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David Beck

*College of DuPage*, [essai\\_beck@cod.edu](mailto:essai_beck@cod.edu)

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Discovery of Native American Remains at Cape Breton Highlands National Park

by David Beck

(Honors Biology 1151)

ABSTRACT

During the excavation of a site located within Cape Breton Highlands National Park, Nova Scotia, several artifacts surfaced, including human remains, a bone needle, and pieces of timber frame possibly used for what could have been a sod house. They were thought to belong to a native Canadian tribe called the Beothuks. Through the use of carbon dating, the skeletal remains and bone needle were found to be around 1,000 years old and the timber frame around 900 years old leading to a conclusion that the skeletal remains and the bone needle were related. Historical evidence was used to prove the artifacts were not Beothuk in origin, but were from a neighboring tribe known as the Micmac. The skeletal remains were found to belong to a female between the ages of 21 and 30 that most likely died of natural causes. This evidence should prove useful in future studies for native Canadian Indian tribes.

INTRODUCTION

The Beothuks were a native tribe of Newfoundland that became extinct during the early 1800's (Marshall 1996). They were hunter-gatherers originally from Newfoundland that subsisted on the local fish, animals, and plants of the region (Daly and Lee 1999). Marshall (1996) states that the Beothuk people used bows and arrows to hunt the local animal population for food, hides, and bones. Being a nomadic tribe, the Beothuks lived in dwellings that resembled conical lodges made of sticks set in a circle and joined together at the roof that could be assembled and disassembled easily (Hodge 1959). While they were a nomadic tribe, they mostly resided in the North and West of Newfoundland (Hodge 1959). As such, they were considered isolated from neighboring tribes like the Micmac of Nova Scotia (Cassia and Holly 2003). Hodge (1959) states that the Beothuk had marked dialectic differences from neighboring tribes, supporting Holly and Cassia (2003) that they were an isolated people.

The discovery at Cape Breton Highlands National Park, Nova Scotia, of the skeletal remains of an individual, a bone needle, and a piece of timber frame sparked interest in the anthropological and scientific world because these artifacts could possibly be remnants of the extinct Beothuk people. The focus of this study was to determine how old these artifacts were and what their possible relationship were to each other, if the skeletal remains were that of a Beothuk individual, to determine the gender, age at death, and possible cause of death of the individual.

METHODS

Carbon-14 was used to determine the archeological ages of the human skeleton, wood from the timber frame, and bone needle. Six samples were taken per artifact for determination of archeological age. The Mann-Whitney U Test was then used to test for differences in archeological ages of the skeleton, timber frame, and bone needle. Sexual dimorphic characteristics of the pelvic region were examined to determine the gender. Observations compiled on tooth development and information from sources on Native American life expectancies of the time were used to approximate

the age at the time of death. Finally, the remains were examined to determine the possible causes of death.

## RESULTS

Results of carbon-14 dating are provided in Table 1. The mean ages of the human skeleton and bone needle did not significantly differ ( $U=9.5$ ;  $P=0.17$ ), but both differed significantly from the timber frame ( $U=0$ ;  $P<0.004$  for the two tests). Hence, the skeleton and the bone needle were approximately 1,000 years old or from the same time period while the timber frame was younger at about 900 years old. This means the skeleton and bone needle were most likely related in some way, while the timber frame was in all probability not related to the skeleton or the bone needle.

The pubic arch measured at an angle of  $90^{\circ}$ ; the pelvic brim was also found to be large and oval shaped; the iliac crest was round, but shallow; the obturator foramen was oval, all of which were consistent with the female pelvic region (Grabowski and Tortora 1996). Therefore, the skeletal remains were believed female.

The presence of the third molars or the wisdom teeth in the jaw indicated that the female was at least 21 years of age (Ferllini 2002). Biolsi (2004) states that Native Americans of this time period had an average life expectancy of late twenties or early thirties. This places the female skeleton between the ages of 21 and 30.

The possible cause of death of the female individual was most likely natural causes due to the lack of trauma on the skeleton and the fact that she was already nearing the limits of the life expectancy projected for the time.

## DISCUSSION

The possibility that the skeletal remains belonged to a Beothuk individual was ruled out, but there is reason to believe that the remains belonged to a neighboring tribe called the Micmac. The Beothuks were located in the North and Western parts of Newfoundland (Hodge 1959), not from Nova Scotia where the skeletal remains were found. Marshall (1996) supports this argument that all Beothuk artifacts already found were centrally located on Newfoundland, and that there was no migration of the Beothuk people recorded. However, there is information that the Cape Breton Highlands Park area was inhabited by the Micmac people of Nova Scotia (Hoxie 1996).

The Micmac people and their ancestors inhabited the Nova Scotia area as early as 12,000 years ago, which places the skeletal remains well within the time period of Micmac occupation (Tiller 1996). Hoxie (1996) states that the neighbors of the Micmacs, which would include the Beothuks, recognized the Micmac people's territory and rarely violated its borders. The Micmacs were also known to use bone needles as tools for sewing the tough animal hides used to make clothing (Doig al. 1998), which does seem to add more to the relationship of the skeletal remains and the bone needle. While the age of the timber frame places it at later age than the skeletal remains and the bone needle, the possible use of this timber frame could have been for the construction of a typical wigwam made of poles covered by bark, hides, and woven grass mats that the Micmac used for shelter (Doig al. 1998).

Table 1. Summary (mean  $\pm$  standard deviation; all n=6) of the archeological ages of the three artifacts.

Artifact	Mean $\pm$ Standard deviation (Years)
Human skeleton	1037 $\pm$ 44.3
Timber frame	915 $\pm$ 5.2
Bone needle	1007 $\pm$ 11.7

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