

PRELIMINARY CULTURAL SEQUENCE AND PALAEO-ENVIRONMENTAL RECONSTRUCTION OF THE INDIAN HOUSE REGION, NOUVEAU-QUEBEC*

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ABSTRACT

Archaeological investigations since 1973 at Indian House Lake near the northern limits of the boreal forest reveal a long but sporadic history of interior adapted caribou hunters. Although sites are noted for their limited assemblages, surface locations and lack of organic material for radiocarbon dating, the culture history of this area has been reconstructed on the basis of a beach ridge chronology and regional comparisons. The sequence has been divided into four temporal, but not necessarily cultural, historical periods: the Early, Middle and Late Prehistoric Manifestations and the Mushuau Nipian Phase. The clearest cultural relations exist between the Early

Prehistoric and the Maritime Archaic, and the Mushuau Nipian Phase, which represent the historic ancestors of the Naskopi. The sequence is dominated by Indian groups, while evidence for Eskimo exploitation of Indian House Lake is extremely limited.

A palaeoenvironmental framework is also presented based on two pollen cores from the Indian House Lake region. Pollen taxa indicate that the boreal forest spread into the region about 3800 BP, climaxed about 3000 BP and thinned out about 2500 BP in response to a period of climatic cooling. Possible cultural adaptive responses to these changes are suggested.

INTRODUCTION

Archaeological research at Indian House Lake, Nouveau-Québec began in 1969 with work by G. Conrad (1972) of the Hamilton Inlet Project directed by William Fitzhugh. Historic and prehistoric sites were located on both shores of the Ruisseau de la Pyramide de Sable. In 1972, further interest in the archaeology of the area was manifested by Louis-Edmond Hamelin of the Centre d'études nordiques, Université Laval who reported recent Algonkian sites at the mouth of the

Ruisseau du Météorologue (Hamelin 1973). Finally, today as in the past many outfitters (H. Culos, K. Macdonald), and biologists and pilots (B. Simard, T. Bennet) have made an important contribution by locating and reporting new sites.

In 1973, the Indian House Lake or Mushuau Nipi Project took form as an outgrowth of the archaeological research carried out by the Smithsonian Institution on the coast of Labrador. Surveys in 1973 and 1974 resulted in the locating of 75 archaeological sites of which 30 contained lithic debitage. Representative samples were surface collected or retrieved by test pitting. In 1975 and 1976, extensive excavations were undertaken at the following sites: HeDf-4 6 and 12, and HdDe-3 and 5.

Generally, sites are characterized by their small size, limited assemblages, surface location, lack of organic material for radiocarbon dating and scarcity of diagnostic tools. However, a limited number of sites, selected for excavations, offered an *in situ* cultural level

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Tools consist of biface bases, squared or side-notched and convex or slightly concave. The site was possibly occupied by two to three household units simultaneously during the open water season. The maximum age for the site is between 2300 and 1600 years B.P., while the few tools suggest some typological affinities with Dorset of Wakeham Bay (Barré 1970).

MUSHUAU NIPIAN PHASE

The cultural occupation of Indian House Lake ends with the historic Mushuau Innuts from at least 1839 to 1945 (Samson 1976). Undoubtedly, this ethnographic group represents the most important cultural group. Their specialized interior caribou adaptation left as many as 780 habitation structures at 49 different locations, an interesting figure in the light of their small band size of 40 to 60 individuals living in about four tents (Cabot 1920). The average number of tent rings at each site is about 20 to 25.

At HeDf-4, which contained 105 structures, a total of 16 structures were excavated. Tent rings yielded various 19th century European trade goods such as percussion caps, 44 to 40 cartridges, lead musket balls, heart-shaped tobacco stamps, square-cut and wire nails, pieces of textile, canvas and leather, seed beads, and wood and metal plastic buttons (Fig. 11). Tent rings are characterized by a peripheral earth ring about four meters in diameter, a central hearth, a slight interior depression and a ramp from the hearth to the entrance.

Most of the earth rings on terraces 1 and 2 are close to the present beachline and most probably pertain to an open water period of occupation. The tent rings on terraces 3 and 4 are much less abundant (about ten) and were most likely occupied during late fall/winter. Perhaps some of these tent rings were spring-caribou lookout stations since they offered good visibility southwestward toward the oncoming caribou migration.

The major part of this late historic Algonkian site is interpreted as the spring/fall gathering location for many local bands such as the Mushuau Innuts (George River or Barren Ground band), the Davis Inlet band and the Fort Chimo band. Clusters of tents suggest synchronicity of occupation for many of the tent rings. The European material indicates that the site was used from the early 19th century to the early part of the 20th century.

Except for the late prehistoric and early contact predecessors, the ancestors of the Mushuau Innuts are unknown. No early historic Indian remains (16th, 17th and 18th centuries) have yet been found which suggests that either the area was unoccupied or very

seldom occupied during this period, or that the Indians maintained the use of stone tools into the beginning of the 19th century in northern Québec. The near absence of Indian occupants is possibly explained by the control of the Labrador coast and of the Strait of Belle Isle region by the Eskimo after A.D. 1500. However, the origins of the Mushuau Innuts and of northern Algonkians are to be found in cultural manifestations such as HeDf-6 and 12.

PALAEO-ENVIRONMENT AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

The palaeo-delta formations (zero to 35 meters above lake level) bearing the prehistoric and historic remains are most likely no older than 6000 to 4000 years BP. Carbon-14 dates from Bog A (3710±100; I-9500) 35 meters above lake level and from lac des Roches Moutonnées (4090±250; I-9067) 110 meters above lake level (about the elevation of N3) suggest that the palaeo-deltas began to form during the latter part of that period, i.e., 4000 to 5000 BP.

The pollen diagram (Fig. 12) of lac des Roches Moutonnées (McAndrews and Samson 1977) indicates that after the decanting of proglacial Lake Naskaupi a sparse tundra vegetation of *Cyperaceae* became established on the valley slopes of the northern section of the lake and undoubtedly in all of the George River Valley. By about 4000 years BP a rich shrub-tundra dominated the landscape and was rapidly invaded by *Tamarack* and *Spruce* about 3800 years BP. This forest invasion produced taiga patches which became three times more abundant by 3000 BP and extended 150 meters higher on the plateau than today. During this forest climax, the vegetation was that of a rich forest-tundra. About 2500 years BP a general cooling of the climate is registered and coincides with the lowering of the tree line and the thinning of taiga zones.

Although the chronological position of the High Quartz assemblages relies on uplift and typological dating, we hypothesize that they represent the remains of the earliest occupants of the lake and most likely relate to the Maritime Archaic Tradition. Coinciding with the early phase of the vegetative sequence these people ventured seasonally inland after caribou and fish had recolonized the area by at least 5000 to 4000 years BP. Prior to 3800 years BP this incursion into the George River Valley undoubtedly remained precarious until trees afforded some security and protection during the winter months.

By 3800 years BP the development of taiga zones offered more suitable ecological conditions since trees gave shelter and firewood for winter residency and likely attracted