

An Archaic Sequence from the Strait of Belle Isle, Labrador, Mercury Series (Excerpt)

by Robert J. McGhee and James A. Tuck
(born 1940)

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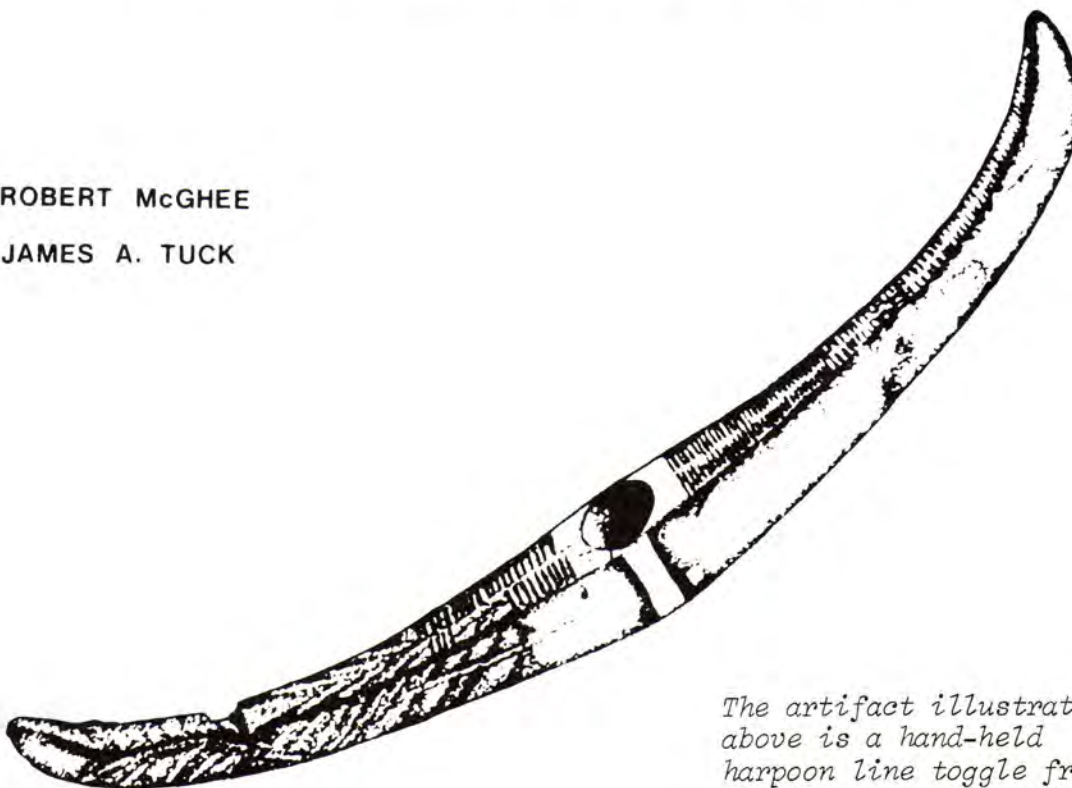
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AN ARCHAIC SEQUENCE FROM
THE STRAIT OF BELLE ISLE, LABRADOR

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*The artifact illustrated
above is a hand-held
harpoon line toggle from
the L'Anse Amour burial
mound.*

ABSTRACT

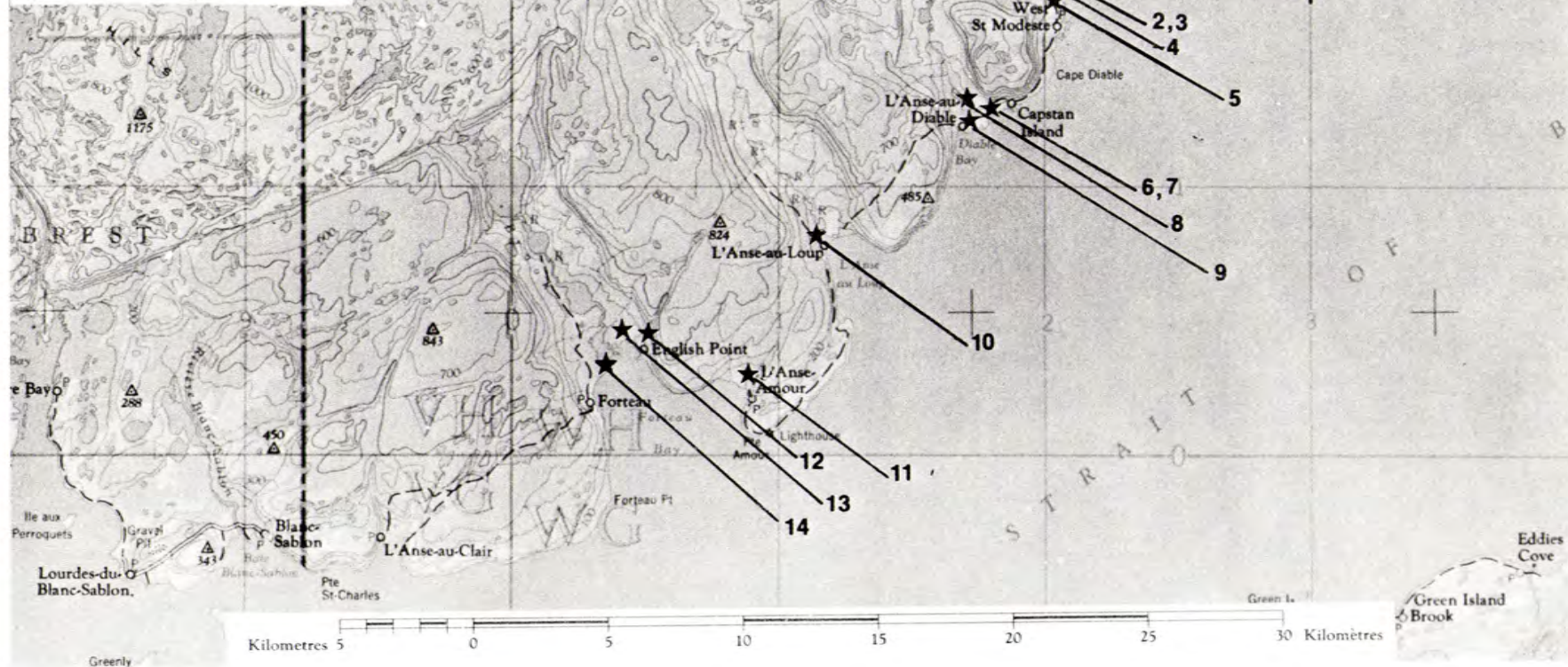
This report presents the results of archaeological survey and test excavation undertaken on the southern coast of Labrador during the summers of 1973 and 1974. Preliminary reports summarize our work at 14 sites, all but one of which relate to Archaic occupations. These components are placed in chronological sequence using evidence from seriation, comparison of collections, relative site elevations, and radiocarbon dating. The resulting sequence is used as the basis for postulating the development of a local variant of the Maritime Archaic tradition from a late Palaeo-Indian immigration to the area at approximately 8000-9000 years ago. We postulate continuity in the local occupation and adaptation from that time to approximately 3000-2000 years ago, when we suggest that the local tradition was interrupted by a possible environmental change and the immigration of Dorset Eskimos. The prehistory of the last 2000 years is unclear, and we suspect that occupation of this region was sparse and perhaps sporadic during the late prehistoric period.

RÉSUMÉ

Au cours des étés de 1973 et 1974, nous avons entrepris une reconnaissance archéologique sur la côte sud du Labrador, en la région du détroit de Belle-Isle. Cette monographie présente des résultats préliminaires sur les fouilles à 14 stations, de qui 13 appartiennent à des occupations archaïques. Ces gisements sont rangés en ordre chronologique, en utilisant les témoins de la seriation, comparaisons stylistiques les ensembles, l'altitude des sites au-dessus du niveau de la mer, et des datations C-14. Nous suggérons que la région était occupée initialement par des Palaeo-Indiens tardif il ya a 8000-9000 années, et qu'ils ont fait une adaptation archaïques qui a continué de cette période à il ya a 2000-3000 années. La tradition archaïque locale était interrompue par l'immigration des Esquimaux dorsets, et peut-être par une modification environnementale, pendant la première millénaire avant J.C. Pendant les dernières 2000 années l'évidence archéologique et historique suggère que l'occupation aborigène de détroit du Belle Isle était peu dense et plus sporadique que dans la période de l'occupation archaïque.

Figure 1 - Locations of sites

1. Easter Settlement
2. Fowler
3. Pinware West 5
4. Pinware Hill
5. Cowpath
6. Wrinkle
7. Iceberg
8. Arrowhead Mine
9. Juniper
10. Barney
11. L'Anse Amour
12. English Point
13. Graveyard
14. Forteau Point



The L'Anse Amour Burial Mound

On our first visit to the L'Anse Amour site, in July 1973, the first feature which we noticed was a concentration of boulders emerging from a patch of scrub forest beside the road which passes over the northern end of the site. We duly noted this feature, photographed it, named it Feature 1, and ignored it in favour of the pleasure of surface collecting in the extensive blowouts closer to the coast. Our camp was set up only 100 m from the structure and we walked over it every day for a couple of weeks, occasionally wondering whether or not it was natural, or perhaps the remains of some sort of dwelling. Despite the fact that we were keeping our eyes open for boulder-covered tumuli of the sort discovered near Bradore by René Levesque, and in fact spent a good part of one day in heavy labour dismantling a natural tumulus on a boulder beach to the west of the main L'Anse Amour site, we did not recognize this structure for what it was.

One day early in the 1974 season we found that we could not profitably employ our entire crew in the job on which we were concentrating, the excavation of the deeply buried Area 10 deposits at L'Anse Amour, so set half of them to clearing the scrub growth and drifted sand from Feature 1. Within a couple of hours, this revealed the structure as something other than a natural feature: a vaguely circular concentration of piled boulders, measuring approximately eight m in diameter, set on the surface of a sandy terrace. Immediately to the west and north of the feature the ground surface dropped away toward the gully of the main brook running through the site, while to the east the sand and perhaps the edge of the boulder pile had been scraped away by road construction machinery. The boulders therefore stood out slightly above

the surrounding surface, at an approximate elevation of 28 m above present sea level.

The positions of the boulders were mapped, the structure was divided into quadrants, and the boulders removed from the southwestern quadrant. The rocks averaged some 30 cm in diameter, weighed perhaps 10 kg on the average, and were piled closely together. They may have been obtained from the bed of the nearby stream, where similar boulders are exposed by erosion revealing the underlying boulder beaches. The ancient peat horizon, layer III of our general stratigraphic profile, was found to overlay the boulders which had not been exposed by road construction and subsequent deflation. Among the boulders near the centre of the structure we found a slab of ground stone which may have been used as a whetstone, and a chunk of white quartz.

Removal of the upper layer revealed a deeper layer of similar boulders in the central part of the structure, extending to a depth of approximately one m below the top of the mound. These were mapped and removed, revealing the upper edges of three large slab-like boulders which were set upright in a line, apparently forming the edge of a cist-like structure. Traces of red ochre were found in two places along the line of upright boulders. In order to locate the remainder of the cist, the boulders of the northwest quadrant were removed, and the excavation enlarged to include a two m strip of the eastern segment of the mound. We duly located the other edge of the cist, a parallel line of two boulders one m north of the first line but beginning and ending 60 cm farther east than the boulders of the first line. The upper edges of these boulders were encountered at approximately 45 cm below the top of the mound, and they extended to a maximum depth of 100 cm beneath the original surface. At this point we began to have trouble with our excavation, as

the sand dried and we began to get cave-ins and threatened cave-ins. Accordingly, we enlarged our excavation to a square pit seven m on a side and centred on the original centre of the mound. This removed all of the heavy concentration of piled beach boulders in the central area, an irregular concentration some four m in diameter. The floor of the excavation was now entirely composed of sand, save for the two parallel lines of upright boulders forming the cist within which we expected to find a burial.

We were to be disappointed in this, as excavation revealed only a few traces of a black substance which might be decayed organic material, and a small patch of charcoal containing a few burned but badly deteriorated fish bones; the size of the bones suggests that they came from a fish about the size of a cod or salmon. Having excavated and removed the boulders of the cist, we were faced with a square pit with sand walls and a blank, apparently sterile, floor of sand. Rather discouraged, we nevertheless continued the excavation, and after a couple of hours of removing sterile sand we encountered a small stain of red ochre at a depth of 30 cm below the base of the cist, and 130 cm below the original surface of the mound. This ochre stain proved to derive from the back of a human skull, and a few more hours excavation revealed the entire skeleton.

The body had been buried in an extended position, directly beneath the cist-like arrangement of stones some half-metre above. It lay on its stomach, the hands at the sides, the head pointing west and turned so that the face looked to the north. A walrus tusk lay directly in front of the face, and 30 cm to the west of the head there was a pile of artifacts including four stone projectile points or knives, three socketed bone points, and a stemmed bone point. Two more stone projectile points

or knives lay directly above and below the left shoulder, and a stone biface was found between the legs. A large slab of rock lay across the lumbar region of the back. More artifacts were revealed when we began to remove the skeleton. At the left side, at about the waist, were found two nodules of graphite stained with red ochre, apparently paint-stones, and a decorated antler artifact which may have been used as a paint-grinder or applicator. Beneath the upper chest area there was a small bone pendant, a bone whistle or flute, a few small fragments of bird bone, and a toggling harpoon-head. Beneath the sacral region lay a decorated ivory toggle. On either side of the skeleton there was a scatter of charcoal extending over an irregular area over one m in diameter, and one boulder lay at a distance of two m to the northeast of the body. A badly decayed piece of antler, probably caribou antler, was found some two m to the southeast of the body, and a few small chunks of white quartz were scattered in the same area. The charcoal scatter indicates that the original burial pit, the walls of which we could not trace in the homogeneous sand marked with stains percolating from the boulders above, was at least five m in diameter.

The skeleton was removed after noting such features as bone fusion. By the time the skeleton had been revealed and prepared for removal, it had dried out and the bones were in extremely poor shape. Consequently, it remains only partially reconstructed in the laboratory, where Sonja Jerkic (Memorial University) has undertaken a preliminary study.

Artifact Descriptions

Unless otherwise noted, the artifacts described below were directly associated with the burial beneath the mound.

Projectile Points: To consider all six of the stemmed bifaces from the L'Anse Amour burial on the same basis as the projectile points from the habitation sites previously described may be somewhat misleading. Four of these specimens are much longer than any of the projectile points previously described, all show a certain degree of asymmetry, and therefore may have been hafted knives or perhaps objects prepared specifically for inclusion in the grave. Although these are of very similar form to the smaller specimens described below, they are not included in the comparisons with other projectile point collections. The two smaller specimens are grouped in a class from which we describe the following "typical form":

L'Anse Amour Form: Tip pointed; lateral edges convex; blade cross-section biconvex; surface and edge retouch completely bifacial; marked edge serration. The haft element is comprised of slightly rounded shoulders forming a right or obtuse angle; straight stem with straight parallel edges and straight base with unifacial basal thinning. Grinding is present on the base, stem edges, and slight grinding on the blade edges. Material is quartzite. The two specimens have the following attributes:

Total length:	50 mm	61 mm
Maximum width:	27 mm	26 mm
Maximum thickness:	8 mm	9 mm
Blade length:	40 mm	51 mm
Blade index (w/bl):	.67	.51
Neck width:	20 mm	16 mm
Haft length:	10 mm	10 mm

The four larger specimens found may be variants on this "typical form", from which they diverge in being approximately twice as long and somewhat asymmetric in form. Four are of quartzite, and two of a distinctive vein quartz with orthoclase and chlorite inclusions (see Appendix II).

Biface: A rather crudely chipped biface is asymmetrically lanceolate in outline, with a straight base and a slightly broken pointed tip. Length is slightly over 95 mm, maximum width 51 mm, and maximum thickness 12 mm. It is made from dark brown metamorphic rock.

Paintstones: Two nodules of graphite, 30 mm to 50 mm in dimensions, are deeply grooved on one surface, and smoothly rubbed all over. The surfaces are stained with red ochre.

Whetstone(?): This specimen was found among the upper layer of boulders covering the central part of the burial mound; it may have been there at the time the mound was built, or at a later period. It is a flat elongate slab of rock with smooth surfaces, and rounded edges which are highly polished; one end is rounded, the other broken. Length is greater than 230 mm, maximum width 50 mm, and thickness 11 mm.

Pendant: A small flat pendant of bone is a narrow tear-drop shape, with a small suspension hole gouged in the narrow end. Both surfaces are decorated with two vertical rows of short horizontal incisions spaced about 1 mm apart. Length is 43 mm, maximum width 11 mm, and thickness 4 mm.

Whistle or Flute: This instrument is made from a bird long-bone, circular in cross-section with outside diameter of 12 mm, and cut to a length of 170 mm. The end placed in the mouth is somewhat broken. Along

one edge, two drilled holes six mm in diameter are centred at distances of 25 mm and 50 mm from the other end; this edge is also decorated with a series of short horizontal incisions placed approximately two mm apart and extending for a distance of 85 mm from the distal end. When blown as a whistle the instrument produces a piercing note above the range of the piano keyboard.

The instrument may have been reduced from a longer length, as the edge of a third hole is visible in the cut surface of the distal end.

Walrus Tusk: The proximal end of this tusk is deteriorated, and the specimen appears not to have been worked; total length is 270 mm.

Paint Applicator: This object was found in association with the paint stones described above, and is heavily stained with red ochre. It is made from the proximal end of a naturally shed small antler, perhaps caribou, and is cut to a length of 97 mm with a squared end on the main tine and a rounded end on a small subsidiary tine. A hole 12 mm in diameter has been drilled laterally through the middle of the object, and the specimen is decorated with four rows of short incised lines or hatches.

Socketed Bone Points: Three specimens are made from caribou ulnae which have been cut across at one end and the cancellous interior of the bone removed to form a socket into which one could fit a shaft. The two complete specimens are both 125 mm long, and tapered to a flat and sharp distal tip with sharp lateral edges.

Stemmed Bone Point: A deteriorated specimen, perhaps made from the long bone of a sea mammal, is a thin slab of bone cut to form a point with triangular blade section, sharp and slightly acute shoulders, straight stem and straight base. Overall length is greater than 75 mm

(perhaps as long as 150 mm), maximum width at the shoulders 29 mm, stem width 16 mm and haft length 20 mm; thickness is 5 mm.

Harpoon Head: A small toggling harpoon head is made from antler, and is slightly broken at the tip. The body is conical, 16 mm in maximum diameter, tapering evenly toward the distal end. The base is concavely oblique, set off from the body by a narrow ridge, and extends laterally to a strong toggling spur. A tapering hole is drilled in the base, 9 mm in diameter and 23 mm deep. Overall length is slightly greater than 65 mm. There is no line-hole, and we must suppose that the line was attached around the body above the slight basal ridge.

Toggle(?): A very attractive ivory artifact, 162 mm long, is crescentic in shape and tapered evenly toward the curved "horns" at either end. In the centre the cross-section is circular with a flattened face on the concave surface of the crescent, and measures 18 mm by 14 mm. A hole 11 mm in diameter is drilled from the concave to the convex surface in the centre of the artifact, and a slight ridge is carved on one lateral surface parallel to the hole. The flattened concave surface is decorated with a series of short lateral incisions placed approximately one mm apart. This specimen might have been used as a hand-toggle to which a harpoon-line was attached.

Radiocarbon Dates

7530 \pm 140 (I-8099): Charcoal from apparent grave-fire on same level as skeleton and one to two m south of skeleton.

Plate 26 - L'Anse Amour Mound (actual size)

- a. bone or antler pendant
- b. antler pestle(?)
- c. graphite paintstone
- d. graphite paintstone
- e. bone whistle



a



b



c



d



e