Newfoundland Studies

The Prehistory of Port au Choix:
History, Cultures, and Landscapes

William W. Fitzhugh

Volume 27, numéro 1, spring 2012

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds27_1re01

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (imprimé)
1715-1430 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Fitzhugh, W. W. (2012). The Prehistory of Port au Choix:: History, Cultures, and Landscapes. *Newfoundland Studies*, *27*(1), 131–139.

Review Essay

The Prehistory of Port au Choix: History, Cultures, and Landscapes

WILLIAM W. FITZHUGH

M.A.P. Renouf, ed. *The Cultural Landscapes of Port au Choix: Precontact Hunter-Gatherers of Northwestern Newfoundland*. New York: Springer, 2011, ISBN 978-1-4419-8323-7

THIS SYNTHESIS of three decades of research on the archaeology of Port au Choix on the western coast of Newfoundland establishes it as one of the most important archaeological locations in Canada. Port au Choix has been known for its archaeology since the days of Howley, Kidder, and Jenness. Its regional importance was confirmed by Wintemberg and Harp, and major excavations at the Phillip's Garden Dorset site by Harp and at Maritime Archaic cemeteries by Tuck revealed its long history and cultural complexity. Harp was the first to document the site's Dorset material culture, age, cultural affiliation, and settlement aspects. In 1984, after Tuck revealed an equally impressive Maritime Archaic occupation, Parks Canada designated the Port au Choix region as a National Historic Site, built a museum, and initiated more than two decades of Memorial University research directed by

Priscilla Renouf. This partnership eventually led to this volume, which reports long-term research by Renouf (archaeologist), Trevor Bell (paleogeographer), and colleagues and students whose contributions appear here. This report substantiates Parks Canada's foresight and the legacies that accrue from a wise National Historic Site designation. .

Before reviewing highlights, I want to single out the contextual approach and landscape theme that have served as the backbone for this long-term project. It is easy to try to accomplish something new by putting "landscape" in a book title; but in this case Renouf and her authors have integrated historical, environmental, and archaeological data into a single regional framework that demonstrates why "landscape" has become an important component of archaeology. The book is not absolutely comprehensive — chapters on Port au Choix Dorset art, grave goods, and ritual; a broader look at the Maritime Archaic; a comparison of how the art of Dorset and Maritime Archaic people reflected different landscape and world views; some connections between Port au Choix archaeology and Beothuk and Inuit ethnology all would have better justified the volume's all-inclusive title, which excludes the word "prehistoric." A fully regional synthesis may come later. The appendix provides much carbon-14 detail, but a chapter dedicated to the analysis of radiocarbon dates would have been useful, and more specific discussion of issues like the state of dual Amerindian–Paleoeskimo occupation of the Port au Choix area (and Newfoundland) would have been helpful.

These lacunae aside, the importance of this compilation is its comprehensive reporting on two decades of intensive study of Indian and Paleoeskimo adaptations to a rich Subarctic environment. The volume has been carefully prepared, provides a comprehensive history of each topic covered, and is meticulously referenced and credited. The maps, charts, editing, typography, and production are excellent. The only technical flaws are the dull and blurry photos that do little credit to the region's dramatic landscapes and the magnificent artistry of the ancient artifacts, of which too few are illustrated. (For recompense, see Renouf, 1999, and Harp, 2003.)

The book's dedication to Elmer and Elaine Harp acknowledges the foundation this unusual team provided for the research and community relations that Parks Canada and Renouf continued. Port au Choix has become a fine model for the role archaeology can play in advancing science, public appreciation for cultural heritage, and sustainable economic development.

The underlying premise of the Renouf phase of Port au Choix research has been to compare ways in which the Paleoeskimo and Indian cultural traditions used the landscape, adapted to its varied resources, and interacted with the landscape and each other over a 6,000-year period. Port au Choix was explored as a "cultural landscape where, for each culture group, activity, memory and history created layers of meaning through which the place was perceived and acted upon." The book begins with a history of research and chapter summaries and a review of the Stone Age environment, and then unfolds with chapters on each of the cultural periods starting

with Maritime Archaic, then several chapters on Paleoeskimo traditions, and ending with recent Indian occupation and a summary.

Bell and Renouf lay the geographic groundwork in their "By Land and Sea" introduction. Point Riche's complex topography changed dramatically over time due to post-glacial land uplift, which provided a shifting complex: from an island-dominated cape to a three-pronged peninsula with many protected harbours, and geographic displacement of settlements over 6,000 years that suited various Indian and Paleoeskimo landscape and settlement requirements. Point Riche's interruption of the north-trending west coast brought the harp seal migration close to its shores, and spring sea ice provided a stable platform for hunters. The juxtaposition of marine, coastal, and interior habitats made a wide range of resources attainable. Limestone bedrock formed caves and soils that preserved artifacts and burials, and the region's thick peats and ponds preserved environmental records.

Local and regional climate proxies indicate winter and summer warming on land and sea surface from 6000 to 3200 BP (before present), peaking at 3600 BP, followed by cooling from 3200 to 2100 BP, with summers 3-4°C cooler than present. Conditions warmed from 2100 to 1000 BP, after which modern conditions prevailed although the sea surface was cooler than present. Over the past 6,000 years vegetation varied little, other than the replacement of relatively drier conditions from 6000 to 3000 BP with wetter conditions and bog expansion in later years. Charcoal abundance generally parallels the temperature cycles, with higher fire frequencies during the warmer climate regimes. These climate and vegetation cycles coincide with the cultural patterns, notably the appearance of Groswater and Dorset Paleoeskimos with cooler periods, lower sea surface temperatures, and higher sea ice indices, factors that would have promoted large seasonal harp seal populations in the Gulf. The disappearance of the specialized Dorset from Port au Choix and Newfoundland *c*. 1100 BP can be attributed with certainty to rising sea temperatures, declining sea ice, and loss of the crucial harp seal resource when winter ice in the Gulf disappeared. Indian occupations coincided with warmer conditions on land and sea, and longer ice-free summer seasons that favoured coastal travel and the more generalized Indian adaptations to both land and sea.

The treatment follows the established cultural sequence for Newfoundland prehistory: for the Indian tradition, these are Maritime Archaic Indian, recent Indian (including Cow Head, Beaches, and Little Passage/Beothuk); for the Paleoeskimo tradition they include Groswater and Dorset. The monograph supposes dual occupancy of Indians and Paleoeskimos throughout the Paleoeskimo period, *c*. 2900-1100 BP. Renouf and Bell also establish the cultural periodization that is followed consistently through the volume. While standardization is crucial, the lack of a detailed discussion of the entire radiocarbon corpus leads to problems.

Renouf and Bell review the Gould site's early components in relation to the Port au Choix Maritime Archaic mortuary complex. The absence of Maritime Archaic dwelling sites relating to the cemeteries (*c*. 4200-3400 BP) is a long-standing

problem that has been partially solved by a complementary suite of dates for the younger Maritime Archaic component of the Gould site. However, the scattered and low-density artifact inventory and its location across a tickle from the cemeteries are at odds with expectations, which assume a seasonal population aggregation for such high-profile mortuary activities as seen at the Port au Choix Maritime Archaic site. A dwelling site adjacent to the cemetery area may yet be found; but until it is the authors propose a settlement model emphasizing small gatherings and dispersed and highly mobile field camps, with a less mortuary-focused settlement pattern than most researchers previously envisioned. Their model is intriguing and aligns with the relatively low-profile settlement sites known south of Newfoundland, but contrasts with cemetery sites from Labrador, where large summer settlements occur.

When Groswater Paleoeskimo sites utilizing western Newfoundland chert began to be found from Cape Chidley to Battle Harbour and from Blanc Sablon to Harrington Harbour, it was clear they would also be found in western Newfoundland. The new phase of work at Port au Choix confirmed this, with the bonus of organic preservation. Three chapters treat the excavations of two Port au Choix Groswater sites — Phillip's Garden East (PGE) and Phillip's Garden West (PGW). Calibrated median ages suggest an occupation of *c*. 2540-1910. This period is towards the latter end of the Labrador Groswater series and coincident with ages from Quebec's Lower North shore. Patricia Wells's study indicates that seals composed more than 95 per cent of faunal remains at both sites, and of the seal remains identified to species, almost all were harp, while most of the other remains were from sea birds. She concludes that both PGE and PGW, whose dates substantially overlap, saw a full range of seal processing and butchering, but suggests ritual intervention in the reduced presence of seal cranial elements at PGW. Perhaps seal crania were given special treatment for ritual exposure and display. However, the relatively small number of cranial elements present in these sites makes this finding somewhat tentative.

Karen Ryan's chapter on Groswater mobility, curation, and exchange at PGW follows Wells's train of ritual thought in exploring the anomalous nature of its finely flaked side-notched endblades. Her analysis confirms Renouf's findings of stylistic change in this special class of Groswater points, and her regional studies show they occur geographically throughout Newfoundland, but mostly in Dorset rather than Groswater site contexts. She explains the geographic pattern as a function of three possibilities: widespread mobility; heirloom curation by succeeding Dorset Paleoeskimos; or trade with other Groswater or Dorset groups. While Ryan does not resolve the issue, this marker style and its chronological development is an important clue for deciphering the enigmatic Groswater-Dorset transition in Newfoundland. Some, myself included, tend to see these points as one of several lithic elements in Newfoundland Dorset that point towards a Groswater-Dorset acculturation that occurs only here and not in Labrador or Quebec.

Kendra Stiwich's description of the Party site reveals a seasonal Groswater variant that contrasts with the dominant late-winter/early-spring pattern of outer coast Groswater and Dorset site locations. This site is located in a sheltered shore of Back Arm and was buried beneath a thick peat layer. Besides suggesting that many other sites in the Port au Choix area remain undetected, charcoal from Area 1 provides several of the earliest Groswater dates in Newfoundland, nearly equivalent with the earliest sites in northern Labrador. Area 2 was occupied 200-300 years later, contemporary with the PGW occupations. Both lacked faunal preservation owing to the acid peat overburden, but are interpreted as spring (Area 2) or summer (Area 1) occupations based on fewer harpoon endblades and broken burin-like tools (i.e., spring sealing) in Area 1.

The next six chapters present new data and interpretations on Dorset occupations. Renouf outlines the major features of the Phillip's Garden site and its 68 or more dwellings, whose median ages list as *c*. 1900-1180 BP, overlapping slightly with the Groswater. Three arbitrary divisions in its settlement history indicate a slow buildup from a small founding population, a flourishing multi-dwelling mid-term occupation with at least 9-10 contemporaneous dwellings, followed by diminishing settlement size. While there is no question about the general rise and fall of the settlement's population, using the extreme tails of the c-14 date curves (Figures 7.3, 10.1) might be questioned, since both ends are supported by only three or four dates, most with 200-300 year error ranges, and the earliest dates may have been fat-contaminated. One might argue for a more conservative occupation range from *c*. 1800 to 1350 BP and a correspondingly higher settlement density. One important clue to the pre-1200 BP disappearance of Dorset from Newfoundland is the absence of any trace of Late Dorset tool styles there. The bulk of Renouf's paper deals with the settlement's nearly exclusive focus on an early-spring harp seal hunt, new interpretations of the dwelling size and shape (slightly cruciform, multi-family, and larger than Harp thought). Her comparisons with other large settlement sites in the Arctic confirm Port au Choix as "one of the largest and richest Dorset sites in the Canadian North."

Erwin's chapter takes a closer look at the PG settlement in diachronic perspective and attempts to refine previous interpretations of its settlement history, house types, middens, and features in the light of increasing knowledge about the variability of these components. He sees the major site function as a "regular seasonal occupation" tied to the spring harp seal hunt but also sees evidence for more varied site function as a result of a broadened diet evident in the latter PG phase, suggested from faunal data developed by Hodgetts. The next phase of PG settlement research, Erwin notes, requires a more detailed diachronic method with careful attention to microstratigraphy and substantially more dating. A start at such a new approach is outlined in the following paper by Eastaugh and Taylor, who attempted to identify unsuspected house walls and floors in a 2001 magnetometer survey covering 2,800 square metres in the southwest corner of the site. The results show great promise,

for they identified scores of features and depressed floors that did not have surface indications, and four that may be buried house depressions.

Ramah chert, the lifeblood of Dorset archaeology in Labrador, is present as a minor component at the PG Dorset site and is discussed by Antsey and Renouf. Their primary focus is on quantifying tools and debitage for use as proxies for gauging "intensity of ... exchange and social interaction [with Labrador Dorset]." They find Ramah chert present in small amounts (<2.5 per cent) throughout the PG Dorset sequence but note changes in intensity (relative frequency) in samples from early, middle, and late PG occupations. In six houses analyzed, Ramah chert debitage was greater than artifact frequencies in four houses, and all frequencies were <1.4 per cent.

All tools and debitage were from late-stage reduction of unfinished preforms and finished tools, suggestive of founder effect and down-the-line trade or exchange processes. Frequencies were lowest in early and middle PG Dorset phases, indicating limited Labrador contact and exchange, but in the later phase were "exceptionally high" relative to earlier assemblages. The authors conclude that just prior to the collapse of Dorset populations in Newfoundland, contacts with Labrador Dorset, perhaps through Daniel Rattle Indian intermediaries, were greater than at any other time. This situation is reminiscent of the explosion of Late Dorset art in the Canadian Arctic and of East Greenland Inuit art during periods of social/climatic stress. Both Late Dorset and Daniel Rattle sites contain large amounts of Ramah chert in the form of large tools and large sizes and weight units of debitage. Newfoundland Dorset must have participated to some degree in the enhanced Ramah trade of this period. It is also interesting that small amounts of Newfoundland chert are present in Labrador Middle and Late Dorset sites and that Ramah chert harpoon endblades (men's implements) and endscrapers (women's tools?) are present in more or less equal numbers. Much more could be done with this type of raw material analysis.

Maribeth Murray takes an unusual approach in her study of harp seal hunting at Phillip's Garden by taking a contemporary hunter's perspective on harp seal biology, ecology, migration routes, and folk taxonomy. The annual spring harp hunt has been a defining aspect of traditional Newfoundland outport culture, and Murray brings this rich knowledge about the behaviour and life stages of this species into sharp focus by drawing on historical literature, hunters' lore, biology, and zooarchaeology. More is known about this animal than most others because of its economic importance to modern Newfoundlanders and because of the political controversy surrounding the harvest of its infant whitecoats. Here we see how an archaeological problem — the need to determine site seasonality — has stimulated advanced studies of osteology and has brought concordance between stages of osteological development and folk taxonomy, although it has not yet provided simple, reliable methods for precise aging, seasonality, or species identification. Her article is encyclopedic, and includes a re-analysis of earlier data to determine a

more precise interpretation of Phillip's Garden seasonality. Her results confirm earlier suggestions that the major PG hunt was during early spring when northward migration takes harps through a persistent ice lead close to Point Riche where young adult animals were the most common quarry. It would be interesting to see how tooth sectioning for seasonality and DNA analysis for species identification would advance knowledge of this crucial adaptation.

Stuart Brown's study of amateur-excavated finds from two burial caves at Port au Choix and their relation to other reputed Dorset burials from the Eastern Arctic reveals how much can be learned from the smallest amount of data imaginable. Even so, we know almost nothing about Dorset mortuary behaviour and beliefs, spatially and chronologically. This is the only paper in the collection that undertakes a broad regional approach. Only in the Northern Peninsula are Dorset burials found in caves or rock shelters. Another peculiarity is the rare finding of mandibles and skulls together; in most cases only one or the other is found at a given site. Throughout the Eastern Arctic, Dorset graves are accompanied by small deposits of tools and amulets whose presence has no relationship to age, gender, status, or burial type. Food deposits do not occur, and most burials appear to have followed a period of prolonged exposure and never demonstrate element articulation. Brown's study is the most complete extant summary and analysis of Dorset mortuary behaviour from the Eastern Arctic, and it is from Port au Choix, near the southeastern extremity of their range, that we learn more than from anywhere else.

Renouf, Teal, and Bell's chapter on the Gould site's Cow Head complex documents the most recent occupation, by Amerindians, of Port au Choix. The Cow Head complex is known only from the Northern Peninsula at dates of *c*. 2110-930 BP. It seems to be contemporary with the Beaches complex of eastern Newfoundland and immediately precedes the Little Passage complex, which most anthropologists consider proto-Beothuk. This site adds an important new dimension to an elusive complex that, until recently, was known mostly from quarry and workshop sites like Cow Head, whose lithics dominate these sites and sites like Spearbank, Peat Midden, L'Anse aux Meadows, and a few others that defined the complex's lithic assemblage. Gould allows a more complete description, including the only Amerindian ceramics (they are dentate stamped) known from Newfoundland, a full lithic assemblage, and a suite of botanical and animal remains, all found in the middle of a hearth-centred depression that was probably a tent serving as a residential base for a small mobile group. The site location by a stream on an 8-10m terrace was 350m from the shore and would have been hidden from the coast. The geographic contrast with the region's Paleoeskimo sites could not be more pronounced.

The volume's final paper is Renouf's "Life History of Port au Choix Landscapes," which begins with a summary of the region's cultural history and then interprets the Port au Choix landscape in terms of "life histories" of three "landmark" locations (after Zedeño): the Port au Choix isthmus, the southeast shore of Back

Arm, and northwestern Point Riche Peninsula. Her intent is to address "the sequence of occupation of each, how each became a series of cultural landscapes and how these series were connected over time." Uplift gradually transformed the isthmus area from an island passage to low, forested isthmus that became the primary habitat of Maritime Archaic and more recent Indians, with only a few small warm-season Paleoeskimo settlements. The Back Arm shore saw only light summer settlement activity by both traditions. Contrasting with these was the outer coast of Point Riche with its intensive Groswater and Dorset spring villages facing the Gulf, surrounded by dwarf spruce and peat-covered moors. This landmark region was populated by various "taskscapes" (after Ingold), like Bass Pond where skins were soaked, Crow Head with a lookout station and burial place, or Phillip's Garden West where seal crania may have been ritually displayed and where tents rather than sod houses are indicated.

Contact between the Port au Choix cultures is rarely noted, but a few tantalizing examples occur: a few PGW tools among a Dorset burial cache at Crow Head, a few Dorset tools in the Cow Head horizon at the Gould site, and a Maritime Archaic shell ornament with a PGW harpoon in Crow Head Cave. It is possible, but not clearly demonstrated yet, that some of these groups may have lived simultaneously or seasonally sequentially in the varied topography and geography of Port au Choix. Renouf's approach to these shifting cultures, changing landforms, and perhaps shared landscapes uses ethnography to fill the social voids of the archaeological remains. More could be learned if this type of interpretation were more closely integrated with the archaeological finds — for instance, the "life histories" as represented by burial objects in Maritime Archaic graves (killer whales, auk-shaped combs, shell beads) that demonstrate real biographical and spiritual orientation to the maritime zone; or the exposure and then re-burial of Dorset individuals with tools to ensure the afterlife of a seal hunter; or the dense organic remains in and around the Gould site Cow Head tent encampment.

We have to keep in mind, also, that this volume only begins to tell the "life history" of Port au Choix's prehistoric past; it does not begin to touch upon the region's initial European settlement, its French fishing period, and the "lives and landscapes" of its modern English heritage. But the landscape analysis used here has shown its utility for a new type of archaeological interpretation that has moved away from studies of tool typology and chronology to consider broader aspects of cultural reconstruction. Such an approach could be enhanced by studies of household patterning and settlement pattern analysis, of detailed provenance studies of lithic raw materials, and more intensive scientific investigations of midden matrix. What Renouf and her colleagues have given us is a theoretically astute reconstruction that provides a firm foundation for future research. Clearly the "life history" of Port au Choix has lived up to the promise foreseen by Wintemberg and Harp and will be a continuing source of exciting archaeological work for years to come.

References

Harp, Elmer, Jr. 2003. *Lives and Landscapes: A Photographic Memoir of Outport Newfoundland and Labrador, 1949-1963*. Edited with an introduction by M.A.P. Renouf. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Renouf. M.A.P. 1999. *Ancient Cultures, Bountiful Seas: The Story of Port au Choix*. St. John's: Historic Sites Association of Newfoundland and Labrador.