

# OUTPORT ARCHAEOLOGY: COMMUNITY-SPONSORED EXCAVATION IN NEWFOUNDLAND

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## Abstract

*In recent years Newfoundland has seen a growing interest in archaeological research on the part of local community heritage groups. Local sponsorship is not unique to Newfoundland, but it has become common here, while it remains anomalous in many other jurisdictions. Community groups often see archaeological site development as a tactic to develop heritage tourism. These local heritage organizations are not, however, always aware of the other factors that affect archaeological research, excavation, conservation and interpretation. The Newfoundland Archaeological Heritage Outreach Program is an SSHRC-sponsored Community-University Research Alliance designed to help community groups by identifying and disseminating practical strategies for appropriate programs of research and interpretation. The Outreach Program will emphasize training through graduate and undergraduate research assistantships and fellowships in community projects. The Archaeology Unit will cooperate with the Newfoundland Museum; the Culture and Heritage Division of the provincial Department of Tourism, Culture and Recreation; the Newfoundland Historical Society; and community heritage groups from various parts of the province. The Program is both a means of assisting communities to approach their past archaeologically and also an experiment in the local development of heritage resources. We are studying both the past and the way in which the past is reconstructed. The question of what part archaeology might play in community construction of the past raises some broad issues. The tourism-driven economic context of locally-sponsored site development in Newfoundland and Labrador tends to obscure the problematic relationship between heritage on the one hand and history (or prehistory) on the other. If we understand heritage as what people today make of the past for present purposes and contrast it with history/prehistory, as what once was and is no longer, then heritage can be thought to provide a false perspective, at least to the extent that it distorts the distance between past and present. Unfortunately this heritage/history distinction is itself problematic, at least for present purposes, since the perspective of many decades may be required to see an invention of tradition for what it is. Despite these theoretical challenges, there are some practical questions which can be asked about the emergence of community-sponsored archaeology.*

Last spring, about a year ago, a woman from Sandy Cove called my office. She wanted to talk about Beothuk rock art, specifically a carving she had found and she wondered whether she could drop by when she was in town, visiting her sister. Sandy Cove, in Bonavista Bay, is a three or four hour drive north of St John's, near Terra Nova National Park and the prehistoric stone quarry at Bloody Bay Reach, currently under investigation by Laurie MacLean for the Burnside Heritage Foundation. So the idea of Beothuk rock carvings near Sandy Cove wasn't completely off the wall, so to speak. This was a woman with little formal education who had a simple idea. She and her husband had found a human visage on the rocky wall of a sea-side cave. There was no community memory of its origin, so she had decided it must be Beothuk. Her idea was that I should validate this identification and that she would then charge admission to the cave, if this was legal.

When she came to see me, she brought some excellent colour photographs and I could easily pick out the grim and haunting face that she and her husband had found while boating one Sunday. I assured her that I too could "see the face", rugged and angular as it was. (There is something like it

in the movie *Labyrinth*.) But I felt I had to be as blunt as the visage I was staring at: this was the work of Nature not of man or woman. My response upset my visitor and she accused me of obstructing the living her family might make by tourism. This gave me plenty to think about, although I didn't know what to say. A few decades ago her parents would probably have identified the face as the work of God. Through some Hegelian quirk of cultural evolution she now saw it as the work of the human spirit, in its local pre-European manifestation: the ineffable, because absent, Beothuk. In the end, I earnestly explained that:

- (a) I didn't think it was made by humans
- (b) Whatever I thought, she could call it what she wanted... and
- (c) It might be a very nice little tourist attraction simply as a mysterious face in a scenic cave.

There was not much point elaborating. She was aggrieved. From her point of view I had failed her, as an archaeologist, by refusing to validate the past she had constructed out of local materials. This happened because it was my responsibility, as an archaeologist, to tell her the truth about the past and its material manifestations, as I understood them. This is an anecdotal version of a larger situation, universal I am sure, but particularly pertinent in Newfoundland and Labrador these days.

Within the last decade, local heritage organizations in the Province have become more and more interested in archaeology. Community-level sponsorship is a new model for archaeological research and interpretation in Newfoundland, although it has rapidly become the most common way in which projects are promoted. Digs in this style now outnumber those organized by universities, Parks Canada or by the provincial Culture and Heritage Division. Of the 49 archaeological permits issued in the province last year about 75 percent were for CRM-driven survey work, most of it of short duration, although there were two or three longer-term research projects associated with major construction activities like the extension of the Labrador highway from Red Bay to Cartwright. Excluding the small CRM surveys there were 15 archaeological digs: two were academically sponsored, three were major, development-driven, CRM survey programs in Labrador and 10 were community-sponsored excavations. Community-sponsored projects are known in other jurisdictions, for example Laird Niven's work on black loyalist settlement at Birchtown, Nova Scotia (Niven 1994). Although academic archaeologists have long recognized the need for good community relations, community sponsorship is not normal (Macleod 1977). Often, "community involvement" is invited in order to resolve ethnic tensions surrounding the disturbance of burials or other culturally-sensitive features (La Roche and Blakey 1997). Local communities are rarely the instigators of excavation but rather parties invited to participate in subsequent interpretation (Binks 1989; Singleton 1997). The situation is different in Newfoundland and Labrador, where community involvement in archaeology increasingly implies an organizational and fund-raising commitment by community groups. With this comes a degree of control over the interpretative agenda. The closest parallel within Canada may be the emerging situation in Nunavut. Although community sponsorship is not unique to Newfoundland, it has become common, while it remains anomalous in many other jurisdictions. Inevitably, this will raise new questions.

The province has a rich archaeological heritage of human occupation stretching over 9000 years. This includes Maritime Archaic, Recent, Beothuk, and Mi'kmaq Amerindian cultures, Dorset and other Paleo-eskimo peoples, as well as various Europeans, including medieval Norse Greenlanders, sixteenth-century Basque Whalers, Norman, Breton, Portuguese and West-country migratory fishers and some of the oldest permanent European settlements in Canada, starting with John Guy's colony

at Cupids in Conception Bay, founded in 1610 (Tuck 1976; Miller *et al.*, 1996). (I fear I have left out the Moravians, of whom I hope we will hear more soon.) Some community groups have sponsored successful programs of survey and excavation. A good example would be Bill Gilbert's work for the Baccalieu Trail Heritage Corporation on Cupids and the pre- and proto-historic aboriginal sites in nearby Trinity Bay (Gilbert 1998). A few groups have not only sponsored excavations but have also interpreted these convincingly for the public. Good examples include the Colony of Avalon Foundation project at Ferryland and the work of the Fleur de Lys Dorset Eskimo Quarry Committee (Tuck 1996; Carter, Gaulton and Tuck 1998; Erwin 1999). Other communities are hosts to important sites already interpreted by Parks Canada, but have become interested in promoting local interpretation of other regional archaeological cultures. Thus, for example, local heritage organizations on the Great Northern Peninsula, including Port au Choix and L'Anse aux Meadows-Griquet are interested in locally-sponsored research on the early modern migratory fishery on the French Shore, to complement existing interpretation of important Dorset Paleoeskimo, Maritime Archaic and Norse sites. There are communities with sites that have been researched but which remain uninterpreted, like Bay Bulls, where the 1696 wreck of HMS Sapphire was partially excavated some years ago (Farmer and Carter 1979; Waddell 1978). Many communities are working to encourage further archaeological research on sites identified by earlier survey work, and some hope to sponsor initial survey work (Skane 1994, 1996; Pope 1996; Gaulton and Carter 1997; Reader 1997, 1998). Memorial University has a long-established and, I hope, well-regarded Archaeology Unit. For decades we have relied on horizontal collaboration with community organizations in research and appropriate site development: the National Historic Parks at Port au Choix and Red Bay and the Provincial Interpretation Centre at Boyd's Cove are a testimony to that tradition of cooperation. But we are no longer equal to the current critical demand for effective development of what tourism planners now call the "archaeological resource".

Interested community groups often see archaeological site development as a tactic to develop heritage tourism (Canning and Pitt 1995; Snow 1996; Renouf 1998). These local heritage organizations are not, however, always aware of the other factors that affect archaeological research, excavation, conservation and interpretation. Many projects suffer from a lack of coordination among local promoters, academics, regulators and funding agencies. Research archaeologists and regulators in Newfoundland and Labrador agree that this is the right time to work on better coordination among community-level projects. Out of this consensus Memorial's Archaeology Unit developed a Community-University Research Alliance (or CURA). This CURA is designed to disseminate practical strategies for appropriate programs of research, conservation and interpretation and to help community groups themselves to evaluate realistically the interpretative potential of local archaeological resources. In making this proposal we did not presume that locally-organized "community" archaeology is to be preferred, as a model for archaeological projects, to academically-driven projects, rescue archaeology, or state-directed management in the manner of Quebec's Ministère des Affaires Culturelles or English Heritage (English Heritage 1991). This proposal was not a plea for community-sponsored archaeology but rather an attempt to deal with a cultural phenomenon that already exists. Given economic and political realities in Newfoundland, it is a safe bet that much of the archaeological research work in the province will continue to be driven by the heritage interests of local community groups. What we proposed was that Memorial University, with the help of three Provincial partners, could respond positively to this situation both by assisting the diverse research aims of local projects and also by taking the opportunity to record and assess a new style of constructing the past. Last fall, an SSHRC committee evaluated our proposal for a Newfoundland Archaeological Heritage Outreach Program, liked the idea, and gave us some serious financial

support, with a couple of dozen other CURAS across the country (on many other themes). Our research alliance joins the Memorial University Archaeology Unit with: 1st. The Archaeology Office of the Culture and Heritage Division of the Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Tourism, Culture and Recreation. 2nd. The Newfoundland Museum and 3rd. The Newfoundland Historical Society. To date, sixteen community groups with interests in local archaeological heritage have registered with our Program. The Archaeology Unit is well-positioned to facilitate the information exchange envisaged. There are several effective and appropriate means of doing this, including workshops, publications and the development of websites. However, in the long run the most important function of the Outreach Program will be placement of student research assistants and interns in field, laboratory and exhibit situations. Students will bring fresh theoretical and methodological perspectives to local projects and, at the same time, they will learn about the practical realities of interpreting the past, in community settings. The Outreach Program is essentially an attempt to build on the successes of the best-developed current archaeological projects in the province by initiating relevant research activities, coordinating training, and by facilitating information flows among archaeological partners at all levels. Few sites are as large or as significant as Ferryland or Port au Choix; in this sense they cannot be cloned. There is, nevertheless, much that can be shared and even smaller projects can provide models. For example, the Cupids excavations recently adopted a cataloguing database for historical archaeology which I developed for the St John's Waterfront Archaeology Project. The Port au Choix Project recently sponsored an oral-history inventory of the Griquet/l'Anse au Meadows area, focussing on sites, land use and changing landscapes, for the regional Heritage Committee — a research initiative which could be a useful model for other communities. The proposed Outreach Program is designed to facilitate such transfers of methodologies for community-based assessment, research and interpretation.

But who asks the questions? Our research aims fall into two categories:

1. Research specific to particular local archaeological projects.
2. Research on the emerging model of community-based archaeology.

All archaeological investigators in Newfoundland, community-sponsored or not, must file research aims with the Archaeology Office of the Culture and Heritage Division (Newfoundland and Labrador 1996). They range from understanding the development of the St John's waterfront to refining the cultural prehistory of a lithic quarry in Bonavista Bay (Pope 1996, 1998; MacLean 1998). The Outreach Program supports these various aims, of course, but our own research aims are not fully captured by a compilation of the specific aims of particular local projects. Underlying our Community-University Research Alliance is a general research aim: we wish to better understand how local communities grasp their own past through archaeology. Seen in this light, our Outreach Program is both a means of assisting communities in Newfoundland and Labrador to approach their past archaeologically and also an experiment in the local development of heritage resources. We are studying both the past and the way in which the past is reconstructed. The former as appropriate to facilitate local research objectives; the latter as we record and analyze the factors which constrain or promote responsible archaeological research under community sponsorship.

With the goal of putting the emerging model of community-based archaeology into a broader perspective, researchers from several other disciplines are participating in the program. Lanita Carter of Memorial's Faculty of Business Administration, will bring her expertise in tourism marketing to identify critical success factors in community-sponsored archaeological site development projects (Carter 1997). We are still debating what "success" means in this context, but I think we are

reaching agreement that this has more to do with stability, than with size. The sociologist James Overton has a long-standing interest in how culture is used as a tourist commodity in Newfoundland and Labrador (Overton 1996). He is interested in how and why particular communities rather than others obtain financial support for their projects and I am sure he will find food for thought in the Minister of Tourism's recent announcement of a huge grant for archaeology at Bird Cove, in his northern peninsula district. The folklorist Gerry Pocius, of our centre for Material Culture Studies, is interested in how local organizations broaden their interests to archaeology, from more traditional entrées to heritage research, including oral history, non-archaeological material culture, and built heritage (Pocius 1991). Most of you are already aware that this is not the best of all possible worlds: archaeological sites will not be developed in order of just desserts, politics will have its effect, worthy sites will languish, despite the efforts of committed volunteers. We are, as I have said, studying some of sociological, commercial and cultural reasons for the wrinkles that seem to get put in the fabric of time as it unravels. Some of these interpretative distortions are interesting, particularly those which seem to be inevitable.

The question of what part archaeology plays or might play in community construction of the past undoubtedly raises some very broad issues. The tourism-driven economic context of locally-sponsored site development in Newfoundland and Labrador tends to obscure the problematic relationship between heritage, on the one hand, and history (or prehistory), on the other. If we understand heritage as what people today make of the past for present purposes, and contrast it with history/prehistory, as what once was and is no longer, then heritage can be thought to provide a false perspective, at least to the extent that it distorts the distance between past and present (Lowenthal 1996). Unfortunately this heritage/history distinction is itself problematic, at least for present purposes, since the perspective of many decades may be required to see an invention of tradition for what it is (Pope 1997).

As the Newfoundland Archaeological Heritage Outreach Program unfolds, I find myself asking how communities fix on particular "story lines". How and why do lay persons with little or no specialist training choose the interpretative context in which they invite professionals to participate? The term "communities" here really means the four or five volunteers, often strong-minded women, who get the local heritage organizations going, often with a paid person or two, including the archaeological Principal Investigator. All site interpretation comes out of some such process. In the case of outport archaeology, local people have a stake in the construction of a particular past from a very early stage in site development and hence, inevitably, they affect the general direction of research. Three years of research on this process will no doubt yield a lot of anecdotal data about the success or the failure of particular organizations, their development strategies, and the tactics they work out, with field archaeologists, to get the research done and put to use. We will, perhaps, someday learn some lessons from the inevitable failures. I think we can already see a pattern among the early successes: that is, among those projects which have consistently generated the most interesting research results.

Consider this a working hypothesis. The community groups most adept at productive management of archaeological research are those with the best sense of where they are. Let me expand. I don't mean "where they are" metaphorically, I mean it literally. I mean that local committees sensitive to the specific geographical context of their sites and their place in a wider regional economic context are most likely to sponsor consistently interesting, cost-effective archaeology. One would expect such an approach from projects like Ferryland and Port au Choix

which are well-connected academically. (In the case of Port au Choix, Priscilla Renouf has local committees thinking about early Holocene shorelines! {Renouf and Bell 1998}) It is even more impressive that groups like the Baccalieu Trail Heritage Corporation found the money to fund on-going regional survey work, while they are investigating a site of major importance at Cupids. John Erwin has been doing similar work for the Fleur de Lys Dorset Eskimo Quarry (Erwin 1999). Last summer, Priscilla and her co-researcher, the geographer Trevor Bell, initiated an archaeological resource inventory at the tip of the Great Northern Peninsula, to which the Outreach Program has committed funds for dissemination. It was, in fact, the very first project we decided to spend money on, because this kind of information is crucial. It is the communities which understand where they are, who are ready to start asking questions about how they got here.

## **Partners**

Memorial University of Newfoundland  
Culture and Heritage Division, Department of Tourism, Culture and Recreation,  
Province of Newfoundland and Labrador  
Newfoundland Museum  
Newfoundland Historical Society

## **Participating Local Organizations**

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