On the “Viking” presence in Nunavik: Much ado about nothing! La présence « viking » au Nunavik: beaucoup de bruit pour rien!

Daniel Gendron

Volume 39, numéro 2, 2015

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1038151ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1038151ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Centre interuniversitaire d'études et de recherches autochtones (CIÉRA)

ISSN

0701-1008 (imprimé)

1708-5268 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Gendron, D. (2015). On the “Viking” presence in Nunavik: Much ado about nothing! *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 39(2), 285–293. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1038151ar>

Résumé de l'article

Dans les années 1950, les maisons longues dorsétiennes étaient inconnues des archéologues travaillant dans l'Arctique. La découverte de l'une d'entre elles près de Kangirsuk (Nunavik) au début des années 1960 représentait un apport considérable au corpus des données sur la culture de Dorset, mais Thomas Lee ne l'a jamais présentée comme telle. D'une certaine manière, cette découverte se trouva emmêlée dans quelque chose d'autre, et bien qu'à l'heure actuelle les maisons dorsétiennes soient identifiées en différents lieux du monde arctique, le site Imaha à l'île Pamiok reste porteur de fallacieux fantômes du passé. Entretien des conclusions infondées des travaux archéologiques qui y ont été réalisés au milieu des années 1960, les Kangirsummiut croient encore que ce site est d'origine viking, et ce mythe est entretenu à l'extérieur du Nunavik par des visiteurs qui n'en savent pas davantage. Cet essai vise à mettre fin une fois pour toutes à ces croyances fantasques et à restituer au site Imaha sa véritable nature.

Essai / Essay

On the “Viking” presence in Nunavik: Much ado about nothing!

Daniel Gendron*

Résumé: La présence « viking » au Nunavik: beaucoup de bruit pour rien!

Dans les années 1950, les maisons longues dorsétiennes étaient inconnues des archéologues travaillant dans l’Arctique. La découverte de l’une d’entre elles près de Kangirsuk (Nunavik) au début des années 1960 représentait un apport considérable au corpus des données sur la culture de Dorset, mais Thomas Lee ne l’a jamais présentée comme telle. D’une certaine manière, cette découverte se trouva emmêlée dans quelque chose d’autre, et bien qu’à l’heure actuelle les maisons dorsétiennes soient identifiées en différents lieux du monde arctique, le site Imaha à l’île Pamiok reste porteur de fallacieux fantômes du passé. Entretenant les conclusions infondées des travaux archéologiques qui y ont été réalisés au milieu des années 1960, les Kangirsummiut croient encore que ce site est d’origine viking, et ce mythe est entretenu à l’extérieur du Nunavik par des visiteurs qui n’en savent pas davantage. Cet essai vise à mettre fin une fois pour toutes à ces croyances fantasques et à restituer au site Imaha sa véritable nature.

Abstract: On the “Viking” presence in Nunavik: Much ado about nothing!

Back in the 1950s, Dorset longhouses were unknown to archaeologists working in the Arctic. The discovery of one near Kangirsuk (Nunavik) in the early 1960s was an important addition to the corpus of data on the Dorset culture, but it was never presented as such by Thomas Lee. Somehow, this discovery was twisted into something else, and although Dorset longhouses are today being recognized in different parts of the Arctic world, the Imaha site at Pamiok Island carries false ghosts from the past. Following unsubstantiated conclusions from archaeological work done there in the mid-1960s, the Kangirsummiut still believe the site is of Viking origin, and this myth is being carried on outside Nunavik by visitors who are not informed better. This essay aims to end this charade once and for all and restore the true nature of the Imaha site.

* Avataq Cultural Institute, 360-4150 Ste-Catherine O., Westmount, Quebec H3Z 2Y5, Canada.
severian@avataq.qc.ca

Introduction

In the summer of 1966, while doing archaeological fieldwork near Kangirsuk (then called Payne Bay) in Nunavik (Figures 1 and 2), Thomas Lee had a visit from writer Farley Mowat, who was travelling in an Otter aircraft along the coast, likely in search of Viking sites, as he had recently published a book on the subject (Mowat 1965). The next day, Mowat offered the use of his plane to survey the coast. As drizzle did not allow a coastal trip, they went instead to Payne Lake as Lee (1968: v) later wrote: “we did fly in to Payne Lake, in the interior, for an examination of the Cartier site, found by a C.E.N.¹ expedition in 1964 and partly excavated in 1965. Following this, [Mowat] declared that the site was ‘unquestionably and unmistakably a European village’.” This visit likely influenced Lee’s perception of the Imaha site,² located near Kangirsuk, as a Norse occupation. Indeed, he was about to pursue the excavation of a longhouse there and, two years later, even “rebuilt” the 25 x 7-metre structure (Lee 1969) (Figures 3 and 4).³

Lee (1968, 1971, 1974) wrote on several occasions that he had no preconceived idea of the cultural affiliation of the Imaha site, but one can wonder when he made up his mind on this question because there was absolutely no indication that the site was anything else but a Dorset occupation. In his defence, longhouses were not really known as part of Dorset architecture in the 1960s, but his convictions were certainly not based on material culture, since every single artefact collected on the site clearly belonged to an archaeological culture that used lithics extensively, unlike the case with “Vikings” or “Norse” settlers.

Was Mowat’s impromptu visit in that summer of 1966 the event that convinced Lee that the Viking/Norse hypothesis was the right one? The idea that a people other than Europeans could not build something slightly complex is omnipresent in his writings. After all these years, and many rebuttals, it is surprising that this misinterpretation still has supporters (see, among others, Sollish 2000). And locally, the Imaha site is still presented as a “Viking/Norse” site to visitors (e.g., Hellman in press⁴).

In October 2011, I spent one week in Kangirsuk to attend the Avataq Cultural Institute’s Elders’ Conference. I was once identified as Avataq’s archaeologist, and several Kangirsummiut came to me to talk about the “Viking” site. A bit surprised at first that this idea was still very much alive in Kangirsuk. I naively thought that this question had been settled many years before, as I have certainly tried to set the record

-
- 1 C.E.N. = Centre d’études nordiques (at Université Laval). Thomas Lee was a visiting researcher at the C.E.N., which also funded his fieldwork in Nunavik (see Lee 1967a, 1967b, 1968, 1969, 1971).
 - 2 The Imaha site was originally recorded by Taylor (1958), then working for the National Museum of Canada. Its Borden code is JaEj-1. *Imaha* means ‘maybe’ in Inuktitut.
 - 3 As can be seen in Figure 4, this reconstruction was done with a Norse style in mind. The intention was to produce small walls contouring a large rectangular house with three major rooms.
 - 4 Hellman is a graphic artist who visited Nunavik and produced a graphic novel where, among other things, we can see the Imaha site represented as “Viking,” with a horned helmet as a bonus!

straight on several occasions in the past.⁵ Thomas Lee’s conviction had reached far indeed. Since I was in the village for a few days, I took the opportunity to visit Pamiok Island, where the Imaha site is located (Figures 3 and 4), and on the same day went also to have a look at the infamous “Hammer of Thor” cairn (Figure 5), several kilometres upriver from the village. This cairn and the longhouse are the two “icons” of the Viking/Norse presence in Nunavik.⁶ In this essay, I aim to end the Viking charade in Nunavik once and for all and restore the true nature of the Imaha site.

Figure 1. Location of Kangirsuk, Nunavik.

5 There is always the odd individual who contacts the Avataq Cultural Institute once in a while with new views and hypotheses about the Viking question in Nunavik. There is rarely anything new in these conversations.

6 There are several other elements in Lee’s “Viking” vision of Nunavik: the majority of the cairns that Lee observed in the North; the aforementioned Cartier site; a “beehive” structure at the A.L. Penhale site at Deception Bay (Lee 1967); and some others (Lee 1968, 1971, 1974, see also Plumet 1969).

Figure 2. Location of the Imaha site (JaEj-1).

No Viking/Norse evidence at the Imaha site

Patrick Plumet, who was Lee’s research assistant during the summer of 1966⁷ and thus present when a test trench was dug at the Imaha longhouse (Lee 1968: 85), was quick to publish a scientific and thorough rebuttal of its nonsensical interpretation as a Norse occupation (see Plumet 1969). He examined in detail the 37 arguments that Lee presented to interpret the site as Viking/Norse. Every argument is discussed in detail and refuted by Plumet (1969: 19-25), who identified the longhouses as Dorset structures.⁸ Many of Lee’s arguments are so vague, irrelevant, or made to fit his ideas that it is hard to understand how he reached his conclusions about the Imaha site or any other features he identified as “Viking/Norse.” For example, Lee (1967a) interpreted a traditional Inuit fox trap at the A.L. Penhale site in Deception Bay as a “Viking/Norse” shelter and went so far as to reconstruct one with a side door!⁹

One thing is clear when reading Lee’s hypotheses and Plumet’s comments: Lee’s (1968, 1971, 1974) argumentation is completely Eurocentric. One single artefact of European manufacture was retrieved from the site. This object, an iron axe, was found in close proximity to Longhouse No. 2. The only thing that this proves is that someone

7 This was actually the first time Plumet did archaeological fieldwork in Nunavik.
 8 At the time of Plumet (1969)’s publication, Dorset longhouses were just starting to be recognized as such.
 9 This “beehive” structure (Lee 1967a) is often used as a toilet nowadays.

in the recent past lost that axe at that location. It is clearly not associated with the longhouse occupation (see Lee 1974).

Figure 3. The 25 x 7-metre Longhouse No. 2 before excavation at the Imaha site, 1966. Source: Lee (1971: 17, fig. 6B).

Figure 4. Longhouse No. 2 after Lee's 1968 reconstruction, Imaha site, 2011. Photo: Robert Fréchette, Avataq Cultural Institute.

The infamous “Hammer of Thor”

What Lee (1968: 12) called the “Hammer of Thor” is actually a most inconspicuous cairn (Figure 5) despite being 3.3-metre high. Usually, a cairn (*inuksuk* in Inuktitut, plural *inuksuit*) would be built on high ground to ensure its visibility. The “Hammer of Thor” is quite invisible to the naked eye from any point along the Kangirsuk River. Even when you approach the beach on foot it does not become apparent until you are actually very close to it (*contra* Lee 1968: 12). What is the purpose of building a directional cairn¹⁰ that no one can see? Plumet (1969: 23) discusses this issue in some detail. Zachariasi, the elderly Inuk who accompanied Lee to the cairn back then, could have suggested to Lee that this structure may have been built by Qallunaat. Plumet cleverly points out that Zachariasi could have played on Lee's vanity to suggest this. This makes a lot of sense when considering the actual location of this structure at a commercial fishing camp that had operated until the 1950s. It makes me wonder whether Zachariasi was not actually making reference to the fact that several Qallunaat had visited and stayed at this location and that they may have been in fact the makers of this structure. How else could we explain its awkward

10 It remains possible that this cairn was not built to indicate a direction. For the other functions of *inuksuit*, see Hallendy (2000, 2009).

location? The cairn is just a few metres away from the foundation of the main cabin of the former commercial fishing camp.

Figure 5. The “Hammer of Thor” near Kangirsuk, 2011. This cairn is 3.3 metres high and located less than 5 metres above the high tide mark. Photo: Robert Fréchette, Avataq Cultural Institute.

Conclusion

Although it has not been possible to review in this short essay every single hypothesis that Lee presented to the world to support his interpretation of the Imaha site and the Viking presence in the Kangirsuk area, we refer the reader to Plumet (1969) who did this splendidly. If this site were discovered and excavated today, no one would suggest that it was anything but a Dorset longhouse.

It has been demonstrated repeatedly that longhouses are Dorset in origin. And anybody who has ever been interested in this phenomenon knows about Lee’s assertions and their falsehoods, which are based solely on his incapacity to accept that the “primitive” Dorset and Inuit could have been builders of complex habitations or structures.¹¹ People can be forgiven for past mistakes, but the delusion has lasted long enough. It is time to tear down the walls. As Nunavik is working hard to develop cultural tourism, it would be inappropriate to attract visitors with false historic sites.

11 Lee (1968: 191, 1974) actually uses the terms “Primitive Dorset” and “Primitive Eskimo.”

Education is important, and the Avataq Cultural Institute has a mandate to ensure that the local population and visitors are correctly informed about past occupations. However, as long as this reconstruction remains standing, there will always be some people who believe that Lee's interpretation was the correct one. The ideal solution in my view would be to dismantle it once and for all. At the very least, it should be mentioned everywhere that the Imaha site is not a "Viking" site. I could envision a poster at the airport that informs visitors of the real origin of the Imaha longhouse if the local community insists on keeping it as it is.

References

HALLENDY, Norman

2000 *Inuksuit: Silent messengers of the Arctic*, Toronto, Douglas and McIntyre, University of Washington Press.

2009 *Tukiliit: The Stone People who live in the wind. An introduction to inuksuit and other stone figures of the North*, Toronto, Douglas and McIntyre, Fairbanks, University of Alaska Press.

HELLMAN, Michel

in press *Nunavik*, Montreal, Éditions Pow-Pow.

LEE, Thomas E.

1967a *Archaeological Investigations, Deception Bay, Ungava Peninsula, 1965*, *Anthropological Journal of Canada*, 5(3): 14-40.

1967b *Fort Chimo and Payne Lake, Ungava, Archaeology, 1965*, Quebec City, Université Laval, Centre d'études nordiques, Nordicana, 16.

1968 *Archaeological Discoveries, Payne Bay Region, Ungava, 1966*, Quebec City, Université Laval, Centre d'études nordiques, Nordicana, 20.

1969 *Archaeological Findings, Gyr Falcon to Eider Islands, Ungava, 1968*, Quebec City, Université Laval, Centre d'études nordiques, Nordicana, 27.

1971 *Archaeological Investigations of a Longhouse, Pamiok Island, Ungava, 1970*, Quebec City, Université Laval, Centre d'études nordiques, Nordicana, 33.

1974 *Archaeological Investigations of a Longhouse Ruin, Pamiok Island, Ungava Bay, 1972*, Trois-Rivières, Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, Paléo-Québec, 2.

MOWAT, Farley

1965 *Westviking. The Ancient Norse in Greenland and North America*, Toronto, McClellan & Stewart.

PLUMET, Patrick

1969 *Archéologie de l'Ungava: Le problème des maisons longues à deux hémicycles et séparations intérieures*, Paris, École pratique des hautes études - Sorbonne, Sixième section: Sciences économiques et sociales, Contributions du Centre d'études arctiques et finno-scandinaves, 7.

SOLLISH, G.E.

2000 *Five Days on a Lee Shore: The 1999 Report of the Payne Lake Project*, unpublished manuscript, copy held at the Avataq Cultural Institute.

TAYLOR, William E. Jr.

1958 Archaeological Work in Ungava, 1957, *Arctic Circular*, 10(2): 25-27.