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Out of Alaska:

Reconstructing the Social Structure of Prehistoric Canadian Thule Culture

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Prehistoric Thule Inuit societies (*circa* 1000-400 B.P.) of the eastern Canadian Arctic were derived directly from Inuit whaling societies of northern Alaska. Thus, in many respects, the latter offer the closest analogy for interpreting Canadian Thule social structure. However, there are also a number of social characteristics of some modern eastern Canadian Arctic Inuit societies that bear directly on this issue.

In this paper, we employ data from both sources in interpreting Thule social structure, and do so with reference to corporate groups. Specifically, we focus on the role of the *umialik* (whaling crew leader), the importance of the *karigi* (men's house), and the social composition of whaling crews.

INTRODUCTION

The investigation of social complexity amongst prehistoric hunter-gatherer societies had, until the past two decades, received relatively little attention. While there were exceptions [see e.g., HAYDEN 1981; KING 1978; WINTERS 1974; YESNER 1980], until the publication of *Affluent Foragers: Pacific Coasts East and West*, edited by Koyama and Thomas [1981], and *Prehistoric Hunter-Gatherers*, edited by Price and Brown [1985a], the archeological record of such societies was typically presented as "small ephemeral encampments occupied by a few people eating, sleeping, scraping hides, and occasionally reproducing" [PRICE and BROWN 1985b: 3].

As noted by Burch and Ellanna [1994: 220], the majority of papers in the Price and Brown [1985a] volume, and many other ethnographically-based models of complex hunter-gatherers, are based on the premise that the development of hunter-gatherer complexity initially depends on an abundant resource base and the technology to effectively exploit it. From this premise, they noted that attention had focused variously upon population pressure [e.g., COHEN 1985], storage ability [e.g., TESTART 1982; WOODBURN 1982], resource "clumping" [e.g., SCHALK 1981], sedentism [BROWN 1985], intensification [e.g., AMES 1985], and socioeconomic competition [e.g., HAYDEN 1994].

A common thread, explicit or implicit, running throughout most of the above foci is the role of suprahousehold corporate groups (that is, groups above the domestic household unit). Such groups are typically kin-based and are found in non-egalitarian hunter-gatherer and

stratified non-industrial societies [HAYDEN 1995: 36-37]. To some extent they control labour and other resources at the expense of individual households. In this paper, we discuss the formation and maintenance of such groups within historic North Alaskan Inupiat and eastern Canadian Arctic Inuit societies, and interpret the archaeological record of Canadian Thule Inuit societies (*circa* 1000-1600 A.D.) with reference to these groups.

Finally, note that we use a number of specific Inuit-Inupiat cultural terms in this paper. These are explained in the text when first introduced, and are also defined in the appendix for the convenience of readers.

THE NATURE OF INUPIAT CORPORATE GROUPS

In his classic study of North Alaskan Eskimo (Inupiat) society, Spencer [1959] noted three social features associated with bowhead whale (*Balaena mysticetus*) hunting that he considered to be integral to Inupiat culture. These were, first, the role of the *umialik* (pl., *umialiit*) or whaleboat owner-captain, second, the importance of the men's house called *karigi* (var. *gargi* or *qalgi*; pl., *kariyit*), and, third, the critical incorporation of "strangers" in the formation of whaling crews. In a later analysis, Spencer [1972] elaborated upon all three of these elements of Inupiat social relations with specific reference to the exploitation of bowheads. Emergent was a picture of whaling in which high-status boat owners recruited individuals into their crews through the widest available social means, and maintained and reinforced this collectivity through the institution of the *karigi*. The *karigi* itself was the structure where economic, social organization and regulation, and ceremonialism associated with whaling were centralized. In effect, it had both physical and institutional significance (see LARSON 1995 for a detailed discussion of Inupiat *karigi* institutions.)

Recent attempts by archaeologists to interpret Thule social structure and organization in the context of bowhead whaling [see e.g., GRIER and SAVELLE 1994; HARRITT 1995; SAVELLE 1987; SHEEHAN 1985, 1995; WHITRIDGE 1999] have begun to conceptually integrate Spencer's social analyses. In particular, the archaeological identification of *kariyit* has been accepted for a relatively long period in the literature on Thule Culture [see summary in SAVELLE 2002]. However, the other two social features noted by Spencer as central to whaling, the importance of *umialiit* and the recruitment and composition of *umiak* crews, have generally been more implicit in models of Thule social organization [see SHEEHAN 1985] and then not always without some confusion [see e.g., HARRITT 1995: 38-40].

Burch [1975: 22-24, also 209-210], following from Spencer, has dealt with the importance of *umialiit*, and in particular, the relationship between the *umialiit* and the recruiting of crew for subsistence activities. Particularly salient to Thule archaeology is how the whaling crews were socially composed and led. This and subsequent analyses by Burch [1981] will be used here to put ethnological data from a modern Baffin Island Inuit society in an Eastern Arctic Thule perspective. In doing so, it is noted that bowhead whaling had disappeared from the Eastern Arctic Inuit subsistence repertoire before European contact. However, we submit that social organizational data from the former community of Aqviqtiq, eastern Baffin Island, in the Eastern Canadian Arctic, offers a strong baseline for an inter-regional comparison.

kinship [see BURCH 1975; DAMAS 1963; HEINRICH 1963; STEVENSON 1997; WENZEL 1981], most notably with the idea that "...group composition, individual relocations, and the network of authority and cooperation...seek explanation in kinship" [DAMAS 1963: 34].

Finally, Burch's work suggests that Spencer's [1959, 1972] emphasis on the importance of strangers in whaling crew composition overlooks this primary mechanism. In particular, Burch [1975: 22] suggested that "...most traditional 'settlements' were in fact kinship units..." and that "...kinship ties were emphasized at the expense of all others."

THE VIEW FROM THE EASTERN ARCTIC

The doubt Burch casts on Spencer's conclusion that whaling crews were recruited on a society-wide basis, and its implications for how Western Thule peoples may have demographically and socially organized whaling operations, is significant when considering Thule whaling in the Eastern Canadian Arctic. That Burch's rendering of whaling crew formation and leadership has application to the Eastern Arctic is strengthened by ethnological data gathered from the indigenous eastern Baffin Island settlement of Aqviqtiq between 1971 and 1975.

Aqviqtiq (which means "like a whale") was the last "autonomous" Inuit village on Baffin Island [see WENZEL 1981]. It was abandoned in 1976 and its inhabitants relocated to the government hamlet of Clyde River. The permanent core population between 1971 and 1975 ranged from a minimum of 19 and a maximum of 22 individuals, all of whom were members of a single extended family (*ilagiit*) (see Figure 5.1B). Similar single *ilagiit* villages were the predominant residential pattern along the East Baffin coast since at least the early 20th century [see also BOAS 1888].

The Aqviqtiq *ilagiit* consisted of four consanguineally-related households (three of them are shown in Figure 5.1B), headed by three brothers and the married son of the senior brother. The oldest consanguineally-linked male was in turn the *isumataq*, or *ilagiit* head. Physically, each household occupied a canvas-sod-wood *qangmaq* (structure consisting of low sod walls, slightly sunken floor, and traditionally, a skin roof, and typically occupied during the fall and spring) roughly 3-4m x 5-7m and 1.75m in height, with the *isumataq* and his family occupying the largest structure. Subsistence was ecologically patterned in a manner similar to that described by McGhee [1972] as the "Netsilik Model." Briefly, September to July activities were dominated by ringed seal hunting, mainly at breathing holes but also at leads, on the spring ice and in open water. One trip that combined caribou hunting with char fishing was usually made inland between December and March. Summer (July-August) harvesting centered on caribou and ringed seals, with arctic char fishing and narwhal hunting occurring late in the season. Finally, polar bear were opportunistically pursued between October and May.

Of particular interest to the present discussion is the way subsistence at Aqviqtiq was socially organized. The *ilagiit* provided the structural template within which all ecological actions developed. Virtually all decisions involving the allocation of subsistence effort by the settlement were vested in the *isumataq*. He likewise exercised considerable authority regarding the specialized equipment used in harvesting. The *ilagiit* was the social, as well as demographic, unit from which task group participants were recruited. That is, the persons with whom an

individual hunter affiliated during the conduct of subsistence tasks correlated significantly with the individual's *ilagiit* reticulate. Moreover, if the *ilagiit isumataq* did not participate in the task unit, the senior kinsman participating assumed the role of decision maker for the duration of the task. Even in cases where a non-kinsman might participate in an *ilagiit*-affiliated task unit, decisions relating to available resources, including allocation of individual effort, were subsumed under the authority of the senior member of the kinship-related core.

The *isumataq* also served as the primary vector for the distribution of all harvest products, while the *ilagiit* served as the principal consumption unit. In addition, the redistribution of food resources beyond the sphere of the *ilagiit* also generally occurred via the *isumataq*. Other cooperative harvesting formations are known, notably the *nunariit* (cooperating non-kinsmen or partners) and the *umiaqqatigiit* or boat crews. While these are recent incorporations into East Baffin society, it is frequently noted that the preferred composition of such groups has some basis in kinship.

CORRELATING THE ALASKAN AND EASTERN ARCTIC DATA

Intuitively, Burch's focus on the extended family fits well with ethnological information from the Eastern Canadian Arctic on the way harvesting task groups were recruited and economically maintained in the recent past. The central structural feature of social organization was the *ilagiit* (or in some cases *amilraq*), which, as Burch observed for North Alaska, subsumed within it all consanguineally-related kin. However, in the Western Arctic, he notes that the *amilraq* is the critical organizational feature for whaling. Today, no such larger formation appears to exist in the Eastern Arctic, although Balikci [1964] notes that among the Netsilik Eskimo in specific situations the term *ilagiit* may be used to include certain categories of affinal kin (usually parents-in-law).

With regard to leadership and ecological decision-making in the Eastern Canadian Arctic, the closest analogue to the Inupiat term *umialik* is that of *isumataq*. Both represent individuals who occupy senior genealogical positions within extended consanguineal kinship reticulates. From these positions, they exert considerable strategic and economic authority. On the other hand, the idea put forward by both Spencer and Burch that the concept of *umialik* also denotes a person of wealth has less apparent applicability to the Eastern Arctic *isumataq*.

There is no institutional analogy amongst modern Eastern Arctic Inuit for the Inupiat *karigi* which figures so prominently in the social organization of Alaskan whaling. However, *kariyit* were recorded amongst several early historic Eastern Arctic Inuit groups, and in Labrador, at least, their construction and use was closely related to whaling activities [see e.g., TAYLOR 1990]. Moreover, the centrality of the *isumataq*'s dwelling in the life of subordinate *ilagiit* kinsmen in the east may be seen as filling something of a similar functional role. At Aqviqtiq, virtually all group activities were conducted in the camp leader's house. These included Sunday worship, commensal meals, the division of prey after hunters returned to the village, and the fabrication of specialized goods such as bearded seal skin rope and fishing leisters. This centrality was not limited to the "camp" situation present at Aqviqtiq, but was and remains an important aspect of *ilagiit* solidarity in contemporary Clyde River. At the same time, the male exclusiveness associated with the *karigi* in Alaska is completely absent for the situation

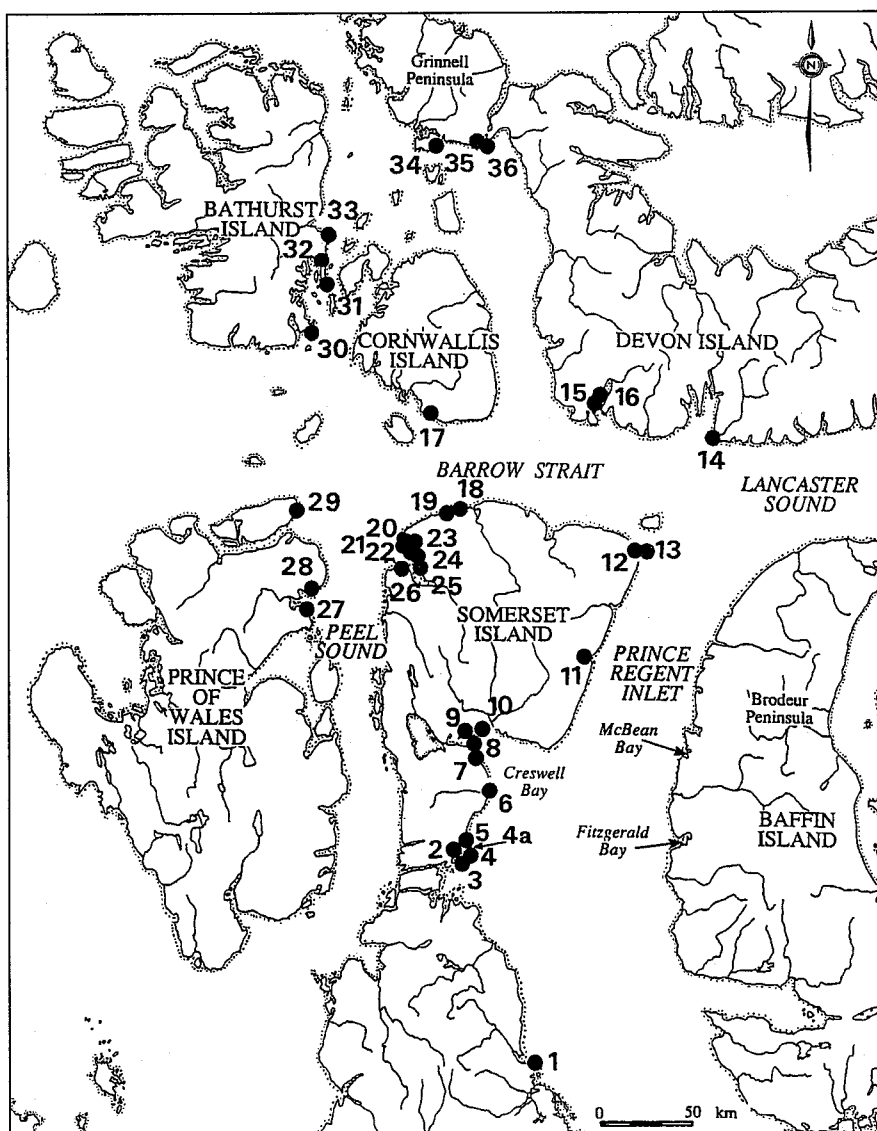


Figure 5.2 Study Area in the Eastern Canadian Arctic, showing locations of major Thule winter residential sites (sites 1-4, 5-23 and 25-36) and two probable fall whaling sites (sites 4a and 24).

1. Bowles Bay; 2. Mount Oliver (PaJs-2); 3. Ditchburn Point A (PaJs-3); 4. Ditchburn Point B; 4a. Hazard Inlet South (PaJs-4); 5. Hazard Inlet North (PaJs-13); 6. Cape Garry; 7. Idlout Pt. A; 8. Idlout Point B; 9. Learmonth; 10. Quoak; 11. Batty Bay; 12. Port Leopold A; 13. Port Leopold B; 14. Fellfoot Point; 15. Radstock Bay A; 16. Radstock Bay B; 17. Resolute; 18. Cape Anne A; 19. Cape Anne B; 20. Aston Bay A; 21. Aston Bay B; 22. Aston Bay C; 23. Aston Bay D; 24. Aston Bay E; 25. Aston Bay F; 26. Aston Bay G; 27. Back Bay A; 28. Back Bay B; 29. Cape Walker; 30. Cape Evans; 31. Brooman Point; 32. Deblicquy; 33. Black Point; 34. Port Refuge; 35. Porden Point Pond; 36. Porden Point Brook.

described from eastern Baffin Island, suggesting that this exclusiveness may be more functional than institutional.

APPLICATION TO EASTERN ARCTIC THULE SOCIAL RELATIONS

In the following, we use the concepts of *isumataq* and *ilagaiit* as described above to interpret intra- and intersite dwelling patterns in the Thule Culture record. Our premise is that internal site structure reflects social differentiation and integration among hunter-gatherer societies [see e.g., BINFORD 1991; CHANG 1962; WHITLAW 1991; YELLEN 1977]. As noted by Grier and Savelle [1994: 96], “the spatial relations within a settlement are structured to emulate social relations.” We have chosen two areas on Somerset Island (Figure 5.2) where the archaeological remains appear to reflect the major facets of Inuit social structure as outlined above. Our approach to site structure follows that first adopted by Whitridge [1994], who suggested that Thule winter sites could be related to increments of the number of households required to form complete whale-hunting (that is, boat) crews.

Aston Bay

The first area comprises the Aston Bay and adjacent coastline of northwest Somerset Island. In this area, there are eight Thule sites that contain sod/stone and/or whale bone dwellings, traditionally considered to represent winter occupations (sites 18-23, 25, 26 in Figure 5.2). It is important to note that while whale bone is incorporated as structural material into many of the dwellings, overall, whaling appears to have been less important in this area than within the “core” whaling area in the Eastern Canadian Arctic [see e.g., Savelle 2000; Savelle and McCartney 1994]. The number of dwellings at these sites ranges from 3 to 9, with an average of 5.9. Representative examples of the Aston Bay site patterns are illustrated in Figure 5.3. By comparison, historic North Alaskan Inuipiat settlements inhabited by individual *ilagaiit* or *amilraq* typically ranged from 1-6 dwellings, while the *ilagaiit* settlements on Baffin Island were typically in the 3-4 dwelling range. Given that not all of the Thule dwellings within any one site can be assumed to have been occupied contemporaneously, it can be suggested that we are probably dealing with similar social units on northwest Somerset Island. In addition, at least one *qangmaq* site occurs in the area, containing 11 of these structures (site 24 in Figure 5.2). Given the amount of associated whale bone, this site probably represents a late summer/fall whaling camp comprising two or more *ilagaiit*. Note that there is no evidence of *kariyit* at any of these late summer/fall whaling camps or winter sites, nor have any been identified at any of the tent ring sites in this area, out of which whaling may also have been conducted. This does not suggest that ceremonialism was not important, only that such activities were probably concentrated within the residential dwellings of individual *isumataq* - that is, extended family heads.

Southeastern Somerset Island

In this area, there is evidence for a much heavier reliance on bowhead whales, and the

winter residential whale bone dwelling sites tend to be correspondingly much larger. A total of nine winter sites occur in this area (Figure 5.2), and three — Ditchburn Point A, Cape Garry and Quoak (sites 3, 6, and 10 respectively in Figure 5.2) — will be examined in detail in this paper. These sites have been chosen because they seem best to demonstrate multi-*ilagiit* patterns.

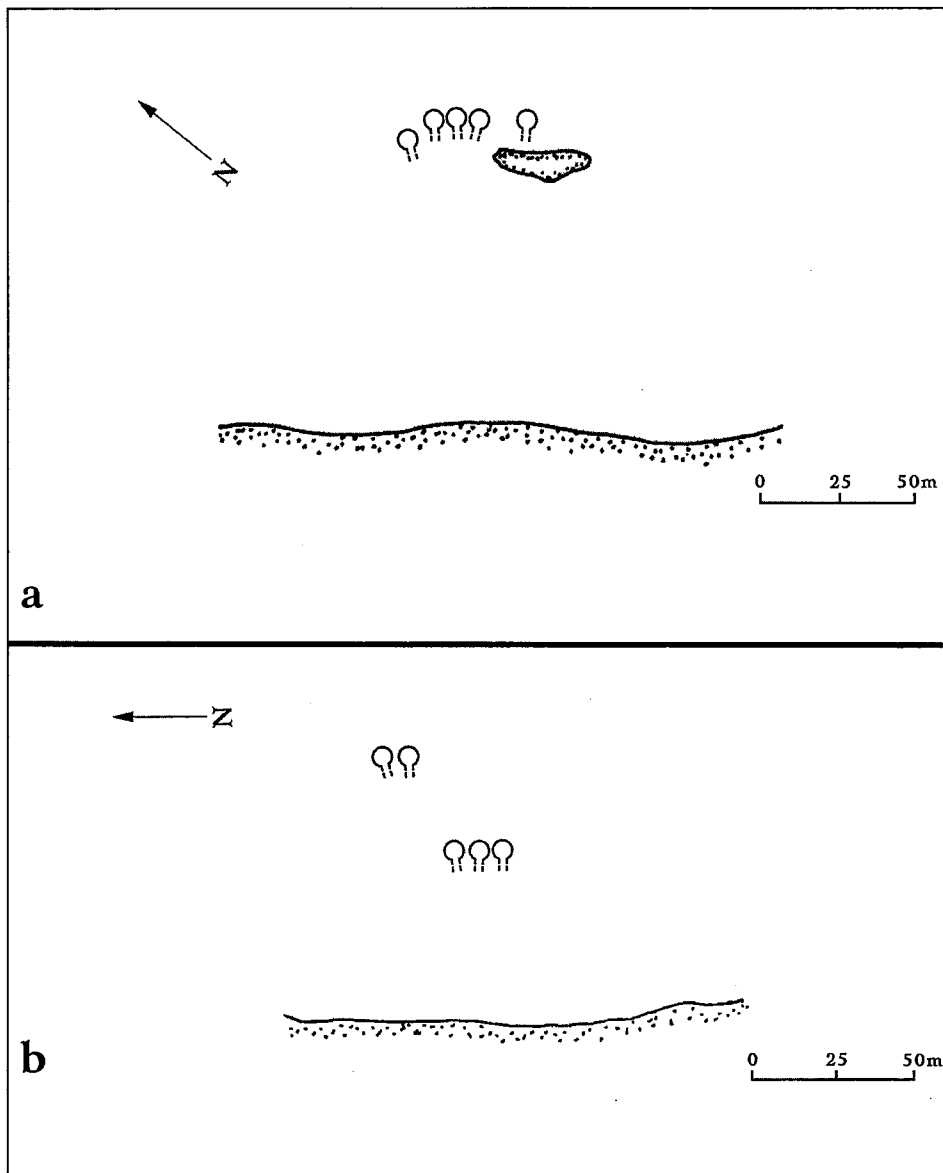


Figure 5.3 Examples of Thule winter residential site structure at Aston Bay (a: site 25, and b: site 21, in Figure 5.2). For legend, see Figure 5.5.

The three sites consist of 12, 26 and 22 dwellings respectively. That is, they are approximate multiples of the six (5.9) dwelling average from northwest Somerset Island. Again following Whitridge [1994], we interpret this as evidence for the amalgamation of several *ilagiit*.

If we now look at the patterns of these dwellings within individual sites, two probable individual *ilagiit* are evident at Ditchburn Point A, the first consisting of seven dwellings and the other five dwellings (Figure 5.4). In addition, there is at least one feature, and possibly a second, which, based on surface characteristics, appear to be *kariyit*, one associated with each *ilagiit* house group. Each *ilagiit* would presumably have been able to supply one whaling crew, with the *isumataq* assuming the position of *umialik*, or whaling crew leader.

The Cape Garry site differs in that the dwellings are constructed in two rows on adjacent beach ridges (Figure 5.5). One row consists of seven dwellings, which we interpret as representing a probable *ilagiit*. The larger house row can be broken down into three groups of 4, 8 and 7, or alternatively 4, 9 and 6, depending on the social placement of the dwelling indicated with a question mark in Figure 5.5. Furthermore, of the three dwellings excavated

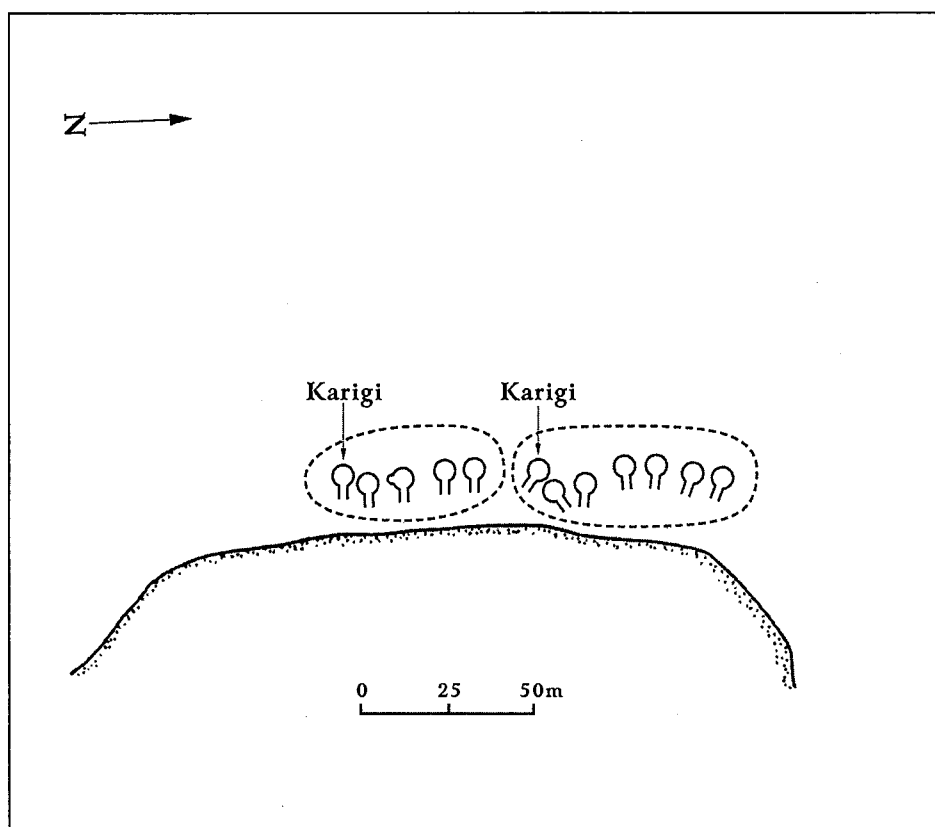


Figure 5.4 Site structure of Thule winter residential site at Ditchburn Point A (site 3 in Figure 5.2). For legend, see Figure 5.5.

here by McCartney [1979, 1980], one was identified by him as a *karigi*, while the structural features of one of the unexcavated dwellings also suggest a *karigi*.

The third site, Quoak, was first investigated by William E. Taylor, Jr. [TAYLOR and MCGHEE 1979], and later by Allen McCartney [1979] and Savelle [2002]. The site consists of

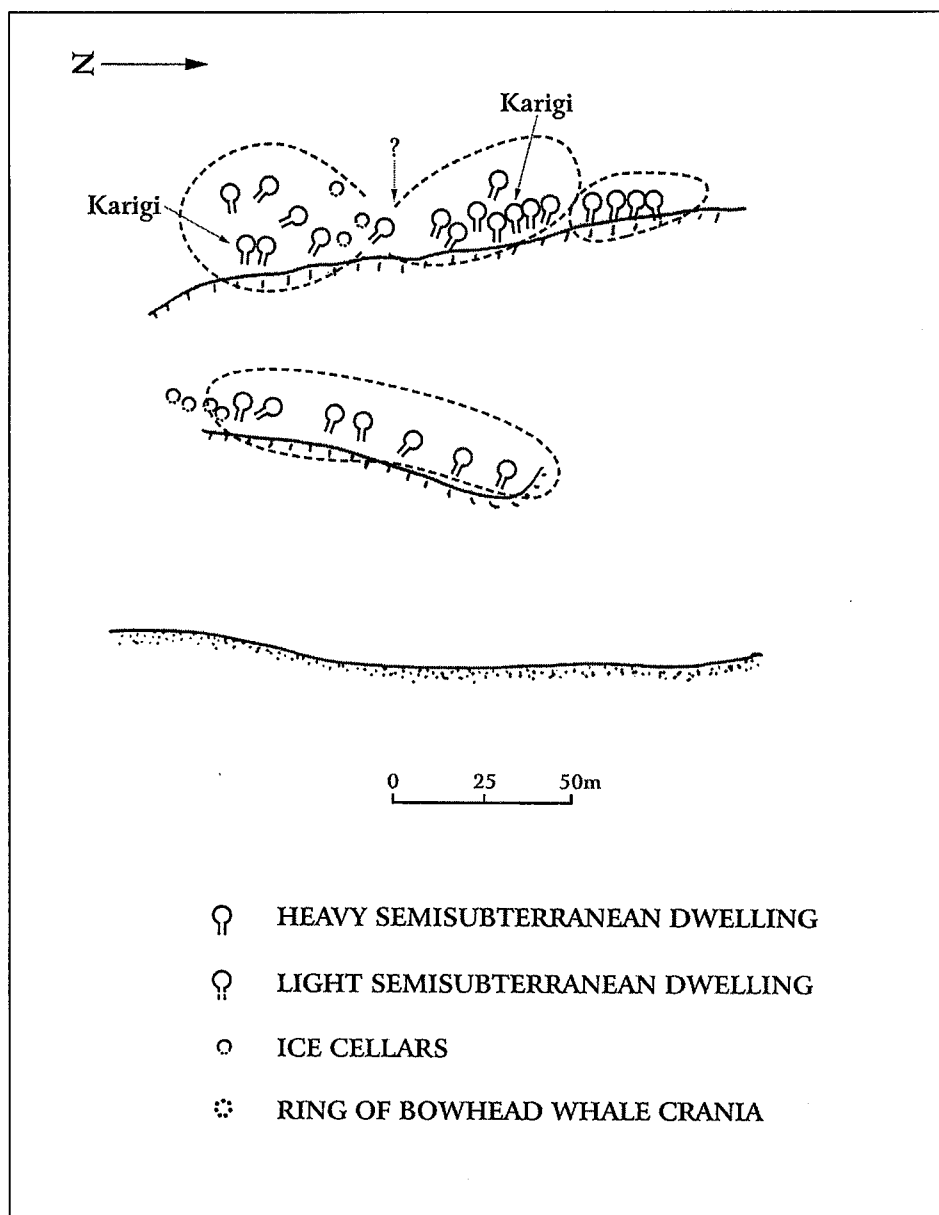


Figure 5.5 Site structure of Thule winter residential site at Cape Garry (site 6 in Figure 5.2).

three separate dwelling rows, comprising, from the north, 5, 10 and 7 dwellings respectively (Figure 5.6). We interpret each of these rows as probable individual *ilagiit*. In addition, there are at least two dwellings which, based on structural characteristics, may be *kariyit*.

At all three sites, then, there is a clear pattern of dwelling clusters within each site that very likely represent individual *ilagiit*. While individual dwelling cluster sizes vary — from 4 to 10 — the overall average of 6.7 compares very favourably with the average of 5.9 for interpreted *ilagiit* units at Aston Bay. In contrast, however, these multiple-*ilagiit* groupings are

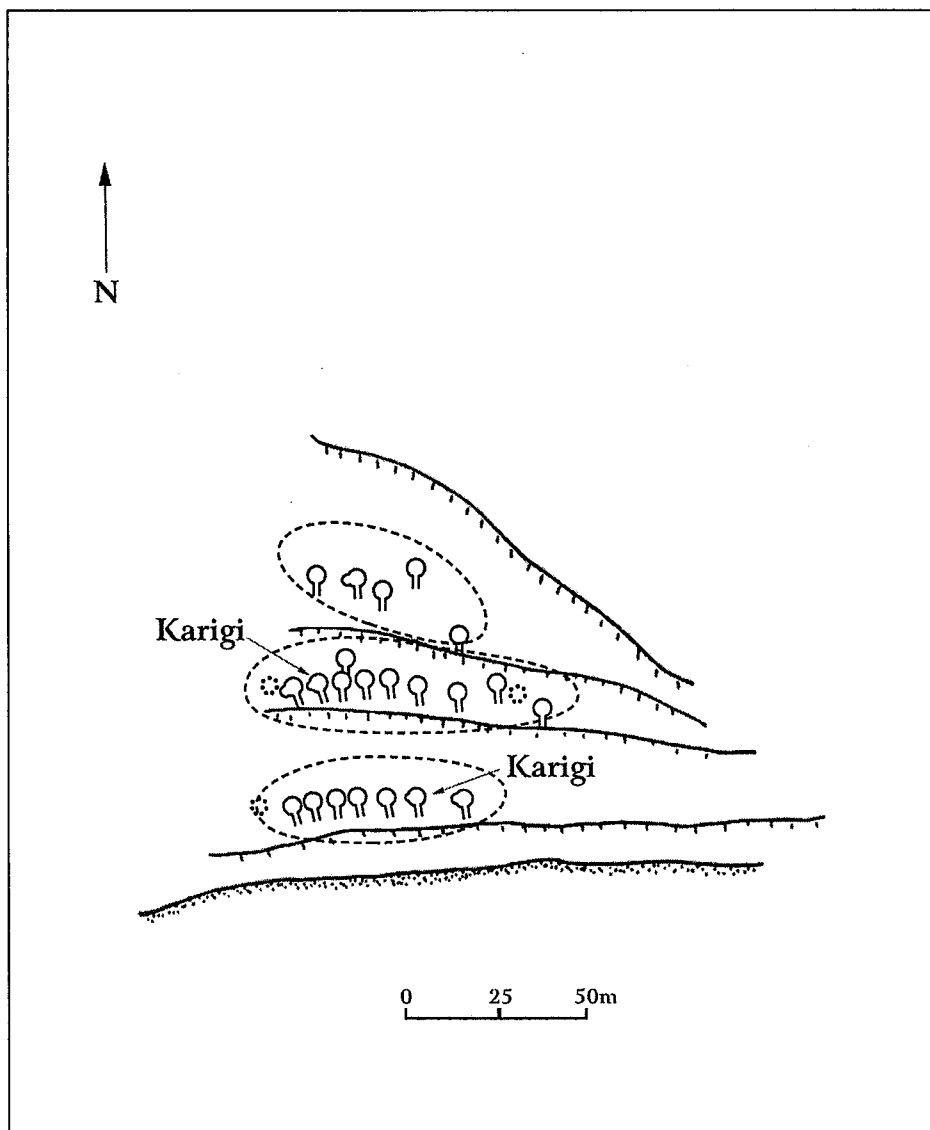


Figure 5.6 Site structure of the Quoak Thule winter residential site (site 10 in Figure 5.2). For legend, see Figure 5.5.

characterized by the presence of one or more features that we interpret as *kariyit*. Such structures were constructed by members of particularly large and powerful *ilagiit* in North Alaskan Eskimo whaling societies. The fact that the number of interpreted *kariyit* tends to be less than the number of *ilagiit* at the larger sites suggests this may also have been the case amongst southeastern Somerset Island Thule whaling societies.

The final site to be considered on southeastern Somerset Island is a *qangmaq* site at Hazard Inlet (site 4a in Figure 5.2). This very likely represents a late summer/fall whaling camp. There are at least four such sites on southeastern Somerset Island, and the associated features and adjacent whale flensing and caching areas leave no doubt that they were whaling camps. The largest consists of approximately 60 *qangmaq* with two, and possibly three, large *kariyit* (examples of these features are presented in Figures 5.7 and 5.8; they are typically much larger than *qangmaq*, and rather than possessing sleeping platforms, contain seating benches along the interior walls). A unique characteristic of this site is a series of well-preserved footpaths radiating out from one of the *kariyit* (*karigi* "A" in Figure 5.10). Each footpath connects a *qangmaq* cluster to the *karigi* (Figures 5.9 and 5.10). There are at least five, and perhaps six, such clusters, varying in size from five to seven features, and we interpret each as representing individual *ilagiit*. Furthermore, the overall average cluster size of 6.0 compares very favourably with the average size of *ilagiit* clusters of 6.7 at winter sites in this area.

If these clusters represent contemporaneous occupations, and the presence of the footpaths suggest this may have been the case, then we are dealing with more *ilagiit* than we typically find at most winter sites (with the possible exception of PaJs-2, a Thule winter village approximately 10 km to the west consisting of 62 dwellings; see Whitridge [1999]). If this is



Figure 5.7 Example of a *qangmaq* (excavated) at a fall whaling camp at Hazard Inlet South (site 4a in Figure 5.2).



Figure 5.8 Example of a *karigi* (excavated) at a fall whaling camp at Hazard Inlet South (site 4a in Figure 5.2).

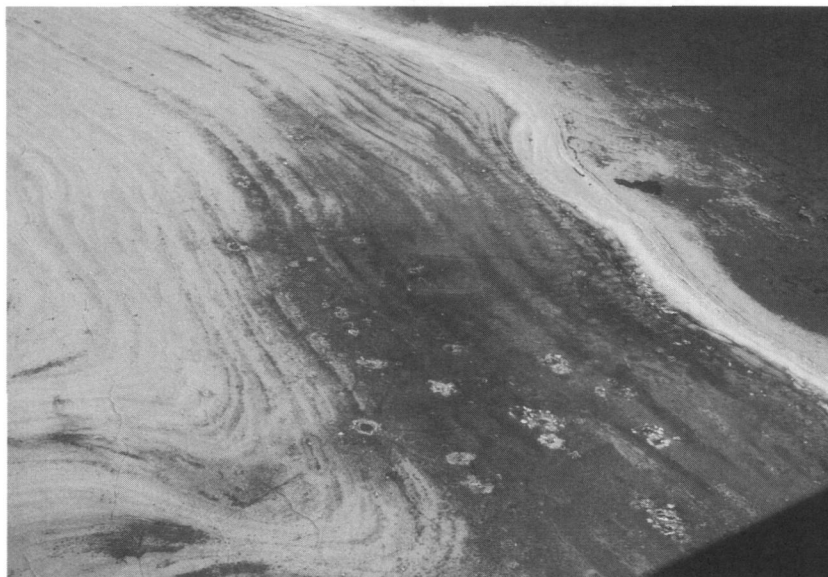


Figure 5.9 Aerial photograph (view north) of a fall whaling camp at Hazard Inlet showing *kariyit* and *qangmaq* (site 4a in Figure 5.2). Note the two *kariyit* on the innermost raised beach, and the footpaths radiating from the *karigi* in the foreground (see also Figure 5.10).

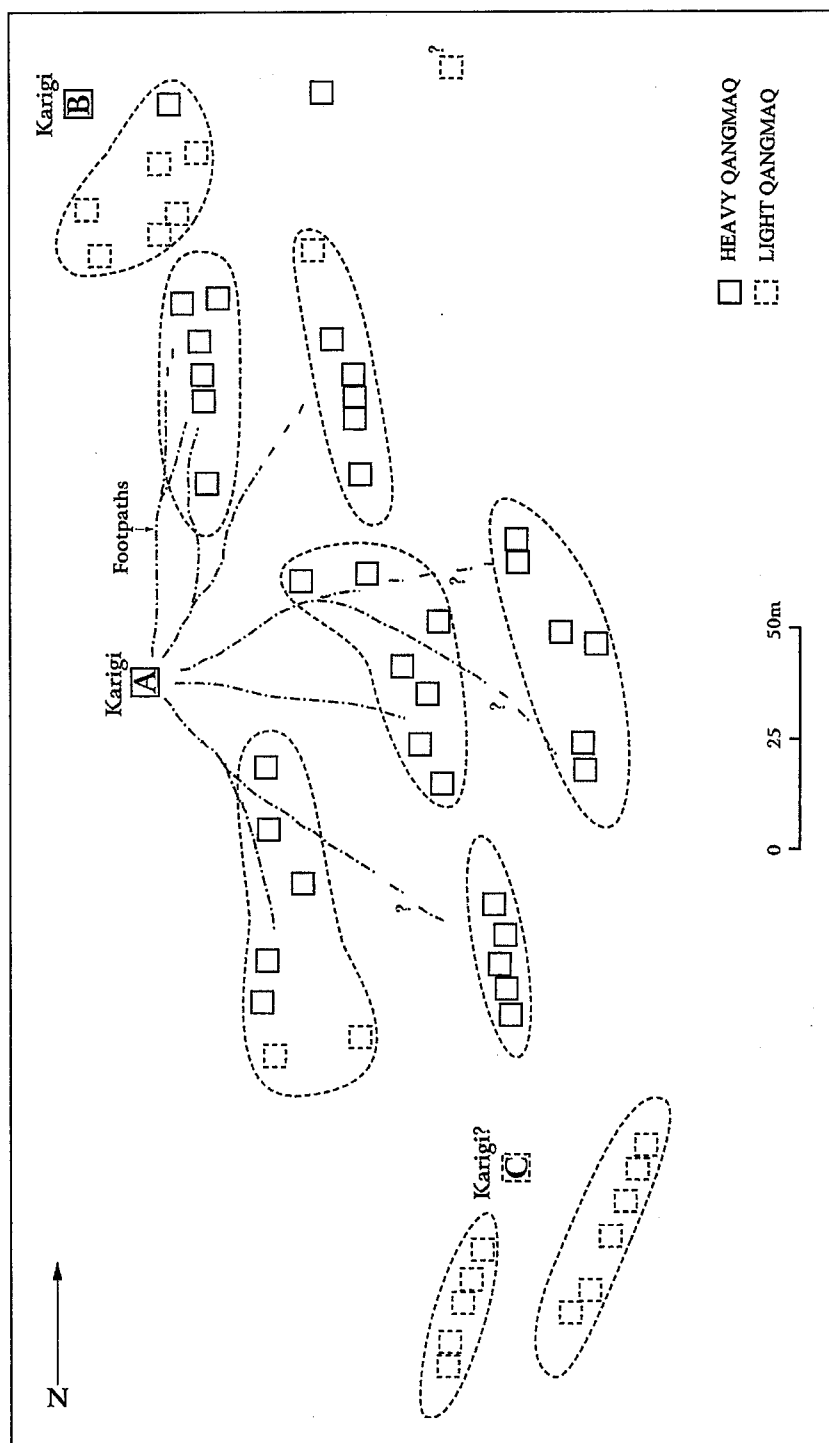


Figure 5.10 Structure of a fall whaling camp at Hazard Inlet South (site 4a in Figure 5.2).

the case, we are probably looking at an amalgamation of *ilagiit* from two or more separate winter villages. Accordingly, this would be the best evidence we can provide for recognizing *nunariit*, that is, co-operating non-kinsmen or partners, that we can recognize.

Finally, this site also displays a number of features that are less distinct than the *qangmaqs* discussed above, but that nevertheless appear in most cases to be dwelling structures, although of a more temporary nature than the true *qangmaqs*. These features likewise are concentrated in groups that range in size from five to seven, and average 6.0, as with the *qangmaq* groups. In addition, a large (5 x 7 m) depression with structural rock is associated with two of these groups (Feature "C" in Figure 5.10) and may be a third *karigi*.

DISCUSSION

If the interpretations outlined here have validity, there is clearly a progression in what might be termed site structural complexity with increasing site size. Overall, and as suggested by Burch for North Alaskan Eskimo society, the extended family, or *ilagiit*, or in some instances perhaps the "expanded" extended family equivalent to the Alaskan *amilraq*, appears to have been the core organizational feature of Eastern Arctic Thule society.

There are a number of implications of this study for the interpretation of Thule sites, two of which we will deal with here. First, and assuming we can identify the appropriate material culture indicators, kinship distance between households within basic house groups at winter sites should be relatively small regardless of the site size. That is, if the *ilagiit* is the core organizational feature, then interpreted kinship distances within basic house groups should remain relatively small. Conversely, kinship distances should be greater between house groups. These same material culture indicators could also be used to determine the relationships between *ilagiit* at the fall whaling sites. That is, do these sites represent amalgamations of *ilagiit* from one site, or from several sites?

A second implication relates to the issue of the origin and development of social complexity among hunter-gatherers. On Somerset Island there is evidence for single *ilagiit* villages, multiple-*ilagiit* villages with associated *karigi-umialik* complexes, and finally, at least at the larger fall whaling camps, possible mixes of *ilagiit* from different villages associated with a single *karigi*. This succession represents increasing "on-the-ground" structural complexity. Accordingly, if this increasing structural complexity was accompanied by increasing social differentiation in the form of increasingly powerful *umialiit*, we should be able to track the development of this differentiation within the suite of sites identified on Somerset Island.

There are obviously a number of other implications that could be addressed, but overall, our main point here is that studying the internal structure of Thule sites, with attention to ethnographically-documented social composites, can assist significantly in the interpretation of Thule social relations.

The case study discussed in this paper also has implications at a broad level: investigating the role of corporate groups in prehistoric hunter-gatherer societies can lead to insights that otherwise would be unrecognized. As the present study illustrates, even in the case of incipient social inequality, the "structural template" around which corporate groups are organized has recognizable archaeological correlates.

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APPENDIX List of Inuit-Inupiat cultural terms used in the text.

Cultural Term	Definition
<i>amilraq</i>	Expanded extended family
<i>ilagiit</i>	Extended family
<i>isumataq</i>	Oldest consanguineally-linked male in <i>ilagiit</i> , <i>ilagiit</i> head
<i>karigi</i> (pl. <i>kariyit</i>)	Structure where economic, social organization and regulation, and ceremonialism associated with whaling were centralized
<i>nunariit</i>	Cooperating non-kinsmen or partners in task unit
<i>qangmaq</i>	Structure consisting of low sod walls, slightly sunken floor, and traditionally, a skin roof, and typically occupied during the fall and spring
<i>umialik</i> (pl. <i>umialiit</i>)	Whaleboat owner-captain
<i>umiaqqatigiit</i>	Boat crews

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