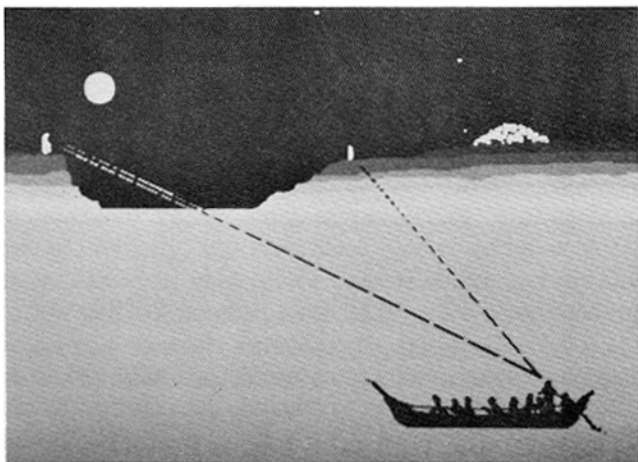




MYSTERY OF THE LOST RED PAINT PEOPLE:



The Discovery of a Prehistoric North American Sea Culture

Study Guide

by

Stuart A. Eldridge

Department of Anthropology

University of Pennsylvania

MYSTERY OF THE LOST RED PAINT PEOPLE

A film by T.W. Timreck and William Goetzmann

57 minutes (available in 2 parts for classroom use)

16mm film or videocassette available from:

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SYNOPSIS

Mystery of the Lost Red Paint People introduces the viewer to a less well known area of prehistoric archaeological research, namely, the maritime hunter-gatherer populations that lived in what is now coastal Maine and the Canadian Maritime Provinces over 3500 years ago. Beginning with the work of early antiquarians and professionals at the turn of the century, investigators have spent almost 100 years attempting to reconstruct and explain this complex sea-faring adaptation.

Attempts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries at presenting a case for the presence in northeastern North America of such a seemingly sophisticated prehistoric culture were hindered by poor preservation, inadequate sampling, crude dating methods, destructive excavation techniques, and negative bias regarding the ability of early Native Americans to use the demanding sea environment. Subsequent excavations since the 1930's have benefited from improved methods, technology, and more complex theoretical frameworks. Sites in central coastal Maine,

Newfoundland, and Labrador exhibit similarities in artifact types, burial structure, and resource use, supporting the current view that the Maritime Archaic (the Red Paint People) represents a widespread, skilled, intensive adaptation with deeply held and supportive spiritual beliefs.

The program builds a scenario for the ceremonial organization and spiritual perception necessary for a life dependent upon maritime resources (as opposed to terrestrial ones) at such an early point in time. Shamanistic practices are postulated, with analogies built from Eskimo, Northwest Coast Indian, and early Scandinavian spiritual practices. It is the existence of stylistic similarities in burial structure, artifact classes, and similarities in site locations between the northwest Atlantic on the one hand and northern Europe and Scandinavia on the other that has led some archaeologists (with some reservations) to resurrect older hypotheses regarding the existence of a "Circumpolar Culture" based on the possibility of long distance diffusion of ideas, goods, and/or populations from North America to Europe via Asia and western North America.

This program traces the efforts of archaeologists to understand the problems engendered by long term study of a particular prehistoric culture and the consequent cycles and changes in what is considered acceptable theoretical bases for research. The impact of the program is that, regardless of archaeological debate over origins and analogies, the impressive abilities and cultural complexity of a people that existed over 4000 years ago should be etched in the modern mind.

BASIC OBJECTIVES:

- 1) Become acquainted with the level of sophistication and knowledge exhibited by Maritime Archaic peoples as reconstructed by the archaeologists.
- 2) Be aware of what archaeologists actually do: their methods, tools, techniques, etc., as presented in the program. In addition, keep an account of the kinds of biases that can beset archaeology as a discipline, as well as individual archaeologists — why, or for what reasons, are theories discarded or evidence seemingly ignored?
- 3) Register the role and significance of shamanistic activity in the prehistoric hunter-gatherer populations portrayed.
- 4) Be sensitive to the degrees of power of diffusionist models as explanatory tools. What are the advantages and dangers in the use of this type of theoretical framework?



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- 1) How do contemporary value judgements about what constitutes quality, refinement, skill level, complexity, and intensity of cultural expression potentially bias hypotheses regarding prehistoric adaptations?
- 2) During the latter portion of the 19th century what were prevalent attitudes towards the then existing Native Americans which may have fueled antiquarian notions of lost races or diffusion to explain the presence of complexity in prehistoric northeastern North America?
- 3) What is the proper role/use of analogy in understanding prehistoric peoples' lifeways? Are stylistic similarities in artifacts and burial structure an adequate basis for postulating analogous functions and, extrapolating further, similar social behaviors?
- 4) What lines of evidence are presented in the program to substantiate possible circumpolar connections between prehistoric sea-faring cultures? What evidence and cultural conditions would have to be present in order to establish the legitimacy of a diffusionist hypothesis to explain cross-cultural similarities? Conversely, what evidence or conditions would be necessary for parallel cultural evolution to take place?
- 5) What sorts of difficulties or limitations can an archaeologist expect to be confronted by when inferring past human ritual behavior and religious and mortuary ceremonialism from archaeology data?
- 6) What is the proper place in the archaeological discipline for amateurs?
- 7) How do preservation factors potentially affect archaeological inference? After viewing the program discuss the ways in which Maritime Archaic materials have been subjected to problems of preservation.

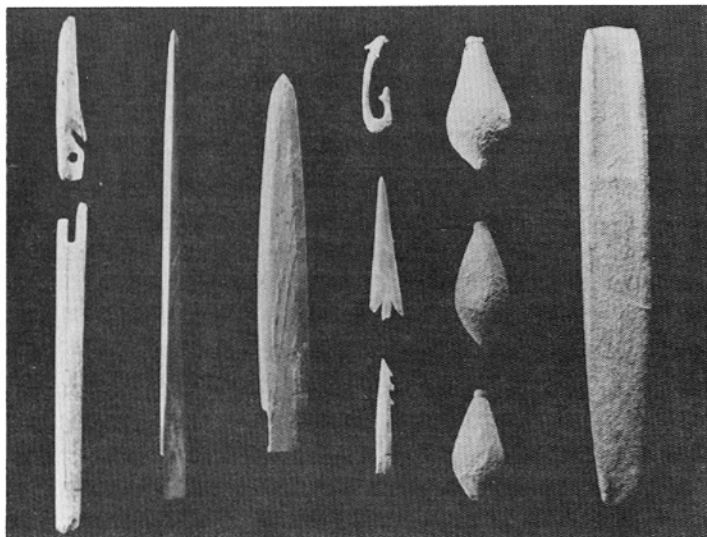


Photo: "Courtesy of Maine State Museum"

- 8) What evidence exists that enables archaeologists to postulate that Maritime Archaic cultures were complex adaptations with a high degree of skill and environmental knowledge?
- 9) In what ways has radiocarbon dating changed attitudes and hypotheses regarding Maritime Archaic adaptations and cross-cultural connections?
- 10) Is cultural evolution a progression of "simple" to "complex" or "traditional" to "contemporary" in a linear fashion? How does cultural evolution proceed? Does a multilinear model of cultural evolution mirror reality more closely? Why do many contemporary archaeologists emphasize ecological frameworks in their attempts to reconstruct and explain prehistoric human cultures?
- 11) What sorts of contributions can the study of maritime hunting and gathering peoples make towards the study of hunter-gatherers in general? Is there something unique or special regarding maritime resources that justifiably places a culture that uses them in direct contrast to terrestrially based groups?

VOCABULARY:

ANTHROPOLOGY: The study of human cultural behavior and the underlying patterns of human culture in general.

ANTIQUARIANS: A term used to describe amateur anthropologists and archaeologists of varying abilities and bias active at the turn of the century.

ARCHAEOLOGY: The reconstruction and attempt to explain the lifeways of prehistoric human cultures.

CULT: A system or community of religious worship.

DIFFUSION: In archaeology, the movement of ideas, materials, and/or human populations in a spatial dimension over time.

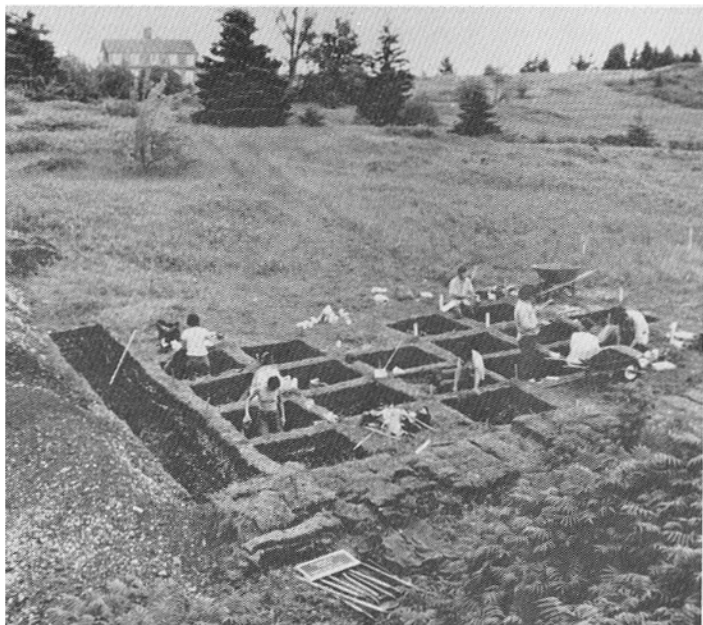


Photo: "Courtesy of Maine State Museum"

- MIDDEN:** The accumulated and superimposed debris left at a site by successive human occupations.
- MOUND BUILDERS:** A series of Native American cultures in North America, inhabiting the Midwest from approximately 100 B.C. to almost 1600 A.D., marked by the construction of complex earthworks.
- PREHISTORY:** Human activity and adaptation prior to written or recorded history.
- RADIOCARBON DATING:** A radiometric dating method based on the measurement of the amount of Carbon 14 (an unstable radioactive carbon isotope with a known half-life) in an object. The method can only be used on materials with an organic content.
- RED OCHER:** A powdered pigment made from ground hematite or iron oxides. Used for thousands of years by many human cultures as part of ritual practice and ceremony.
- RED PAINT PEOPLE:** A more popular term for a prehistoric sea-faring people who lived in what is now Maine and the Canadian Maritime Provinces over 4000 years ago.
- SHAMANISM:** A religion in which certain individuals, through training or inherent ability, function as intermediaries between humans and the supernatural world of spirits and ancestors and act as mouth-pieces for supernatural entities.
- TOGGLING HARPOON:** A harpoon point constructed so as to turn sideways once it has penetrated the hide of an animal, fastening the attached line more securely.

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