

| A Conflict of Interest: a case study for community archaeology in Nunavut, Canadian Arctic

by *Brendan Griebel*

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In the controversial realm of cultural heritage, there is a tendency for groups to invoke the past as a means of justifying contemporary – and often conflicting – visions of community, identity and place. The role that professional archaeologists play in this process is often portrayed as one of underlying neutrality, with the assumption that the positivist approach of their discipline favours the representation of ‘objective truth’ rather than the social and political interests of particular groups (Smith, 2009: 123). By detailing a case study from the Canadian territory of Nunavut, this article presents an inversion of this traditional relationship between archaeology and public interest. Archaeologists working throughout Nunavut have been charged with the task of using their trade to encourage, rather than defuse, the interests of local Inuit populations. With the territorial mandate to develop projects that recognize and address Inuit social issues, archaeologists now struggle towards the creation of a more community-conscious archaeology that is capable of both meeting academic standards and benefiting the people of Nunavut.

‘Why archaeology?’

In 1989, archaeologist Christopher Tilley famously challenged his discipline with this query. ‘What is its

purpose?’ he asked. ‘Is archaeology relevant or irrelevant to the world? Is doing archaeology like playing the fiddle while Rome burns? In short, why archaeology?’ (1989: 105). I have often resurrected this question in conversations with acquaintances throughout the Canadian Arctic, only to be met with awkward silence. In Nunavut, like many other places, archaeology’s day-to-day utility is felt to be negligible. Archaeologists, after all, simply dig up old things; they prod and ponder over a past that many northern communities recognize as being already known by local elders. In recent years, however, policy implemented by the Nunavut government has forced archaeology into the position of challenging this image by promoting itself as a tool that is both relevant and beneficial to the territory’s Inuit population. As a result, community-engaged archaeology in the area has become both a scholarly ideal and an administrative necessity.

The implementation of the Nunavut Land Claims Act in 1999 gave rise to a new era of archaeology in the Canadian North. The designation of Nunavut as a separate territory of Canada represents the largest native land claim settlement in the nation’s history, with approximately 750,000 square miles of the Canadian Arctic being proclaimed a semi-autonomous Inuit homeland, to be governed



22. A student replicates Pembroke site artefacts through a process of foam mould casting.

by unique policies designed to ensure the representation and continuation of the group's cultural and social well-being. As a result of such policies, mandatory components of community outreach were created for all incoming archaeological projects, ensuring that researchers engage local communities through employment and education, as well as issues of historic interpretation. Before being granted permission for any form of archaeological project in Nunavut, archaeologists would now have to convince Inuit community councils of their explicit effort to involve and benefit local populations.

As one might expect, reactions on behalf of archaeologists to this shift of power and protocol have been mixed. Many practitioners are thrilled with the increased opportunity to collaborate with northern communities. But there is also a sense that the mandate for partnership adds a certain pressure, not

only on inadequate budgets and timeframes, but also on the very definition of archaeology as the pursuit of scientific, rather than social, truths. With archaeological research in Nunavut no longer deemed justifiable through conventional standards of knowledge acquisition, professionals have, once again, been forced to ask themselves that same old question 'why archaeology?'

It is this fundamental dilemma that gave rise to a recent project partnered by the University of Toronto and the Kitikmeot Heritage Society – an elder-directed, non-profit organization located in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut.¹ By looking at the relationship between archaeologists and Inuit communities in more ethnographic terms, the project has been trying to determine what potential social and civic roles investigations of the past might serve in the Canadian Arctic. By broadening our understanding of



23. Participants of the Qajaq Revitalization Program display the finished sealskin kayak.

not only *why* archaeology is practised, but also *how* it engages non-archaeological populations, this ongoing research seeks to create more widely accessible and usable interactions with history.

The Nunavut hamlet of Cambridge Bay (known locally as *Iqaluktuutiaq*) was chosen as a site for the project due to its long-term archaeological involvement with Dr. Max Friesen of the University of Toronto, who has been working with the community for over a decade to explore its regional history through excavations, elder-youth field camps and elder narratives (Friesen, 2002). Under the direction of Dr. Friesen, a community-oriented archaeological excavation of the Pembroke site began in the summer of 2008. The Pembroke site was originally identified and partially excavated by William Taylor (1967, 1972), and consists of a collection of eleven winter and summer dwellings dating from approximately the

fourteenth century AD (Friesen, 2008). As the site offers an assemblage of very visible, ancestral Inuit occupations located only a short distance outside of town, its reinvestigation provided the perfect opportunity to engage with the local community and promote new dialogue on the nature and importance of local history. Over the course of the four-week excavation, Inuit elders were brought out to the site to interpret its features and artefacts, and a day camp for children was held to teach them about life in the area, and the methodologies of the archaeological trade. A team of five archaeologists, myself included, maintained an active presence in town, always on hand to answer questions individuals might have about the antiquated site. Despite some success, however, the project still did not manage to capture the interest of the community as a whole. The Pembroke site was located directly along a well-travelled gravel road, yet passing motorists would

rarely stop. Inuit students were reluctant to fill paid positions as fieldworkers, finding little alluring about the dirty process of excavation. Perhaps most disconcerting was that, despite the project being a big event in a very small town, locals simply went about their business as usual.

Somewhat deflated by these results, I made the decision to live full time in Cambridge Bay to investigate alternate and more appropriate ways of exposing archaeology and history to the community. After several focus group meetings with local elders, it became clear that they desired local history to be a tangible phenomenon. Many elders spoke of the importance of physically recollecting the past, be it through a place, artefacts or the motions of remembering via mnemonics. The importance of archaeology for much of the community lay not in the methodological precision of fieldwork, but in the touchstone of material remains that it produced. In terms of community projects, this seemed a good a place to start.

Recollecting the past

In December of 2008, a community workshop was organized to bring a collection of the artefacts excavated from the Pembroke site back to the community and to create replicas for individuals, the local museum and educational use. A three-day course was held to initiate participants into the skills of foam mould casting and technical painting. To my surprise, over twenty interested community members showed up to create replicas, and to see and discuss the artefacts that had been excavated earlier in the summer. The nature of involvement within this workshop was noticeably different from that of the excavation. There was a stronger sense among individuals that they were active participants in the interpretation of history. Rather than auditing a tour or lectures about their heritage, they took the initiative to identify and physically recreate elements of the past that they found interesting and worthy of attention. This process made participants feel more

comfortable about debating formal archaeological interpretations of the artefacts, and about offering more elaborate accounts of alternative utilities. A small item – assumed by the archaeological team to be a pendent representing a snow knife – took on new levels of reinterpretation: a shaman's ornament, a component of a seal hole indicator, a bone marrow extractor. A rich narrative, weaving together stories of personal experience and pragmatic contextual use, accompanied each of these suggestions.

In April of 2009, two related workshops were initiated in local schools, to further investigate historical themes through the context of video documentation and exhibit design. A week-long training course – generously funded and facilitated by the UK-based Insight Productions – was delivered in HD video. It encouraged students to record their experiences of both the historical and present events of their home community, ranging from recreational town activities to land travel and fishing. By navigating such issues through visual recording, students could overlap their contemporary interests in media technology with ideas of historical change, gaining a better perspective on how the life-ways of their grandparents and earlier ancestors were different from their own, and what benefits and repercussions this transformation was having. The following workshop took a similar approach, using the construction of museum exhibits as a medium through which to explore the relationship between traditional tools and modern living. Students were taught to cast archaeological artefacts, and were given the task of building them into displays that critically examined various aspects of their aesthetic, social and symbolic significance. The resulting exhibits tended to categorize artefacts according to distinctly non-archaeological themes – practicality on the land, inheritance and alienation – generating new insight into a diversity of cultural and social associations with the material realm.

Together, these workshops accomplished two things. Firstly, they allowed students to reflect on

aspects of their community and heritage that they normally fail to consider. When immersed in the act of recording, students began to view history as an alternative lens through which to examine their contemporary world critically. Learning about the diverse ways in which people lived in the past ultimately led to questions about the manner and cost of living in the present. Secondly, these workshops helped to deconstruct students' ideas of archaeology as an inaccessible and elusive profession, redefining it as a more creative tool, with which anyone could duplicate, embody and contribute ideas about the past.

For the year's final project, we decided to take a different approach to archaeology from community-based excavation. During the brief window of summer, local elders wanted to live out on the land. They wanted an opportunity to address history in such a way that they could pass on their own knowledge about the old days to the youth of the community. The Qajaq Revitalization Program was founded on this desire.

The basic goal of the programme was to reconstruct a traditional kayak boat (or *qajaq*) in the style of the Copper Inuit – a regional Inuit group which traditionally occupied the area surrounding Cambridge Bay. The practice of kayak building had been lost to the community for nearly half a century; few living elders could remember ever having used a kayak, and none had ever built one. Many of the associated cultural skills such as hunting, sewing, skin preparation and traditional tool use, however, still lingered in the communal memory, and it was decided that these abilities should be the focus of our historical attention.

A team of seventeen individuals from the Nunavut communities of Cambridge Bay and Kugaruuk assembled to share their ideas and knowledge for reconstructing the kayak. Line drawings of one of the world's three extant Copper Inuit kayaks held in museum storage (see Zimmerly,

1985) were used as a blueprint for traditional dimensions. Over the course of three weeks, our group lived at a land camp located on the coast approximately half an hour outside Cambridge Bay. Again, it became a situation in which the past and present truly collided. Traditional tools from the area were reconstructed and used alongside modern equivalents, to manufacture the kayak and to harvest much of the food and resources required for the camp. Exploiting their new proficiency with video cameras, youth documented their elders' stories and explanations about traditional building, butchery and sewing. Unlike the previous year of excavation, increasingly large crowds of people were drawn out from town, to the point where between fifty and sixty people a day were using the camp as a site to fish, learn about traditional activities, gain video skills, and share their knowledge about the past. Most important, however, was that at the end of three weeks, the community was left with something more than an excavated hole in the ground. The finished, twenty-two foot long kayak has become a visible monument of cultural pride within the community. The boat is currently being built into an exhibit for the local community museum; and the stories of its history and use are being absorbed into the educational curriculum for local schools. This will ensure that the narratives, lessons and skills gained throughout its construction will not be easily forgotten.

To bring this article around full circle, I will re-approach that thorny question: 'Why archaeology?' Perhaps the best response is that archaeology is able to approach the world as a solvable puzzle. As professional archaeologists, we have traditionally been taught to reassemble the remains of the past systematically, in order to build a picture of how things used to be. Over the last year, however, the community of Cambridge Bay has been using the same elements of history for more contemporary purposes. By using tangible reminders of the past as a means of meditating on how and why their communities have changed, these individuals have gained a better perspective, not only on how things

were, but also on how they desire them to be in both the present and the future. Archaeology, I believe, is still coming to terms with the idea that it has this ability, and perhaps no alternate choice but to make contributions extending beyond the parameters of scientific knowledge. To do this, however, wider connections must be drawn between history and the present, and the barriers that separate 'academic knowledge' from 'social realities' must be broken down. This, I believe, would ultimately benefit both the public and the archaeological profession, for, in the classic words of scholars John Fritz and Fred Plog:

Unless archaeologists find ways of making their research increasingly relevant to the modern world, the modern world will find itself increasingly capable of getting along without archaeologists (1970: 412).

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| NOTE

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