

REPORT OF 2010 EXCAVATIONS AT NORTH ISLAND-1

Marianne Stopp and Kara Wolfe

Parks Canada & Memorial University of Newfoundland

The 2010 field season at the site of North Island -1 (FeAx-3) in St. Michael's Bay, southern Labrador, is a continuation of 2009 work funded through the SSHRC- CURA project "Understanding the Past to Build the Future." This interdisciplinary project examines Labrador Inuit presence along the coast of Labrador south of Hamilton Inlet and incorporates archaeology, anthropology, church histories, and genealogy. One of the key goals is to present the knowledge gained from our respective researches to both an academic arena and to the communities of southern Labrador.

The site consists of two Labrador Inuit sod houses set into a small hill overlooking a well-protected cove. The site was first recorded in 1991 and initial excavation of each house and its midden took place in 2009. The 2010 field season focussed on opening up the interior of House B. Excavation proceeded by 1x1m units divided into quadrants, which were dug in 10 cm levels. Coordinate and depth measurements were taken for the majority of key artifacts, with the exception of

nails, some small ceramic sherds, lithic flakes, and unidentifiable iron particles. All soil was screened through ¼ inch mesh. In most units, house floor level was reached within 20 cm of the surface. The ridge of land between House A and B was tested in hopes of finding outside activity areas. Excavations halted at roughly 30 cm below surface when permafrost was reached with no cultural evidence.

Testing of the entire cove was also completed this year with only three finds from deep test pits, all of which were flakes from the Dorset component at this site. Many Dorset flakes have been collected from within both houses, a not unusual occurrence for Thule sites, which are frequently found in the same places as much earlier Palaeoeskimo Dorset in coastal Labrador and the eastern and central Arctic. Reasons for this may range from direct contact between the two groups, which may have occurred in the central Arctic during a brief period of overlap in the early 13th century. In Labrador, where there was no contact situation between Dorset and Thule Inuit, the latter may have taken advantage of

Figure 1 FeAx-3:266 (Photo: Chelsea Arbour).



richer sod development at former Dorset camps, which also signalled potential resource areas.

House B is a semi-subterranean structure measuring roughly 8 x 8 m. Its perimeter is defined by a raised rim of sod on the west, north, and east sides that extends about 35 cm above the surrounding taiga. The south wall is the hillside itself, and the east wall is broken by the down-sloping entrance passage. Sod collapse has somewhat altered the original shape, which appears to have been semi-circular with a south wall defined by the hillside. There is no clear indication of how the upper wall courses and the roof were constructed. Soil overburden atop the living floor is not substantial and there is no evidence of a roof support system, suggesting post-abandonment re-use of materials. Occasional lengths of unworked wood that had fallen inward were exposed along the north and west walls and probably represent collapsed supports. Those along the north wall are well-

preserved while those along the west wall are largely decomposed due to wet soils. One piece of wood that extends into the house from the west wall at the height of the living platform differs from the rest and is a finished plank. Possibly part of a large barrel stave, this piece was sampled to determine if it is oak.

The well-preserved floor of House B is of carefully constructed flat paving stones. A somewhat incoherent jumble of larger beach rocks along the inside west and north walls rests atop the paving floor and once formed a small, L-shaped living platform. Several other beach rock features were recorded along the interior edges of the house. These include two large, flat-topped rocks at either end of the living platform along the west wall of the house that may have served as lamp stands or household surfaces. One of these, in the NW corner, was placed directly on top of the bedrock; the other, in the SW corner, formed the top of an interior cache

Figure 2 FeAx-3:286 (Photo: Chelsea Arbour).



feature. Inside were the fragments of a large stoneware bowl or storage vessel (Figure 1) and faunal remains. A second cache feature of beach rock was situated in the southeast corner of the house. It contained a nearly complete white salt-glazed stoneware soup bowl/plate (Figure 2) and a mass of faunal remains, chiefly seal bone. This feature is built alongside a large circular surface of bedrock that was covered with black, loose, and ashy soil quite different from soil elsewhere within the house. The carefully laid flagstone flooring extends up to the bedrock mass and encircles it. This corner of the house may have been a cooking area and will be examined further in the upcoming field season. Initial testing of the entranceway revealed random beach rocks that may have formed side walls atop dense, greasy, black soil.

Cultural material from House B is a mix of classic eastern Thule Inuit bone objects and European items. Two Thule Type 5 harpoon heads with iron blades and pieces of drilled whalebone were found alongside European items such as iron fish hooks, square iron nails (some reworked), lead shot and lead fragments, a few glass beads, case bottle sherds, and ceramics. With the exception of the white stoneware soup bowl/plate, which is English, all ceramics are of French manufacture. Although the sherd count itself is high,

the total vessels represented are low and consist of one or two tin-glazed vessels, a few stoneware vessels, one or two case bottles, and some coarse red earthenware. Excavations of House A in 2009 and House B over two seasons did not uncover evidence of habitation strata, but the ceramics, two dateable coins, a dateable lead bale seal, as well as a small number of radiocarbon dates place site use between the late 17th century and the mid-18th century. The Inuit artifacts, the small number of European objects (with the exception of iron nails), and the faunal remains from diverse species, point to the maintenance of a traditional way of life in a cultural context where Europeans had been a seasonal presence in the region since at least the 16th century. Inuit occupied North Island between the late 1600s and the mid-1700s, during a period of extensive French presence in the Strait of Belle Isle and the Gulf of St. Lawrence, when fishing vessels and traders also began to venture as far northwards as Hamilton Inlet. Analyses of data, including soils, faunal remains, ceramics, nails, mussel shells, and settlement are ongoing. ▀