

EXCAVATIONS AT RED BAY, LABRADOR - 1986

James A. Tuck
Archaeology Unit
Memorial University

Excavations at the 16th century Basque whaling stations at Red Bay, in southern Labrador, moved into their tenth season in 1986. The project began with a survey of the area in 1977 and excavations have continued each summer since. The 1986 season demonstrated that the sites around Red Bay Harbour are far from exhausted despite the intensive excavations which have taken place there, as the following description demonstrates. In addition to the construction of a small visitors' centre which provided a modest exhibit of material recovered thus far from the site as well as additional laboratory space for the registrars and conservators assisting in the processing of material recovered from the sites, work concentrated upon four areas, three of which had not previously been explored.

Organ's Island, northwest of Saddle Island where the bulk of our excavations have been carried out, was the site of a large fishing premises dating from the late 19th century and in use until the mid-20th century. This small island was known for some years to contain evidence of Basque utilization in the form of what appeared to be several small tryworks on the sheltered northern shore. Surface indications suggested that these tryworks were smaller than the majority of those on Saddle Island. Low rock walls, visible through the surface vegetation, suggested small structures perhaps capable of supporting only a single cauldron. The walls themselves were perpendicular to the shoreline, in contrast to those on Saddle Island, which invariably parallel the shoreline. It was suspected that these structures, different in form from those reported elsewhere, might relate to whaling activities either before or after the peak decades of the 1560s through 1580s or, alternatively, might represent the activities of French Basques who carried out whaling in the Strait of Belle Isle but whose shore stations do not appear to have been documented archaeologically in the Red Bay area. Unfortunately, neither of these hypotheses appears to have been correct, as the discussion below indicates.

The surface features of the site proved to be of 19th century origin, despite the presence of fragments of red roofing tile, burned whale fat, fire-broken stone, and other indications typical of tryworks excavated elsewhere. They consisted of three parallel rows of large rocks, perpendicular to the beach, for which it is possible to offer only a tentative interpretation. Nails and other material from the 19th century suggest that wood was somehow also involved in the construction of whatever structures stood there. The relative paucity of domestic refuse—ceramics, glass, and even tobacco pipes—typical of most 19th century sites around Red Bay suggest some use not related to domestic activities. The best guess is that we may have exposed a boat haul-out where small fishing boats were removed from the water at the end of each season, perhaps for storage on a nearby stone fish flake, constructed at some unknown time in the past.

That some of these rocks were removed from an earlier tryworks at the same location was indicated by traces of both burned fat and fire-spalling on a few of the rocks which comprised the haul-out. When this recent structure was removed the fireboxes of a large tryworks similar to those on Saddle Island soon emerged. As is usual, the back wall, in this case excavated into the shelving beach, paralleled the shore a few metres in front of it (see Plate 1). The structure proved to be slightly more than ten metres in length and some of the six fireboxes retained walls upwards of a metre in height. Although no traces of post molds were found, quantities of tile were present, indicating that the structure must have been covered by a framework of posts and beams, in turn surmounted by a tile roof.

Despite these elements shared with tryworks elsewhere at Red Bay, the example from Organ's Island displays some significant differences which allow us to suggest its placement in time relative to other shore stations and provide some indications of how such features were used. Excavations around the structure failed to produce any evidence of associated structures, which are common at most other shore stations. Except for a few small sherds of coarse earthenware and *majolica*, artifacts were extremely scarce. The fireboxes themselves appear to have suffered very little from the effects of constant heating which characterize most other such structures excavated to date. The entire impression is one of a shore station which was little used,

perhaps having served for only a single season.

Why such a large and obviously costly (at least in terms of labor) feature should have been constructed and abandoned after only a single season's use is not at once apparent but the location of the shore station offers us another clue. In contrast to other whaling stations the tidal zone in front of the Organ's Island tryworks is flat and shallow. The preferred location appears to have been one where deep water was immediately off the shore, probably so that whales could be manoeuvred as close to the shore station as possible to facilitate the transportation of blubber to the tryworks. Many such areas exist along the sheltered side of Saddle Island as well as on the mainland and each of these appears to have been utilized extensively. Finally, the location of the Organ's Island shore station subjects it to the effects of the extreme northeast winds, the only dangerous weather situation in Red Bay Harbour. The combination of a little-used shore station in an unsuitable area might suggest simply a poor choice for the establishment of a station and one of which its builders soon thought better. No doubt it was a poor location, for the factors mentioned above, but it seems doubtful whether even newcomers to southern Labrador would have failed to realize its disadvantages. More likely, I think, is the possibility that this shore station was constructed and briefly used during the peak of the whaling industry, that is at a time when pressure on the harbour was great and no more suitable locations were available. The Organ's Island tryworks, therefore, would have been in use sometime during the three decades between about 1560 and 1590.

Finally, the differential heat damage to the individual fireboxes which comprise the tryworks suggests that not all fireboxes were used to the same extent; those near the centre display considerably more damage than those at the ends. It seems likely that original construction produced more fireboxes than were necessary at any one time; some served as spares or reserves to be used only when those first fired became unusable because of heat damage. Judging from the tryworks excavated elsewhere such damage must have been an endless problem. Whether all six fireboxes were originally equipped with the large copper cauldrons in which the rendering actually took place is not certain. They may have been, but it seems equally likely that once a firebox became unserviceable the cauldron it supported was simply removed to an intact

firebox and the rendering process continued uninterrupted. The latter technique would have lowered the initial investment in large and expensive copper cauldrons to at least a certain extent.

The Organ's Island excavations, therefore, while not successful in discovering evidence of either early or late whaling activities, or evidence of French Basques, did succeed in providing information about the peak period of the whaling industry, for example that latecomers were willing to locate in areas singularly unsuited to the operation of a shore station, as well as information about the operation of the tryworks themselves, something entirely lacking in the documentary evidence published to date.

EKBC 10

Saddle Island West appears to have been another shore station used only briefly, at least as far as present evidence admits. It, too, is located adjacent to a shallow-water area where manoeuvring the carcass of a whale would have been difficult. In addition, it appears to lack the associated structures and refuse which characterize most other shore stations. The Saddle Island West tryworks also differs from all others in that it was built on a fairly level sand and gravel terrace with none of the boulder and bedrock obstructions found at other locations. It therefore promises to provide a model of what tryworks were expected to look like: no accommodations needed to be made to local topography. Indeed, preliminary investigations indicate that the Saddle Island West site will provide the most extensive evidence of such a structure yet recovered. While the stone construction comprising the walls of the fireboxes has still to be exposed, the post holes and molds of the building which sheltered the tryworks have been revealed. At least ten large posts, some greater than 25 cm in diameter, were placed to form a rectangle measuring approximately nine by ten metres. Three form the back wall, three others supported the ridge parallel to the shoreline, and four posts comprised the front (waterside) wall. The positioning of the posts, in a slightly staggered fashion, suggests that the horizontal members were attached to them by means of half lap joints on alternating sides of the beams, a construction technique common in the Basque country. Following excavation, a series of smaller posts was placed in the post molds, as a result of which it became much easier to visualize the dimensions of such a structure (see Plate 2). The fireboxes appear to be located in the forward half of the structure while

the back half displays a linear depression which might prove to have been involved in some way in the cooling of oil. Hopefully, excavations during the 1987 season will provide us with a much more complete picture of one of these early industrial structures.

While no associated buildings were discovered, excavations outside the tryworks did provide ample evidence of occupation—not by Basques, however, but by Indian people contemporaneous with the 16th century whalers. Scattered over an area of several hundred square metres (at least as far as indicated by test excavations) are small cobble hearths containing both native and European material. The position of these hearths is stratigraphically impossible to distinguish from the Basque utilization of the area. The material contained within, and scattered around, the hearths includes small stemmed or corner-notched projectile points (Plate 3) made both from high quality green and grey cherts and from Ramah chert. Stylistically those made from the two types of raw material are impossible to distinguish from one another. The coloured chert examples resemble those from sites around Blanc Sablon, Quebec, and, if found on the Island of Newfoundland, would probably be referred to the Recent Indian Little Passage complex (c.f. Penney 1984). The Ramah chert specimens, if found further north on the Labrador coast, would be equated with the Recent Indian Point Revenge complex (c.f. Fitzhugh 1978). Other items of native manufacture include small triangular bifaces, thumbnail scrapers manufactured on flakes, and a single sherd of coarse native pottery. European material found within and around the hearths includes iron nails, bits of coarse earthenware, textile, leather, and baleen which almost certainly was a product of the European whale hunt.

There seems little doubt that these represent the first Indian remains contemporaneous with the 16th century Basque utilization of the Red Bay area. Just what sort of relations might have existed between the two groups is a long way from obvious but a few preliminary indications are afforded by the meagre evidence at hand. The hearths themselves are small and appear to have been but briefly used. They do not seem to be substantial enough to have been used by the natives who are reported by Richard Whitbourne (from Prowse 1895: 63) and Lope de Isasti (from Barkham 1980: 54) to have assisted the Basques with the processing of whales. It seems more likely that they were used only

temporarily by natives who visited the Basque premises seasonally, perhaps to obtain European goods. There is a suggestion that these visits may have taken place when the stations were abandoned during the winter months, for the only refuse bone recovered from the hearths, all of it in a calcined state, derives from harp seals (Stephen Cumbaa, personal communication) which would most easily have been taken from the pack ice during the seasons when the Basques were not present in southern Labrador. The evidence may, therefore, point to a period of native exploitation of European premises during which short visits were made to Red Bay to obtain European objects by simply helping themselves to what had been left behind by the whalers. Again, further research is necessary to investigate this hypothesis more thoroughly, but preliminary indications are that the evidence is there.

Area M, where previous investigations had indicated former activities by several cultural groups, was further investigated during the 1986 season. A large trash-filled pit containing a wealth of 19th century material was fully excavated. The stratigraphy indicates that a pit was dug through an earlier depression to bedrock and was then filled with ceramics, glass, metals, and organic objects dating to the mid-to late 19th century. The function of this most recent pit remains uncertain, although the presence of domestic material suggests that some sort of dwelling must have been associated with it.

The original depression, although its edges were somewhat blurred by the more recent activity, appears to have been dug sometime during the Basque utilization of the area. The pit and a large area surrounding it are covered with a deposit of wood charcoal, in places up to ten centimeters deep. Contained within the charcoal are ceramics, fragments of glass, and a few nails, all of which have counterparts in nearby deposits from the 16th century. Of some interest are a number of sherds of Normandy stoneware, a distinctive hard grey-*ba3ie7* ceramic produced in northwestern France, including fragments of several minute ointment or condiment jars, which occur in much higher frequency than they do in other 16th century assemblages. It is conceivable that this deposit, despite its resemblance to 16th century material collected elsewhere in Red Bay, represents a somewhat more recent deposit, although the evidence is not at hand to say so with any degree of certainty. It is also possible that the relatively large proportion of Normandy stoneware indicates

not exchange between Spanish Basques and potters in Normandy but, in fact, a French presence in southern Labrador. Again, it is presently impossible to decide which, if either, of these alternatives is correct. Since the area has now been virtually completely excavated it seems doubtful whether any new evidence is likely to emerge.

The work at Area M also confirmed the presence of a large Middle Dorset occupation, much larger than previous test excavations indicated. A large assemblage was recovered, scattered over an area of more than 450 m². The material recovered (Plate 4) includes tip-fluted harpoon end blades, triangular end scrapers, side-notched and unnotched bifaces, completely polished tabular burin-like tools, microblades and cores, various forms of ground slate tools and weapons, and a variety of soapstone lamps and bowls including one example repaired with an inset "butterfly" of flaked chert. In addition to soapstone, raw materials include a relatively low grade mottled chert with numerous fracture planes, a variety of higher quality cherts, Ramah chert, and quartz crystal. Despite the large number of chipped stone artifacts, features were notably lacking and include only a single scattered cobble hearth which produced wood charcoal, not yet dated. No house features such as those which characterize Middle Dorset winter settlements were apparent, nor was there any discernible evidence of tent rings. The site probably represents a number of sequential occupations by small Dorset bands, perhaps for the purpose of spring sealing, although faunal remains are almost entirely lacking. If, however, this is the case, it seems likely that there exists an as yet undiscovered Middle Dorset winter village somewhere along the southern coast of Labrador unless the settlement pattern of these people was radically different from that for Middle Dorset people elsewhere in the province.

As excavations at Area M expanded toward the fringes of the Middle Dorset habitation area several unexpected features pertaining to the Basque utilization of Saddle Island emerged. Five human burials and one pit identical in all respects to graves previously recorded but lacking any evidence of an interment were discovered during the latter stages of the field season. Although near the cemetery excavated during the 1982-1985 seasons, these burials are clearly outside the cemetery which is bounded by a large natural bedrock ridge. Their positions outside the cemetery are not the only features

which set these burials apart from the more than 50 burials excavated in previous seasons. The apparently empty grave is a type of feature not previously encountered. The profile adjacent to the pit contains the same gravel fill sandwiched between sod layers which formed before and after its excavation, as did most other burials. The relative position of the fill layer suggests that the pit was excavated during the Basque occupation of the area. SodS thrown or shoveled into the pit at the time it was filled are also identical to those recorded in true graves. Conditions for preservation in this area were no worse than in many other areas of the cemetery, hence disintegration of the human bone cannot account for the absence of any trace of human remains. Whether the grave was refilled without being used or whether its occupant was removed for reburial elsewhere we shall, unfortunately, probably never know.

A second burial, found at the considerable depth of nearly one metre below present ground surface was unusual in this respect; most other burials were found at depths averaging about 30 cm. While the burial position, extended on the back, head to the west, and hands folded over the abdomen, was the same as the vast majority of the other burials, this was the first of more than 50 to contain deliberate grave offerings. A few centimeters above the chest, and perpendicular to the long axis of the skeleton, rested the remains of a hardwood (?) board measuring about 45 by 15 cm. Removal of the board, which contained no markings of any kind despite our hopes to the contrary, and a few more centimetres of loose soil revealed a large wooden cross, about 34 cm high and 15 cm wide, which had been placed squarely on the chest of the deceased (Plate 5). Textile, in a very poor state of preservation, appeared to underlay the skeleton, also very poorly preserved, and what appear to be braided strands of fabric lead from the neck downwards on either side of the cross. The impression is one of someone buried wearing a cloak or cape, most likely of wool, tied at the neck. No evidence of any means of suspension for the cross itself are visible and, in any case, it seems too large to have been worn regularly.

The combination of the unusual nature of this burial and its poor state of preservation posed considerable problems. Ordinarily skeletons in such poor condition as this one were drawn, photographed, such observations as were possible were made, and the skeleton reburied in sifted shell and sand beneath

gravel and sod. In this case, however, the presence of the cross and fabric suggested that closer inspection of the burial, particularly the underside, might have produced useful information. Normal blocklifting techniques clearly would not have been suitable given the fragile and thin nature of the compressed skeleton and textile. We determined, therefore, to experiment with block lifting by freezing the entire skeleton and associated material using dry ice. The ice was flown from St. John's by commercial airline and arrived in good condition, with little loss of volume during the trip. The following day the feature was saturated with water, ice placed directly upon the skeleton, and within 45 minutes the feature was solidly frozen. The underlying sand and gravel substrate, which did not retain water, remained unfrozen, could be easily removed, and the entire feature was lifted into a specially constructed crate for transport to the field laboratory. Excess gravel was removed, the upper surface covered with foil and a layer of foaming polyurethane poured to provide support. The block was then inverted and the process repeated on the underside, thereby providing shockproof padding for transport to the Canadian Conservation Institute headquarters in Ottawa. Further examination, including X-radiography failed to reveal any additional information, but the technique of dry ice blocklifting was to serve us in good stead for a second burial to be described below. The skeleton is now at the Canadian Conservation Institute where an attempt to consolidate the entire feature will be made as soon as analysis has been completed and tests of a variety of consolidants are made.

The interpretation of the feature, as appears to be the case all too frequently, is still doubtful. That the cross was a deliberate grave offering seems clear. This together with the cloak-like garment, suggests the burial of a priest, but again it probably will be impossible to be more definite about this conjecture.

Three other burials, two single interments flanking the burial of three individuals, were discovered while work on the first burial was still in process. The single interments were unremarkable, being in shallow graves, positioned on the back with their heads to the west in the fashion of most other burials. The triple burial between these two, on the other hand, was quite a different matter. Not only was it deeper than either of the single

burials, but the individual in the centre proved to be heading east while the other two individuals were headed west in the normal fashion. Preliminary exposure of the skeletons revealed traces of textile and leather as well as what appeared to be unidentifiable iron objects associated with all three skeletons. Again the unusual occurrence of grave goods, or at least objects accompanying the skeletons, indicated that further inspection of the features might be profitable. Once again the block was frozen with dry ice and the entire feature, measuring about two metres long, a metre in width, and weighing an estimated 250 kg, was successfully removed, cleaned, and packed for shipment to the Canadian Conservation Institute.

In this case the examination by X-ray revealed some unexpected information. In addition to two long, and apparently pointed iron objects, three other masses of metal proved to be corroded iron keys, in one case accompanied by what appear to be slightly bent nails. Two of the keys are located near the margins of the centre skeleton while the third rests of the chest of that individual. It is not clear whether all three keys are associated with this individual or whether one key originally accompanied each skeleton. This burial is now undergoing further excavation at the Canadian Conservation Institute, wherein gentle washing should remove the soil leaving the iron objects, as well as the remaining leather, textile, and whatever other material might be contained within the feature in their original positions.

Despite the success of the techniques of recovery and examination, we are no closer to understanding the significance of this feature than we are for the described previously. In fact, if anything, this feature is more enigmatic. At least the cross and cloak suggest a priest -- the significance of the keys and other iron objects remains a complete mystery.

Finally, the fifth burial discovered during the 1986 season proved, if anything, to be more of a surprise than the previous four. Located a few metres to the north of the other burials, it was marked on the surface by several small boulders protruding through the surface of a small peat bog. Standing water was visible among the rocks and we originally began excavations there with the notion that the depression may have represented a small basin built to collect drinking water. No trace of a grave or other pit outline was

visible as excavation proceeded, although a number of smaller rocks and cobbles within the peat indicated human activity. Finally, the edge of a large piece of textile appeared, resting on the bedrock which underlay the peat deposit. Further excavation revealed increasing amounts of textile, folded and compressed into a narrow band not more than 30 cm wide and upwards of two metres in length, and covered by rocks of various sizes. We remained unsure of what this might be, although we suspected (optimistically) that it might be a burial. When excavation reached the extreme eastern portion of the textile and a pair of leather shoes, with textile running into them, all doubts were allayed.

As final *in situ* cleaning progressed fingernails were found near where the right hand must have been, although all trace of bone had long since disappeared. The textile, when fully exposed, proved to be in such a good state of preservation, except for loose fragments below the area where the standing water was initially visible, that it was removed by sliding the entire mass on to a support.

Following removal of the costume from its burial place a small pool of water which remained beneath it was drained and explored for any small pieces of textile which may have remained. None was found, but at the bottom of the pool was a small, roughly made iron lance or dagger no more than 15 cm in length. It appears to have been part of the original grave furniture and represents still another case of a deliberate grave inclusion. Three of the five burials found in 1986, therefore, contained objects other than those which might have been worn by the dead at the time that they were interred. Why this should contrast so sharply with the burials made within the cemetery, only a few metres to the south, remains a mystery. Equally mysterious is the fact that these individuals were not interred in the main cemetery which was not only close by these 1986 burials but also contained ample unused ground for a number of individual interments.

Preliminary cleaning in the field laboratory allowed the garments to be separated and identified (Plate 6). The mass ultimately resolved itself into a knitted cap containing human hair, another mass of the same material which must have been a beard, a long sleeved shirt and jacket or overshirt, both with what I think are called "polo" necks, at least in modern parlance. Both

shirt and jacket are made from rather coarsely woven wool. The trousers, also of wool, are of a much heavier material and appear to have been brushed or teazled, on the exterior surface at least, which resulted in an almost felt-like appearance. They are pleated at the waist but the legs, which end at the knee, are not gathered as was the case with a garment recovered in 1984. From the knees down the legs were covered by socks or leg wrappings which terminate in a pair of ankle-high leather shoes, tied at the front with fine leather ties.

It is impossible to date this costume precisely, but the shoes are identical to some recovered by Parks Canada divers from a 16th century shipwreck in Red Bay Harbour, probably the Spanish Basque vessel the San Juan, and the rest of the garments are consistent with what little we know about 16th century working class costume. Very little, in fact, is known about the dress of fishermen and whalers from this period; hence the discovery of a virtually complete costume represents an important advance in our reconstruction of day to day life of the whalers.

The costume is now undergoing analysis and treatment at the Canadian Conservation Institute. Fibers and weave will be analysed and samples of fibre will be submitted for dye analysis. It will be possible to reproduce the entire costume and may be possible to reassemble the original in a three dimensional fashion.

As mentioned above, these five burials and the presumed empty grave comprise a series of features quite unlike the burials contained within the main cemetery a few metres to the south. Not only do they appear to have been excluded from the usual burial area but three of the five graves are unusual in themselves. The inclusion of a wooden cross with an extremely deep burial, the keys and other iron objects with the triple burial, and the iron lance or dagger with an individual who may simply have been sunk with rocks in a small hollow in a peat bog all represent departures from what we have come to consider "normal" burial practices. Clearly there was something about these men which distinguished them from their companions whose graves were found nearby. Although it cannot be proved, since the skeletons are too badly degraded, burial positions and styles of dress indicated that they were Europeans. We might suspect, therefore, that something about their status in life, or per-

haps the manner in which they met their deaths, somehow were responsible for their unusual burials. Although it does not look particularly promising, investigation of these remains is still in process and we may yet be provided with an answer to this latest mystery.

Finally, excavations at Red Bay were expanded from the islands in Red Bay Harbour to the mainland where several promising areas were tested. They are part of an extensive occupation in the southeastern part of the community which has long been favoured by local fishermen for placement of stages and stores. Deep water lies only a few metres offshore and the area is sheltered from all winds. These same attributes made the area attractive to the 16th century whalers. In fact, this area may have been the prime location for the whaling operations. Parks Canada divers have found two shipwrecks in the area and roof tiles and other evidence of 16th century activities are found along more than 200 m of shoreline. Our brief excavations revealed what appears to be the refuse from an area used partly for domestic purposes -- ceramics, glass, and so forth were common -- and which, on the strength of a single auger or gimlet and the site's location overlooking a tryworks, may have been a cooperage. EXC-17

Several areas along the shore are now waterlogged, and appear to have been during the Basque occupation, hence we anticipate that further excavations will reveal organic materials that should add significantly to the growing picture of life and working 16th century Labrador.

REFERENCES CITED

Barkham, Selma

- 1980 A note on the Strait of Belle Isle during the period of Basque contact with Indians and Inuit. Etudes/Inuit/Studies 4: 51-58.

Fitzhugh, William W.

- 1978 Winter Cove-4 and the Point Revenge occupation of the central Labrador coast. Arctic Anthropology XV(2):146-174.

Penney, Gerald

- 1984 The prehistory of the southwest coast of Newfoundland. M.A. thesis, Department of Anthropology, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Prowse, D.W.

- 1895 A History of Newfoundland. MacMillan and Co., London and New York.

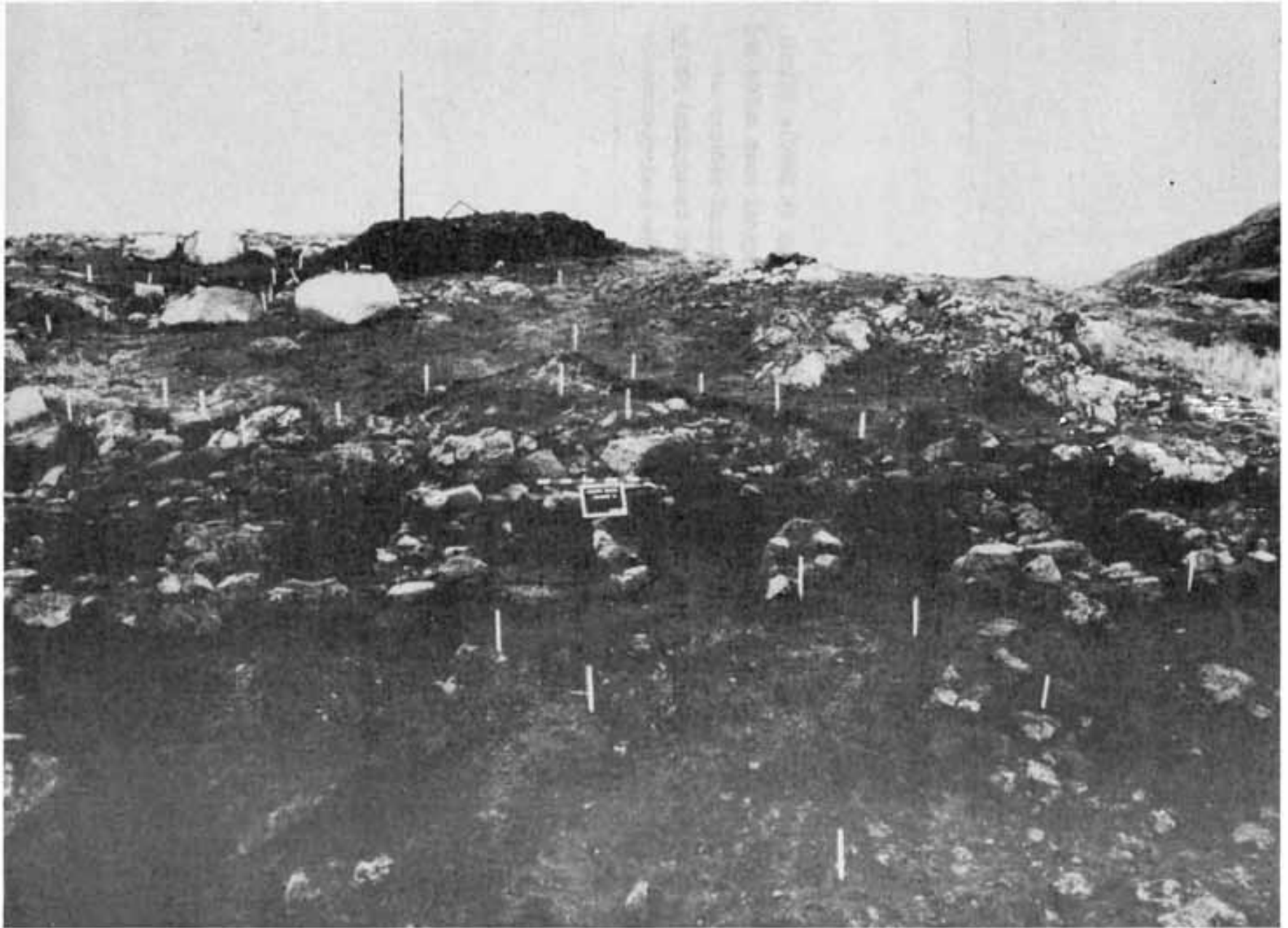


Plate 1: Tryworks on the north shore of Organ's Island.

Plate 2: Reconstruction of the frame of a tryworks at Saddle Island West. Posts have been placed in the original post molds and conjectural roof timbers added. The vertical members are not as high as the originals. In the left foreground can be seen scattered Recent Indian hearths, some contemporaneous with the Basque occupation.

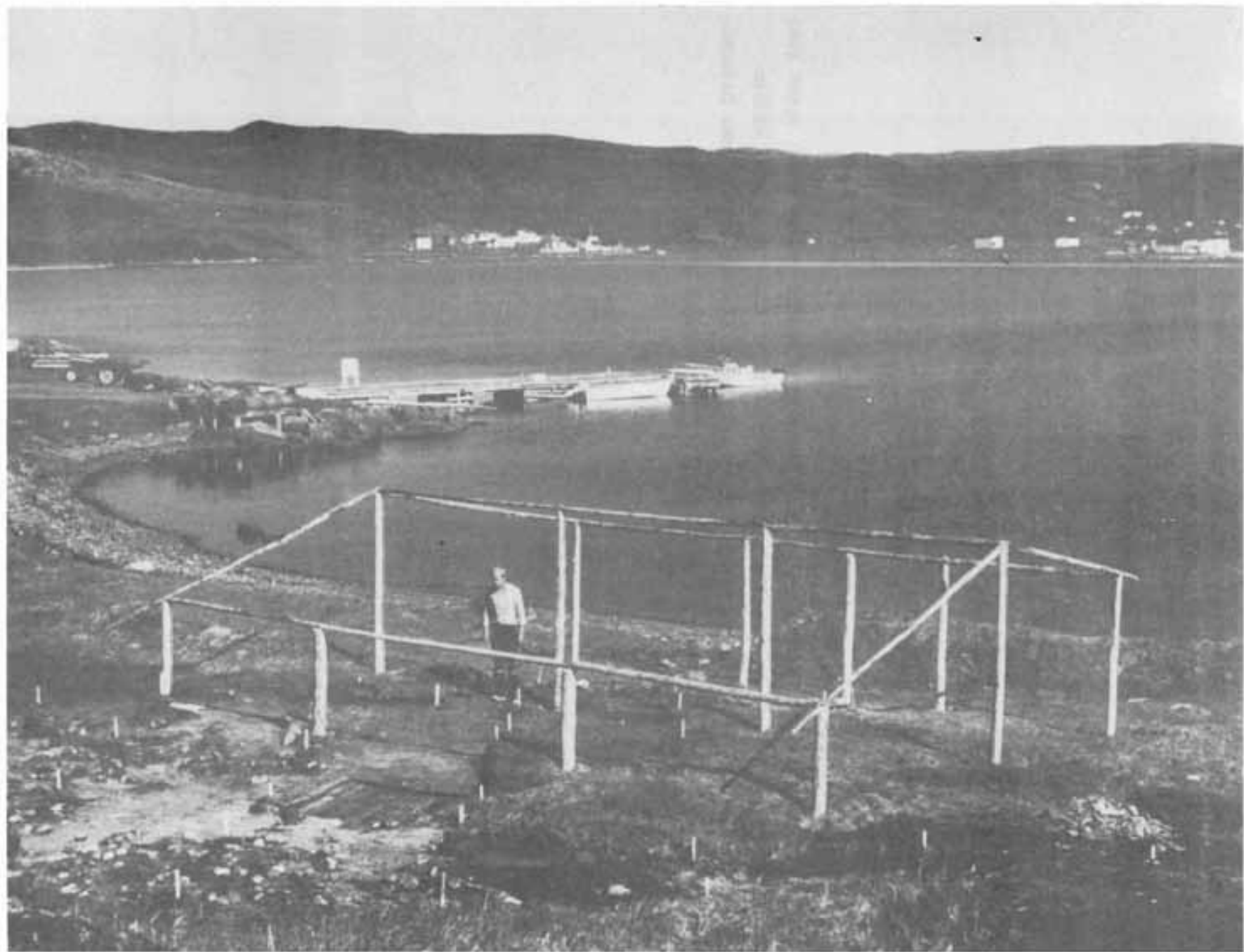


Plate 3: Recent Indian artifacts from Saddle Island West: upper row, projectile points; middle left, flake scrapers; middle right, bipolar core and linear flakes; bottom row, bifaces. Photo by Jack Martin, ETV, Memorial University.

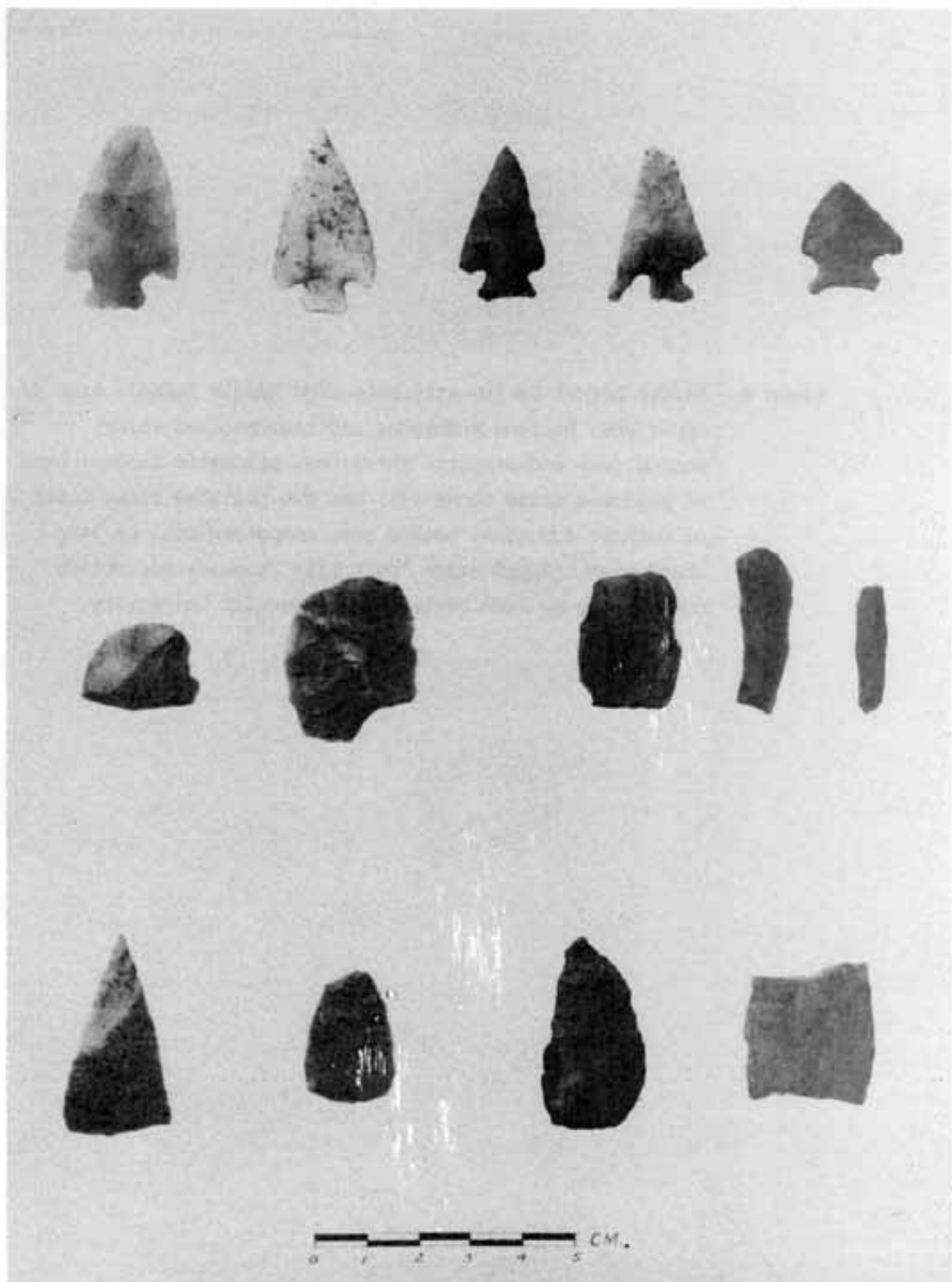


Plate 4: Middle Dorset Eskimo artifacts from Saddle Island, Area M: upper row, harpoon endblades and side-notched knife; second row, endscrapers; third row, prismatic blades, base of polished slate lance (?), and two polished slate tools of unknown function; bottom row, soapstone bowl or lamp sherd with chipped stone "butterfly" repair, microblade core. Photo by Jack Martin, ETV, Memorial University.



Plate 5: Detail of Burial 57. Clearly visible on the chest of the nearly completely decayed skeleton is a large wooden cross. What appear to be braided ties, perhaps for a cloak upon which the skeleton appears to be resting, are faintly visible on either side of the cross.



Plate 6: Costume preserved with Burial 59. Visible are knitted cap and human hair, outer jacket inside of which is a shirt of similar construction, heavy knee-length breeches, socks or leg wrappings, and leather shoes. Photo by Jerimy Powell, Canadian Conservation Institute.

