

Nadlok and Its Unusual Antler Dwellings



From the beach, a composite view of the kayak platform and work area, the stone winter house and the antler hut of 1986.

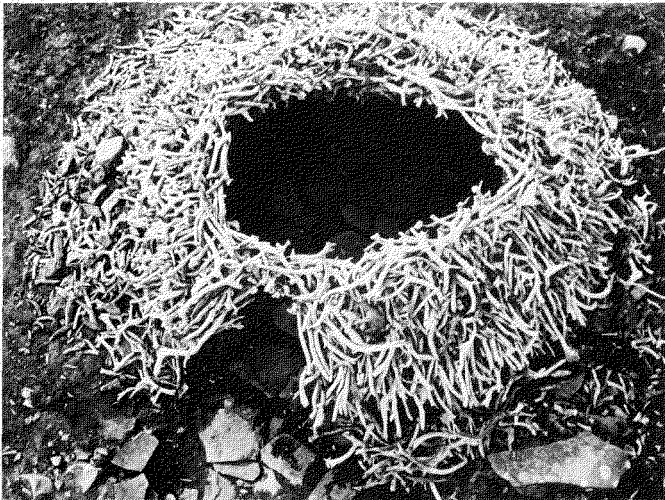
Nadlok, or “crossing-place-of-deer” in Bathurst Inuit dialect, is an island camp and herd interception site found in 1982 by Douglas Stern 100 km south of Bathurst Inlet, Northwest Territories. In the “Little Ice Age” (1450-1700 A.D.), a few families of coastal Copper Inuit appear to have abandoned a declining seal resource on the coast for predictable and available inland caribou hunting at Nadlok. A simple tent camp, as seen in the architecturally sterile bottom level dating 1400 A.D., evolved into 15 sturdy stone and antler dwellings occupied in winter.

Of Nadlok’s 15 dwellings, 5 stone winter houses are paired with 5 antler huts, while 5 untested large stone rings lie to the east of the paired dwellings. One paired house and hut dug in 1985 gave data useful in rebuilding a second pair a year later. The hut excavated in 1986 was larger, its uppermost antler ring suggesting a sloping open-domed roof of 3000-4000 antlers likely covered with caribou hide and banked with snow. Beneath this ring were the remains of 3 sequential but smaller rings surrounding 5 superimposed stone floors, the remains of smaller and earlier occupations.

The stone floors and antler rings form a 7 m diameter fireweed- and wormwood-covered mound sloping down from the ridge crest of the island. Floor pavements progressively



Location of the Nadlock site.



Top view of antler house: inward sagging a year after 1986 reconstruction suggests the roof opening was larger and the walls more upright.



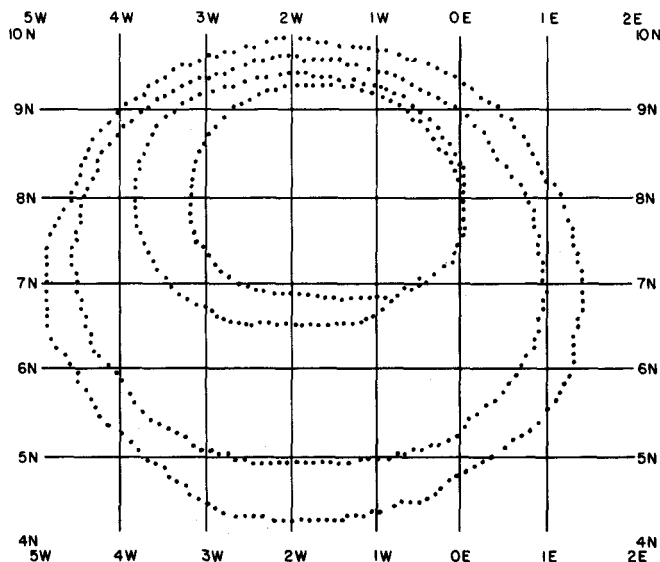
Stone floor encircled by the underlying antler ring.

thicken to 1.5 m opposite their common doorway on the crest. They had slumped when summers thawed their supporting clay and sand. Successive inhabitants added readily available slabs to level each floor.

Scattered between the floors were late prehistoric Copper Inuit tools, art and trade goods. Men's and women's tools include an ornately engraved antler knife handle, ulus, har-

poons, arrows, copper fishhooks with bone lures, needle cases, whittling knives, engraved pendants, fire-starting kits and awls. There were also some 40 000 bones, mostly the remains of caribou, but also of birds, fish and muskox. In summer, the Nadlok people probably jigged for fish, shot or trapped waterfowl and lanced caribou from kayaks as they swam the lake on their way south to the forest. Cached meat and fish likely sustained them over winter, while in spring they preyed on muskox. Ongoing analysis suggests that caribou carcass portions were consistently distributed on both sides of the hut doorway. There were twice as many fore as hind limbs (femoral fragments may be more difficult to identify than humeral fragments) and occurrences of caribou skeletal elements did not change significantly through the 250-year occupation of the site.

Dog crania and a knotted rawhide line suggest the use of dog sleds. Copper, soapstone, pottery and painted birchbark baskets may have been trade goods obtained from the Inuit of Coronation Gulf and Indians of the interior. Because historic Copper Inuit went to the Thelon to get wood and they have a similar dialect to Caribou Inuit, surveys are being conducted on the Kazan River to the southeast to see if early historic Caribou Inuit may have made antler huts. Such evidence would strengthen the hypothesis that Nadlok's people were ancestral to Caribou Inuit.



Antler rings 1-4 in the 1986 excavation at Nadlok. Dotted rings represent maximum outside diameters of antler rings. The hut quadrupled in size in the period 1450-1700 A.D., with the common doorway remaining at top of drawing (N) on the ridge crest. A 1 m² grid is superimposed.

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