologies, methodologies, and ways of thinking allow questions not previously possible. Even excavation, archaeology's cornerstone, has changed in many significant ways such as the relationship between artifacts and context. Early excavators prioritized artifacts – frequently to the complete disregard of context – but it is now recognized that details like an artifact's precise location and the conditions of the soils around it may actually offer more information (Renfrew & Bahn 2004).

ARCHAEOLOGISTS – NEUTRAL REPORTER OR SUBJECTIVE STORYTELLER?

Archaeology is thoroughly intertwined with many other sciences and with the scientific method they are built on. However, archaeological "progress" should not be taken as a neutral, straight-forward process in which "facts" are further refined until they eventually become "absolute truths." Archaeology is an act of selective narrative constructions. Decisions about what to focus on, what to omit, and how to connect data points happen repeatedly at all project stages. And with excavation being fundamentally destructive, choice within archaeology frequently means permanent decisions about what can and cannot be known (Swain 2007).

STAKEHOLDERS -- DOES EVERYONE THINK AND CARE ABOUT ARCHAEOLOGY THE SAME WAY?

Archaeology matters to different people in different ways for different reasons. An important change over time has been increasing recognition of who can be regarded as a stakeholder (archaeologists, museums, governments, policymakers, Indigenous peoples, the public, etc.) and of how to ethically navigate competing stakeholders' needs. Archaeological narratives impact representations of the past and how Indigenous peoples are viewed. In extreme cases, this may even affect Indigenous self-identity due to limited access to information about a group's own past (Bryne & Tetehu 2013).



Two maps of Avertok: as it existed in 1934 and in 2007 (Bird 1945:130; Penney 2002:7).

Three previously visible sod houses now built over by a road (Bird 1945).

Excavating in 1934 and 2017 (Greenuptime 2011).

AVERTOK: A CASE STUDY FROM LABRADOR

Avertok, *The Place of Whales*, was a 16th-18th century Labrador Inuit whaling settlement located in what is now the Nunatsiavut Community of Hopedale. At its peak, it was estimated to have been home to close to 270 people. In 1782, Avertok then became the site of the Hopedale Moravian Mission of which several buildings still stand (Brice-Bennett 1977). In 1934, the archaeologist Junius Bird (1907-1982) excavated at Avertok and several sites nearby on behalf of New York's American Museum of Natural History (Bird 1945). His report, published in 1945, represented the first systematic excavations of Labrador Inuit sites and provided Archaeology with its first culture history of the Labrador Inuit. In 2017, the Canadian and Nunatsiavut Governments announced that they would pursue having Hopedale named Canada's first Inuit UNESCO World Heritage Site (Arsenault 2017). Consequently, at the requests of the Nunatsiavut and Hopedale Community Governments, multiple forms of archaeological investigations were carried out at Avertok and other nearby sites between 2017 and 2018 in order to create a more robust and nuanced understanding of Avertok and its role within Labrador Inuit lifeways.

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The Inuit who settled at Avertok were neither the location's first nor last inhabitants with others in the region including the Innu and Moravians (Kaplan 1983). Avertok was also never "abandoned," and today's Hopedale Residents are part of a tradition of continuous habitation. Archaeologically, Avertok is only one of the sites documented within Hopedale's boundaries. And while we may think of others like the Moravian Mission and Old Hopedale (a settlement of early Inuit Moravian converts) as separate from Avertok, it is far more likely that people moved fluidly between them. When excavating in 2017 and 2018, the realities of this complexity were obvious with the modern habitation obscuring the historic ones (build over) and difficulties determining where one site ended and another began.

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Bird's 1934 excavation serves as a particularly clear example of how archaeology in the early 1900s differed and the consequences those methodologies have for current research. Working on behalf of a museum seeking to expand its collection, in a matter of days Bird mapped and excavated 20 sod houses but recorded almost no details of provenience beyond which house artifacts belonged to (Bird 1945). Without that data, many things like understanding how space was used within these houses and the relationships between household members becomes nearly impossible. Furthermore, the 2017-2018 excavations found that the original Avertok settlement had been completely built over. So, while continued study at the site is possible, Bird's work represents what will likely be Avertok's only sod house excavations.

ARCHAEOLOGISTS – NEUTRAL REPORTER OR SUBJECTIVE STORYTELLER?

Bird's excavation is also a notable example of narrative creation through conspicuous choices. Bird did not collect faunal remains, and it has also been thought that he excluded European materials out of the (now recognized inaccurate) belief that they did not represent authentic Inuit culture (Arendt 2013). However, Bird's 1945 report is still regarded as a foundational document. It recorded the first culture history of the Labrador Inuit and, through a focus on sod house architecture, created the chronological typology system that would become a focal point of archaeological research in Labrador for decades.

STAKEHOLDERS – DOES EVERYONE THINK AND CARE ABOUT ARCHAEOLOGY THE SAME WAY?

The long-term goal of UNESCO status for Hopedale is important as a publicly recognized statement of value about Canada's Inuit heritage to domestic and global audiences (Ryan & Silvanto 2011). In this spirit, the 2017-2018 excavations followed a community archaeology approach with work carried out at the request of Hopedale officials and local students hired to participate. All results were shared at community meetings. By contrast, Bird's excavation was typical of the 1930s in that the people of Hopedale were not viewed as stakeholders or even informed of the materials being taken.

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MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY
NUNATSIAVUT kavamanga Government
ISER Institute of Social and Economic Research
NSTP PFSN
American Museum of Natural History
J.R. Smallwood Foundation
TRADITION+TRANSITION THE W. GARFIELD WESTON FOUNDATION
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada
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