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Beothuk Iron — Evidence for European Trade?

LAURIE MACLEAN

NEWFOUNDLAND'S BEOTHUK INDIANS, WHO were extinct by 1829 (Howley 231), are famous for their alleged refusal to befriend European visitors to their homeland. Archaeologists and historians agree that the Beothuk gradually retreated in the face of a growing European presence in Newfoundland. Ultimately, the natives found themselves confined to an area around the northern end of Red Indian Lake, deep in the island's interior. Archaeological sites along the Exploits River valley, and on the northeast coast from Bonavista Bay to Notre Dame Bay, tentatively corroborate this escape to a lacustrine environment (Fig. 1). However, some important details of Beothuk life contained in the collections of artifacts from these sites have been overlooked until now. This oversight derives partly from the implied unidirectional, negative nature of Beothuk-European interactions. New information suggests that more productive encounters took place than has typically been thought.

It has, of course, long been known by historians and archaeologists that the Beothuk used iron for a number of purposes; and some useful preliminary study of the subject has been done (see Locke's illustrated pamphlet, *Beothuck Artifacts*, and his short paper, "The Use of Iron by the Beothucks"; also MacLean, "Locke Collection"). But the author's research over the past seven years, at Memorial University and the Newfoundland Museum, produced the first comprehensive analysis of Beothuk iron tools. During the historic period, iron implements gradually replaced more traditional items made mostly of stone. Projectile points were by far the most common Beothuk iron object, supplemented by fish spears

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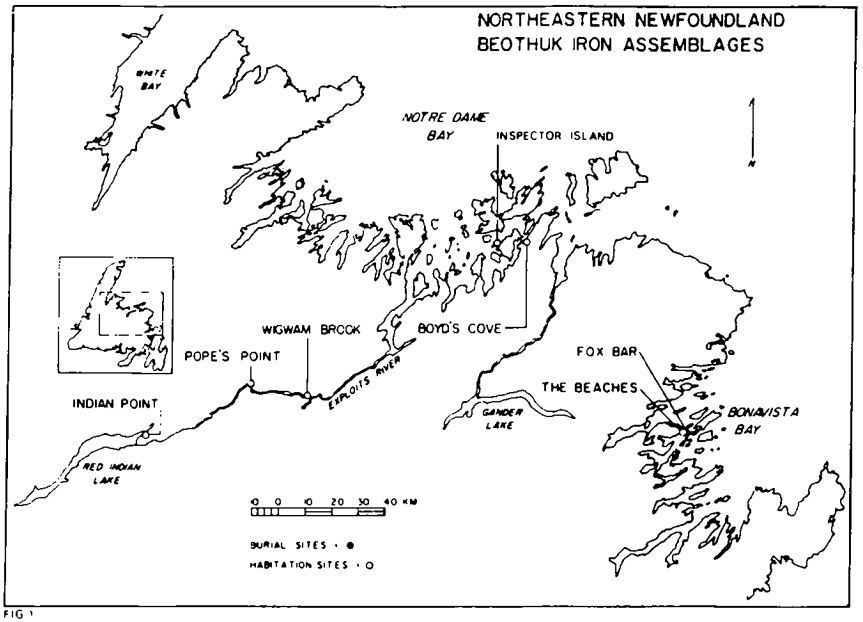


FIG 1

and awls. European axes, hammers, fur traps, knives, nails, and fishhooks were also utilized to varying degrees. The Beothuk depended completely on European sources for iron, as their ancestors had no knowledge of metals. To get it, they often resorted to pilfering from European fishing premises, but this probably did not fill all their needs. Information introduced here suggests that iron, probably along with other materials, was sometimes obtained through less antagonistic means during the early historic period, i.e., until ca. A.D. 1720. Furthermore, these means — I refer to meetings for trade purposes, exchange of gifts, occasional encounters — might have permitted the Beothuk to obtain information that helped them maintain their iron tools. They also could have gleaned insights about recycling European iron into objects better suited to traditional native functions.

The author examined ten iron artifacts from the Beaches and fifty-seven from the Fox Bar burial, two coastal sites in Bonavista Bay. (An additional twenty iron objects from the Beaches were not available for viewing.) Two Notre Dame Bay localities, Boyd's Cove and Inspector Island, produced almost 2,000 iron artifacts, which represent the apex of coastal ironworking. Over 1,500 iron objects from thirty-two inland sites in the Exploits River-Red Indian Lake region complete the sample, which clearly indicates evolutionary aspects of the Beothuk iron industry (Fig. 1).

The Beaches housepits have produced mostly stone tools, a few wrought iron nails, including two modified examples, one unfinished projectile point, and one complete projectile point (Devereux 42-5; MacLean, "Report" 7, 9, "Burnside" 16). The housepit which produced the complete iron projectile point, two modified nail fragments, and six stone projectile points has been radiocarbon dated to A.D. 1490-1630 (MacLean, "Burnside" 17). This is the terminal Beothuk radiocarbon date at this site. The data suggest that stone tools were more important than iron at this time, although unexcavated portions of the site could contain evidence of post-1630 occupations. A larger proportion of iron and possibly other European materials might be expected in these areas.

The Fox Bar burial is located just across the harbor from the Beaches. The two sites appear to be approximately contemporaneous, although a wider selection of iron objects is present in the burial. Nine projectile points and four preforms were recovered, along with European knives, an axe, and other objects (MacLean, "Beothuk" 130). The over-representation of projectile points and other iron items in the burial, when compared to the living site, reflects their value to the Beothuk. Presumably these tools were placed in the grave to facilitate the survival of the deceased in the next world. Fox Bar's large collection of iron implies that Beothuk in the area were more dependant on this material than the present data indicate. This increased use of iron probably occurred at occupations subsequent to those that have been found to date at the Beaches. More excavations should produce evidence for this technological change.

Some early stages of the Beothuk iron industry are manifest in the large Boyd's Cove sample of over 1,700 iron artifacts, dating to the 1650-1720 period (MacLean, "Beothuk" 128; Pastore 98). Wrought iron nails and nail fragments (1,179) found at Boyd's Cove obviously represent the preferred raw material for recycling. Of the 229 partly modified objects, 160 are nails, and many of the thirty-seven projectile points are also made from nails (MacLean, "Beothuk" 128; Fig. 2). Most appear to be Beothuk-worked, but a laboratory examination reveals the presence of European-recycled examples. Twenty-two iron artifacts that were metallurgically tested at Parks Canada's conservation labs in Ottawa contained three modified nail fragments that had been hot-worked at temperatures in excess of 1000° C (Fig. 3). These conditions could only have been attained in a forge (MacLean, "Beothuk" 100, 101). Two other nail fragments that had been heated to over 1200° C and cooled slowly, as in a forge, may have also been worked in accordance with Beothuk templates. Unfortunately, corrosion had removed the sections containing possible diagnostic evidence (MacLean, "Beothuk" 101).

In St. John's, Boyd's Cove artifacts were examined by a material culture expert who was also an iron specialist. He concluded that three iron projectile points exemplify too high a quality of workmanship to have been made by

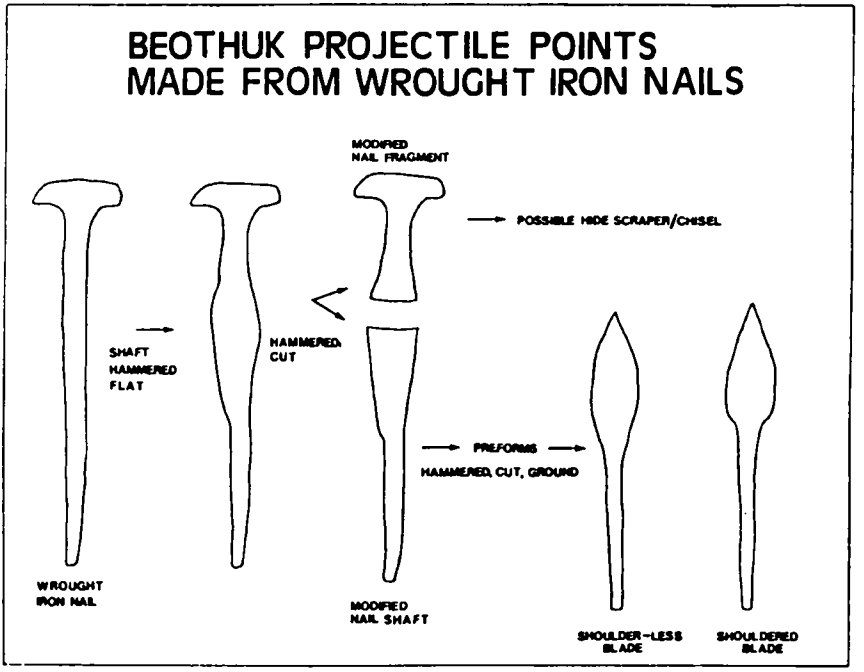

BEOTHUK PROJECTILE POINTS
MADE FROM WROUGHT IRON NAILS
MODIFIED
NAIL FRAGMENT
POSSIBLE HIDE SCRAPER/CHISEL
SHAFT
HAMMERED
FLAT
HAMMERED,
CUT
PREFORMS
HAMMERED, CUT, GROUND
WROUGHT
IRON NAIL
MODIFIED
NAIL SHAFT
SHOULDER-LESS
BLADE
SHOULDERED
BLADE

FIG 2

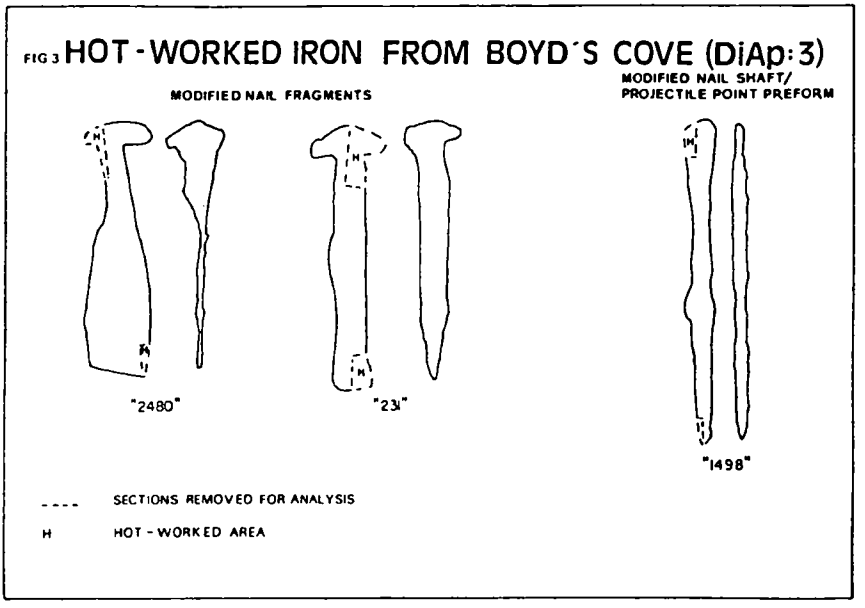


FIG 3 HOT-WORKED IRON FROM BOYD'S COVE (DiAp:3)
MODIFIED NAIL FRAGMENTS
MODIFIED NAIL SHAFT/
PROJECTILE POINT PREFORM
H
"2480"
"231"
"1498"
SECTIONS REMOVED FOR ANALYSIS
HOT-WORKED AREA

Beothuk or other similarly late entrants into iron technology (Fig. 4).[1] These data and the metallurgical information suggest that the Beothuk at Boyd's Cove received European-modified iron as trade goods or gifts during the 1650-1720 period. Europeans and/or native allies, possibly the Montagnais Indians, could have supplied the artifacts. The presence of 677 glass trade beads at Boyd's Cove corroborates this suggestion. A recent reappraisal of Boyd's Cove faunal remains shows a larger proportion of fur-bearing animals than is typical for comparable sites. This raises the possibility that the Beothuk were preparing furs for trade with Europeans or native middlemen.[2]

The metallurgical information is additionally significant, considering that the hot-worked items consist of partially modified nails rather than finished tools. This suggests that Europeans reworked the iron in the Boyd's Cove area, because such unfinished objects were not normally used as trade goods. To date, no evidence of a forge has been found at Boyd's Cove, but the alleged hot-working might have taken place on board ships or at expedient land-based facilities which were the norm for this period (Light 659-62). Possibly the Beothuk were able to witness Europeans modifying iron, including cold-hammering and hot-working. If so, this may have furthered the development of their own recycling skills.

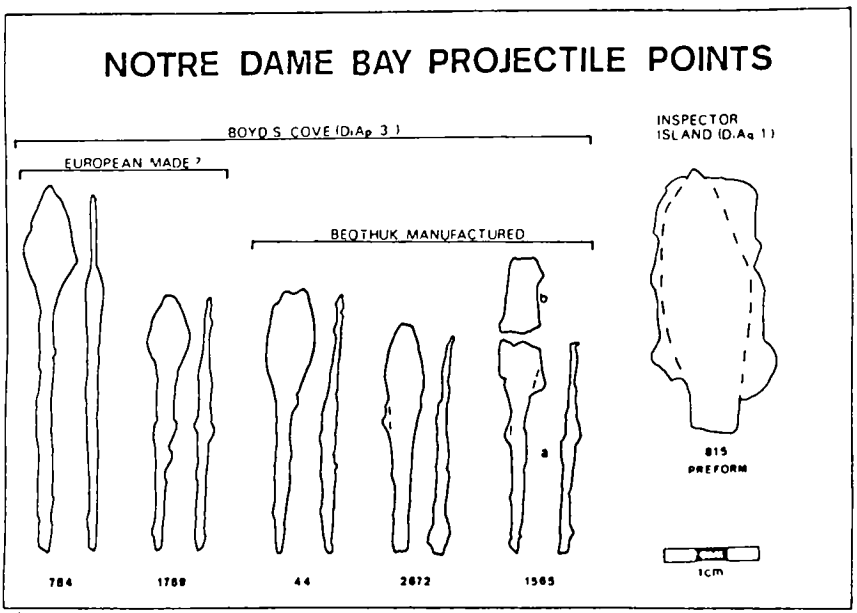


FIG 4

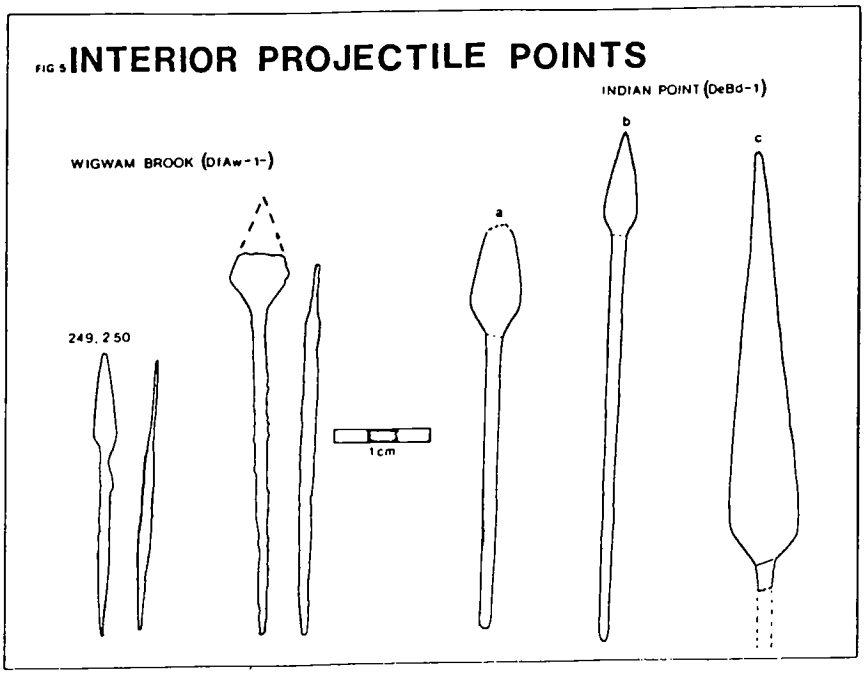
Inspector Island may represent a Beothuk occupation just after that at Boyd's Cove.[3] As at Boyd's Cove, wrought iron nails constitute most (78%) of Inspector Island's iron artifacts. Many of the projectile points, modified nails, and partially recycled objects from each site are very similar, but there is evidence that Beothuk ironworking skills had evolved somewhat at Inspector Island. Here a projectile point preform was made from a fur trap, axe, or other large European object that was not used as a raw material at Boyd's Cove. The proto-tool was partially carved out of a thin rectangular slab of iron, which is a manufacturing technique not utilized at Boyd's Cove (Figs. 2, 4). This suggests Beothuk experimentation in ironworking or continued refining of skills (MacLean, "Beothuk" 51). Three European trade beads from a Beothuk housepit at Inspector Island imply that some external contact with other people was maintained at this site.

Beothuk ironworking skills peaked at interior sites, which were probably occupied in the latter half of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. By then the natives had mostly disappeared from the coast (Howley 71). Many of these sites contain few or no stone implements except abraders, which reflects the Beothuk's complete reliance on iron. Their improved ironworking abilities are reflected in high quality projectile points and the use of a wider selection of European objects as raw materials.

The interior projectile points' symmetrical, shouldered blades strongly resemble older examples from Nova Scotia. The latter are European-made, probably of French Basque origin (Fig. 5).[4] They are also similar to possibly European-made items from Boyd's Cove (Fig. 4). The Beothuk versions typically have thicker, longer tangs than do European types. This could be a stylistic trend or a local adaptation to the physical stress encountered in killing large numbers of caribou in the interior. It also implies a less frugal use of iron by the natives, who did not share the European motive to produce the cheapest possible item.

The Beothuk mostly used European fur traps as a raw material for projectile points in the interior. Hammers, knives, axes, and other European items incorporating steel in their structure were also recycled more frequently at inland sites than in coastal zones. Reworking these objects required much more hammering, cutting, and grinding than wrought iron nails did. Fur traps also permitted the production of large projectile points, up to 490 millimeters long, that were historically referred to as deer spears (Howley 248; MacLean, "Beothuk" 124).

The new data pertaining to Beothuk-European relations corroborate historical references to sporadic peaceful interactions between members of the two groups. Perhaps the most famous of these incidents occurred in November, 1612, when John Guy and his fellow explorers met canoe-travelling Beothuk in Bull Arm, Trinity Bay. The natives were given scissors, nails, needles, hatchets, trinkets, and a dozen "pointes," among other items



(Howley 16-18). The "pointes" are interesting in view of the possibility that they were iron projectile points. Europeans commonly used such items as trade goods and gifts for North American natives (Gulløv and Kapel 205; Salwen 163; Whitehead 37, 39, 43). In 1820, Lieutenant David Buchan had his armourer manufacture iron projectile points as gifts for the Beothuk. Buchan did not locate any natives that year, but the intended gifts were left at various inland sites used by Beothuk (Howley 341).

Other historical information suggests that the Beothuk participated in some form of fur trade. In 1582, in Trinity Bay, three European men discovered a Beothuk camp with a great store of skins from deer (caribou), beavers, bears, seals, otters, and other mammals. Many were of excellent quality and well dressed (Howley 21). These could have been destined for European traders. In 1811 a group of men led by Buchan encountered Beothuk, who offered the Europeans animal skins in exchange for items given to them (Howley 77). William Cull, a European furrier and hunter, reported early in the nineteenth century that a conspicuously placed bow without a string indicated the Beothuk's desire to engage in trade (Duckworth Papers, 1864, 4645).

Other examples of European-Beothuk contact describe non-aggressive meetings between natives and individual fishermen/livyers. Thomas Pike

reportedly exchanged iron and other goods for furs with Beothuk people on Carbonear beach in the latter eighteenth century (Howley 265). The Pulling manuscript of 1792 reports that . old man by the name of Hollett was on friendly terms with the Beothuk in Notre Dame Bay (Hewson 8). George Rowsell got along affably with Beothuk in the mid-eighteenth century, and John Guinn of Indian Arm River befriended the natives by letting them remove salmon from his rack (Peyton 7, 10). Other Europeans also permitted Beothuk to remove salmon from their nets (Howley 267).

These references to peaceful interactions between Beothuk and Europeans are outnumbered by reports of violent clashes. Many accounts tell of European men who were feared and detested by Indians (Cartwright 1:14; Cell 193; Hewson 4, 6, 8, 18, 23, 27-32; Howley 18, 195, 221; Patterson 129, 132; Peyton 3, 7, 8, 53). There are many other, rather implausible, reports of Beothuk-European conflicts that do not warrant mentioning here.

This brief account of the Beothuk iron industry summarizes a key, albeit previously somewhat overlooked, aspect of Newfoundland history. Metallurgical evidence indicates that artifacts initially considered to be products of Beothuk ironworking include items that were modified in a forge. This suggests that Europeans in Newfoundland made objects specifically for trading with the Beothuk. Friendly Beothuk-European contact could have occurred often throughout the early historic period, when the natives did not feel threatened by the newcomers. The eventual breakdown in communications probably came as the European population grew along the coast, especially around the beginning of the eighteenth century. Future archaeological excavations, metallurgical tests, and historical research should help indicate whether European-worked iron occurs at different sites or if it is specific to Boyd's Cove. Further analysis of high quality iron projectile points from inland sites may reveal more morphological similarities to European examples. Such tests could prove the presence of similar production techniques as well. As is often the case in archaeology, the generation of significant new data appears to raise more research questions than supply answers. Additional examinations of Beothuk iron and other artifacts promise many more discoveries about these people.

Notes

[1]John D. Light, personal communication.
[2]Rowley-Conway, personal communication.
[3]Ralph Pastore, personal communication.
[4]Ruth Whitehead, personal communication.

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