

An Archaeological Survey of Bache Peninsula, Ellesmere Island*

During the early part of August 1977, a survey of archaeological sites was carried out in the Bache Peninsula region on the east coast of Ellesmere Island, N.W.T. (Fig. 1) with the purpose of ascertaining the feasibility of detailed prehistoric human/ecological investigations in that area in the future.

The Bache Peninsula region was chosen for a number of reasons: it is one of the few major ice-free (non-glaciated) regions along the east coast of Ellesmere Island. The area is connected by an ice-free corridor (Sverdrup Pass) to the Fosheim Peninsula region on the west coast of Ellesmere Island. This corridor, which is generally thought to have been ice-free during the last 5,000-6,000 years, could have served as a convenient passage to the east coast of Ellesmere Island for the early inhabitants of the High Arctic. The close proximity of the Bache Peninsula region to Greenland (40 km between Brevoort Island and Cape Ingfield), as well as the fact that the northern boundary of the Baffin Bay North Water is located along this

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general latitude, enhance the attractiveness of this area as a major migration route into Greenland. Judging from the results of the field research, the use of the area was apparent not only in terms of a convenient crossing area, but also in terms of a seasonally permanent habitation locale.

Archaeological sites were first noted in the study area by Otto Sverdrup¹ and his crew when they wintered in, and explored, the general region between 1898 and 1899. Some of these sites, as well as new ones, were later noted by T.C. Lethbridge, members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and Dr. R. L. Christie of the Geological Survey of Canada.

The specific objective of the Ellesmere Island Research Project was to locate sites pertaining to the various phases of Arctic prehistory, including the earliest Independence I (or Gammel Nûgdît?) sites, Independence II sites, and Dorset and Thule culture sites. The cultural associations of the various sites were generally established from a study of dwelling configurations and location in relation to present sea level, as well as fortuitous diagnostic surface finds. Other objectives of the field survey included observations of wildlife, ascertaining sea-ice distribution, and tidal movements, and studying general conditions in so far as they relate to future research plans.

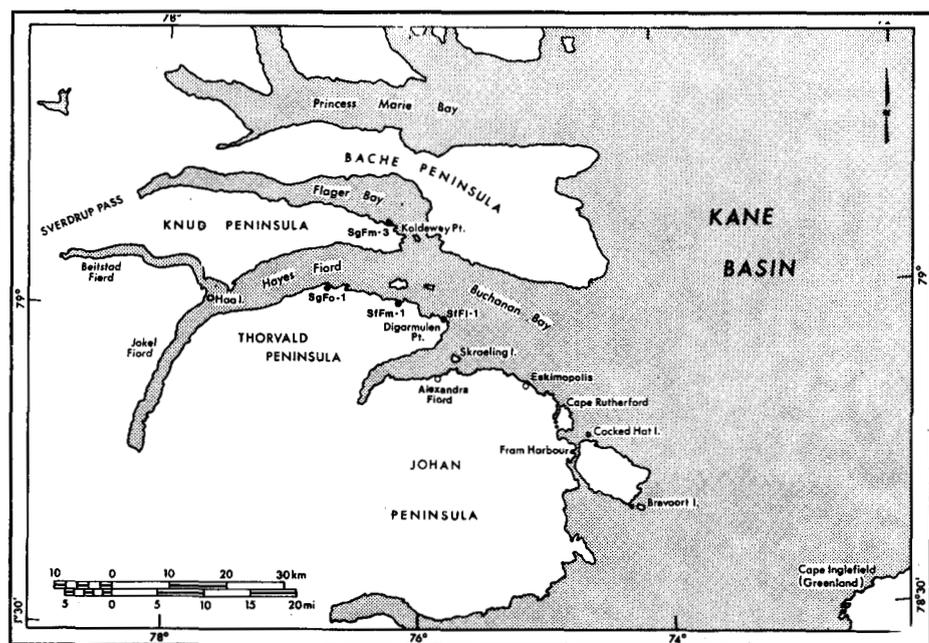


FIG. 1. Bache Peninsula region, east coast of Ellesmere Island.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

A total of 33 archaeological sites was located during the field reconnaissance. Several of these sites should more properly be termed "site areas", as they included archaeological features from different terrace levels and probably different cultural associations within restricted geographical localities. The Arctic Small Tool tradition (ASTt) was represented on eight sites, most of which contained several ASTt phases. On ASTt site SfFI-1 (Fig. 1), a small hearth was located approximately 30m above present sea level near vaguely defined, boulder-outlined structures. The latter were not central-passageway features, although several of these were noted on other ASTt sites. A charcoal sample (driftwood) obtained from the hearth has been radiocarbon dated at 4390 ± 80 B.P. by Dr. W. Blake, Jr. of the Geological Survey of Canada (serial no. 2576).

The Thule culture was represented on nearly all of the sites in the form of summer encampments and/or winter settlements. A total of 110 sod/stone and whalebone winter houses was located on ten Thule culture sites in the study area. The sites contained a large amount of whalebone (bowhead), suggesting an excellent habitat for the large whales during a particular time period. In 1974, two Thule culture winter houses were located near Cape Storm on the south coast of Ellesmere Island². Both dwellings and contents indicated a close resemblance to ancestral Polar

Eskimo material from Greenland, suggesting a wider geographical distribution of these people in the past. This likelihood is strongly supported by the existence of large permanent winter settlements in the Bache Peninsula region. The house types on the Thule culture sites ranged from small, rounded, single platform structures to the larger clover leaf, triple platform variety. There were a number of house types reminiscent of the four sided houses with kitchen offshoots known from Cape Kent and Ruin Island in Inglefield Land, directly to the east of the study area³. Another interesting note of resemblance with the latter region was an apparent lack of the otherwise typical Thule culture cairn burials. It would appear that, during the time of their early contacts with white explorers, the Polar Eskimos in northwestern Greenland constituted only a residual population of a much larger pre-historic distribution. In the ethnographers' accounts, notably Steensby's⁴, of the Polar Eskimos, there are no references to major winter settlements on Ellesmere Island; however, the Pond Inlet Eskimos apparently still believed in the presence of muskox-hunting Eskimo tribes on Ellesmere Island.

The Dorset period was represented on site SgFm-3 near Koldewey Point (Fig. 1). The site was rendered prominent by the presence of a large (approx. 40m x 4m) rectangular, boulder-walled, enclosed structure (Fig. 2). Other less clearly defined stone walls indi-



FIG. 2. Large rectangular Dorset structure on Site SgFm-3.

cated the presence of at least one similar structure, and a single-line boulder "wall", approximately 40m long, was situated in a small gully on the site. Two smaller, sub-rectangular Dorset houses were also noted on the site. As the site was located late at night, only a brief stay was possible. Two harpoon heads were found within the large stone structure, both suggesting a middle-to-late-Dorset period of occupation⁵. A third harpoon head (Fig. 3), located outside the stone structure,



FIG. 3. Harpoon head from site SgFm-3.

was of Meldgaard's late Pre-Dorset type-state A-10, found on the 24m levels on the Jens Munk site near Igloolik, dated by him to ca. 950 B.C. A reasonably similar specimen was located by E. Knuth on the Lonesome Creek site (TjAg-1), northeastern Ellesmere Island, and attributed to the Independence II phase of the AST; harpoon heads of the Independence II phase in Greenland span Meldgaard's type-states A-8 to A-11⁶. McGhee's "Independence II" harpoon heads are also of Meldgaard's late Pre-Dorset type-state A-12⁷. It would appear that most of the known Independence II harpoon heads are related to Meldgaard's late Pre-Dorset phase of Igloolik, suggesting that Independence II constitutes an amalgamation of late Independence I and Pre-Dorset traits.

The construction of large sub-rectangular "communal" dwelling features has been noted and attributed to the Dorset culture period by several investigators⁸. The presence of such a structure on Ellesmere Island is a significant addition to knowledge about the Dorset presence in the Canadian High Arctic.

A number of new sites were located in the High Arctic during the 1977 season. Two factors resulting from this are relevant to the Ellesmere Island data. It would appear that several stages of the Dorset culture are represented in the High Arctic, from early (site QjLd-21), to early/middle (sites QjLd-2 and QjLd-24) and late (site QjLd-25). The presence of late Dorset has already been well established in the High Arctic⁷. However, the early and middle stages indicate a greater continuity of trait diffusion between the Central and High Arctic during the Dorset phase. Site SgFm-3 on Ellesmere Island represents yet another stage in the Dorset presence — namely, middle to late.

The new discoveries in the Arctic Islands indicate an appreciably greater cultural continuity than previously suggested. It is per-

haps more reasonable to think in terms of greater or lesser intensity of human occupation and utilization rather than extensive periods of complete abandonment of the High Arctic.

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