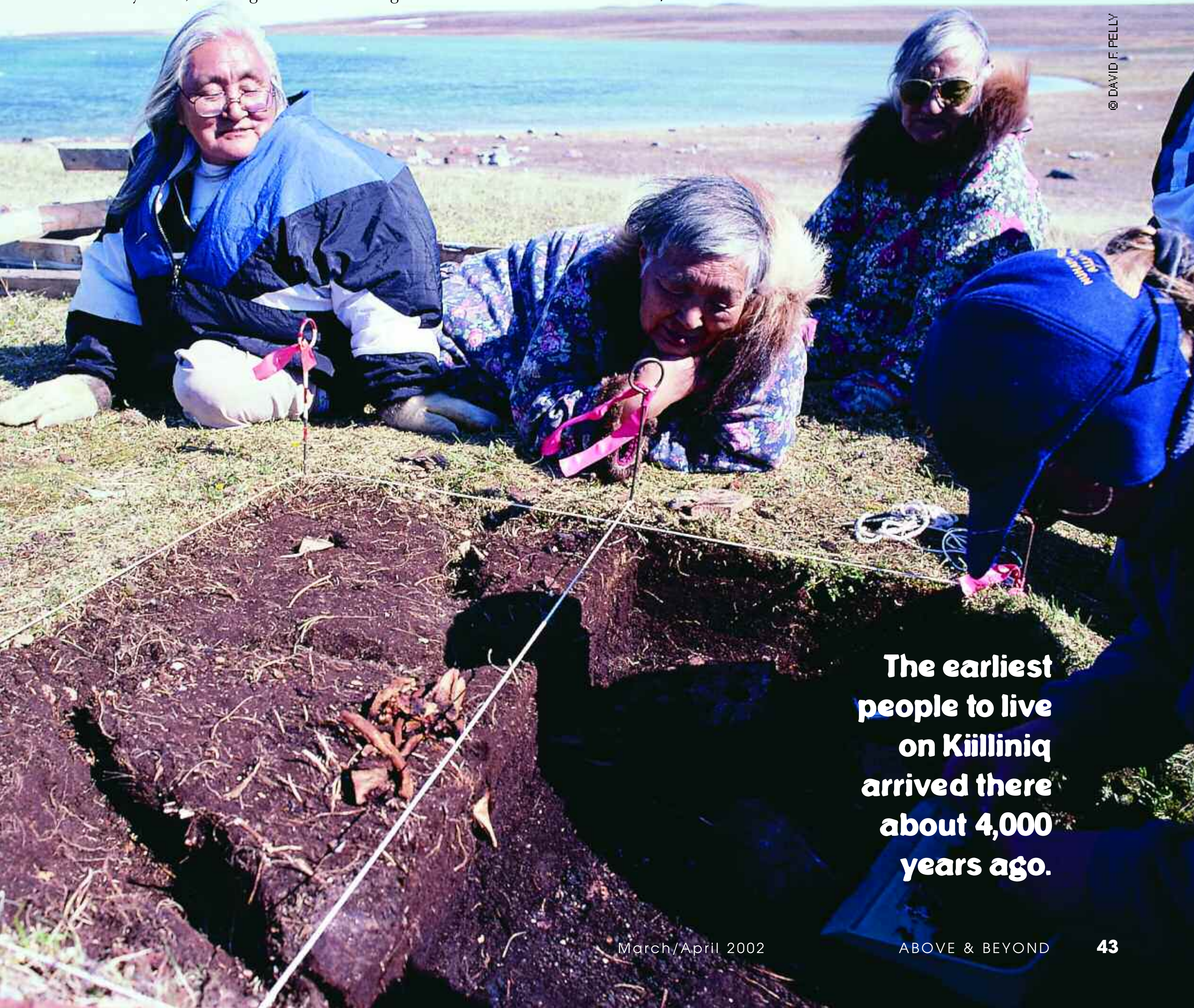
Iqaluktuuq

Inuit Elders and archaeologists Unravel Our Past

By David F. Pelly

The earliest people to live on Kiilliniq (Victoria Island) arrived there about 4,000 years ago. They were not the direct ancestors of today's Inuit but an earlier people whom Inuit call Tuniit and archaeologists call Palaeo-Eskimos. Little is know of their language or belief systems, although the archaeological record provides some clues as to how they survived at that time. They were hunters but it is thought they did not know how to hunt whales and caught seals only rarely in open water or at the ice edge, not having developed the technology required to hunt at a seal's breathing hole. Their chief prey was muskox and caribou, hunted mostly with bow and arrow.

Cambridge Bay elders, (L to R) Mary Mingilgak, Bessie Emingak, and Mabel Angulalik, look on as Marit Zimmermann, archaeology student, excavates a one-metre square.



© DAVID F. PELLY

The earliest people to live on Kiilliniq arrived there about 4,000 years ago.

Much earlier, somewhere around 4,000 years before these hunters arrived on this island, in the era that followed immediately after deglaciation at the end of the Ice Age, most of the land was submerged below the sea. Only the highest hills of Victoria Island would have been above sea-level at the time; Mount Pelly, for example, was one of these small islands, with only its flat top rising out of the sea. The vast lake-dotted plain we now see all around the prominent hill near Cambridge Bay was on the sea bottom. Relieved of the great weight of ice, the land slowly rose, and so the sea receded, in a process that took thousands of years to create the large island known today, the second largest in the Arctic archipelago, covering roughly the same geographic area as Great Britain. Even when the Tuniit first arrived, the island looked much different from today. Everything that is now within about 25-30 metres of sea-level was then still underwater; the shoreline of Victoria Island was somewhere farther inland and higher than today's. But even today the old shorelines are still evident in the landscape, as what geologists call "beach ridges."

In the era that followed immediately after deglaciation at the end of the Ice Age, most of the land was submerged below the sea.

Probing this ancient history, to find out how people lived on this land long ago, is the life's work for archaeologists like Drs. Jim Savelle and Max Friesen. Currently, Savelle and his team are working in the southwest part of Victoria Island where he says there are "hundreds of archaeological sites containing thousands of occupation features," in a study designed to examine the human response to environmental and climate change. Friesen and his graduate students are focused on the sites at Iqaluktuuq, about 50 kilometres northwest of Cambridge Bay. "Jim Savelle [archaeologist] and Art Dyke [geologist] are looking at overall numbers of sites on beach ridges from the past 4,000 years," explained Friesen. "So they're getting a broad-scale image of when this area was occupied and by how many people, developing an overall picture of settlement in this general area. But here at Iqaluktuuq, we are getting a more precise high-resolution picture of the people who lived at one specific place." One part of that process which particularly excites Friesen is that every summer, for a week during his field season, several Elders from Cambridge Bay join the archaeologists at Iqaluktuuq. "With the Elders there, I can really get a much deeper understanding of how people lived."

The archaeological features at Iqaluktuuq are concentrated around a short, narrow river which empties a large lake into the sea. At some point far back in time, that lake was an arm of the sea but as the land around its mouth rose following deglaciation, it eventually became a lake, now about 10 metres above sea level. The topography therefore plays a key role in making this the important archaeological site it is, because people have gathered here for millennia in pursuit of the animals needed to survive, principally fish and caribou, each of which concentrated here because of the geography. Examining that relationship, and how it has changed over time, is central to the current research.

© DAVID F. PELLY (2)

(L to R) Amanda Kapuena, Mabel Angulalik, Ayalik, and Kenneth Ogina examine an artifact found at Iqaluktuuq. The three young people were at Iqaluktuuq as part of the Elders' effort to pass on their knowledge.

The Elders' camp beside the river at Iqaluktuuq.

The Elders share Friesen's enthusiasm. "It is very important that we revisit the past and record our history in this way," said Mabel Angulalik, 75, while at Iqaluktuuq. "It is important that this whole project documents our past." Walking over the site, like the other Elders, she has, in effect, travelled back in time to see artifacts and structures used at various times over the past 3,000 years or more. The archaeological evidence at Iqaluktuuq represents different eras of occupation by successive peoples. According to Friesen, Iqaluktuuq offers "a full sequence of nicely preserved archaeological sites representing every major group of people that ever lived in the Arctic." That defines it as one of very few such sites to be found anywhere.

Standing on the bank of the Ekalluk River, ten metres above the water level of today's river, Friesen points toward the ground at his feet, where in the summer of 2000 his crew dug six one-metre squares. They found an array of artifacts here, including harpoon heads, fish-spear barbs, fine needles and an awl, among others, all made of caribou antler or bone. Significantly, they also found stone tools and razor-sharp blades used for cutting meat or carving the bone implements, and some soapstone fragments from old seal-oil lamps. Taken together, the artifacts paint a fairly comprehensive picture of life on the riverbank roughly 2000 years ago. The Tuniit people who left these were likely living right beside the river, which would have been much higher at the time. Archaeologists believe these people used neither dog-sleds nor qayaqs and hunted caribou using lances rather than bows and arrows.

"It is very important that we revisit the past and record our history"

Walking farther up the slope, away from the river, Friesen indicates another small excavation, this one positively dated to 2,900 years ago, considerably older than the riverbank camp. "When this [higher] site was occupied, there was no river," he explains. "The whole valley was flooded by the sea." This older camp, where the discarded bones suggest people here were hunting mainly for caribou, was at the time located on the sea coast.

Returning to the river, and walking downstream, toward today's seacoast, Friesen points out where some more recent people camped, just before the ancestors of today's Inuit arrived about 1000 years ago. The excavation there indicates that fishing was

Estimated dates of Iqaluktuuq's archaeological sites and the respective cultural affiliations:

(In order from most recent to oldest.)

Thule Inuit:
from approximately 800 years ago up to the 1900s.

Tuniit (Late Dorset):
approximately 1,000-1,500 years old.

Tuniit (Early Dorset):
approximately 2,000-2,500 years old.

Palaeo-Eskimo (Pre-Dorset):
approximately 2,500-3,500 years old.

© DAVID F. PELLY

Cambridge Bay elders, (L to R) Macki Kaosoni, Marjorie Taptoona, Mary Kilaodluk, Mabel Angulalik and Bessie Emingak, listen as Frank Analok (right) offers comments to archaeologist Max Friesen (left) about an excavation.

the principal activity when the site was occupied by Tuniit, possibly during the annual char run, and suggests that they were using the river much as it has been ever since.

Across the river, on the north bank, there are more extraordinary features, most significantly a massive caribou-drive system and three Tuniit longhouses. Each of these will be the object of careful examination by the archaeological team in the years ahead, including precise mapping and some excavation to find artifacts. The longhouses, which range from roughly 20 to 40 metres in length, are particularly interesting for Friesen. "Many groups [of Tuniit, the Late Dorset culture] got together at longhouses, annually, to provide an opportunity to meet distant relatives; a chance for young people to meet marrying partners; to exchange knowledge of, for example, where there's been good hunting, and to exchange actual material – in our test-dig, we found copper and soapstone, which must have been brought from elsewhere. Maybe a longhouse was a symbolic way to say 'we are all members of the same big family' which was so important to their survival. That's the way I'm leaning right now. I'm thinking now that the aggregation at the longhouses was in late spring or early summer."

"We are all members of the same big family"

Extending his logic further, Friesen believes that after the communal gathering at the longhouse, these Tuniit went their separate ways for late summer hunting and fishing. Only some, it appears, stayed at Iqaluktuuq – and the archaeological evidence discovered so far, an abundance of fish and caribou bones, suggests that most of those moved across the river to the south bank – for the fall char run and caribou hunt, probably using the extensive caribou-drive system, which could well have been built long before them, about 2,000 years ago, when hunters were using mainly lances to spear caribou. The interconnectivity of the various sites at Iqaluktuuq, and the different periods of occupation, becomes ever more complex as more information is unearthed.

The puzzle of how Iqaluktuuq has been used over the past 3,500 years, and just how each of those groups managed to survive, is slowly being pieced together. It will take years, acknowledges Friesen. But

© DAVID F. PELLY (2)

An artifact of Tuniit (Late Dorset) origin, probably a handle for a tiny, stone micro-blade.

(L to R) Tom Kilaodluk, Max Friesen, Kenneth Ogina, Amanda Kapuena, Marjorie Taptoona, and David Kaomayok examine a *naulaq* (harpoon-head for seal-hunting) made of caribou antler, found just outside an ancient longhouse once used by Tuniit, approximately 1,000-1,500 years ago.

in the end, "I hope to make this region comparable to the best-published regions in the central and eastern Arctic," in terms of its archaeological record, he says. He would not be able to do that without the participation of Inuit elders from Cambridge Bay, people like 84-year-old Frank Analok, who remembers being at Iqaluktuuq when he was about seven years old for a large gathering of Inuit during the fall char run. He and others bring a unique perspective to the archaeological puzzle. "On an academic level," says Friesen, "it is impossible for me to fully understand what's going on there without knowing the Inuit view. Even for very early archaeological material, they offer me a recent but detailed picture to compare it to."

"I'm going to go to Iqaluktuuq to go fishing …"

Friesen believes the Iqaluktuuq area was not occupied much before about 3,500 years ago. "That probably is the earliest here. If you imagine the sea level 30 metres higher than today, this area would've been mostly flooded, with just a few islands showing. So the people would've looked for broad plains somewhere, probably with musk-oxen." It is not the oldest site found, even on Victoria island, but it is, insists Friesen, one of the most important archaeological sites under investigation anywhere in the Arctic. "It offers us a single, key, environmental hot spot, used by all the different groups, but used differently, so it allows us to compare how they made a living. This set of sites is one of the most significant anywhere in Nunavut, because of the concentration of sites. Every group who ever lived in this region over the past 3,500 years used Iqaluktuuq."

Some of the Cambridge Bay elders remember hearing about a man by the name of Amagonalik, who lived long before their time, they say. He is said to have made a song about Iqaluktuuq, celebrating it as a special place of good fishing. It starts "I'm going to go to Iqaluktuuq to go fishing …" begins Analok in a half-chanting voice, and it goes on from there to sing the praises of Iqaluktuuq. The old song is a measure of what an important place this was for the survival of Inuit from many miles around. Today, its importance is different, though it continues to provide many tons of fish every year. It is now also offering a window into the past, so that the Inuit of tomorrow will understand how their own ancestors and *their* predecessors, the Tuniit, lived. Iqaluktuuq remains, as it has for centuries, a special place worthy of widespread attention and celebration. A&B

After passing by the Iqaluktuuq site on a canoe trip in 1997, regular contributor David Pelly proposed the joint archaeological/oral-history project to the elders of the Kitikmeot Heritage Society in Cambridge Bay, and to Dr. Max Friesen at the University of Toronto. The fieldwork, with logistical support from the Polar Continental Shelf Project, is funded by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada through to 2004.

Dr. Max Friesen, archaeologist, from the University of Toronto in the field at Iqaluktuuq.

© DAVID F. PELLY