NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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LETTER FROM LABRADOR

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I was out in the middle of Okak Bay (57° 30' N.) having lunch and hiding from the flies one day in the middle of August when a float plane appeared from which Bill Fitzhugh emerged bearing mail. Amongst the letters and bills was a request from our Editor asking for a short article on archaeology in Labrador. The following is the result. It was penned over a couple of nights in my tent on an unnamed island near the outer edge of the Nain archipelago (see map). I hope it is of interest despite a hasty birth in the frozen north.

In essence Labrador consists of a cold-water coast and a high dissected plateau which together connect the high Arctic with the temperate areas to the south such as Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Maine. In the course of post-pleistocene climatic amelioration a forest dominated by white and black spruce with various combinations of birch, alder, aspen, red pine and white pine has become established over the south and central regions of Labrador. The hardy black spruce grows as far north as Napaktok (58°N.) where it is found in sheltered inner bay locations. A broad strip of lichen woodland and tundra has remained along the coast north of Hamilton Inlet because of the effects of the Labrador Current which brings cold Arctic waters south. Pack ice is present in most areas for 6-7 months of each year.

The first occupants of the Labrador peninsula were Indians of the Maritime Archaic Culture. They appear archaeologically in the Strait of Belle Island region about 8000 B.P. and spread north to central Labrador by 6500 B.P. They were clearly related to Indian occupants of continental America to the south and west. Remains of Maritime Archaic settlements are found on island and headland situations and, less frequently, back in the bays. Early in the Maritime Archaic period these settlements were small and evidently occupied in the spring-autumn season during which the migratory harp seals are available along the coast. Larger settlements were used later in the period, some of which include multiple domestic structures and cemeteries. Grave goods appear to increase in variety and quality through time and there is strong evidence for increasing long distance transportation, presumably using boats, of a distinctive chert from Ramah Bay (58° 50' N.). This material is present in some Archaic sites in Maine and has been found as far south as Florida. Typological affinities between Maritime Archaic assemblages along the coast are close for the first thousand years of the period after which there is

evidence of growing regionalisation in styles. The Maritime Archaic Indians appear to have abandoned the coast of Labrador by about 3800 B.P.

Indian occupation of the central coast was continued by a series of Intermediate Indian cultures, apparently derived from the west. They maintained an economy which centred on inland hunting with excursions to the coast in summer. Major Intermediate Indian sites, such as Tikkiratsiak near Nain, are composed of the super-imposition of evidence from numerous short-term occupations. Material culture of the period includes several forms which cannot be derived from Maritime Archaic industries; similarities in artefact types suggest inland origins. Cherts from the inland region to the west are important in the Intermediate Indian assemblages and the Mugford cherts, from an area just north of Okak, are present although much less common. Ramah chert, on the other hand, is relatively uncommon which suggests that occupation of the coast north of Mugford was ruled out by the presence there of pre-Dorset Eskimo.

No faunal material has been recovered to date from Intermediate Indian sites. However, site locations, sizes and the ethnographic evidence suggest that caribou slaughter at inland lake crossings during winter was most important and that the summers were probably spent on the coast hunting seals and caribou.

In the period during which the Intermediate Indians occupied the south and central coastal and interior regions (ca 3800-1500 B.P.) the Eskimo entered Labrador. These first Eskimo settlers arrived about 3600 B.P. and are referred to as the 'Predorsets'. Their lithic technology was a regional aspect of the Arctic Small Tool Tradition which has its remote geographical origins in the Western Arctic. The Predorsets are thought to have had a common immediate origin with the Eskimo of Baffin Island, Sarraqau and Independence I cultures of Greenland. Predorset occupation extended as far south as the area around Davis Inlet and Hopedale. Sites of this culture are generally found on islands and outer bays but at Okak they are located in inner bays and near rivermouths. Most of them appear to represent short term occupation by small groups engaged in seal and other marine mammal hunting during summer. Predorset occupation is continuous on the north coast. It is discontinuous in central Labrador where archaeological evidence indicates some contact with Indian cultures.

The Dorset period Eskimo also entered Labrador from the north. They occupied the coast as far south as Newfoundland. Dorset culture replaced Predorset in most areas after 2600 B.P. and it lasted as a distinct entity until about 1500 A.D.. The Dorset period economy, in so far as there was a single economy for the whole period over the entire

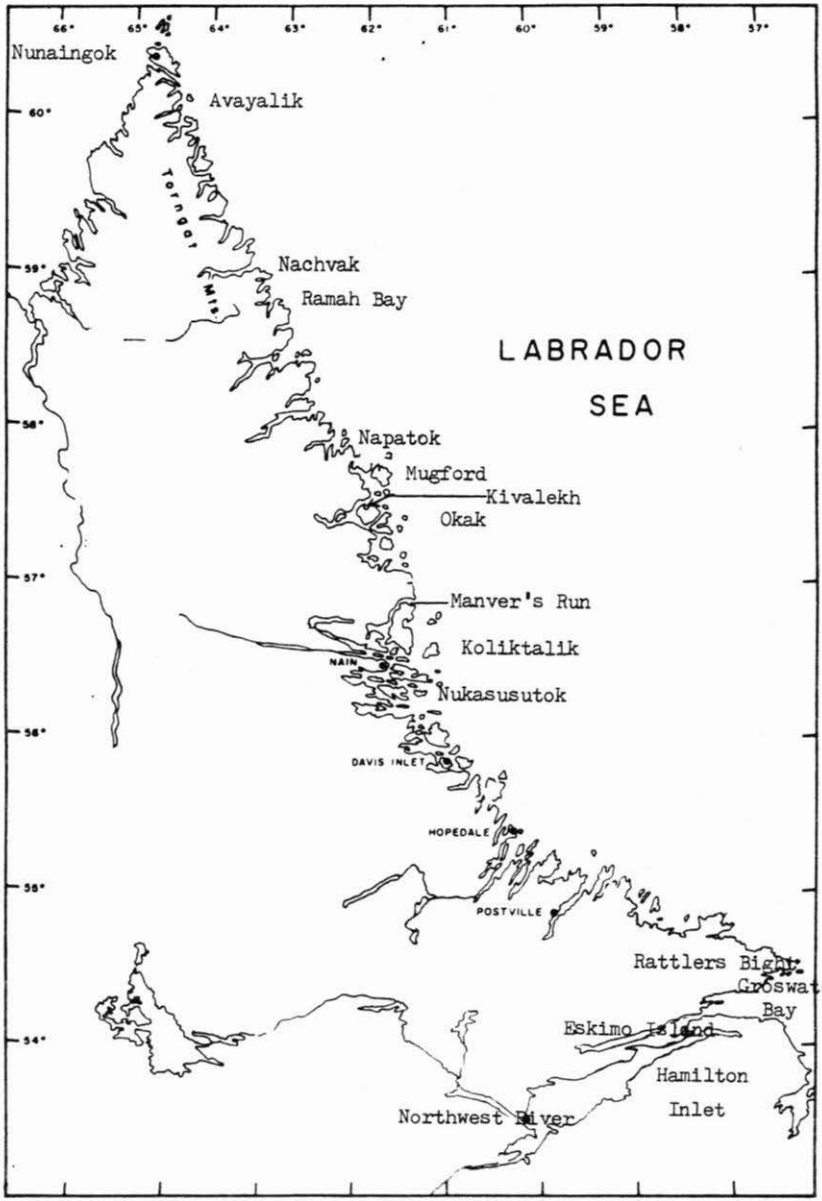

FIGURE 1. Labrador archaeology - place names used in text.

range of Dorset culture, was focussed on the hunting of marine mammals (seals, walrus but not whales) by boat, at breathing-holes early in the winter, and at the edge of the landfast ice during the winter season. Birds, fish, bears and smaller land mammals were also taken but the primary emphasis was on marine mammals. Winter settlements were located on islands near the ice edge and summer settlements appear to have been most commonly positioned in bays and inner islands near sealing and birding locations.

The Dorset occupants of north and central Labrador were apparently isolated from Dorset people in Newfoundland by the Point Revenge Indians. This Point Revenge culture apparently had its origins to the south of Hamilton Inlet and spread to the coast there about 700 A.D. and possibly earlier. A modified interior adaptation is suggested for the Point Revenge period. Interior hunting of caribou during winter was most important and coastal resources were exploited only during the open water months. Both inner and outer coastal regions were settled although the maritime specialisation which is characteristic of many Eskimo cultures was not developed. Contact and trade with Eskimo groups is suggested by the predominance of Ramah chert in Point Revenge assemblages. The phase lasted until about 1650 A.D. and although unclear at present it seems most likely that Point Revenge was the progenitor of the Naskapi-Montagnais culture of Labrador and of the very interesting extinct Beothuck Indian culture of Newfoundland.

Eskimo culture in Labrador was substantially changed late in the sequence. Thule culture appears in the archaeological sequence about 1300 A.D. It is most clearly represented at Nachvak on the north coast and in a recently discovered 'Thule Village' near the outer edge of Voisey's Bay south of Nain. Thule culture has a very distinctive material culture which has been associated with the development of offshore whaling in the western Arctic.

The prehistoric Eskimo sequence ended with the communal house period which is tentatively dated to 1600-1850 A.D. It includes a whole series of interrelated adjustments to the presence of European trade goods and, later, Europeans living ashore. These include multi-family houses, reflecting a centralisation of political authority and population.

This summer's fieldwork began in June and ended in the first week of September. It has been an extension of Bill Fitzhugh's Torngat Project which involved survey and excavation in the rugged area north of Nain. We have operated two field parties. One included Bill Fitzhugh, Stephen and Eric Loring, Susan Kaplan and Morten Melgaard. They worked off the Smithsonian research vessel Tunuyak and went north to Nulliak near Saglek where they excavated an important Maritime Archaic

site with house structures and burials including grave goods. They also mapped a caribou drive system inland from Nulliak which although undated at present may have been initially constructed by Dorset Eskimo. The Tunuyak crew then surveyed various coastal areas on the way south, particular attention being given to a cluster of Predorset structures near the northern end of Manvers Run and to a structure of that period on Black Island. A large Maritime Archaic site was found in Kaipokak Bay near Postville and mapped.

The other field party consisted of myself, Brian Hood (Trent University, Ontario), with help late in the season from two 'volunteers' from the University of Leeds and one from the Royal College of Art. We began the field season by completing the excavation of a Maritime Archaic structure 37m above sea level on Nukasusutok Island which is about 25 miles east of Nain. We also dug two early Dorset axial structures there and then moved north to the protohistoric village of Kivalekh in Okak Bay where we test-pitted nearly twenty semi-subterranean houses in an unsuccessfull attempt to find well-preserved Dorset period bone material. We then excavated a Dorset period winter house on the edge of a terrace on the eastern perimeter on the site.

We moved south again with a very nice artefact assemblage but no Dorset bone and took up residence on No Name Island which is east of Nukasusutok. Here we excavated a midden adjacent to a Dorset sod house and recovered a good sample of bone and an artefact assemblage from a shallow stratified deposit. The bone is mostly walrus and includes seven mandibles found in a single metre square.

My research at the Smithsonian has focussed on the reconstruction of Dorset period hunting strategies, based on the identification of bone material, the computerisation of a minimum numbers procedure, and the modelling of resource distribution and availability. The recent recovery of bone from sites like Eskimo Island, Koliktalik, Avayalik, Akulialuk, Nunaingok and Rattler's Bight offers an opportunity to substantiate estimates of seasonality and site function which were made on the basis of site contents, location and size during extensive survey and test excavation research in the earlier Hamilton Inlet and Torngat projects. It may also be possible to use the Labrador data as a case against which to consider the relationship of resource distribution to socio-political organisation and differentiation of material culture in hunter-gatherer cultures. It certainly presents a striking contrast in each of these three respects to the opposite (north-west) coast of continental America. Cross-cultural patterns in this relationship have become something of a preoccupation since I wrote the last chapter of my Ph.D. thesis.

I would add that the archaeology was excellent - although trowelling down with infinite care through permafrost is an activity you have to get used to. The most striking part of the summer for me, however, was the opportunity we had at Okak to live next to Eskimo families who were out in the country to hunt and fish. It was my first, all too brief, introduction to the ethnographic present in the Subarctic.

Most of the information presented here is available in two widely circulated volumes. These are:

Brice-Bennett, C. (ed.) 1977 Our Footsteps Are Everywhere: Inuit Land Use and Occupancy in Labrador. Labrador Inuit Association, Nain, Labrador.

Fitzhugh, W.W. 1972 Environmental Archaeology and Cultural Systems in Hamilton Inlet, Labrador. Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology, 16.