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HUNTING CAMPS IN PREHISTORY

Current Archaeological Approaches



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Article outline

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OF EASTERN CANADA:

Variability, Representativeness and Significance

Adrian L. BURKE

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THE HALTE DE CHASSE IN THE PREHISTORY OF EASTERN CANADA:

Variability, Representativeness and Significance

Adrian L. BURKE

Abstract

Archaeologists working in Eastern Canada regularly excavate small sites that appear to be the product of short term occupations by hunter-gatherers. Ethnographic and ethnohistoric data on hunter-gatherer groups that occupied these northern latitudes indicate that there are many types of short term sites and that they should contain evidence of a variety of activities and related features and artefacts. This article explores the variability, representativeness and significance of these small, short term, hunting related sites by presenting a few archaeological cases from Quebec.

Keywords

Northeastern North America, ethnography, archaeology, hunter-fisher-gatherers, short term occupations, small sites.

1 - Introduction

Archaeologists working in eastern Canada study over 12500 years of human occupation covering the Paleoindian, Archaic, and Woodland / Ceramic / post-Archaic / Recent Indian periods. This is essentially an archaeology of hunter-gatherers, for the aboriginal groups north of 45° latitude and east of 80° longitude never adopted a sedentary village life based on horticulture, with the exception of northern Iroquoian groups (figure 1). For this reason, most of the sites that archaeologists excavate in eastern Canada are considered to be the product of mobile hunter-gatherers. The degree of residential or logistical mobility (*sensu* Binford, 1980; Kelly, 1983, 1992) varied greatly, of course, depending on the time period, the region, the cultural group, the environment, the adaptation, the season, and many other factors including kinship networks and sociopolitical organization. Whatever the degree of residential mobility, however, the hunting-fishing-trapping-gathering way of life required the use of large annual territories and several moves throughout the year in this part of the world. Archaeologists have therefore focused considerable effort on describing the variability of these sites and on reconstructing settlement patterns for these prehistoric groups at various times and in different regions. The ethnographic data presented below suggests that the specialized sites created by hunting parties were generally small due to few people and relatively short stays. These same ethnographic descriptions also point to a richness and variety of sites resulting from hunting activities. The number of activities, the length of stay, the features created



Figure 1 - Location of the regions discussed in the text.

at these sites are expected to vary as a result. We present here a series of archaeological expectations based on ethnographic data for hunter-gatherers in northern latitudes, we then present archaeological examples from eastern Quebec that suggest that this variability is real and should be taken seriously. Finally, we propose some suggestions in terms of the utility and management of small hunting-related sites that are based on the experience of North American cultural resource management.

2 - Variability: what the ethnographic record tells us, and what archaeologists should expect

Variability in the archaeological record has been a central preoccupation of North American archaeology throughout the 20th century, from Culture-History to New Archaeology, albeit for different reasons (Willey and Sabloff, 1974; Trigger, 1989). In the case of hunter-gatherer archaeology, the interest in site types and their variability was motivated in large part by the New Archaeology's focus on settlement patterns and adaptive systems. This produced a welcome growth in the ethnoarchaeology of hunter-gatherers which often included detailed studies of site types, or how hunter-gatherers organized themselves with respect to their territory and its resources (e.g., seasonality, patchiness) (Binford, 1976, 1978, 1980, 1982, 1983, 2001; Yellen, 1977; Gould, 1980). Archaeologists now realize that hunter-gatherers organize themselves in very different ways depending on a variety of variables (resource structure, degree of sociopolitical organization, relationships with neighbouring groups, etc.) and that this can produce a great variety of sites.

Moreover, within specialized sites such as those dedicated to hunting there are a variety of site types like caches, hunting stands/blinds, drives/jumps, carcass dressing/processing locations, as well as the hunting camps where the hunting party resides. The time an individual or a hunting party stays at any one of these sites can vary, but in general it is very brief. Only the hunting camp can be considered as a residential site, and they can sometimes be occupied for weeks. In addition, all of the sites mentioned above can be re-used and re-occupied. To complicate matters, not all hunter-gatherers send special task groups to hunt (collectors *sensu* Binford) and it is often the case that the entire family-residential unit moves around as a hunting party (forager *sensu* Binford), at least for certain parts of the year.

To deal with this seemingly endless variability, it is necessary to find patterns in the ethnographic data which the archaeologist can apply to the archaeological record as a series of expectations. Let us look at some of the ethnographically known site types from North America's hunter-gatherers that might produce small archaeological sites. Our intention here is not to imply that all small sites are hunting-related sites, but rather that many of the small archaeological sites that we find may indeed be the short term, hunting-related sites we are trying to define in this volume. **Table 1** was developed by Jones (2008) for prehistoric sites in northeastern USA and is based on Newell and Constandse-Westermann (1996) and Binford (1982, 1990). It is just one example of how the archaeologist can develop models or expectations based on hunter-gatherer ethnography that can be applied to archaeological cases. The table demonstrates the variability of small, short term, hunter-gatherer sites, but also shows that the hunting camp (*halte de chasse*) should contain specific activities and related archaeological features. These include: meat and/or fish drying racks, stakes for stretching hides, outdoor surface hearths, drop and toss zones associated with these hearths most likely containing flakes from maintaining and retouching tools, broken tool fragments, and faunal remains, tool caches, hunting/shooting blinds, wind breaks or other expedient shelters, and bone dumps (in Eastern Canada especially calcined and comminuted bone from the production of bone grease from bone marrow boiling). Not all of the above features are exclusive to short term hunting sites based on Jones' table. Some features, however, are more likely to be found at hunting sites and might help to distinguish them from other small, short term sites. These include hunting/shooting blinds, wind breaks, and tool caches; more on these caches below.

Based on what we've seen in **table 1**, short term, hunting related sites, and in fact all short term occupations, can be the venue for a surprising variety of activities. These activities in turn produce certain features and leave behind a variety of tools and debris associated with these activities. **Table 2**, developed by Jones to address Archaic period sites in northeastern USA (Jones, 2008), presents a list of potential tool forms that one might encounter on residential versus logistical sites. On small, short term, logistical sites like those encountered by Jones in upland locations and dated to the Archaic period when groups were hunter-fisher-gatherers we can expect to find the following with a moderate to high probability: projectile points (probably broken), tool preforms (for bifacial knives and points), flake knives and choppers (disarticulating/flensing), large flakes, cores (most likely at the end of their use lives), used flakes and possibly scrapers, and post molds for racks, as well as debitage mostly related to tool maintenance and resharpening. These tools are not exclusive to short term logistical sites but there are several tool forms that are more likely to be found on logistical sites and which may help to differentiate them from residential sites, namely choppers and flake knives related to dressing game in the field. Unfortunately in this article I can only address the lithic remains but it should be obvious that there are many zooarchaeological signatures that can be added to this table.

Table 1 - Various short term sites and the features one can expect to find on these sites based on ethnographic data from North America. In bold are the features most commonly associated with the short term hunting site. The term "hunting station" is from Jones and is kept here for consistency (reproduced from Jones 2008 with the author's permission).

	Net drying rack	Fish dry/smoke	Hide scraping stump	Hide drying frame	Skin /bark tent	Elevated cache	Meat/fish dry rack	Hide staking area	Fish weir/trap	Expedient shelter	Outside cook hearth	Drop and toss zones	Above/underground cache	Cairn-cache	Inside hearth	Dog yard	Bone dump	Surface hearth	Smudge hearth	One-man tent	Shooting blind	Tool cache	Wind break	No features/facilities	Snare anchors	game drive fence	Butchering area
Small residential camp	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X																		
Field camp					X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X							
Transit camp					X	X				X																	
Hunting station							X	X			X	X					X	X			X	X	X				
Kill-butcher site							X		X		X	X	X	X										X	X	X	X

Table 2 - Various activities that can take place at hunter-gatherer sites, the types of stone tools associated with these activities, and the likelihood of finding these on a residential versus a logistical site. In bold italics are the activities most directly related to hunting and the tool forms that are most likely to be found on short term hunting sites (reproduced from Jones 2008 with the author's permission).

Activity	Archaeological signature	Likelihood of occurrence	
		Residential site	Logistical site
Hunting	Broken projectile points	High	High
Hunting tool repair / production	Preforms and debitage, scrapers?	Moderate	High
Flake tool production	Large flakes and spent cores	High	Moderate
Game dressing	Choppers and flake knives	Low	High
Plant collecting	Flake knives?	High	Low
Plant processing	Utilized flakes, manos, nutting stones, leaching pits?	High	Low
Meat processing	Flake knives and utilized flakes, small post molds from racks	High	Moderate
Hide processing	Scrapers, post molds from racks	High	Low
Plant cooking	Earth ovens, roasting platforms (fire cracked rock)	High	Low
Meat cooking	Hearths	High	Low
Food storage	Pits	Moderate	Low
Heavy woodworking	Groundstone tool fragments	Moderate	Low

Based on North American ethnographic data for northern hunter-gatherers it seems clear that no matter how narrowly one may choose to define a *halte de chasse* there is good reason to believe that the small, short term, hunting-related site can be identified based on a series of activities and related archaeological features/artefacts. Moreover, it can be distinguished from other small, short term sites. There exists a significant variety of activities and related archaeological features/artefacts on these hunting sites. Rather than seeing this as a problem, we can consider it an asset in terms of not only exploring the richness of this type of site, but also because with a larger number of archaeological cases we can do justice to the complexity of hunter-gatherer lifeways.

3 - Representativeness: what about those tool caches?

What is representativeness in archaeology? After all, how can we be sure that the sites we have excavated and described really reflect the richness and diversity of prehistoric hunter-gatherer lives? In the case of eastern Canada, this issue has recently come to light with respect to hunter-gatherers with a high residential mobility. Archaeologists in eastern Canada are fortunate to have rich ethnographic and ethnohistoric documentation on aboriginal groups that were living traditional lifestyles in many of the same areas and environments where archaeologists work. In some cases, we work closely with the descendant aboriginal communities that still occupy their ancestral lands. While we cannot presume a direct historical link, many times the ethnohistoric data offers the archaeologist an excellent model for how prehistoric hunter-gatherers occupied and exploited their territory throughout the year.

In the Maritime Peninsula (figure 1), the ancestors of the Maliseet that occupied the interior forests along the Saint John Valley were highly mobile, at least during the winter months (Chalifoux *et al.*, 1998; Burke, 2000). This means that the small family unit (between 5 and 15 individuals) would be together for a large part of the year, and on most of the sites occupied, including short term hunting camps. In a region with a resource structure like that of the interior of the Maritime Peninsula, we can expect more residential mobility and less logistical mobility (foragers with little food storage; Binford, 1980; Kelly, 1983). This is because the use of few camps (few residential moves) and numerous logistical trips would rapidly place the group at risk due to depletion of resources in the immediate area (Kelly, 1983: 291). A greater reliance on hunting also tends to a greater area exploited over an annual cycle (Kelly, 1983: 296-297; Binford, 2001), and both the resource structure of the interior region and the ethnohistoric evidence points to a central role for hunting and trapping of medium to large mammals. Higher residential mobility which covers a larger effective exploitation area as opposed to a settlement system that uses fewer residential moves combined with logistical forays is therefore considered optimal in the interior of the Maritime Peninsula (Hayden, 1981: 375; Johnson, Earle, 1987: 27-31, 92-93). For a small family hunting group exploiting the interior of the Maritime Peninsula in the winter of 1634, father Le Jeune logged 23 residential moves over four months, thus averaging one move every 5 to 6 days (Moreau, 1980; Thwaites, 1897).

In this same region where LeJeune accompanied the small family hunting band, a team from the *Université de Montréal* excavated a small site measuring less than 100 square metres in 2005 and 2006 (Burke, 2006). Site CjEd-5 produced an unusual feature dated to 1150 rcyBP which contained within one square metre 1280 pieces of fire-cracked rock, 11 764 pieces of calcined and comminuted bone of which 641 bones represented at least six beavers including juveniles, one projectile point, ten scrapers and used flakes, one hammerstone, three abraders, 7085 waste flakes, and what appeared to be a cache of four large bifaces. These four large bifaces were made of Ramah chert, a high quality raw material traded from northern Labrador, a distance of 1350 km from the site! Upon closer inspection, it became clear that the bifaces had been intentionally broken using a hammerstone and anvil and were then burned in the fire (Burke, 2006). This sacrifice or “ritual killing” of the bifaces was clearly part of a ritual; accompanied by a small feast of six beavers, it probably served in sealing an alliance between families or perhaps as part of ‘hunting magic’ rituals.

This kind of sacrifice of stone tools in non-burial settings is not unusual in North America (Burke, 2006, table 1). In fact, the *Université de Montréal* has recently excavated another cache of tools at the Nepress site (BiEr-21) 290 km southwest of the CjEd-5 site (Provençal *et al.*, 2010).

It contains a cache of 24 bifaces (possibly as many as 33), 1 projectile point, and 22 unifaces. The bifaces were all intentionally burned in a fire and then deposited in the cache. They are made of a material that comes from 180 km to the northeast of the site. This small site, approximately 25 m², was most likely a very brief occupation but the group that stopped there took the time to carry out a ritual that involved the destruction and burial of two dozen bifaces and other tools. The features at these two small sites demonstrate that among hunter-gatherers it is highly likely that the ritual aspects of life related to life stages, seasonal calendrical events, or ‘hunting magic’ could take place on any site, including short term hunting sites. This is particularly true of north-eastern North American hunter-gatherers who seamlessly integrated the ritual aspects of their religion into everyday life.

4 - Significance: why small, short term sites like *haltes de chasse* are important

The word “significance” when applied to archaeological sites can be a loaded term, especially in cultural resource management where some “non-significant” sites have to be sacrificed due to budget and time constraints. In these situations, the small, short term sites, including the *haltes de chasse*, are particularly at risk. Several governmental and para-governmental cultural resource management institutions have tackled this problem and provide very useful guidelines for assessing the research potential and importance of such sites (Rieth, 2008; Little *et al.*, 2000, especially the section entitled “The Importance of Small or Overlooked Sites”; Schofield and English Heritage, 2000). It is not our purpose here to make an argument for the importance and protection of these sites. This has been amply demonstrated by the *haltes de chasse* conference and the papers in this volume. Rather, I am interested in providing one more dimension to what appears to be the increasingly complex world of the *halte de chasse*.

I am specifically interested in the representativeness and significance of small lithic scatters with no features. While the discussion above has focused on the diversity of activities, features and artefacts one can find on short term, hunting related sites, it is a fact that the vast majority of sites that I work on in Eastern Canada contain no features, no cultural stratigraphy, no pottery, few formal tools, little or no faunal remains, and always some debitage (Burke, 2000, Chalifoux *et al.*, 1998). These are the sites created by the highly mobile hunters that occupied the interior forests of the Maritime Peninsula and who used the extensive quarries of high quality chert and rhyolite. In our case studies for this region we have found that when one is close to the chert quarries the sites are highly visible (and significant!) due to the enormous amounts of debitage and tool fragments recovered. They provide an incredible wealth of information on the raw material economy and chipped stone technology (e.g., *chaîne opératoire*) of these hunter-gatherers (Burke, 2000; Burke, Chalifoux, 1998). However, within only 2 km of the quarries, the same groups produce very few flakes and tool fragments making sites like CjEd-5 mentioned above very difficult to locate in the dense forest of the Northeast (Burke, 2007). These sites are however essential in reconstructing the complete regional settlement pattern, pointing to the use of various environmental zones and resources on the landscape. They also provide crucial information on raw material economies despite their small size (Burke, 2007). A recent use-wear study that included some collections from small, short term sites points to the potential of seeing other activities that may be overlooked at times if small sites are ignored (Hottin, 2009). Finally, and not insignificantly, had it not been for a magnetometre survey of the CjEd-5 site (Burke and Jeandron, 2005), we would have never excavated the feature that produced the ritually killed bifaces because test-pitting of

the site showed a very low artefact density that covered less than 100 m². Initially, this made it of little additional value to the research project other than adding another site to the regional settlement system. In terms of the study of regional lithic raw material economy and technology, the site appeared to be of little “significance”.

5 - Conclusion

Cautionary tales abound in archaeology and they no longer carry the shock value or even the educational value that they once did (O’Connell, 1995). I have presented here a few examples of ethnographic, ethnohistoric and archaeological data that pertain to short term, hunting related sites in northeastern North America. I have mostly concentrated on the variability of the activities taking place at these sites, and the consequent archaeological signatures such as features and artefacts. Changing settlement patterns throughout the seasons (changing residential mobility and collector / forager strategies) add another level of variability to our archaeological sites that must also be taken into consideration. Even certain aspects of hunter-gatherers’ ritual life can be seen on short term hunting sites. All of these potential behaviours reinforce the fact that small, short term archaeological sites that are often overlooked or underappreciated can play an important role in researching the past. The initial purpose of the *Haltes de chasse* conference of 2009, and of this volume, was to come up with archaeological criteria and perhaps a working definition of the short term, hunting-related site called *haltes de chasse* in French. Throughout the conference, participants realized how difficult this can be. The variability of behaviours evidenced by the ethnographic and archaeological data at these small and seemingly ‘simple’ sites is surprising. Nonetheless, it is a worthwhile exercise to try and define these types of sites for it allows us to explore in detail the variability and the patterns in the archaeological record, to demonstrate the research potential of such sites, and ultimately to compare the datasets from various parts of the globe.

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