

Settling a Rocky Shoreline: Possible Inuit structures in southern Labrador

Marianne P. Stopp

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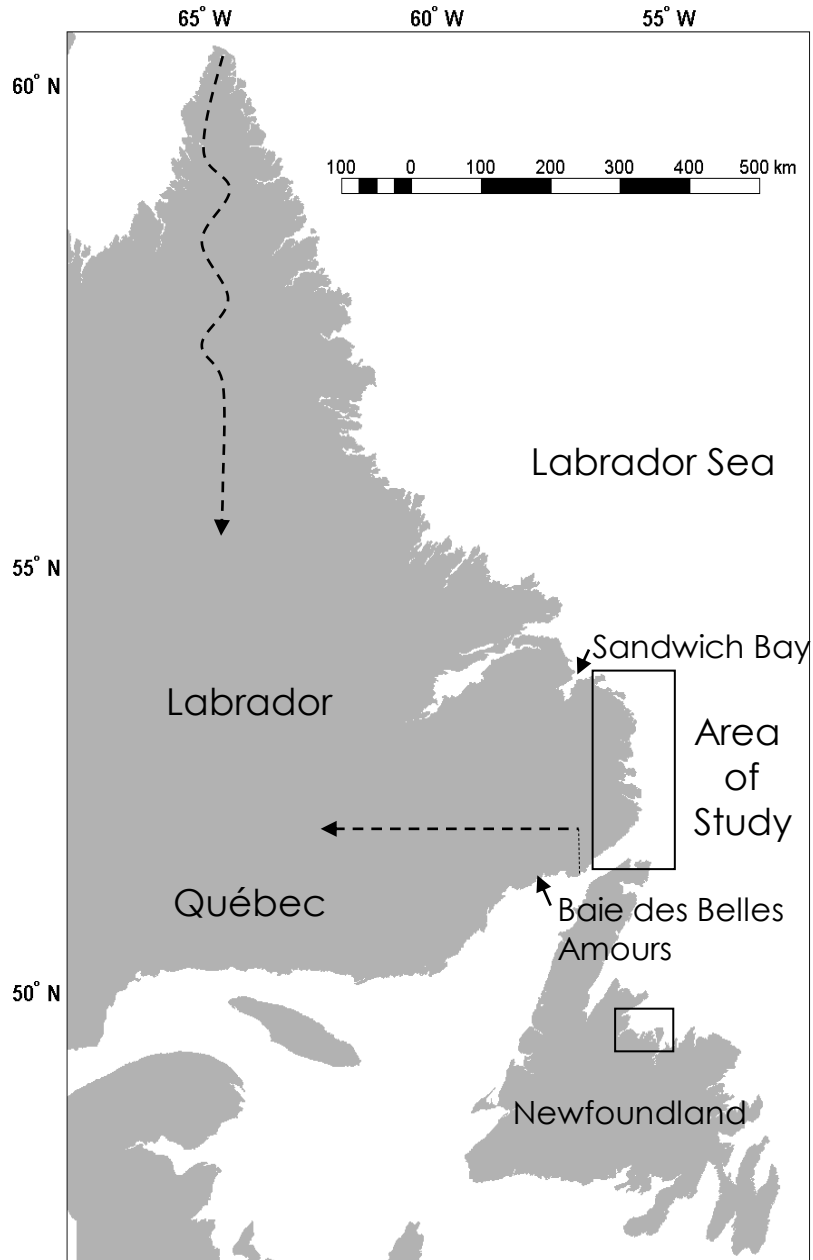
- This paper considers particular cultural uses of isostatically raised, low elevation, cobble beaches along the coast of southern Labrador, and their probable association with Labrador Inuit peoples. The morphology of these features suggests that they are cultural and not natural, and they take two forms: some are circular pits while others are open, oval surfaces. A singular drawback is the near-absence of diagnostic cultural material within them. is considered alongside their potential as seasonal indicators, their function, and as supportive evidence that extends Inuit land use further southward than previously thought.

This talk is a revisit of former research into the raised cobble beaches of southern Labrador and western Newfoundland, and their importance for both precontact and historic peoples (Stopp 1994, 2002a, b).

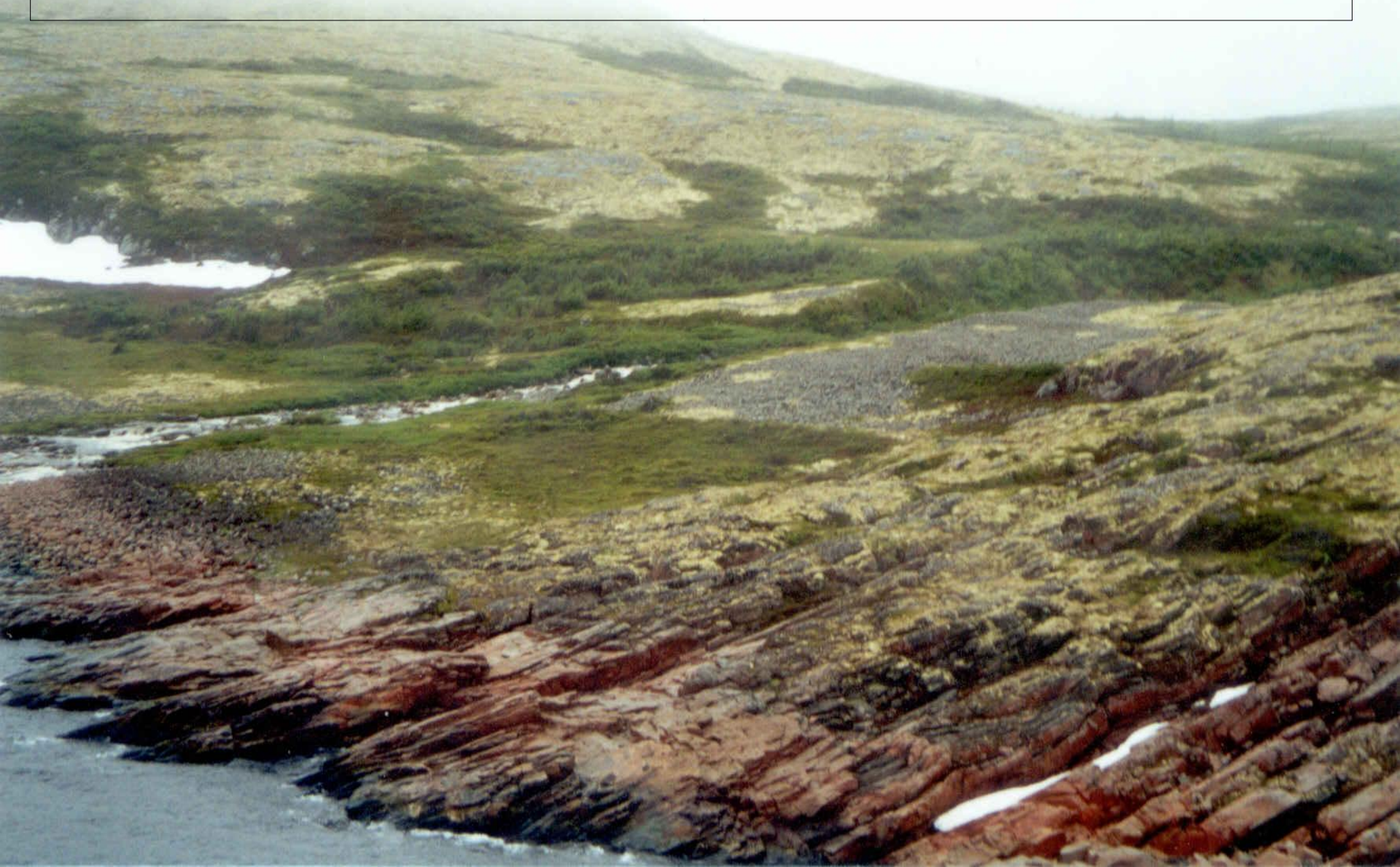
In the 1980s, Réginald Auger (1991) completed his important study of sod houses in the Strait of Belle Isle and the many issues that make their identification as Labrador Inuit quite challenging. At this time, in 2006, the examples of sod house sites south of Hamilton Inlet that bear evidence of Inuit are at Baie des Belles Amours, near Bradore, QC (Dumais and Poirier 1994), Seals Islands (at Chateau Bay; Auger 1991), those suggested in Stopp (2002b) between Sandwich Bay and Cape Charles, and a site in Sandwich Bay (Brewster 2005). For southern Labrador, it continues to be not entirely clear from just test-pitting these structures whether they have an Inuit affiliation, or, whether they were lived in by mixed Inuit / European households that began to grow in numbers by the late 1700s, or, whether they belong to the European/ Newfoundland summer fishing population that came to this part of the coast by the thousands beginning in the early 1800s, some of whom settled permanently and adopted a number of Inuit lifeways.

In this presentation I add to this bumper crop of sites and uncertainty by introducing another site-type found along the southern coast during the same surveys that recorded many of the sod houses (Auger and Stopp 1986, Stopp 1995, 1997), namely hundreds of features in cobble beaches. It is suggested here that those at lower elevations, 5 m asl and lower, may be tied to the Labrador Inuit occupation of the coast. Inuit presence is further suggested for western Notre Dame Bay on the basis of many cobble beach features recorded during a 1987 coastal survey by this author and I. Marshall (G. Penney Associates Ltd, 1987).

The Study Area:
Southern Labrador between Sandwich Bay and the Labrador/Quebec border at L'Anse au Clair. Reference is also made to some sites in western Notre Dame Bay.



Cobble beaches in southern Labrador can be as low as a couple of metres above sea level, but are also found further inland, up to ½ km inland and at 20 m asl. They contain many different types of Indigenous cultural features including fox traps, Labrador Inuit cairn burials, some possible inuksuit, tent rings, fire-cracked rocks from ancient hearths, bird gazes, living floors for tents, and pit features that were probably used for food storage. Examples of storage pit features and living floors are shown in the following slides.



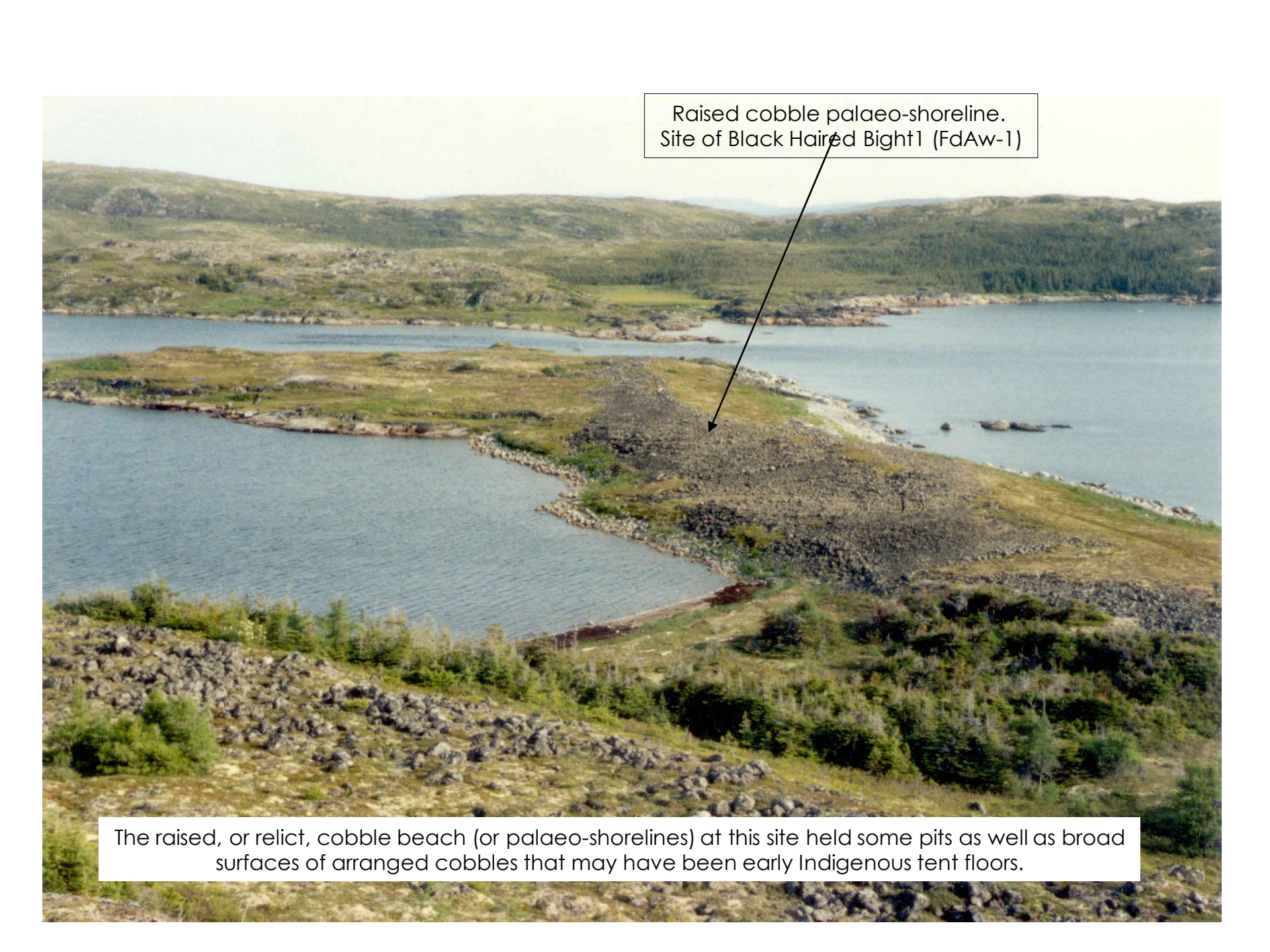


Sites with cobble beach pit features in southern Labrador

Over two hundred pit features have been recorded on raised beaches between Sandwich Bay and L'Anse au Clair, Labrador (Auger and Stopp 1986; Stopp 1995, 1997), with another hundred in western Notre Dame Bay, on the Island of Newfoundland (not shown here; G. Penney Assoc. Ltd. 1987). Ielsewhere, I have argued that cobble pit features were used for various types of storage (food, materials), and for food processing such as fermentation (Stopp 1994, 2002 a, b)

An example of pit features on a raised cobble palaeoshoreline, somewhere between Green Bay and Chateau Bay, Labrador





Raised cobble palaeo-shoreline.
Site of Black Haired Bight1 (FdAw-1)

The raised, or relict, cobble beach (or palaeo-shorelines) at this site held some pits as well as broad surfaces of arranged cobbles that may have been early Indigenous tent floors.

Close up of a possible living floor recorded at Black Haired Bight. Living floors tend to be levelled surfaces with a perimeter of what may have been tent hold-down rocks. It is clear that some choice was exercised in keeping certain rocks inside while removing others. It is also possible that this was a surface cleared for drying fish during the historic period (below).



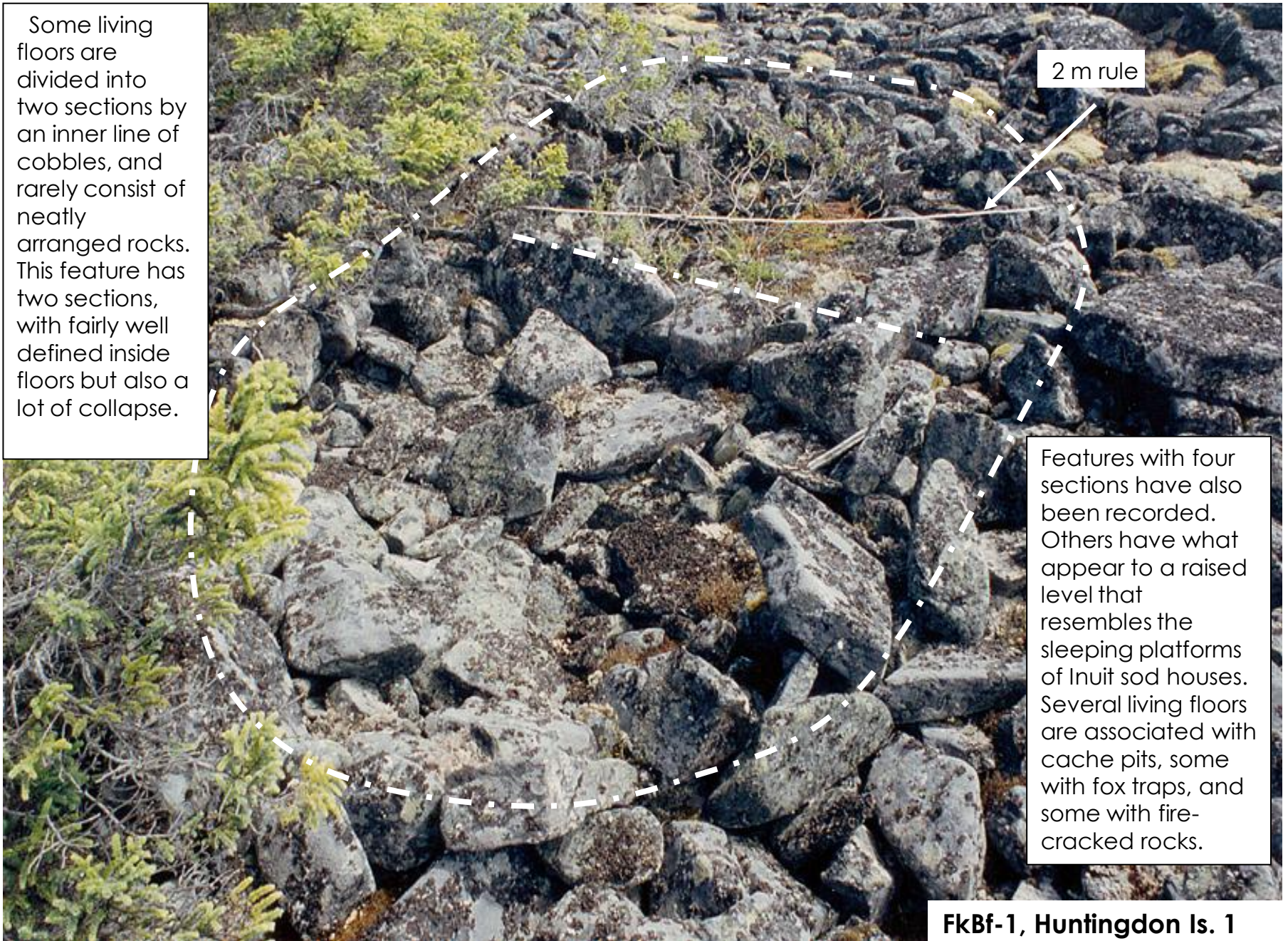
FdAw-1, Black Haired Bight 1

Some living floors are divided into two sections by an inner line of cobbles, and rarely consist of neatly arranged rocks. This feature has two sections, with fairly well defined inside floors but also a lot of collapse.

2 m rule

Features with four sections have also been recorded. Others have what appear to a raised level that resembles the sleeping platforms of Inuit sod houses. Several living floors are associated with cache pits, some with fox traps, and some with fire-cracked rocks.

FkBf-1, Huntingdon Is. 1





**Nineteenth century cobble bawns, or grèves,
Isle aux Marins. Island of St. Pierre (FR)**

The cobble matrix was used by Europeans for drying cod fish upon, especially in the French and Jerseyian fisheries. In some instances, bawns could be confused with living floors. The chief differences between the two feature types are that bawns tend to be larger, over 6 or 7 m in length, and are often well-defined and rectangular. But they share the trait with living floors of being arranged rock surfaces. In a few cases it has been difficult to distinguish between the two in southern Labrador (i.e. Black Haired Bight-1 site). Pictured here are bawns on Île aux Marins from the French fishery at St. Pierre.

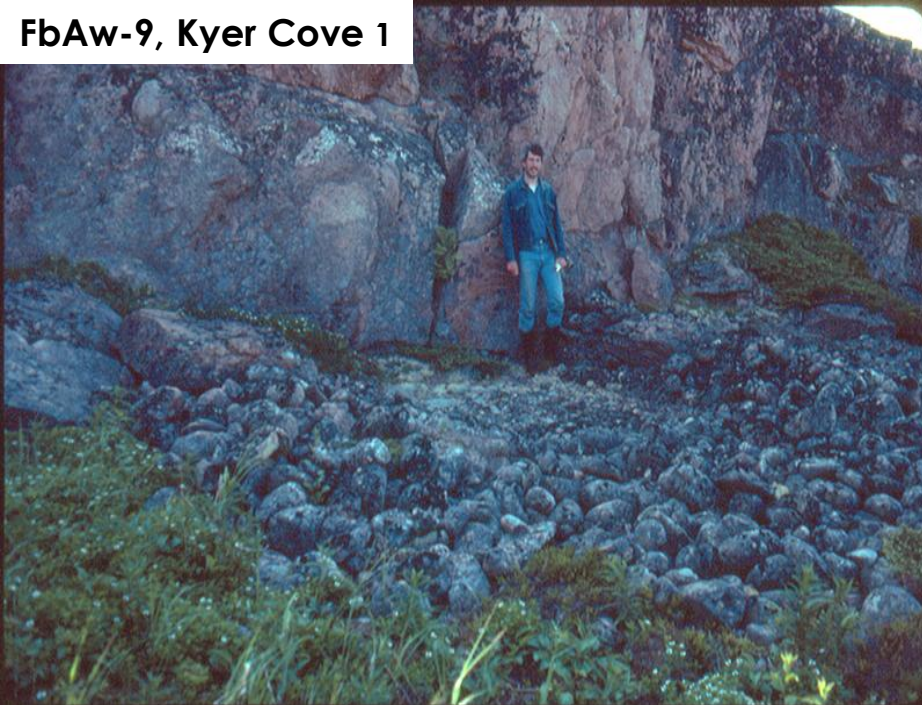
Bawns, or *grèves* at Isle au Bois, Blanc Sablon harbour, QC. These date to the 19th c Jerseyian fishery. Note also the small circular platforms to the right, which were used for piling the dried cod. Examples of both types of features, albeit not on this industrial scale, have been recorded along the southern Labrador coast.



Living floors might also be mistaken for a near-shore ice-melt phenomenon known as the shore ice kettle, where chunks of ice become embedded onshore, remain frozen for long periods, and create indentations. As far as I've been able to establish, these tend to occur on pebble or small-shingle beaches



FbAw-9, Kyer Cove 1



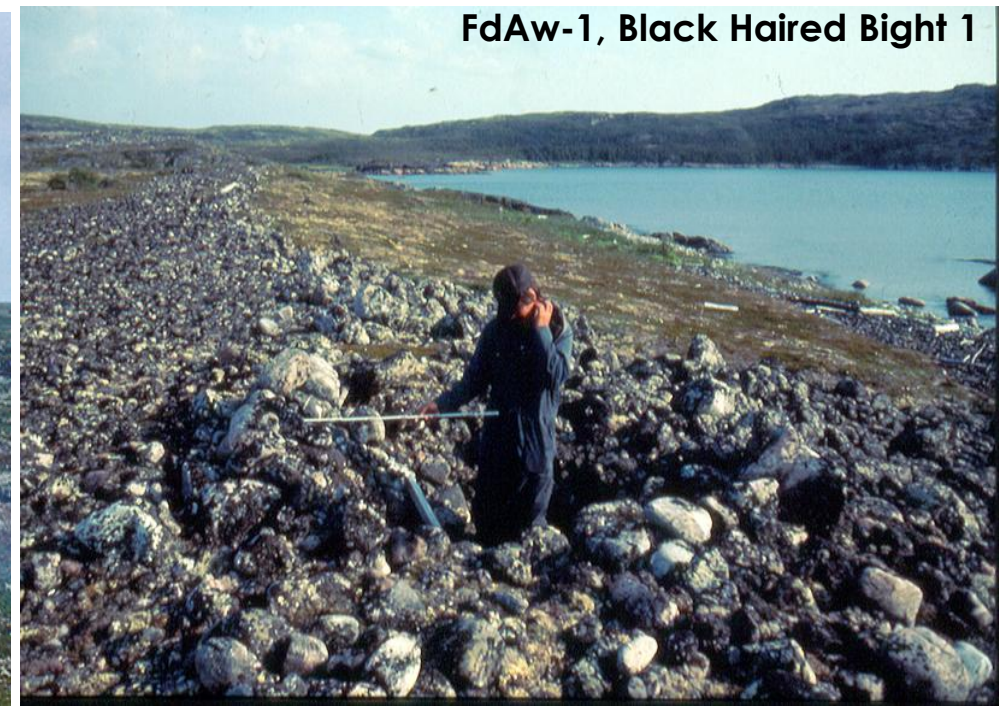
FkBd-1, Cartwright Is



FkBc-10, Mullins Cove 2



FdAw-1, Black Haired Bight 1



FkBd-1, Cartwright Is.

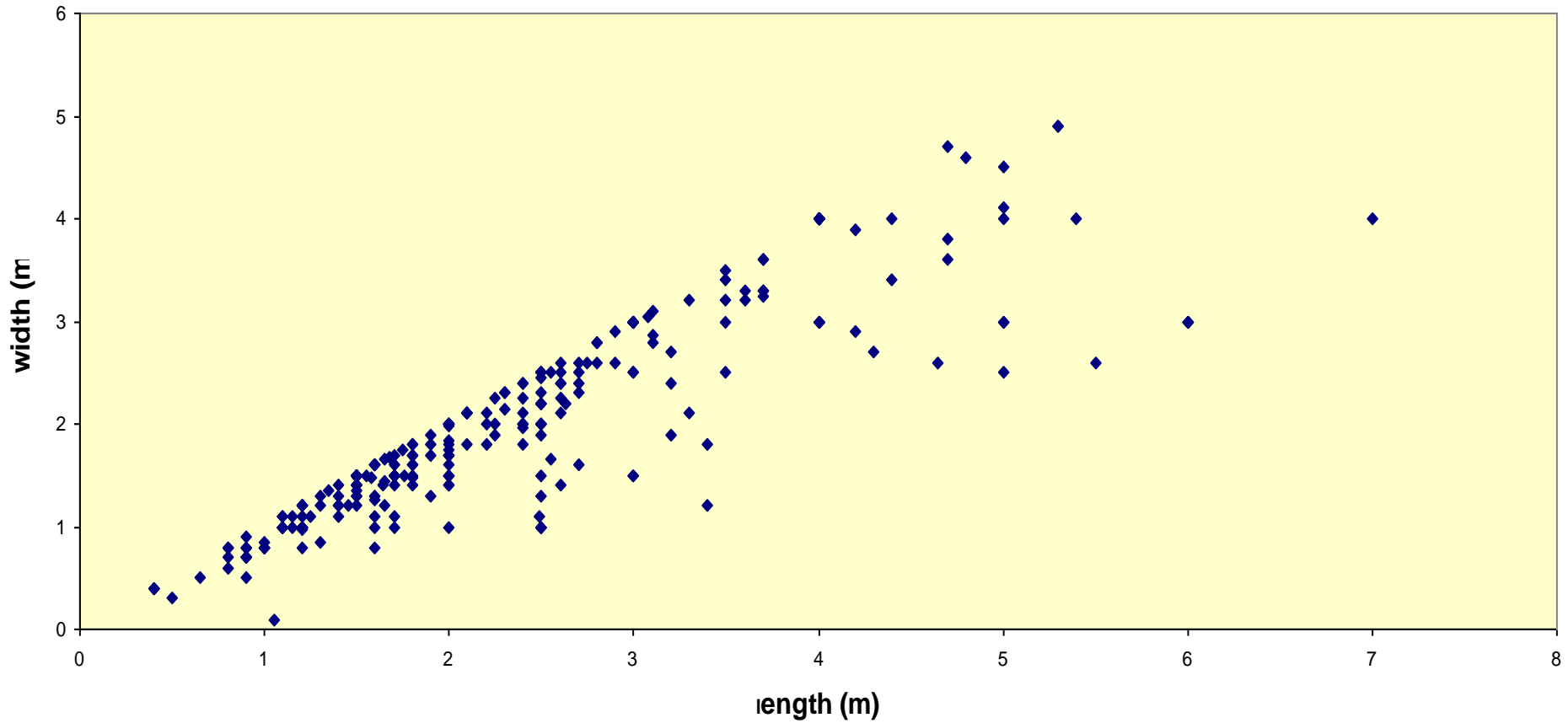
The irregular-shaped rocks of this boulder beach, and its amorphous lichen grey colouring, make photography difficult. This large feature has what looks like an inner divider. Living floor?



This much smaller feature was made of very symmetrically, almost artistically, arranged cobbles. It seemed too small to be a living floor. However, it had a raised surface that resembled a sleeping platform. This feature and others like it, beg the leading question of where does a storage pit end and a living floor begin?
Kevin Martin, 1992



Length x Width for 307 cobble features (from western Notre Dame Bay, and southern Labrador coast from L'Anse au Clair to Sandwich Bay)



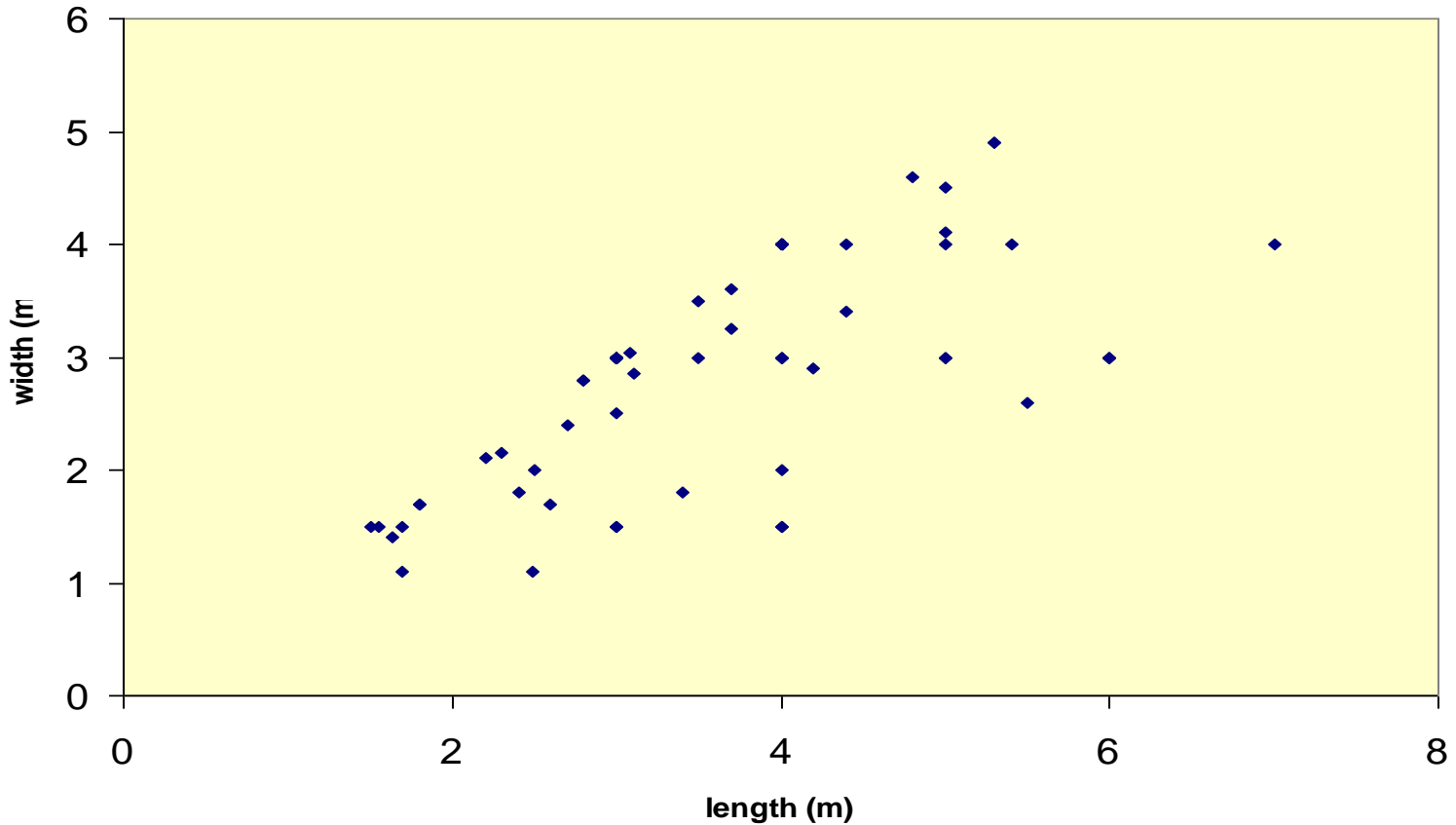
The majority of recorded features have a width to length ratio of 1:1, or close to it. – these are circular features
Depth varies and shallow depth is not necessarily indicative of a living floor. Living floors are more likely to be oval in shape.

Location of cobble beach feature sites with possible living floors.

The distribution of living floors is closely tied to where cache pits are found. Cobble beaches do not occur throughout the coast of southern Labrador but many are in important sealing areas such as the great coastal capes (Cape Charles, Cape Bluff, Cape North), and the mouths of the Strait of Belle Isle and Sandwich Bay, where seals enter and leave the during their bi-annual migrations.



Length x Width for 71 cobble features that resemble habitation floors



This chart shows 71 features that I've considered the likeliest contenders as living floors. The main criteria used to separate them from pits were the presence of a level inner area, whether they were divided into sections, and whether they were assoc. with fire-cracked rock, which few were. The chart shows that living floors have greater lengths than do pits (shown in the previous chart), and are less likely to have a 1:1 width / length ratio. Another criterion used to distinguish pits from living floors was their cross-section; pits have a pronounced concave cross-section, while living floors are like dinner-plates or large soup bowls – a trait that doesn't show up in simple N-S and E-W length measurements.



EiBf-11, Overfall Brook 1

To recapitulate through images, a storage pit is characterised by a concave cross-section, while a living floor tends to have...

... a cross-section resembling a dinner plate (William Gilbert, 1986)



FaAx-4, Ragged Point 1



Again, these features are pits with deep concave cross-sections, as opposed to...



...a levelled inner surface, this one with a possible inner divider or narrowing.



FIBg-1, Horse Chops Is 1



The living floors shown in the preceding and following images appear to be variations on the tent ring, with more hold-down rocks and slightly semi-subterranean. A large number occur at elevations of 5 m asl and less (Stopp 1994) and as a result link reasonably well with Labrador Inuit occupation. At this elevation they also be Dorset or Late Precontact Innu; however, several of these sites are also associated with other low-elevation features typically found on Inuit sites such as fox traps and burial cairns. They also have similarities to known Inuit features elsewhere, such as in northern Labrador, the eastern Arctic, and western Greenland.

Why live on this surface? Cultural disjuncts prevent us from imagining that a cobble beach could have been a comfortable living surface. Comfort may have been achieved with a layer of balsam boughs and skins. **The greatest advantage of cobble surfaces over peat or lichen-covered ground is that it is well-drained and consequently dry, and, rocks can retain campfire heat.**

The pit features as storage units suggest that sites were linked to resource harvests, probably of seals. The spring seal migration along the coast occurs when the snow is still thick on the ground, and I propose that pit features were used during the late autumn migration of seals from the north southwards, with meat cached in time for winter use but also for use in the spring and later summer – fermented meats were a food staple of Inuit as recorded by many early observers. The cobble matrix provides the ideal medium for food storage (for reasons see, Stopp 1995, 2002a).

Testing of a small number of pits has, to date, yielded nothing culturally identifiable. Higher elevation pits (15 m asl) at two sites were “associated” with nearby Archaic artifacts, while the famous site of Oil Islands, in Notre Dame Bay, on a 7 m asl cobble barachois with over 30 features, has a Dorset site alongside. As a cautionary note, *later peoples could have used higher elevation cobble beaches to take advantage of a dry living surface or of a reliable place to create surfaces caches or pit storage. Elevation as a way to date higher features may be unreliable in the absence of other diagnostic evidence.* Also suggested is that counterparts in western Notre Dame Bay represent our first archaeological evidence of Labrador Inuit land use on the Island, which the archival records support for the Great Northern Peninsula (Martijn 2001).

This paper has made a case for Labrador Inuit presence in southern Labrador as evidenced by features in low-elevation (5 m asl or lower) cobble beaches. The low-elevation cobble matrix was a unique cultural landscape: people lived on it, they caught resources on it, they stored resources in it, and interred their dead upon it.

Probably tent ring surface in western Notre Dame Bay, on the island of Newfoundland



DjAw-14, Quinton Cove 1

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