

The Archaeology of Sealing at the Prince Edward Islands

J.J. Boshoff

March 2011

Introduction

The last Archaeological expedition to Marion Island took place in May 1999. This expedition completed the inventory of sites and conducted a limited excavation in Tigard Bay. Since then there have been varied verbal reports on the deterioration of visible artefacts. The 1999/2000 period was also characterised by the amalgamation of cultural institutions and therefore the concomitant restructuring of these institutions. To some extent this was responsible for the temporary cessation of archaeological research on the islands. Iziko Museums, one of the products of this restructuring, is the heir to the SA Cultural History Museum, the institution that was the official repository for all artefacts from the Islands. Iziko is also now in a better position to continue with archaeological research on the Prince Edward Island group due to a new facility and a budding intern programme.

The following proposal will therefore suggest the way forward in the short term to kick-start archaeological research on the islands again. This will include assessment programmes, exhibitions and new research agendas being developed. As part of this vision we will look at the creation of opportunities for young upcoming researchers/archaeologists as well as establishing a long term working relationship between different institutions and departments. We propose that the first phase starts with the Takeover Voyage 2011.

Takeover 2011

The goals for the takeover 2011 voyage are the following:

- Condition assessment of artefacts at base camp
- Assessment and collection (if necessary) of artefacts exposed to the elements at known sites
- Site condition assessments
- Investigate the infrastructure at base camp for the installation of an exhibition on the history and archaeology of the islands
- Total Station Survey of Ship's Cove land site and shovel tests
- Diver survey of the wreck of the Solglimt at Ship's Cove

Condition assessment of artefacts

The first step would be to do an inventory of artefacts at base camp and compare this to previous inventories done. This will inform us whether there need to be a more secure environment for the objects. Ideally an accession register should be created with unique numbers ascribed to each artefact. Furthermore the condition of the artefacts with regards to deterioration/corrosion will be assessed and compared to

previous assessments. This condition assessment will indicate whether an artefact needs to be taken back to Cape Town for stabilisation and treatment.

Exposed artefacts at known sites



Example of type of exposed artefact this at Cape Davis

A survey of the current location and condition of exposed artefacts at known sites will be indicative of the formation processes and dynamics of the various sites. A threat assessment of the artefacts will be based on previous assessments as well as the deterioration and corrosion factors evident at each site. It may be necessary to collect the objects under threat as each object is a unique signifier of the seal hunting period and therefore not replicable. The preservation of the artefacts is then a priority with collection

potentially being the best possible scenario for survival of the cultural archive.

Site Condition Assessment

We will also do a condition assessment for each site with an analysis of the concomitant threats and possible solutions. The assessment will also include the archaeological potential in terms of future research for each site. This could include shovel tests to establish the presence and extent of remains. The aim is to record more than what was done by the previous surveys in order to develop a better picture of the sites. This in turn will help with the eventual design of an archaeological research plan.

Exhibition facilities at base camp

With the new base camp up and running it is the ideal time to investigate the possibility of an exhibition facility in the new structure. A possible venue for the exhibition needs to be identified. This venue then need to be measured and the environmental parameters recorded. This includes the microclimate inside the venue as well as lighting and the composition of the walls, floors etc. This will inform us what the best type of exhibition for the island would be and whether it can include for example display cases with artefacts and have multimedia components.

Total Station survey of Ship's Cove site

Ship's Cove is arguably one of the more important sites on the island. As the largest and generally most complex on the island, it potentially contains significant information about the social organisation of seal hunters as well as shipwrecked mariners as both the Solglimt and Sea Bird crews used the site to survive whilst waiting for rescue. Furthermore the presence of the wreck of the Solglimt creates an unprecedented opportunity of having the wreck and survivor camp in close proximity. Although Graham did some basic excavations in the 1990's he did not do much more than identify some of the possible locations for activities in the camp. A Total Station survey will give an overall view of the site remains. This survey will also help to

create a contour map of the topography of the site. With shovel tests the most promising areas for future investigation can be identified.

Diver survey of the wreck of the Solglint

The aim of this very basic survey will be to assess the state of the remains of the wreck and to draw up a basic site plan. A photographic survey will also be done. The survey will help in determining whether it is worth excavating parts of the wreck in future as well as the potential information contained in the site. The Solglint potentially contains information about seal hunting equipment and practices of the early 20th century as well as salvage behaviour of shipwreck survivors. This could be compared to other shipwrecks elsewhere in the world to get an idea of the different psychologies at work in a shipwreck situation. The photographic survey can also provide material for the eventual exhibition at base camp.

Sites to be Visited

No.*	Name	Co-ordinates
1	Ship's Cove	46° 51' 20" S ; 37° 50' 38" E
3	Cape Davis	46° 49' 28" S ; 37° 41' 53" E
5	Mixed Pickle Cove	46° 52' 20" S ; 37° 32' 21" E
6	Worktop Point	46° 55' 36" S ; 37° 35' 22" E
7	Rooks Bay	46° 58' 13" S ; 37° 39' 37" E
11	Sealer's Cave	46° 56' 58" S ; 37° 52' 09" E
12	Bullard Beach	46° 55' 27" S ; 37° 53' 06" E

**Numbers refer to numbers on included Topographical Chart*