

FIELDWORK AT RED BAY, LABRADOR

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From late June to late August, 1981, fieldwork continued at a 16th century Spanish Basque whaling station on Saddle Island, Red Bay, Labrador. The research was carried out under permit # 81-5 and was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada with additional financial assistance from the Historic Resources Division, Department of Culture, Recreation and Youth, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador. Especial mention should also be made of the assistance given the project by the Canadian Conservation Institute which provided a professional conservator and equipment to stabilize the wide variety of materials recovered during 1981. The contributions of all these agencies is gratefully acknowledged.

During the 1981 season work was concentrated in four locations called Area C, E, F and G. Each will be described briefly below.

Area C is the location of a large shore station where all activities necessary for the processing of whale

blubber and the preparation of oil for shipment to Europe took place.

A "wharf" or "cutting-in" stage, evidenced by a rectangular mound of rocks and squared timber cribwork, was recorded. It is located in the intertidal zone immediately in front of the large oven at Area C. Limited excavations near this feature were also carried out by Parks Canada divers (see Grenier, this volume) and additional work is planned for the 1982 season. Although no definite function can as yet be assigned to this timber and ballast structure it is believed to have served as a work area to which whales were made fast while the blubber was removed. Some form of winch or capstan must have been present to facilitate this operation but, to date, none has been found.

Following the removal of the blubber it was minced to expose a greater surface area and transported to the oven which was the central feature of each shore station. The oven at Area C was also the scene of our major efforts during the 1981 season. As reported elsewhere (Tuck and Grenier 1981) the principal feature of this oven is a large stone wall some 10 metres long, about a metre high and equally as wide. Our 1981 excavations concentrated on the

outer, or seaward, side of this wall where the remains of two well-preserved fireboxes and traces of three others were revealed. The two better preserved examples were made from sandstone and other rocks imported from Spain as ballast, while the fireboxes in an advanced state of decay were fashioned from local granite boulders and cobbles. A little experimentation has shown that only a few hours of heating is sufficient to reduce the granites to a coarse powder, while the imported sandstones are much more resistant to heat. The fireable nature of these rocks must have been a source of constant irritation to those responsible for the maintenance of the shore stations for it appears that the ovens would have required repair or rebuilding at frequent intervals. We suspect that these rebuildings are at least partly responsible for our inability to detect well-defined fireboxes at the southern end of the oven.

Sources of something more than irritation is evidenced by the numerous copper cauldron fragments found in the fireboxes. It appears that the cauldrons must have occasionally burst allowing about 45 gallons of boiling oil to drop into a fire that was capable of reducing granite to a powder in a very short time. Such an occurrence must have been more than a little exciting

as well as downright hazardous. It is surprising that the documentary sources make no reference to the wooden structures which housed these ovens being subject to frequent fires.

Although we concentrated on the outside of the oven, work also progressed on the inside, or landward side, of the wall. The collapsed platform discovered in 1980 was almost completely exposed and a single plank was lifted on the last day of the season in an effort to determine what we might expect to find beneath it in 1982. In addition to some miscellaneous wood fragments, a hoop made from a single withe twisted around itself and what appears from the radiograph to be a steel for sharpening knives were recovered. The prospect for 1982, therefore, when the entire platform will be removed, looks promising.

As an alternative recording technique and for possible later interpretation of the site a polysulfide rubber and plaster of Paris mould was made of a section of the wood platform, stone wall and one of the fireboxes. A positive cast from this mould is now being prepared at the Canadian Conservation Institute in Ottawa.

Finally at Area C, a small test excavation was made in a waterlogged deposit to the northwest of the oven. Here were found large numbers of barrel staves, head

pieces, hoops and refuse from a coopering operation. Further excavations at this and other water-saturated portions of Area C are planned for the coming field seasons.

Area E is the site of a large cooperage/dwelling similar to that described previously (Tuck 1981) at Area A. Excavations were begun at this location in 1980, were expanded considerably in 1981 and (hopefully) will be concluded in 1982. Except for a few post moulds, the area is lacking in structural remains although a large number of iron nails and spikes suggest a wooden structure.

The function of this dwelling is unequivocally indicated by the large number of domestic artifacts - ceramics, glass, refuse bone, etc. - and coopers' tools found there. The latter include two cooper's adzes, head vises and the blade of a chiv (a tool for cutting croze grooves in an assembled cask). Below this structure a waterlogged deposit produced barrel parts and cooperage refuse similar to that mentioned previously from Area C.

Area F. This small structure, which was partially excavated in 1980, was completely mapped and excavated during the 1981 season. A roughly rectangular pattern of broken and shattered tiles suggested a structure of approximately the same shape and dimensions. In 1981

a series of large post moulds was discovered which confirmed our suspicion of a rectangular wooden structure roofed with red tiles. Artifacts were scarce within and around this building. Most of those recovered suggest domestic use although their scarcity when compared with Area A and E indicate a short duration for this probable dwelling. The ferrules from two supported whaling implements were discovered in 1980 but they do not add significantly to our knowledge of the activities which might have taken place at Area F. Test trenches extended into a large bog to the west of the structure did not reveal any organic refuse of significance.

Area G is an oven located to the south of the Area C excavations (see Figure 1). The central wall was visible on the surface prior to the start of excavations. The area behind the wall was stripped of overburden to the level of the roof fall during 1981, revealing that the wall is not nearly as substantial as that at Area C. We are as yet unable to describe the firebox area to the seaward side of the wall since only a single test trench has been excavated in that region. We anticipate completion of this oven during the 1982 field season.

ABORIGINAL OCCUPATIONS

A bonus was provided by the 1981 excavations on Saddle Island in the form of two small Palaeo-Eskimo components underlying the Basque remains at Areas E and F. The former is the nearest thing to a true pre-Dorset/Dorset component yet found in southern Labrador. In addition to end blades, scrapers, bifaces, microblades and chert debitage, both true spalled burins and ground burin-like-tools were recovered. The aboriginal occupation at Area F seems somewhat later in time although a true burin was also recovered from this area. A charcoal sample was collected from the earlier of the two areas and will be submitted shortly for C-14 analysis.

In summary the 1981 excavations at Saddle Island were successful in every way. We enjoyed the best weather we have yet experienced at Red Bay and this factor, along with a very capable field and laboratory staff, is responsible for the more than satisfactory progress made during 1981.

REFERENCES

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PLATE 1

The oven at Area C, looking northeast. Visible are the central wall, the jumble of rock which once comprised the fireboxes on the harbour side of the wall, and a portion of the now-collapsed platform behind the wall.



FIGURE 1

A map of excavation on Saddle Island
1977-1981.

