

ON THE (EARLY) ORIGINS OF THE BEOTHUK

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Abstract

In 1980, the Beaches Complex was believed to be the ancestral complex of the historic Beothuk in Newfoundland. However, the Little Passage Complex has since been identified and associated with a specific period (1100-400 BP), and thus established as the Beothuk's more direct, ancestral, archaeological complex. The Beaches Complex has therefore been relegated to an earlier period (1200-1100 BP). The Cow Head Complex (1900-1200 BP) is also considered part of the Recent Indian period, but has never been clearly defined.

While the link between the Beothuk and the Little Passage Complex seems clear, little is known of the cultural trajectory that led to the development of those complexes. Archaeological research in Blanc-Sablon, a small village located on the north side of the Strait of Belle-Isle and less than 15 kilometres from Newfoundland, has brought to light dozens of sites associated with earlier complexes (2500-1100 BP). These sites have produced artifacts similar to those identified in Newfoundland. They also include fireplaces containing large quantities of calcinated bones, identified primarily as seal. In this paper, it will be suggested that part of the development of the Little Passage Complex, which bears witness to a well-established coastal adaptation, can be studied through the analysis of these sites.

Résumé

En 1980, on croyait que le complexe de Beaches était associé aux ancêtres des Béothuks de Terre-Neuve de la période historique. Depuis lors, on a découvert le complexe de Little Passage qu'on a rattaché à une période précise (1100-400 A.A.) et désigné par conséquent comme le complexe ancestral le plus direct. On a alors relégué le complexe de Beaches à une période plus ancienne (1200-1100 A.A.). On estime aussi que le complexe de Cow Head (1900-1200 A.A.) fait partie de la Période indienne récente, sans l'avoir cependant jamais défini clairement.

Si le lien entre les Béothuks et le complexe de Little Passage semble évident, on ne connaît guère la trajectoire culturelle qui aboutit à l'apparition de ce complexe. Les recherches archéologiques effectuées à Blanc-Sablon, situé du côté nord du détroit de Belle-Isle et à moins de 15 kilomètres de Terre-Neuve, ont mis au jour des dizaines de sites associés aux deux périodes chronologiques antérieures (1900-1100 A.A.). Ces sites ont livré certains objets semblables à ceux qu'on avait découverts à Terre-Neuve. On y a constaté aussi la présence de foyers contenant de grandes quantités d'os calcinés, essentiellement des os de phoque. J'avance ici qu'une partie de la formation du complexe de Little Passage, qui révèle une adaptation côtière bien établie, peut être étudiée grâce à l'analyse de ces sites.

The purpose of this paper is to review the possibility that the origin of the Beothuk can be traced back to the third millennium BP and that it resulted from the interaction of families, bands and cultural groups who frequented the Strait of Belle-Isle. Another process was also at work at that time, namely, the development of a semi-sedentary way of life based on the intensive exploitation of littoral resources, mainly seals.

The prehistory of the Québec-Labrador Peninsula and Newfoundland cannot be reduced to a single chronological period. On the contrary, it is punctuated by profound changes and by encounters between different cultural groups (Pintal, 1998). Therefore, a precise chronological framework is needed to reconstruct the cultural trajectories that led to the emergence of the First Nations, both past and present. It is believed that the Blanc-Sablon area can provide such a framework on account of its physiographic environment.

Most of the geological substratum of the Quebec North Shore is of Precambrian origin. As a result, the landscape is characterized by rolling hills that descend to the sea. The coast is rocky and often bordered by steep cliffs; however, immense archipelagos create a buffer zone between the sea and the mainland and offer a multitude of sheltered harbours. Some very large rivers give access to the hinterland.

Compared with the rest of the Lower North Shore, the Blanc-Sablon area forms a kind of enclave in which the geological substratum is of Palaeozoic origin. This has affected the landscape, which consists of widely spaced, tiered hills overlooking a gradually descending series of sandy terraces that attest to the decline in sea level. As everyone knows, this type of physiographic environment is conducive to establishing a relative cultural sequence.

In this part of the Lower North Shore, long beaches of fine sand provide easy access to the land. The region is sometimes exposed to strong winds, especially in the area where the Strait of Belle Isle narrows near Blanc-Sablon. Since the region is wide open and the vegetation very fragile, wind conditions create a dynamic process where surface vegetation is regularly covered by sand. The resulting stratigraphical context, coupled with the descending series of sandy terraces, constitute very useful, relative dating tools.

Using the relative chronology established with these tools for the west bank of the Blanc-Sablon River and the 100 radiocarbon dates obtained from the Lower North Shore, we believe that we can define a precise chronological framework for studying the cultural evolution of Native occupation.

After the collapse of their “Maritime Archaic cultures”, the Native groups that frequented the coast of the Québec-Labrador Peninsula did not disappear. From what we know, they reorganized their culture, incorporating some traits that seem to have originated from the “Laurentian” southwest (Pintal, 1998). It is still unclear, however, to what extent the appearance of these traits coincided with the actual arrival of new groups. Nevertheless, given the importance of trade during the Maritime Archaic period (8000-3500 BP), numerous groups apparently contributed to commercial exchanges in the northeast, and it is very possible that some of the families involved in these activities actually moved to the Strait.

Archaeological assemblages from the 3500-2500 BP period in Blanc-Sablon are very different from assemblages found elsewhere (*Ruisseau Manius* Complex, 3500-2500 BP). The groups that frequented this area during that period used a much wider variety of lithic raw materials than any of the Native peoples who lived before or after that time. While the influence of Labrador was clear at the beginning of the period (3500 BP), based on the amount of Ramah quartzite identified in the sites

excavated along the Strait, relations with Newfoundland rapidly increased and predominated by 2800 BP, as demonstrated by the use of St. George formation cherts. As well, stone workers were using quartzite related to regional Precambrian bedrock. The territory in which these raw materials are found is so vast that it could not be covered during a single annual seasonal cycle. This may mean that numerous families from very different areas gathered in the Strait of Belle-Isle or that some members of a related, but dispersed, group congregated there. In any case, they all played a key role in an extensive trade network.

Sites from the 3500-2500 BP interval can be identified by the variability of their lithic raw materials and the “Meadowood-Middlesex” influence among tools. Their existence is also revealed by the presence of certain distinctive features. For example, wide concentrations of burned rocks, sometimes covering more than four square meters, are often associated with these sites. They also contain large quantities of rocks and charcoal, but their fireplaces are thin and burned bones scarce. In addition, such sites bear witness to the use of distinctive cooking techniques, which seem to be related to the processing of littoral resources, such as sea mammals.

It is believed that, during the 3500-2500 BP period, Native people did not stay very long on the coast — a few weeks at the most. They gathered there to at least capture and process littoral resources, and they may have used the products thus obtained during their journey to their autumn-winter campground. Nevertheless, sites from this period are very abundant. Even if we take only known sites into account, we can conclude that Native people frequented the shore of the Strait of Belle-Isle every 20 to 30 years. If we also consider sites that remain to be discovered and those that may have been destroyed by erosion or development, we suggest that the Strait was visited on a very regular basis. The knowledge that Native people acquired during this regular, scheduled occupational cycle helped to establish a settlement pattern where a more sedentary way of life played an important role.

It has been proposed that Native groups resorted to a foraging-like mobility system during the Archaic period while they used a logistic-like system during the post-Archaic. This change was not only the result of adaptation to a particular environmental condition. It should also be recalled that, by 3500 BP, all of the area that makes up present-day Québec had at least been visited and that, at almost the same time, Palaeoeskimos started to occupy the northern part of Québec and Labrador. This post-Archaic “revolution” drastically affected the way Indians saw the territory. Although this new perception of territory was still not well established in 3500 BP, by 2500 BP, the appropriation of new land could no longer play an important role in the sociocultural adaptation process. Native peoples now had to rely more on diplomacy for broad-scale relationships, while extended family ties prevailed during their annual seasonal cycle. These changes marked the beginning of a new era, namely, that which led to the emergence of modern-day First Nations.

It is now suggested that cultural interaction and the development of a sedentary way of life must be taken into account if we want to understand the evolution of the First Nations in the Strait from 2500 BP to the contact period (500 BP - 1500 AD). Families or groups interacted not only with one another but also with the physical and cultural environment. These interactions created the archaeological structure, and the “imposed” societal model continually evolved. During the post-Archaic

period, new contexts constantly emerged, and the arrival of the Palaeoeskimos was not the least important. The Indians reacted to their presence.

As far as archaeological materials are concerned, there is no clear evidence of real relations between the Groswater Palaeoeskimos and the Indian groups of the post-Archaic period. The presence of Palaeoeskimos did not prevent Indians from frequenting the Strait, as is shown by the abundance of Indian campsites from that phase. One might even wonder if the Indians increased their frequentation of the Strait in response to this Palaeoeskimo presence, as they did earlier in Northern Labrador (Fitzhugh, 1984). If so, there should be some changes in the subsequent settlement pattern.

Indeed, between 2500-1500 BP (*Flèche littorale* Complex), the rock “platforms”, which are distinctive features of the 3500-2500 BP interval, were not used anymore. Instead, campsites were built around a circular fireplace measuring one metre in diameter by 10 centimetres thick. Such fireplaces contain numerous fire-cracked bones, identified mainly as seal; however, the presence of other species, such as beaver, shows that other local faunal resources were exploited as well. Clearly, these features reflect a shift from a population engaging in specialized exploitation of the Strait during the 3500-2500 BP period to a population slowly increasing its stay along the coast.

This period witnessed not only the development of a new settlement pattern but also rapid change in material cultures. Judging from the lithic raw materials, contacts with Newfoundland and Labrador were not as intensive initially (2500 BP) as they had been earlier. Native peoples used mostly local raw materials or quartzite associated with the surrounding Precambrian bedrock. Although this may be the result of the presence of Dorset people along the coast of Labrador and in Newfoundland, it does not mean that the Indians did not frequent those areas or that they were not in contact with people living there. As we said earlier, Indians used mainly local raw materials, but there is always a significant percentage of Ramah quartzite and Newfoundland cherts among the assemblages discovered along the Strait. During their annual seasonal cycle, families present in the Strait could easily have encountered other families related to the Daniel Rattle Complex in Labrador or the Cow Head Complex in Newfoundland. During the 3500-2500 BP period, sites were just as, if not more, numerous than before.

It must be remembered that this process occurred during the “Golden Age” of Dorset occupation in Newfoundland (2200-1300 BP). Although the presence of the Dorset people did not prevent Indians from occupying the Strait, the latter’s presence may have checked the influx of more Dorset groups. While the Groswater occupation of the Strait was relatively intensive, Dorset sites are scarce. Again, very little artifactual evidence of contact has been discovered. However, mixed assemblages from the 2000-1700 BP period have been found in Blanc-Sablon as well as in Newfoundland, and this might be more than just a coincidence. Even though there is little material proof of Indian-Dorset contact, both peoples were well aware of each other and they may have used similar cooking or even flaking techniques, and the certainly traded raw materials later on (Nagle, 1984).

In fact, shortly after this episode, a new tendency emerged in the occupational pattern of the Indians (1500-1300 BP, *Petit Havre* Complex). Relations with Labrador and Newfoundland expanded, becoming less diffuse than before. The decline of Dorset occupation in Newfoundland and

along the central coast of Labrador afforded new opportunities. Ramah quartzite, as well as a pink chert that seems to come from the Port-au-Choix area, were abundant. Also, influences were exerted from the west, as demonstrated by some shreds of ceramics and a point of Mistissini quartzite found on a site from that period.

I propose that the origin of the Mameet Innuat, or the Montagnais of the Lower North Shore, whose identity is closely connected to their relationship with their territory, can be traced back at least to the 1500-1300 BP period. At that time, campsites were sometimes built around a thick, elongated hearth, which could measure up to two metres long by and 20 centimetres thick. Such hearths contain a large quantity of fire-cracked bones, most of which are associated with seal; however, the presence of other species indicates that most of the surrounding faunal resources were also exploited. During the 2500-1100 BP period, a semi-sedentary occupational pattern developed along the shore, and seal exploitation played an important role in this process.

Based on the discovery of fireplaces containing only coastal birds, it now seems that Indians were present along the coast in early spring, when the ice started to break up and before the arrival of seals. To be present in this area so early, Native people could not have lived very far inland. It is believed that their journey to their autumn-winter campground brought them close to the first inland lakes. When the weather indicated that the ice was breaking up, they would have left their winter quarters for the coast. This also means that some families were using a smaller territory and therefore had to intensify their exploitation of the resources sustained by that territory.

By 1300 BP, the Dorset people had definitely left Newfoundland. Obviously, this withdrawal had a tremendous effect on the Indians. While their settlement pattern stayed mostly the same, their material culture changed rapidly — twice, in fact, within the next 200 years. This phenomenon has been interpreted as a territorial realignment, and, initially, it seems to have been related to the way in which Newfoundland was used when the Dorset people were still there. Based on the relatively abundant use of local pink chert, already found in small amounts in the previous period, a clear relation with the Port-au-Choix area was now established. This process has been well documented in Blanc-Sablon and on the Lower North Shore (*Longue Pointe* Complex 1300-1100 BP).

Right after that interval, sites were quite numerous in Blanc-Sablon for a short period, and their occupants used a surprisingly large quantity of Ramah quartzite (*Anse Lazy* Complex, 1200-1100 BP). Although the real significance of this short episode is unclear, it has been shown to coincide with the withdrawal of the Dorset people. It may be a consequence of trade, since we know that Indians were trading Newfoundland chert with Dorset groups at that time. The Little Passage Complex, the ancestral complex of the Beothuk, and the *Anse Morel* Complex, the ancestral complex of the Mameet Innuat, seem to evolve from that episode.

What has been described up to now is a process by which the settlement pattern of Native peoples from the Québec-Labrador Peninsula and Newfoundland evolved from specialized use of the coast to a semi-sedentary way of life based to some extent on the intensive exploitation of seals. It seems that Native efforts to establish this system were influenced somewhat by the presence of the Palaeoeskimos, a phenomenon that will surely be documented more fully by research in Newfound-

land, since Dorset Palaeoeskimos sites are rare along the north shore of the strait of Belle-Isle. After the withdrawal of the Palaeoeskimos from Newfoundland, a process of territorial reorganization occurred, leading to the emergence of the First Nations historically identified in the Strait of Belle-Isle. Did the Beothuk or even the Montagnais, as they are defined during the historic period, exist 3500-3000 years ago? Given that we have found no evidence of their distinctive land use patterns and relations with neighbours — two traits closely linked to the identity of Algonquian bands — the answer will have to be no. Nevertheless, their direct ancestors were there, and their everyday life was continually restructured, over the millennia, by new contexts which eventually leads to the historical definition of those First Nations.

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