The Reconstruction of a Pre-Historic People

based on the article

"An Archaic Indian Cemetery in Newfoundland"

by

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The interpretation of evidence, excavated from a site is an all inclusive process. The survey work and the actual excavation are extremely important, for without these, there is no dig; but in a final analysis, survey and excavation are merely the means towards the ends. Interpreting what you find on the site is the whole purpose of conducting the excavation. Interpretation, then, is the climax of an excavation. The interpretation of evidence may reveal certain events or a way of life. The focus of this paper will entail the type of interpretation that reconstructs an entire society and its culture. The pre-historic society that will be discussed in this paper is referred to as the Archaic Indians of Newfoundland.

Until this article was written, June 1970, traces of these types of Archaic Indians have been found all along the northeastern shores of the North American Continent. Burial sites have been the main evidence for man's knowledge of some previous habitation. However, all the burial sites found along the Northeast coast, and there were many, were boneless. In fact, there were only traces of any artifacts that might have accompanied the dead. But there was one connecting strand that ran through all of these grave sites—Red Oucher. This substance left a red tint to the soil covering the grave. Hence,
archaeologists for lack of a better name, dubbed these people "The Red Paint People." This being all the evidence archaeologists had to offer, left "The Red Paint People" still a mystery to the modern world. Then in 1970, a New Foundland cemetery site was unearthed which lead to a better understanding of "The Red Paint People."

The area in which this burial site was found in New Foundland is called Port au Choix (see map on page 3). It covers a relatively large area of beach. That is to say, about 1/2 mile in length. But there are some main differences between Port au Choix and all the other "boneless" sites found along the North Eastern shores of North America. The other sites were not preserved and therefore most skeletal material, as well as other artifacts, were deteriorated. However, Port au Choix, Tuck explains, "... is extremely alkaline, with a pH that averages close to 8.0. This condition and the excellent natural drainage of the beach account for the burial's remarkable state of preservation."¹ The preservation of this burial site was never planned however, the Archaic Indians did plan to bury their dead on the beach of Port au Choix. "The fine sand of the ancient beach is easily dug with the simplest of tools..." ¹

CEMETERY SITE lies on a promontory of the west coast of Newfoundland's Great Northern Peninsula (left), now occupied by a fishing village. The embayment where the village stands opens northeastward and the three sets of burials (right) face the sunrise.
tools, which may partly account for its selection as a burial ground by the Archaic Indians.\textsuperscript{2} In addition to this economy of work for burials, the Archaic Indians, saved their dead, if they happened to die during the winter months, until the summer when the beaches were thawed of ice. This indicates that these Archaic Indians utilized their environment to the fullest.

The location of these curials, as formerly mentioned, is on the beach of Port au Choix. There are three main areas that contain burial sites. The article labels these sites as loci. Locus one was uncovered in 1967. This was the original discovery of the Port au Choix site. The age of locus one dates back to 1460 B.C. Locus two, the largest of the three burial sites, has perhaps been the most productive site of the excavation. It is the oldest site and dates as far back as 1880 B.C. Locus four, the third burial site, is the smallest of the three, containing only two children. It dates back to 1280 B.C. Locus three, was given to a site which was occupied by an Eskimo group at a later date (see map on page 3).

Now that the area of Port au Choix and the background of "The Red Paint People" has been given, we shall delve into the actual reconstruction of this Archaic Indian culture.

\textsuperscript{2}Ibid.
Probably, the most important aspect of a culture is its livelihood. Where and how it got its food, shelter, and what types of things they did construct, are a few questions that need answering. Before we continue, it must be emphasized that all the interpretations refer to the burials and any burial goods found with the skeletons. These burials are the only link modern man has in order to understand the Archaic Indian's culture.

The most abundant type of artifact found in these burials were projectile points. A couple different categories of points have been found in the graves throughout the three loci. "We uncovered a number of bayonet points (probably the heads of lances) fashioned by grinding pieces of slate to the desired shape." Bone was also used for points. The bone was also ground down into a sharp usable point. These types of points were probably used for thrusting. Tuck says that these points were most likely attached to wooden shafts. In addition to spear like weapons, daggers were also unearthed. Most of the daggers were made of ground down bone from a caribou or antlers. One such dagger was found to be made of a wolf's tusk. Tuck has made some interesting interpretations about these weapons. First of all, it's pretty obvious that the spears were used to

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3Ibid., p. 108.
kill large animals such as caribou. In fact caribou hunting was a large part of the Archaic Indians food resource. The caribou would come together each year directly before winter. It was at this time that the Archaic Indians would make their kill and hopefully be supplied with meat throughout the winter. After the kill, the Archaic Indians probably used the daggers to clean and cut the caribou in preparation for storage, removal of hides, or possibly the bone.

Although these weapons were used on caribou, bear, beaver, etc., the Archaic Indians were not limited to hunting terrestrial animals. "The grave goods also included artifacts specifically designed for hunting sea mammals." Artifacts such as harpoons were found along with other grave goods. They are harpoons rather than spears because the end of the shaft has a hole for a rope attachment. Other evidence that lead Tuck to believe that the Archaic Indians were sea hunters, are shafts made of whole bone and two killer whale pieces found in the graves.

Because these interpretations about the hunting of sea mammals can be made safely, Tuck in turn makes some more interpretations. "This, in turn (hunting of sea mammals), supposes that the hunters were also sailors. The key evidence that the

4 Ibid., p. 108.
Archaic Indians were familiar with over water travel is the fact that they reached the island of Newfoundland in the first place." This interpretation, in turn, leads us to another fact about the Archaic Indians. Since they were capable of being good sailors one must ask, what did they use for boats? No boat fragments have been directly found in any of the graves but tools with which to construct seafaring vessels were found. Not only were the Archaic Indians adept at constructing boats but also a variety of woodcrafts. As is the case with local fragments, no actual woodcrafts were found due to the extreme difficulty of preserving wood over 3,000 years, but the tools by which the Archaic Indians made their crafts were found. By the looks of the tools, Tuck says, these Indians were probably master craftsmen.

As one can see, the Archaic Indians of Newfoundland were not only hunters of land and sea mammals but also master craftsmen and competent sailors. And although they were excellent hunters, one must ask, what did the Archaic Indians do when the hunting season was at a minimum. The answer to this question is that the Archaic Indian was as much a gatherer as he was a hunter. "The Archaic Indians, presumably organized in small bands, would have followed a more or less fixed seasonal

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round in exploiting the regions food sources." So the Archaic Indians were flexible and took advantage of their land depending on what happened to be abundant at the time. During the fall and early winter, caribou hunters were the main source of food because this was the time when caribou aggregated in herds. After the caribou supply deplenished towards the end of winter, the Archaic Indians took to the sea to get seal, walrus, and other sea mammal meat. Then during the late spring and most of the summer the Archaic Indians practiced gathering of berries and apples. Also during the spring, the famous salmon migration upstream takes place, and so the Archaic Indians catch a lot of fish. Because these Indians were so diversified in seeking their food resources, they were able to live in harmony with nature and probably survive longer than if they were strictly gatherers or strictly hunters.

Thus far, the only grave goods we have mentioned are those pertaining to hunting and woodworking. With knowledge of these artifacts we learned a little about how the Archaic Indians set out to fulfill their essential needs. Now let's look at some grave goods found that tell us a little more about the Archaic Indians. Needles for sewing were found in abundance throughout the three loci. Tools used for the tanning and

6 Ibid., p. 114.
preparation of hides were also found along with the needles. This tells us that the Archaic Indian probably clothed themselves in animal skins sewed together with these fine needles. Other grave goods tell us more about the Archaic Indians' beliefs or what they did in their free time. We already know that the Archaic Indians of Newfoundland were excellent wood craftsmen but they also enjoy other types of art. Two combs were found at the Port au Choix site that were carved out of caribou antler. They were convenient as combs but they were also a reflection of this culture's art. The handles of the combs were carved into a bird's head. These combs are not the only reflection of the Archaic Indian's art. "A number of bone and antler pendants and pins, together with three bone combs, are objects that, although they are certainly decorative, must also reflect the religious beliefs of their makers."  

As we can see, there probably exists a fine line between their art and their magic-religious beliefs. Sometimes the grave goods border on the line between being separate art objects or a group of objects that represent some kind of good luck or medicine bags. Some gatherings of objects in a grave included things such as seal claws, caribou teeth

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7 Ibid., p. 113.
8 Ibid., p. 110.
and jaws, and the head, bill, and feet of seagulls. As Tuck says, "The likelihood that such beliefs (charms) also existed among the Archaic Indians is strengthened by our observation that items of possible ritual significance are not distributed randomly among the burials."\(^9\) So it seems that through some of the grave goods it can be interpreted that the Archaic Indians did practice some form of Religion or magic charms.

Besides all the grave goods in these burials, each and every burial is important to the archaeologist. Different positions, sex ratios, and ages of all the burials may lead the archaeologist to some conclusions about the Archaic Indian way of burying the dead. The positions of the dead were not especially important in making any conclusive interpretations. However, the positions of the bodies did reflect on the Archaic Indians economic use of space and energy. Children were generally in an extended position while adults were in a flexed position. So the Indians wouldn't have to dig a larger grave, the adults were flexed. The ratio of sexes, with respect to the number of graves is just about equal. "The sex of each skeleton cannot always be determined, but of the burials at locus two, 23 can be established as male and 18 as female."\(^10\) The correlation

\(^9\) Ibid., pp. 111-112.
\(^10\) Ibid., p. 107.
between ages of all the burials turns out to be rather young. "Infant mortality was high among these Archaic Indians: 15 of the dead were less than 2 years old and 12 were newborn." This high rate of infant mortality is probably pretty consistent with other cultures of the same period. It would be an understatement to say that child birth then wasn't quite as foolproof as it is today. One more comparison can be made about the differences from grave to grave and that is, adult male graves contained more grave goods than any other graves. So it would seem that men were probably more dominant and held more status than women and children.

The main thrust of this paper I believe, has been adhered to. Interpretation of the grave goods at the site of Port au Choix by Mr. Tuck is complete. He seems to exhaust all the possibilities that each artifact has to offer when being interpreted. By reviewing all the artifacts excavated, Tuck has competently reconstructed a whole culture. In his reconstruction, we see that this culture is very self-sufficient. They, because of their versatility, show a great capability to adjust to their environment. The Archaic Indians trade some sort of magico-religious beliefs as well as a talent for woodworking and working with animal skins. But the most exciting thing

\[^{11}\text{Ibid.}, \text{p.} \, 108.\]
\[^{12}\text{Ibid.}, \text{p.} \, 114.\]
about this process in archaeology is that the whole Archaic Indian culture may be reconstructed by merely interpreting the inanimate objects that were excavated at Port au Choix.
BIBLIOGRAPHY