

Culture is a 'child of the past'

by Marianne Stopp

Archaeology in St Michael's Bay ended three weeks ago.

During our month at this nearly 300-year-old Inuit winter site we saw the last of the harp seals puttering northwards, and the summer's crop of icebergs gliding quietly southwards.

Salmon began to return to spawning rivers and humpbacks blew in with the arrival of caplin.

The ancient Inuit inhabitants at this place would have known these rhythms well: ducks and loons arriving in spring, harp seals migrating southwards in late autumn in the wake of clouds of now-extinct curlew, and in winter the presence of ringed seals.

Dense, sharp-edged mussel beds encircled the cove and these too played a part in the seasonal harvest of food.

Archaeological inquiry has its own rhythms — excavation is always followed by months and months of analysis and assessment, and then report writing.

The mussel beds form a central part of this year's research.

A mussel grows in visible layers, like the growth rings of a tree, and their study is known as sclerochronology.

A sufficiently large sample of shells can help to reconstruct climatic conditions and to identify in which season of the year, even month, a site was inhabited.

The outer edge of a mussel, also its most fragile portion, must be intact for analysis.

This summer, control samples were collected from the living mussel beds at the beginning of July and again at the end in order to assess growth rate of this apparently fast-growing species.

We also succeeded in collecting a sample of undamaged mussels from the archaeological layers, thanks to painstaking excavation on the part of the crew.

All of these specimens are awaiting analysis at McMaster University in Hamilton and at the University of Mainz in Germany.

Another part of the analysis involves identifying some of the bits of broken European dishes that were recovered.

Like mussel shells, these can help

FIELD NOTES

to date a site and they can also reveal something of Inuit-European contact.

Thus far, I have fervently hoped that the fragments of tin-glazed earthenware dishes and Normandy stonewares pointed to an Inuit camp dating to the late 1600s or very early 1700s.

Artifacts recovered this summer have, however, shifted my hopes to a few decades later.

This is still of great interest, but for an archaeologist older is generally better.

Two well-dated artifacts in particular now suggest a later site date.

One is a seal of lead bearing Roman numerals and lettering that date it to the 1720s or 1730s.

Another is a thin coin with faint Roman numerals and two 'L' back-to-back.

This is a 30-denier coin known as the 'double sol', struck in France between 1710 and 1713 for colonial export.

Two of these have now been recovered from the site and they provide a fine example of how European objects were often transformed both physically and symbolically when they entered Inuit culture.

Each coin had a small hole bored along its edge and was probably used to decorate clothing.

Based on early descriptions and portraits of Labrador Inuit, we know it was customary to decorate clothing with objects such as beads, spoon bowls, and other trade items as expressions of new aesthetics and of wealth.

A third artifact, a nearly complete white stoneware bowl with a decorative pattern around the rim known as 'bead and reel', has played a key role in shifting the date of our site.

Vessels such as this were apparently not made until around 1730.

To confuse matters, but also adding to our appreciation of the complexity of Inuit trade contact with Europeans, this piece originates in the potteries of Stafford-

shire, England, and not in France where most of our European items come from.

Other analysis about to begin includes that of the thousands of bone remains. We expect that several particularly large mammal bones will prove to be walrus, which once had a range extending as far south as the mouth of the St Lawrence.

A small sample of burned wood has been sent for radiocarbon dating while several samples of unburned and well-preserved wood have been collected for wood identification.

One piece in particular resembles a barrel lid and is probably of European oak.

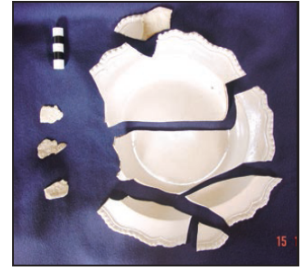
The analysis of soil samples from

inside the house, known as archaeoentomology, is ongoing at Laval University in Quebec City, and will help to reconstruct local climate, environment, and living conditions.

This and other data collected from the site is then compared to results of analyses of other Inuit sites in Labrador and the eastern Arctic.

They contribute to the developing picture of early Inuit settlement, long-term trade, and eventually cohabitation between Inuit and Europeans.

Culture is a child of the past, and it is research opportunities such as this that lead to an understanding of human roots.



Fragments of a nearly complete white stoneware vessel with 'bead and reel' decoration around the rim. This piece has shifted a previous dating of the House from CA1700 to the 1730s-40s.

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