

Vanishing Villages of the Past: Rescue Archaeology in the Mackenzie Delta

CHARLES D. ARNOLD

Introduction

The earliest known inhabitants of what is now the Northwest Territories were small bands of people who moved into that land as it emerged from beneath the melting glaciers of the last Ice Age, which drew to a close about 10,000 years ago. From that time on, people expanded into almost every corner of the territory, adjusting the way they lived as needed in order to survive in the young and still changing landscape. The story of who those people were, and how they were able to flourish in some of the most rigorous environments on the face of the earth, today is preserved mainly in archaeological sites.

Unfortunately, large parts of the archaeological record are threatened as forces of man and nature continue to bring about changes in the environment. In an effort to conserve this rich archaeological legacy, the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre established its archaeology programme in 1982. The area we are responsible for is enormous, comprising approximately one-third of Canada, and impressive challenges confront us in our attempts to rescue archaeological sites. Probably nowhere is this more true than in the Mackenzie Delta in the northwest part of the Territories, where archaeological sites are vanishing at an alarmingly rapid rate. With them are going the last traces of a distinctive culture which was extinguished by the wake of an expanding Eurocanadian civilization.

The Siglit of the Mackenzie Delta

The Mackenzie Delta is a vast maze of channels and alluvial islands which have formed at the mouth of the Mackenzie River (Figure 1). The southern part of the Delta is covered with thick growths of willow, alder and spruce, but to the north, in the outer Delta, the trees give way to open tundra. The deltaic nature of the

terrain is extremely dynamic, changing on almost an annual basis. This situation is compounded in the outer Delta, where silt carried by the Mackenzie River is dropped once it reaches the cold waters of the Beaufort Sea. Those sediments produce an enormous load on the earth's crust, pushing it deeper beneath the ocean. As a result, the coasts of the Delta are retreating as the land sinks beneath the waves. Disappearing with the shoreline are the archaeological remains of people who camped beside the water to be close to the rich resources of the Mackenzie River estuary.

The aboriginal inhabitants of the Mackenzie Delta, the "Siglit" as they referred to themselves, probably were the largest group of Inuit in the Canadian Arctic at the dawn of the historic era. They were distributed as far west as the Alaska-Yukon border and as far east as Cape Bathurst, but most of the population was concentrated near the mouth of the Mackenzie River. Large numbers of people came together there to hunt beluga whales, which entered the

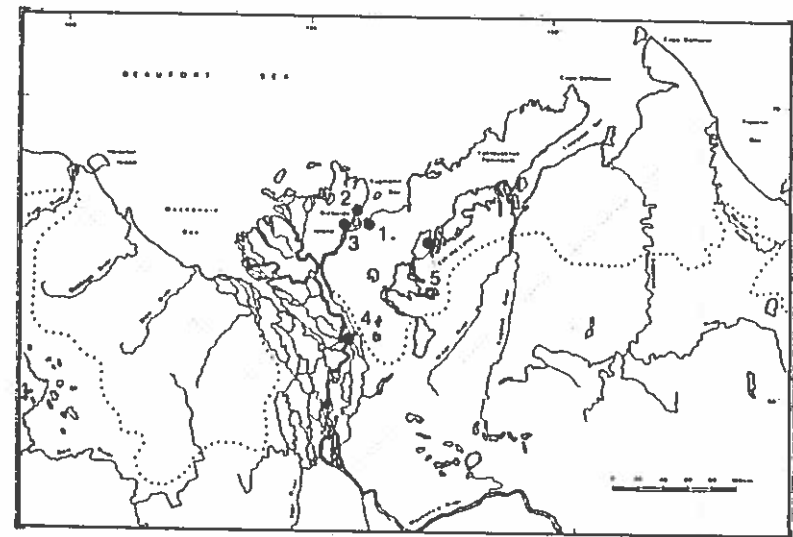


Figure 1

The Mackenzie Delta and adjacent areas within the dashed line were occupied by the Siglit. The numbered areas refer to archaeological sites: 1 — Kittigazuit; 2 — Cache Point; 3 — Gupuk; 4 — Bombardier Channel; 5 — Saunaktuk.

warm estuary for four to six weeks every summer. The Siglit developed an effective strategy known as a "whale trap" to hunt the belugas. Once a group of whales entered the estuary, hunters in kayaks arranged themselves upstream, cutting off their escape. The hunters would then slap the water with their paddles, and shout to scare the whales, driving them into the shoals where they could be speared or harpooned without any danger of sinking and becoming lost (Nuligak 1966 : 14-15).

Most of the meat and blubber obtained through the whale hunt was stored, and provided the Siglit with their staple food while living in winter villages. These villages consisted of sod-covered driftwood houses which were clustered along bluffs overlooking the whale hunting grounds. Probably to avoid overtaxing local resources, before and after the whale hunt the Siglit broke up into small groups and travelled up the river or overland to hunt and to fish, returning to their coastal villages with the onset of winter.

There are hints that the large population and abundant resource base of the Mackenzie Delta contributed to an extremely rich Siglit

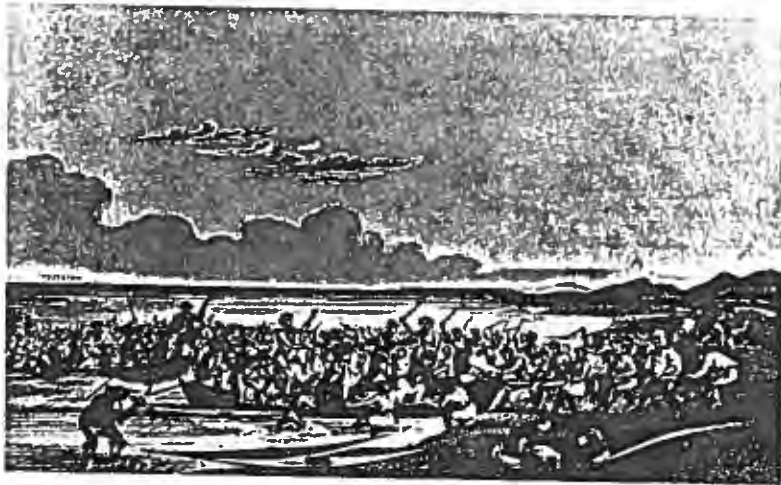


Figure 2

Captain John Franklin encountering hostile Siglit on his expedition down the Mackenzie River in 1826 (Franklin 1828: Plate 8).

culture, but unfortunately we know very little about their way of life. There are several reasons for this. The Siglit were at first hostile towards European explorers, traders and missionaries, which understandably discouraged accurate observation (Figure 2). Trade and other interactions with Europeans opened up only after about 1850, initially in the south as fur traders moved down the Mackenzie Valley, and later on the Arctic coast as Yankee whalers began to appear in the Beaufort Sea. But, as was too often the case in North America, this meeting of races introduced diseases and social disorders which brought about alarming reductions in the number of Siglit. The pre-contact Siglit population can be conservatively estimated at about 2500 (Usher 1971:171); in a little more than a generation of sustained contact the population had been reduced by over ninety per cent (Jenness 1964:14). By the turn of the century, the Mackenzie Delta and adjacent regions had witnessed a near-total demographic restructuring as large numbers of Alaskan Inupiat immigrated to the area. Some came in search of richer lands following the over-hunting in their home territories. Others were brought in to hunt caribou for the crews of American whaling ships which over-wintered in the Beaufort Sea. The combined effects of those events were devastating. Vilhjalmur Stefansson (1919), who undertook the first anthropological investigations in the Delta beginning in 1906, found even then that local narrative histories and memories of traditional ways of life were attenuated. In effect, by the turn of the present century traditional Siglit culture no longer existed.

The situation, then, is that we know very little about the Siglit who once extended over a large part of the western Canadian Arctic, and some of the last sources of information about those people and their archaeological sites are vanishing as the shoreline of the Delta relentlessly erodes. It is this situation which prompted the Northern Heritage Centre to begin rescue archaeology in the Mackenzie Delta.

Rescuing the Sites

When the Archaeology Programme was established at the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre in 1982, we recognized the need to provide opportunities for northerners to become involved in the study and conservation of their archaeological heritage. Archaeological field schools had been run by others in the north, and these

training programmes seemed to be the best way to create those opportunities. It was also in 1982 that we became aware of the urgent need to salvage some of the eroding archaeological sites in the Delta, so planning began to meet both objectives through the Mackenzie Delta Heritage Project, which commenced in 1983.

Prior to this time, the only systematic archaeological work in the Delta was that done by R. McGhee (1974), who has excavated at several sites, the most important of which is Kittigazuit. The Siglit were distributed amongst five territorial groups, each with a main winter village which took the name of the group. Thus, Kittigazuit was the principal winter village of the Kettegarymiut Siglit. Not far from several modern structures standing at Kittigazuit today are at least a dozen willow-covered mounds which McGhee's work showed were the ruins of houses that had been occupied over the past 600-700 years. The excavations at Kittigazuit laid out the basic sequence of Siglit cultural development from the time they first settled in the Delta during the thirteenth or fourteenth century to the coming of Europeans. McGhee's investigations at Kittigazuit established a solid foundation for understanding Siglit prehistory, but as any good scientific inquiry should, it also raised many tantalizing questions. Where did the Siglit originate? Why did their culture appear to remain so stable over the centuries? How did the Siglit interact with neighbouring groups? These and a host of other questions could only be answered through further excavations.

Excavations at Cache Point

The delta building process provides a rare opportunity for us to assess the age of archaeological sites at the mouth of the Mackenzie River. The people who hunted beluga whales there chose to build their winter quarters close to shoals where the whales could be trapped. As more and more sediments were deposited at the mouth of the river, however, those areas became too shallow for the whales to enter, and so periodically the people had to move downstream to deeper waters. Several abandoned village sites found along the shore appear to be progressively more ancient the further one moves upstream. We selected the site situated furthest upstream at a location known as Cache Point as the starting point for the Mackenzie Delta Heritage Project.

Cache Point has been known to archaeologists for more than

thirty years, but before we began our excavations in 1983 the extent of this knowledge was simply that house timbers, bones and artifacts were eroding from the top of a bluff overlooking the river. So dense is the willow overgrowth, and so subtle are the surficial indications of the deeply-buried house remains, that it took us two seasons of work to determine that there are at least twenty-five house ruins at the site. These houses appear to have been arranged in rows almost like streets, which extend back from the bank overlooking the river.

Since this was a rescue archaeology project, we concentrated our efforts along the eroding bluff (Figure 3). This meant that few intact houses were excavated, which compromised the integrity of the data to some degree. Also, the excavations of the house remains proceeded quite slowly, since half of the crew had no previous archaeological experience and were learning on the job. Still,



Figure 3
Beginning the excavation of house depressions along the edge of an eroding bank overlooking the mouth of the Mackenzie River at Cache Point.

during the two field seasons which we spent at the site most of our goals were realized (Stromberg 1984, 1985). One of these goals was simply to learn how to locate and excavate archaeological deposits in the Delta, where rapid burial regimes, dense vegetation and high permafrost levels make sites difficult to find and to dig. We also learned a considerable amount about involving novice crews in archaeology — including what we can expect of inexperienced fieldworkers, how they can be motivated, and best of all what we can learn from co-workers who have spent much of their lives on the land.



Figure 4

Conservator injecting warm water into permafrost to free a bark bowl.

The Cache Point excavations also gave us the opportunity to test and refine artifact conservation procedures (Figure 4). Many of the artifacts had been covered quickly after being lost or discarded by the people who had used them, and as they had been encased in permafrost ever since, we found almost perfectly-preserved items made from bone, wood and baleen which would have deteriorated rapidly under different conditions. As we practiced it, the conservation process began as each artifact was unearthed, continued with field treatments in a laboratory set up at the site, and extended through more elaborate procedures carried out at the Northern Heritage Centre in Yellowknife and at the Canadian Conservation Institute in Ottawa, which has been a constant source of invaluable assistance to our programme.

Not the least, the Cache Point excavations have revealed a great deal about the culture of the Siglit at a time soon after they first appeared in the Delta. Among other things, we have learned about how they made their houses, what kinds of tools they used in their daily lives, and also about the importance of trade which is attested to by the presence of tools made from jade, soapstone, copper and other materials which are only found great distances away. These things in turn hint at less tangible aspects of Siglit society, such as how they organized themselves and related to people in other areas.

Excavations at Gupuk

About ten kilometres downstream from Cache Point, and almost directly across the river from Kittigazuit, is the archaeological site known as Gupuk, the Siglit term for "Mackenzie River" and the main winter village of the Gopugmiut branch of the Siglit. An "old village," presumably meaning one in ruins, was marked at that location on a map made by an explorer who travelled through the area between 1889 and 1894 (de Sainville 1984). However, people living in the Delta in the early 1900s still had memories of Gupuk (Stefansson 1919) which means that it probably had been abandoned no earlier than the second half of the 1800s. We conducted a brief reconnaissance of the site in 1985, and mounted a full campaign of excavations in 1986. Our field school had been shifted to another part of the Territories for that year, so our crew consisted of experienced archaeologists, eight in all, plus two conservators. This is a large crew by northern standards, but was warranted by the extent and rescue needs of the site.

Like most of the winter villages in the Delta, Gupuk is situated right beside the Mackenzie River. From the river's edge the terrain at Gupuk rises some twenty to thirty metres to a series of hills. The remains of the village are on the lee side of those hills, where they are protected from the prevailing northwest winds. The sides of the hills are quite steep, but in some areas erosional fans and spurs

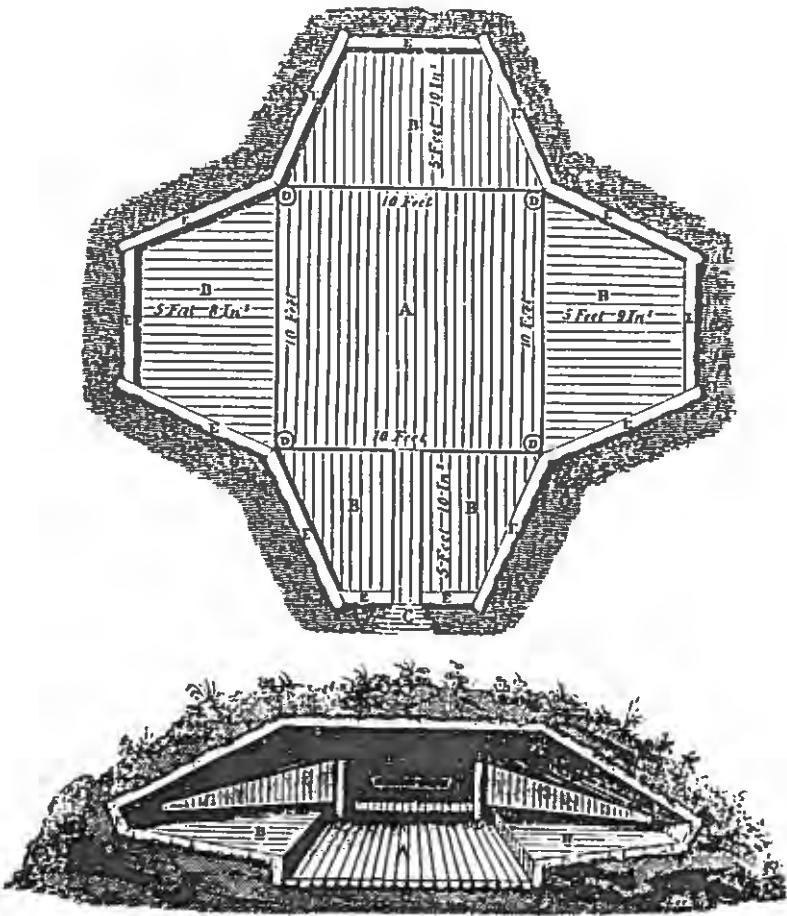


Figure 5

Two views of a Siglit cruciform house (Franklin 1828: 215). Not shown is the long entrance passage in front of the house.

descending from the hills moderate the slope. It is along these fans and spurs that the village had been built.

The main part of the Gupuk archaeological site extends along the shore for about 800 metres. The downstream half of the site has been almost totally destroyed, as shown by the large quantities of bones and house timbers protruding out of an eroding bank, and cultural debris which litters the shore where entire houses have been washed away (Figure 5). In contrast, the upstream portion is largely intact, and about 800 metres still further upstream is what may have been a suburb, also relatively undisturbed, with several clusters of house remains. In all, we found about twenty intact house depressions at Gupuk, and more may be hidden by the dense growth of willow covering much of the site. It is conceivable, too, that at least that many have been lost through erosion of the shoreline. Even though we cannot say for sure how many of these houses would have been occupied at the same time, one gets the impression that Gupuk was a very large settlement, perhaps with several hundred people living in a dozen or more houses.

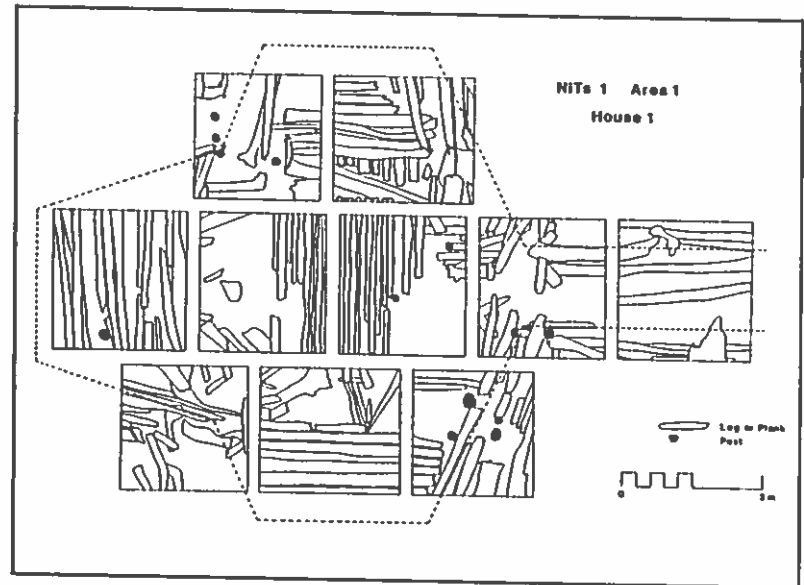


Figure 6

Structural remains of the floor of a house excavated at Gupuk. The dotted lines show the presumed cruciform outline of the house.

The individual house ruins at Gupuk tend to be fairly large, substantially more so than those at Cache Point. They are deeply buried, and are rich in organic debris. In consequence, even with a large crew we managed to excavate only two houses and part of a midden during our six-week field season. One house in an undisturbed part of the site was excavated as a control so that we could make sense of other remains which had suffered disturbance through erosion. Our excavations showed it to be of the "cruciform" type which appears to have been unique to the Siglit (Figures 5 and 6). This style of house was semi-subterranean; that is, it was built in a depression which had been dug into the ground. The floor and raised sleeping platforms were made from driftwood logs. The superstructure had been built of driftwood as well, and the whole structure was then covered with earth and sod to insulate it. The presence of three sleeping platforms suggests that three families may have lived in this house—a crowded arrangement, but one that was efficient in terms of sharing heat, light and food.

Several hundred metres away from this house, ice carried by the swollen waters of the river during break-up had scoured away the nose of one of the spurs which run down from the hills, exposing bones and artifacts. We excavated part of that disturbed area, encountering an extensive midden deposit almost two metres deep, and solidly frozen (Figure 7). Upon penetrating the dense growth of willows upslope on the spur, we found depressions where at least six large houses had once stood. It appears that trash from several of these houses had spread down the slope and piled up in a thick deposit at the base of the spur, creating the midden. One of the houses on this spur was partially excavated in order to investigate this context, which now seems correct (Figure 8).

So far we have barely touched the Gupuk site. A liberal estimate of the proportion excavated is two to three per cent. Even so, and although analysis of the data will take a long time to complete, we have strong hints that information from the site will help us to fill some of the many gaps in our knowledge of Siglit culture. For one thing, we may gain a better understanding of cultural developments through time. Only two radiocarbon dates have been obtained, one from each of the houses excavated, but they point to an occupation as early as about 700 years ago. If the site was occupied up until the beginning of the historic era, as is suggested by historical accounts, then an invaluable chronicle of events spanning more than five centuries may be buried in the ground.

Other Sites

The village sites at the mouth of the Mackenzie River have been the focus of the Mackenzie Delta Heritage Project, but we have also worked briefly in other areas where seasonal camps were established by people who dispersed from the winter villages to hunt and to fish.

Upstream, in the wooded part of the Delta not far from the town of Inuvik, goose hunters several years ago found human bones falling from a river bank and reported their find to us. We never had the opportunity to systematically excavate at this site, referred



Figure 7
Excavating a midden which accumulated in front of a cluster of houses at Gupuk.



Figure 8

Excavation of the remains of a house at Gupuk. Floorboards are exposed in the excavation units.

to as the Bombardier Channel site, because the archaeological remains slumped down the river bank before we could put a crew to work there (Figure 9). The artifacts and animal bones which we collected from the edge of the river, however, showed that Siglit had camped and probably had a net fishery there early in the historic period. In addition, at least three people had been buried at the site. Although information from the Bombardier Channel site is sparse, it is still important because that time period witnessed major cultural changes which are poorly documented (Arnold 1986).

We have also carried out rescue archaeology projects at the Eskimo Lakes, on the eastern periphery of the Mackenzie Delta. The Eskimo Lakes actually are a long inlet of the Arctic Ocean divided into several interconnecting bodies of water by a series of peninsulas. Marine, anadromous and freshwater fish are all found in the lakes, and seals and beluga whales also enter those waters. The ecotonal nature of the area extends to the terrestrial environment, as both arctic and subarctic land mammals are found nearby. The richness and diversity of the faunal resources of the Eskimo Lakes area is further enhanced by the many species of migratory waterfowl which either nest in the area or pass through on their migrations.

Because of these resources, combined with the close proximity of the Eskimo Lakes to the large population concentrated at the mouth of the Mackenzie River, we initially expected that the area would be rich in archaeological sites. However, there too the shorelines are eroding — literally melting away as the waters of the lakes wash against the shore, degrading the permafrost which is all that binds the fine-grained alluvial soils together. We did find a few archaeological sites along the Eskimo Lakes, but most of those have at least partially fallen into the water.

One exception is at a site known locally as Saunaktuk, where archaeological deposits situated well back from the shoreline were damaged in another way. Several years ago a fishing lodge was built at Saunaktuk, and in the process a small mound was bulldozed, scattering bone, timbers and artifacts which had been buried within it. We attempted to rescue the site, but only a small part of it remained intact. Since the disturbed site was being continually looted by visitors to the lodge, we excavated what was left of the buried remains of what once was a pole and sod house (Figure 10). Even though most of the information contained within

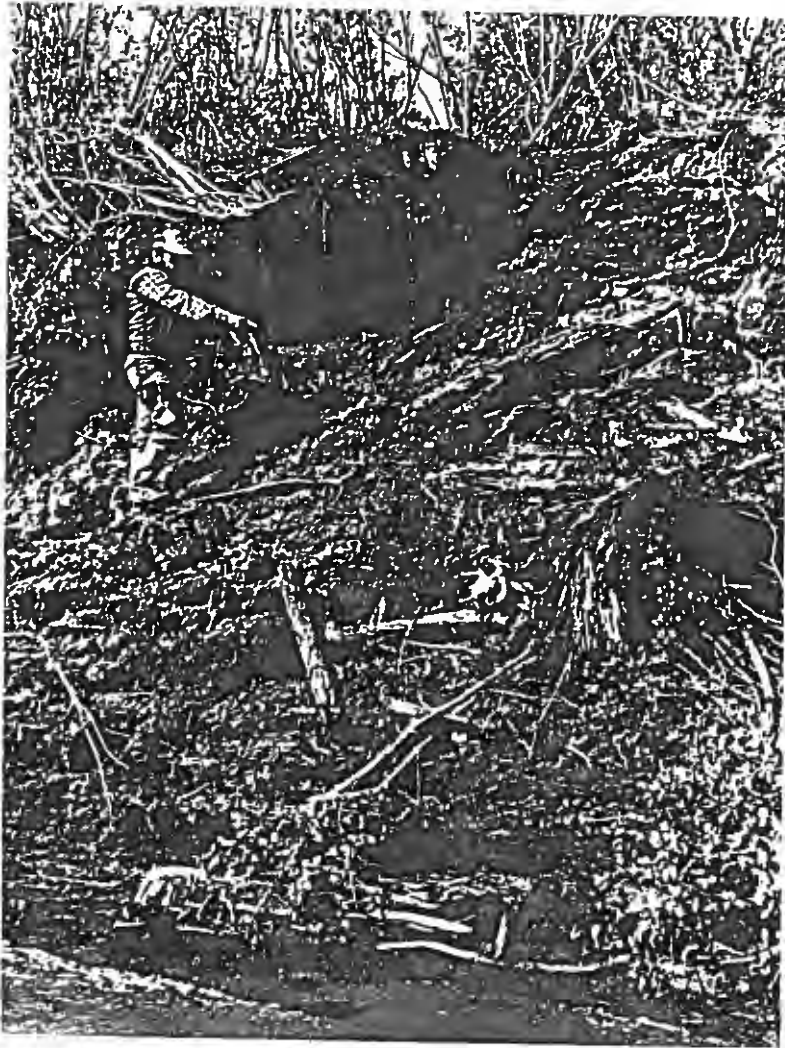


Figure 9
Archaeological timbers which have fallen from the river bank at the Bombardier Channel site.

this house was destroyed, enough was left for us to determine that the site had been occupied about 500 years ago by Siglit who probably were attracted by the diversity of resources in the area which would have supplemented the beluga whales available at the mouth of the Mackenzie River.

Also associated with the Saunaktuk site are local stories of violence and even cannibalism among the people who once lived there. Remarkably enough, we found evidence which substantiated those legends. My best guess based on all the available evidence is that those events were motivated by starvation. This may seem to contradict the observation that the Eskimo Lakes area is an extremely rich one, but given the inherent instability of the Arctic environment, periodic failures in the resource base must have severely tested the ability of the people who lived there to survive. To me, the wonder of it is that not only did people survive under those conditions, but they also developed a sophisticated culture which extended through many generations. In the end, only the presence of intruders from foreign shores, and the diseases which they brought with them, proved to be insurmountable obstacles.

The Living Legacy

As has been pointed out, few of the Inuit who live along the Beaufort Sea coast today owe their biological heritage to the Siglit. Nor does Siglit culture exist in anything but an extremely attenuated form. However, there are still some threads of continuity which link the present to the fabric of the past. This continuity flows from the memories of elders who once lived traditional lifestyles which were not too different from those of the original Siglit, and who recall stories, legends and other information which they learned about the early inhabitants of the Delta.

In order to benefit from this knowledge, the Northern Heritage Centre has been working with elders to fill in gaps in the recent history of the Mackenzie Delta area, and to help us to identify archaeological sites and artifacts. Our involvement ranges from community presentations and discussions, to visits with elders to archaeological sites. Our field training programme solicits the participation of younger people in our work. In these ways, we share information about the past, and also about each other. It is our belief that the value of archaeological research, like individual archaeological artifacts, is meaningful only in terms of its context.

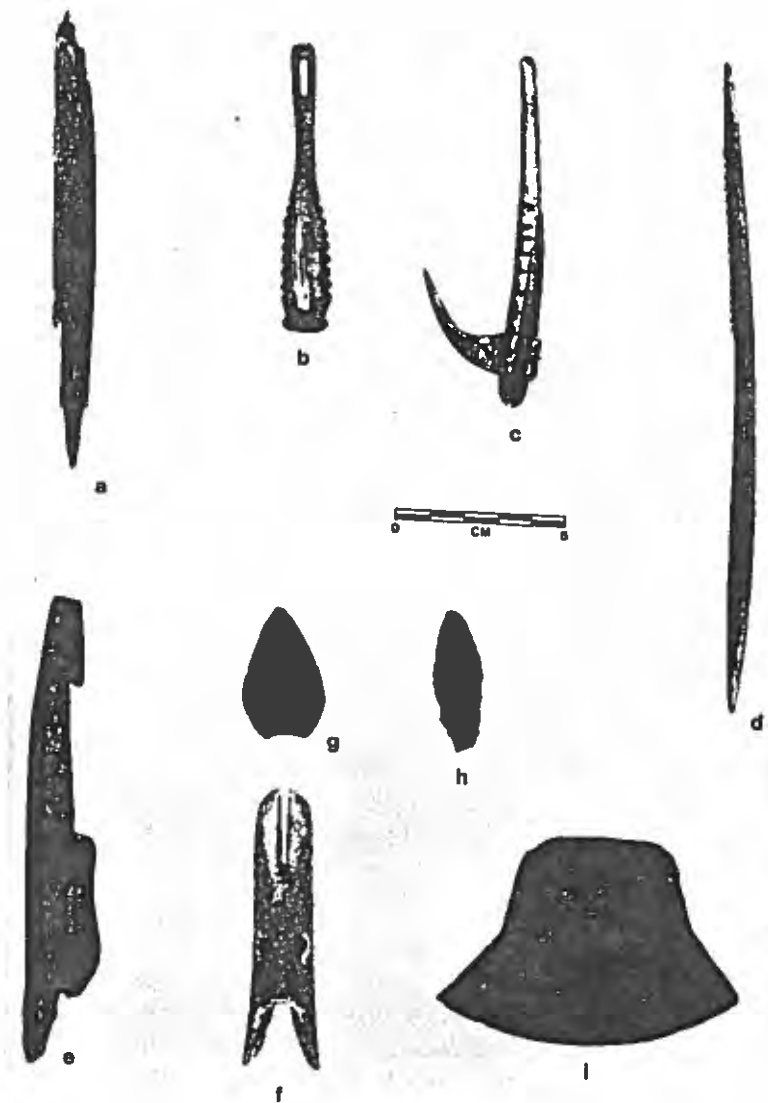


Figure 10

Artifacts from Saunaktuk: a—arrow point; b,c—fish hooks; d—fish spear barb; e—net gauge; f—harpoon head; g—end blade for harpoon; h—arrow head; i—ulu blade.

To a large degree, it is the people who live in the area today, and who are still seeing their culture shaped by changing circumstances, who give meaning to what we are learning.

Future Prospects

Since it was initiated in 1983, then, the Mackenzie Delta Heritage Project has added considerably to our knowledge of Siglit pre-history through excavations at sites of several different time periods and in various environment zones. In the process, we have also achieved many of our rescue archaeology goals and have involved northern people in the discovery of their archaeological heritage.

In truth however, we have saved only a very small percentage of that part of the archaeological record of the Mackenzie Delta which is in danger of being irretrievably lost through shoreline erosion. This is in spite of the fact that we have concentrated a large proportion of the Northern Heritage Centre's archaeological capacity there for several years. There is no doubt that a wealth of information could and should be excavated, and soon. However, the rescue archaeology needs of the Mackenzie Delta must be placed within the perspective of the needs of the Northwest Territories as a whole. Given the scarce resources which will be a fact of life at least for the immediate future, the question which faces us now is: where do we go from here?

Acknowledgements

There is a long list of organizations and individuals who assisted financially and in other ways with the Mackenzie Delta Heritage Project. Special thanks go to the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, Department of Culture and Communications, Government of the Northwest Territories; the Science Institute of the Northwest Territories; the Archaeological Survey of Canada, the Canadian Museum of Civilization; the Polar Continental Shelf Project, Energy, Mines and Resources Canada; the Inuvik Scientific Resource Centre, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada; the Canadian Conservation Institute, National Museum of Canada; and in particular to the many crew members who have worked on the project over the past four years. I also wish to thank Richard

Stromberg, who directed the fieldwork at Cache Point, Gayle Sams who helped out so much with the excavations at Gupuk, and Richard Valpy of the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre who worked at the sites mentioned in this paper and provided valuable comments on this manuscript.

Charles D. Arnold is Senior Archaeologist at the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre.

REFERENCES

- Arnold, Charles D. 1986. "An archaeological site near Inuvik, Northwest Territories." *Arctic* 39 (1): 8-14.
- de Sainville, Edouard. 1984. "Journey to the mouth of the Mackenzie River" (translated by William Barr). *Fram* 1 (2): 540-52.
- Franklin, John. 1828. *Narrative of a second expedition to the shores of Polar Sea in the years 1825, 1826 and 1827*. London: John Murray.
- McGhee, Robert. 1974. "Beluga hunters." *Newfoundland Social and Economic Studies* 13. St. John's: Memorial University of Newfoundland.
- Nuligak. 1966. *I, Nuligak*. M. Metayer (trans.). Toronto: Peter Martin.
- Stefansson, Vihjalmur. 1919. "The Stefansson-Anderson Expedition: Preliminary ethnological report." *Anthropological Papers of American Museum of Natural History*. 14 (1).
- Stromberg, Richard. 1984. "The 1983 excavations at Cache Point, N.W.T." Manuscript on file with the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, Yellowknife.
- . 1985. "The 1984 excavations at Cache Point, N.W.T." Manuscript on file with the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, Yellowknife.

Building Nunavut: A Story of Inuit Self-Government

PETER JULL

The story of Nunavut, a project to create a self-governing territory in the eastern and northern portions of the Northwest Territories, is important for all Canadians. It is the most ambitious of the Canadian aboriginal proposals for self-government, yet is also one of the most practical. It combines Canadian traditions of social and political philosophy with the needs of Inuit culture. It embraces concepts of environment and development, and social values and administration, of the most enlightened modern sort — of the type Canada preaches in the world. Its realization would be the most clear statement of Canada's genuine human rights convictions and commitment to full sovereignty in the Arctic, yet somehow that step has seemed difficult for the politicians and policy-makers in Ottawa to take.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s when young Inuit began using their newly-acquired education and contact with the currents in the world outside their northern homeland, they began to question the situation of their people. They had just come through a time in which the wisdom and authority of their elders had been supplanted by young white administrators with limited appreciation of Inuit language and society. Their people's way of life had been one of extensive use of the living environment based in scattered camps, but now they had been resettled in confused and confusing bungalow communities where an all-inclusive administration tried to reshape every aspect of their lives. They had seen ill family members disappear south for long periods, and often die there, alone. Their own schools had been leaders in the task of replacing their old "primitive" culture with the new ways of the white man, an urban industrial "mainstream" white man at that. It is not surprising that when the world was reverberating with de-colonization in Africa and Asia, and North America in the throes of a re-evaluating of minorities and the building of a caring society, these first Inuit school leavers should speak out.

The first object of concern was the domination of Inuit by white