



Searching for Mikak

Archaeologist uncovering story of first Labrador Inuit woman to earn a place in recorded history

story by Amelia Fay

The story of Mikak's life in eighteenth century Labrador is a fascinating one. As soon as I read about her I was hooked on continuing

my research in Labrador and uncovering more details about her life.

Essentially, my job as an archaeologist is to tell stories about the past based on the artifacts we find in the ground and, in some cases, by reading old writ-

ten documents. For me, archaeology is not just about the interesting things we find, but about the people who made and used them on a day-to-day basis. What creates a good archaeological 'story' is the knowledge of who lived at the sites

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we excavate, and I happen to be lucky enough to know who lived at the site I'm excavating on Black Island, near Nain. The sod house, which is the main focus of my "archaeological story", was inhabited by Mikak and her family in 1776, as recorded by a Moravian missionary census.

Mikak first enters the historical record at a time when the British and French were fighting over Labrador's great resources, and relations between the Inuit and Europeans had hostile tendencies. Mikak and her young son, Tootac, were captured in 1767 by the British, just north of Chateau Bay, in southern Labrador, and were eventually taken to London, England. Hugh Palliser, the Governor of Newfoundland at the time, was impressed by her knowledge of the Labrador Inuit and he quickly realized that he could use Mikak to help him build friendly relations. While in London Mikak met, and once again impressed, many members of high society.

She was also reintroduced to the Moravian missionary Jens Haven, whom she had met previously in Labrador. It has been said that partly because of her interest in the Moravians, that Mikak assisted the missionaries in their goal of acquiring a land grant for their mission stations. Mikak returned to Labrador in 1769 where she married a man named Tuglavina, who was heavily involved in the coastal trade network that had developed along the Labrador coast. They assisted the Moravians in finding a location for their first mission site in Nain in 1771, but continued their trading efforts along the coast by moving items such as baleen, oil and furs south while bringing European items like beads and firearms north. This makes Mikak's story unique in many ways; not only was she one of the few Inuit who were taken to Europe who did not succumb to any European diseases (like small pox), she is also one




of the few aboriginal woman to be so well-documented in the European records which was very rare for this period in history.

We are quite fortunate that the Moravians were such meticulous record-keepers. While written documents must always be read with caution, they provide rich details regarding the past that can greatly assist archaeological research. From the Moravian diaries and other European records it is apparent that Mikak probably lived in a number of different homes along the Labrador

Excavations at Black Island near Nain. (Photo by Amelia Fay)

Opposite: A portrait of Mikak and son Tootac, by renowned English painter John Russell. Used by permission from the Ethnological Institute at Gottingen University in Germany, which houses the portrait.

coast during her travels. The information we can gather from Black Island represents a small fragment of her life, but is important nonetheless. *continued...*



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"Tarnat Mountains", photo courtesy R. Churchill

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The local Inuit called Black Island 'Khernertok', and it is mentioned in the Nain diaries multiple times. Khernertok was a winter sod house site that consisted of two houses, each of which would have housed 10 or more people. The foundations of these houses still exist today, and despite their collapse and overgrowth of vegetation, they remain quite visible on the landscape. Cabin owners on Black Island today refer to these foundations as 'the old houses', and rightly so as they are at least 240 years old.

The difficult part of my job is trying to figure out how long each of these houses was occupied for, and how they may have been altered over time.

During the summer of 2010 I visited the site on Black Island with a small crew to get a sense of how big these houses actually are and to conduct a small test-excavation.

House 1 is very rectangular in shape and has a distinct outline, while House 2 has a more oval shape and its walls have slumped considerably, making it less defined. Rather than fully excavate both structures, mainly due to time constraints, we opened a few small test trenches in each house. Test trenches are

useful when you want to get a sample of artifacts and a sneak peek at the interior architecture of the home without being too destructive.

Artifacts are not only interesting to look at, but can often assist with providing dates for the site we are excavating. For instance, we know when certain clay pipes and ceramics were first introduced in an area and how long they remained in production, thus providing archaeolo-

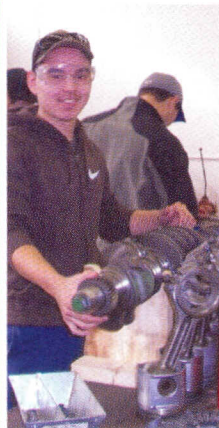
gists with a good time-frame for when the site was inhabited. In this case, the trenches revealed an interesting mix of Inuit and European artifacts.

Many of the artifacts we found are typical eighteenth century finds, things we would expect to see in a house that was occupied in the mid-1700s. Various clay pipes, ceramic sherds, musketballs, glass fragments, and iron scraps all help determine the date that the sod houses



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were occupied.

There are also a number of interesting wood and whale bone artifacts, some of which I have not yet been able to identify, that were recovered from House 2. These are artifacts that I would categorize as Inuit, as they were part of Inuit material culture long before the arrival of Europeans.

Yet, there are some artifacts, from House 1 in particular, that can be dated well into the nineteenth century, which leads me to believe that perhaps it was occupied much longer than the second house.

From these test trenches I have been able to determine that while both houses were occupied during the mid-1700s, it appears that House 1 continued to be occupied into the 1800s and was perhaps modified structurally along the way.

The rectangular shape of the house,

along with the lack of a typical sod house entrance tunnel, leads me to interpret that House 1 was built with more of a European style in mind. This trend towards cabin-style homes has been well-described, as more settlers and other Europeans settled along the north coast during the nineteenth century. House 2 continued to puzzle me, which is why I decided to go back this year.

This past summer I returned to Khernertok with a larger crew to assist with fully excavating House 2.

By the end of August we had the house fully exposed and had recovered hundreds of artifacts, ranging from the tiniest beads to larger whale bone handles. We even found a sealskin boot!

The architecture of the house is consistent with other eighteenth century Inuit dwellings, with an entrance tunnel and cold trap, along with numerous

benches along the sides and back of the home. These benches would have been used for working and/or sleeping, depending on their location within the home.

My goal during the summer was to get a better sense on the structure itself, and see if any of the information gleaned from the artifacts can provide more insight into the life of Mikak.

Now that the house has been excavated, I have all the material I need to begin my analysis. I'm excited to get a good look at all of our finds from the past two summers, piece together the story of this particular home, and hopefully find out more about Mikak in the process.

For more information on Mikak's story or the project on please contact Amelia Fay (aemfay@mun.ca). †



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