

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS OF THE HAMILTON INLET LABRADOR ESKIMO: SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RESPONSES TO EUROPEAN CONTACT*

RICHARD H. JORDAN

ABSTRACT

Intensive archaeological investigations of the Hamilton Inlet Labrador Eskimo reveal a period of occupation between A.D. 1600 and the present. This sequence has been divided into four phases which reflect different social and economic responses to European contact. The 18th century seems to be a particularly important period of socio-economic change as whale hunting, and European and intra-Eskimo trading

emerge as an interrelated network of activities along the entire Labrador coast. The establishment of communal houses is viewed as a direct result of these economic activities as relatives and non-relatives coalesced around important hunter-traders in order to facilitate access to new items of European material culture and to associate themselves directly with these high-status individuals.

INTRODUCTION

Research by archaeologists into the culture history of the Thule/Labrador Eskimo period began in the 1930s. Douglas Leechman excavated a large communal house on the Button Islands and a number of sod houses at Nunaingok near the western end of Mclellan Strait. The results have appeared in a popularized form (Leechman 1950). During the same decade, Junius Bird (1945) excavated 22 sod houses in the Hopedale Area, all dating within the historic period. Subsequent research was not undertaken until 1968 when William Fitzhugh (1972) test pitted a number of historic sod houses on Eskimo Island, Hamilton Inlet and Peter Schledermann (1971) in 1970 excavated a series of prehistoric and historic houses in Saglek Fjord.

My field investigation of the Labrador Eskimo in 1973 and 1975 continued the work

*Funds to support the field aspects of this investigation in 1973 were supplied by Dr. William Fitzhugh, as part of his research into the palaeoecology and prehistory of Hamilton Inlet. Support for the 1975 field season was due primarily to the generosity of the friends and alumnae of Bryn Mawr College and the Department of Anthropology. I wish to express my gratitude to all those who made this research possible.

The Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia generously provided comparative collections for the preliminary faunal analysis. I would also like to gratefully acknowledge the contributions of a number of Bryn Mawr and Haverford College students who have particularly aided this research in a variety of ways: Mary Whelan, Toyo Lynn Yamashita, Barbara Christen, Pamela de Toledo and Mark Schatz.

initiated by Fitzhugh on Eskimo Island. It focused on a detailed investigation of Eskimo social and economic changes during the historic period. A total of 19 semisubterranean winter houses were either tested or intensively excavated revealing a span of occupation from ca. A.D. 1600 to the late 1800s, when the Eskimo discontinued building this house form. In order to place these results in a broader context, comparisons will be drawn with other regions of the eastern Arctic, including northern Labrador, Baffin Island and Greenland.

The Eskimo sequence in Hamilton Inlet has been divided into four phases which reflect different social and economic responses to European activity. These are the Colonization and Raiding Period (A.D. 1600 to 1700), the Whaling and Intermittent Trading Period (A.D. 1700 to 1800), the Trapping and European Settlement Period (A.D. 1800 to 1870), and the Modern Period (1870 to present). Only the first three periods, which were investigated archaeologically, will be discussed.

COLONIZATION AND RAIDING PERIOD A.D. 1600 to 1700

The Labrador Eskimo are directly descended from the Thule Culture that expanded out of northern Alaska about A.D. 1000 into Canada and Greenland (Ford 1959). The age of initial occupation of the Labrador coast is unknown. However, early Thule sites are known from Frobisher Bay, Baffin Island (Collins 1950), and Schledermann (1971:16) believes that a southern population movement into Labrador from Baffin Island occurred about A.D. 1350. This estimate may be essentially correct, even though the only pre-European contact houses to be fully excavated are from Saglek and are

estimated to date about A.D. 1450. In 1977 a number of large prehistoric winter settlements between Saglek and Cape Chidley were located and tested. Villages in Nachvak Fjord, Seven Islands Bay and in the Killinek region appear to have a complete cultural historical sequence from prehistoric Thule to 19th century Labrador Eskimo, but precise chronological refinement is not yet possible as radiometric assays have not been completed.

Relations with Dorset Eskimos along the northern Labrador coast remain uncertain. No firm evidence for late Dorset occupation of the Torngat region or the Nain-Okak regions between A.D. 1200 and 1400 has yet been discovered. However, striking similarities between Dorset and Thule/Labrador Eskimo settlement patterns and economy in the Torngat region still leaves the question of Dorset/Thule interaction open to discussion.

Subsequent expansion along the central Labrador coast took place around A.D. 1600 during the historic period (Bird 1945, Jordan 1974). No precontact houses have yet been located in Okak (Cox, personal communication), Nain (Fitzhugh, personal communication), Hopedale or Hamilton Inlet. The evidence for Labrador Eskimo/Point Revenge contact in this region also remains unclear. No historic period Point Revenge sites have been located, and the only evidence for the late persistence of these Indian groups in coastal areas is based on a single 16th century radiocarbon date from Alley's Head, Hamilton Inlet (Fitzhugh, this volume). All that may be safely said at this time is that the Thule/Labrador Eskimo expansion along the entire Labrador coast appears to have been a relatively rapid process, and that they quickly replaced those prehistoric cultures which might have been occupying coastal locales.

The reasons for this southern population thrust are not entirely understood, although this expansion conforms well with the southern movements of the Thule Culture in the Central Canadian Arctic (McCartney 1971) and Greenland as well (Mathiessen 1930). Deteriorating climatic conditions, most acutely registered in the high Arctic (McGhee 1969/70), may be the primary causal mechanism. In addition, the desire to obtain European material items, especially iron, from fishermen and whalers in the Strait of Belle Isle, may well have further stimulated this rapid expansion along the central Labrador coast.

Hamilton Inlet became the terminus of permanent settlement and the southern stronghold of the Eskimo (Fig. 1). Initial occupation is estimated to have occurred about A.D. 1600, when three small nuclear family houses were built on Eskimo Island at the southern end of the Narrows between Lake Melville and Groswater Bay. These semisubterranean sod

houses were circular to oval in outline with short entrance tunnels and ill-defined sleeping platforms located in the rear of the house. In the latter half of the 17th century these houses were replaced by three more houses which were both larger and rectangular in outline. Subsistence techniques focused overwhelmingly on the procurement of harp (*Phoca groenlandica*), ring (*P. hispida*), and harbor seals (*P. vitulina*), in equal intensity. Remains of birds, fish, otter, wolverine, fox, bear, and wolf were also present in small percentages. Faunal evidence is negligible for whale and caribou hunting.

The material culture indicates an extremely heavy reliance on European iron (Plate 1). Spikes and nails were cold-hammered into a variety of traditional Eskimo forms, including harpoons, harpoon end-blades, ulus, single-edged knives, tanged arrowheads, and scrapers. Other items of European origin are present, but by no means numerous. These include glass and porcelain fragments, a few trade beads, musket balls, a single iron axe, and a single pair of scissors. The general impression is that traditional technological forms remained unaltered; iron was simply substituted in many cases for such raw materials as slate, bone and ivory (Plate 2). Moreover, exotic items, indicative of trading relations, such as glass trade beads and kaolin pipes, are extremely rare. This material probably arrived in Hamilton Inlet as a result of Eskimo raids into the Strait of Belle Isle and Gulf of St. Lawrence. Historic records indicate a great deal of hostility between Eskimos and Europeans in this region during the 17th century which would have been inimical to peaceful long-term trade relations (Gosling 1910; Jenness 1965).

WHALING AND INTERMITTENT TRADING PERIOD A.D. 1700 TO 1800

The eighteenth century was a period of cultural florescence for the Labrador Eskimo. Population size increased as four large communal houses, each containing several families, were built on Eskimo Island (Fig. 2). An increase in the size and number of communal houses seems also to be a consistent pattern along the entire Labrador coast, although precise quantitative data are not available. These houses extend as far north as the Button Islands where they have been described by Leechman (1950).

Seals continued to be the mainstay of the Eskimo, but open-water whale hunting intensified in most regions along the Labrador coast. Whales were important not only as a large protein source, but for baleen and whale oil which were highly valued as trade items. Trading with Europeans in the early 1700s flourished as the English, French, and perhaps the Dutch,

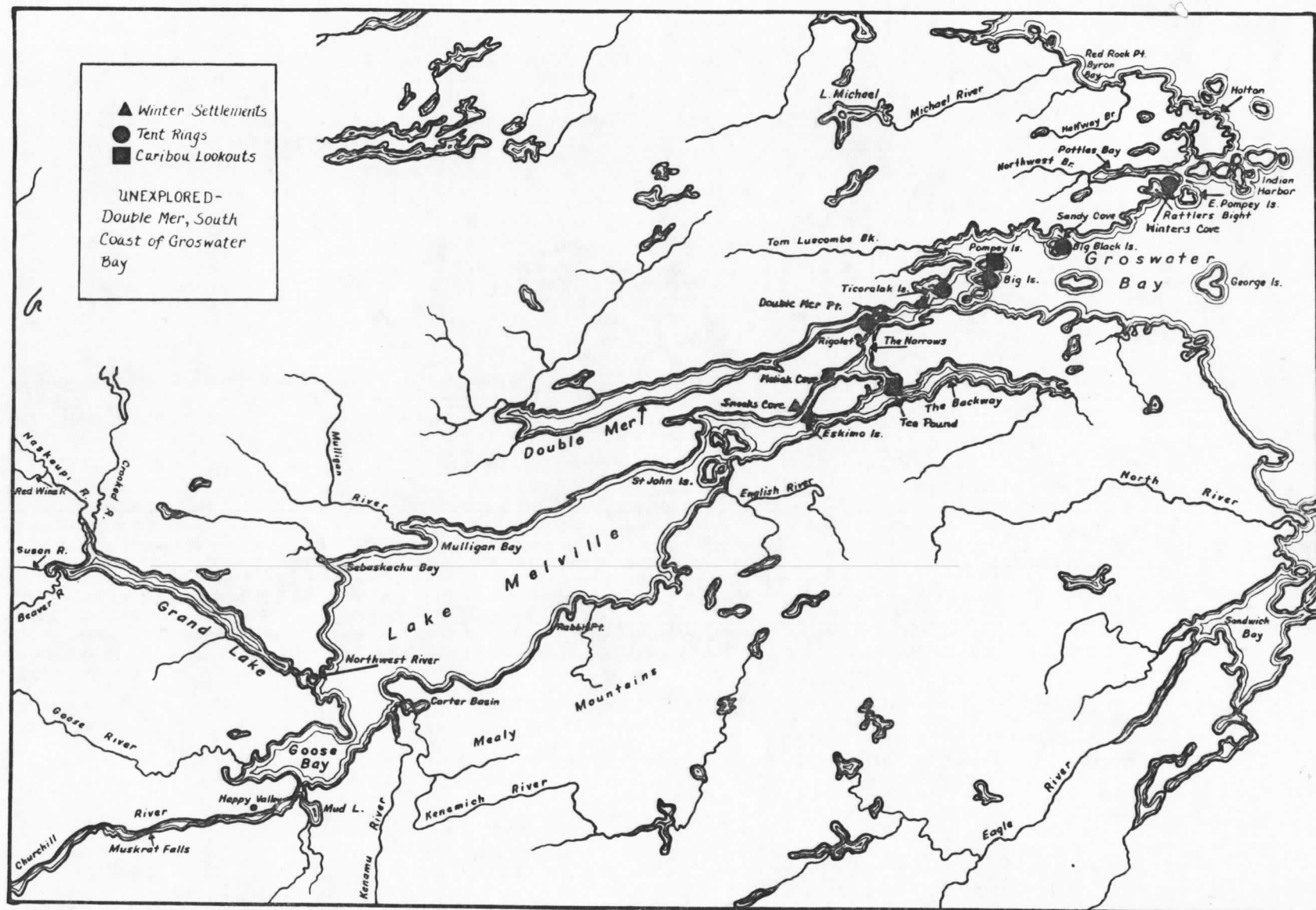


Fig. 1. Settlement Pattern of the Hamilton Inlet Labrador Eskimo. Winter sod houses are confined to the Narrows region, while summer camps are found within Groswater Bay.

launched expeditions to obtain products from the Labrador Eskimo. Because of the better ice conditions along the central coast, Hamilton Inlet became one of the prime loci for this activity. In return for the whale products and animal pelts the Eskimo received numerous manufactured goods, such as muskets and ammunition, knives, ulus, cod jigs, fish hooks, nets, steel traps, axes, porcelain, glassware, kaolin pipes, alcoholic beverages, rhinestone jewelry, and thousands of multi-colored trade beads (Plates 3, 4). Although the Eskimo still continued to fashion many of their own material items, this flood of trade goods began to make them dependent upon European products. Moreover, intra-Eskimo trade networks were established with Eskimos from the northern central and north Labrador coast and with groups as far away as western Ungava Bay (Taylor 1974).

In the last half of the eighteenth century the Labrador Eskimo culture began to change even more radically as European activity increased and diversified in scope. The conflict between the French and English, as they struggled for domination of the New World, also affected the relatively remote region of central Labrador. The Montagnais, allied with the French in the rich fur trade, were given muskets in order to attack the central Labrador Eskimo (Gosling 1910). Archeological evidence for this struggle is amply demonstrated by a litter of mutilated human cranial fragments on the house floors and upper midden deposits of the Eskimo Island communal houses. Some of these show evidence of butchering and one was deliberately filled with trade beads and placed on top of the entrance tunnel as a warning (Plate 5).

Perhaps as a response to these hostilities, the Eskimos moved their winter settlement ten miles to the northern end of the Narrows, a more easily defensible position. Even though peace between the Indians and Eskimo was established by a treaty in 1765 through the efforts of Governor Hugh Pallisher of Newfoundland, the Eskimo continued to reside at the northern end of the Narrows. For the duration of the 18th century the Eskimo maintained active trade relations with Europeans and with each other along the northern and central coastlines. Whale hunting also continued to be an important activity. Populations, however, began to decline, at least in Hamilton Inlet, as only three communal houses were erected during this period. This may have been a result of both the aforementioned hostilities and the introduction of European diseases.

TRAPPING AND EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1800 TO 1870 A.D.)

About A.D. 1800 the Hamilton Inlet Eskimo re-established their winter settlement on Eskimo Island, but their fortunes continued to decline. Only two communal houses were erected, and these were subsequently reduced in size to conserve heat by the erection of an internal wall. Both whaling and intra-Eskimo trade were gradually abandoned, and Europeans began to settle permanently in Hamilton Inlet and establish their own settlements and trading posts. European diseases and the practice by Euro-Canadians of taking Eskimo wives further reduced the population (Zimmerly 1975). Seal hunting remained an important subsistence activity, but trapping of fur-bearing mammals and trading at local posts dominated the winter cycle. Under the ecological necessity of trapping in dispersed groups, the pattern of nucleated winter settlements dissolved. Communal houses were discontinued in favor of small, scattered, nuclear family sod houses erected near trading posts or in good trapping areas along the entire length of the Narrows.

Along the northern Labrador coast the history of contact took another form. In the late 18th century the Moravians established a mission at Nain and later in other northern areas in order to convert the Eskimo to Christianity and control the flow of European economic goods. The result was not only the transformation of Eskimo religious beliefs, but in addition their subsistence and settlement pattern to varying degrees, as the Eskimos converged on the mission settlements. Communal households, however, were strongly discouraged, so that the nuclear family households eventually replaced the old pattern.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The coast of Labrador was initially colonized by the Thule Eskimo from Baffin Island during the prehistoric period approximately A.D. 1350. They advanced as far south as Saglek Fjord by A.D. 1450 and by A.D. 1600 were well established along the entire coast as far south as Hamilton Inlet. This movement conforms well with a period of climatic deterioration which influenced occupation in the high Arctic most directly and necessitated a southern expansion both in the Canadian Arctic and Greenland. A desire for European goods, especially iron, may have been an added impetus both in Labrador and in Greenland where Norse sites were mined for this valuable raw material (Meldgaard, personal communication, 1976). Expansion and



Plate 4

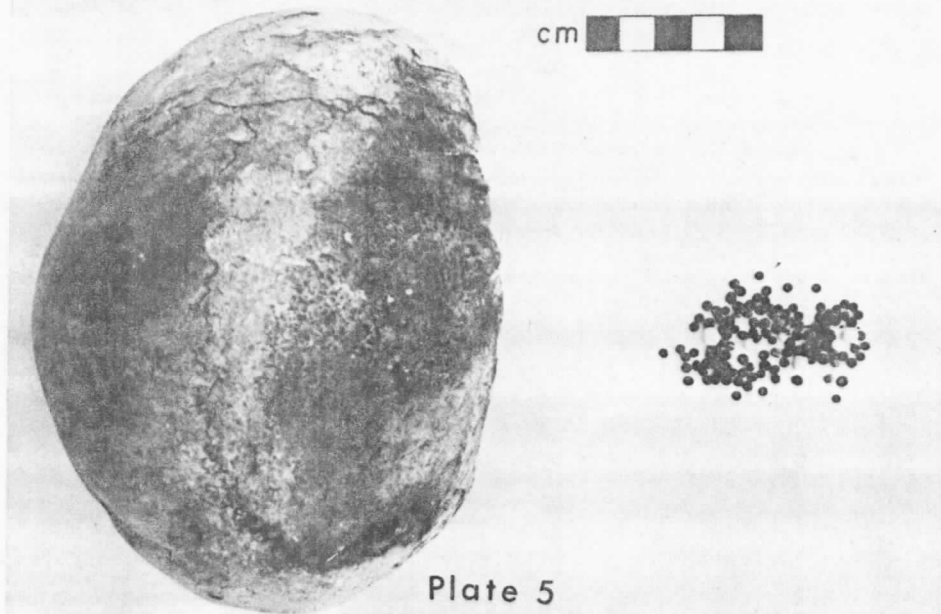


Plate 5

Plate 4. Eighteenth Century Artifacts from Eskimo Island. *Top*: Soapstone pot fragment, green bottle base fragment. *Center*: Kaoline pipe bowl and stem fragments, iron key, iron file. *Bottom*: Small glazed ceramicware, toy soapstone lamp, copper thimble, two in-laid rhinestone jewelry pieces, multi-colored trade beads.

Plate 5. Mutilated Calvarium and Associated Trade Beads from an Eighteenth Century Communal House on Eskimo Island.

initial settlement in Labrador was by a small number of nuclear families.

By A.D. 1700 whale hunting and trading with Europeans were important economic activities, and a shift from nuclear family dwellings to communal houses occurred along the entire Labrador coast. The only other region in which true communal houses were built was in Greenland south of Melville Bay, although they may have preceded those in Labrador by some 50 years. While a number of scholars (Bird 1945; Patterson 1939; Steensby 1910; Thalbitzer 1914) have attempted to explain this change in house form and residence pattern, only the opinions of the most recent investigators will be dealt with (Petersen 1974/75; Schledermann 1976). Both consider that climatic changes resulted in a serious stress period for the Eskimo, as changes in the sea-ice distribution reduced the availability of whales. With a reduction of this major resource there was an increased reliance upon seals. As seal meat was distributed only within households, less successful hunters and their families eventually moved in with more successful families in order to gain access to the limited amount of food. An added advantage is seen in a greater degree of heating efficiency in communal houses *vis-à-vis* the nuclear family dwelling.

While agreeing that this latter point is valid, this hypothesis does not explain why food could not be shared in a settlement consisting of a number of nuclear family dwellings. Or if food could not be shared beyond the household level, it is not clear why successful families would incorporate destitute families, especially if they were not related, into their dwellings, necessitating completely new house forms. Moreover, Taylor (1974), in his careful documentation of 18th century settlement patterns from Moravian mission accounts in Nain, states that the unit of food sharing for seals extended beyond the household level, at least in Labrador. Nor do either historic or archival descriptions of 17th and 18th century Eskimo life in Greenland and Labrador indicate that this was a period of environmental or economic stress. The explanation of the communal house pattern must be sought elsewhere.

During the 17th century in Greenland and 18th century in Labrador similar patterns of European contact occurred. Europeans launched numerous voyages into this area both for whale hunting and trading with the Eskimos. Some of the items most desired by Europeans were the products from whales—oil and baleen. The response in both areas was a continuance or intensification of whale hunting and the emergence of intra-Eskimo trade over broad areas. In fact, annual markets were established in Greenland in the

Sukkertoppen-Holsteinborg region, from which European goods were dispersed along the entire Greenland coast (Gad 1971).

The communal house pattern may be best explained by the emergence of, and coalescence around, a limited number of household heads who enjoyed a high degree of status, prestige, and wealth. The existence of these high-status individuals has been verified by Taylor (1974) in Labrador. Differential status and access to and control of valuable European material goods may have emerged in three intermeshing roles: 1) that of a successful whaling captain; 2) that of a shrewd trader with Europeans; and 3) that of a successful "middleman" in trading with other Eskimo groups. Even though the Eskimos are often cited as a classic example of egalitarian societies, the emergence of higher status individuals has been commonly recorded across the Arctic. High status was usually the result of superior hunting abilities. In European contact situations, an adeptness in trading is also viewed by other Eskimos as extremely important (cf. Spencer 1959; Taylor 1974). Since European material goods would probably have fallen under the category of private property, access to these goods may not have been available beyond the household level of organization. The inclusion of larger numbers of both kin and non-kin members within a single household would have facilitated access by the entire settlement to these resources and increased their prestige as a result of their association with important hunter-traders. Thus, the communal house pattern is seen primarily as a social response to external European contact rather than an adaptation to changing climatic and ecological conditions.

REFERENCES CITED

- Bird, Junius
1945 Archaeology of the Hopedale Area, Labrador. *American Museum of Natural History Anthropological Papers*, 39(2).
- Collins, H.
1950 Excavations at Frobisher Bay, Baffin Island, N.W.T., *National Museum of Canada Bulletin*, 118: 18-43.
- Fitzhugh, William
1972 Environmental Archaeology and Cultural Systems in Hamilton Inlet, Labrador. *Smithsonian Contribution to Anthropology*, No. 16, Washington, D.C.