

# The Dorset culture longhouse at Brooman Point, Nunavut La maison longue dorsétienne de Brooman Point, Nunavut

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Volume 27, Number 1-2, 2003

Architecture paléoesquimaude  
Palaeoeskimo Architecture

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/010803ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/010803ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Inuksiutiit Katimajit Inc.

ISSN

0701-1008 (print)

1708-5268 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Park, R. W. (2003). The Dorset culture longhouse at Brooman Point, Nunavut. *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 27(1-2), 239–253. <https://doi.org/10.7202/010803ar>

Article abstract

This paper presents a brief description of a Late Dorset culture longhouse structure and its associated hearth rows located at the Brooman Point site. Following a description of the spatial distribution of finds recovered through the excavation of the longhouse, the paper explores the significance of the architectural and artifactual patterning seen at Brooman Point and other longhouse sites. It is argued that the concept of linearity underlies the Dorset use of these sites. Furthermore, both the range of activities carried out at these sites, and the size of the groups who aggregated at them, may be smaller than is often assumed.

# The Dorset culture longhouse at Brooman Point, Nunavut

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Robert W. Park\*

**Résumé:** La maison longue dorsétienne de Brooman Point, Nunavut

Cet article présente une brève description d'une maison longue du Dorsétien récent et des rangées de foyers y étant associées au site de Brooman Point. L'article explore la signification des liens entre l'architecture et la distribution spatiale des objets trouvés à Brooman Point ainsi qu'à d'autres sites de maisons longues. Il est suggéré qu'un concept de linéarité est à la base de l'utilisation dorsétienne de ces sites. De plus, l'éventail d'activités qui y eurent lieu ainsi que la taille des groupes qui s'y rassemblèrent furent de moindre importance qu'on ne le présumait.

**Abstract:** The Dorset culture longhouse at Brooman Point, Nunavut

This paper presents a brief description of a Late Dorset culture longhouse structure and its associated hearth rows located at the Brooman Point site. Following a description of the spatial distribution of finds recovered through the excavation of the longhouse, the paper explores the significance of the architectural and artifactual patterning seen at Brooman Point and other longhouse sites. It is argued that the concept of linearity underlies the Dorset use of these sites. Furthermore, both the range of activities carried out at these sites, and the size of the groups who aggregated at them, may be smaller than is often assumed.

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## Introduction

The architecturally diverse structures usually known as longhouses are among the most distinctive features characteristic of the Late Dorset phase throughout much of Arctic Canada and Northern Greenland. Damkjar (2000) provides the most up-to-date summary of what is known about the distribution, form, variability and origin of Dorset longhouses — interested readers are directed to that work for the relevant background

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information. This paper is intended as a contribution both to the small body of published data from the excavation of longhouses, and to our ideas concerning the use of longhouse sites by the Dorset.

## **Brooman Point**

The Brooman Point site (QiLd-1) is situated at the tip of Brooman Point, the southernmost extension of the Gregory Peninsula on the east coast of Bathurst Island, Nunavut. The archaeological remains at Brooman Point were investigated in 1976, 1979 and 1980 by Robert McGhee of the Archaeological Survey of Canada (McGhee 1984, 1985, 1997). The site contains evidence of human use spanning early Paleoeskimo through Thule; McGhee's excavations focused on the Thule occupation but he also investigated a Late Dorset component into which the Thule had constructed their winter houses. In addition to the unknown number of Dorset houses destroyed by the Thule, at least eight shallow Dorset dwelling structures are known from the main part of the site and, separated from them by about 200 m, there is a longhouse. Based on his extensive excavations in the mixed Thule-Dorset part of the site and in several of the other Dorset dwellings, McGhee hypothesized that the Late Dorset and Thule occupations at Brooman Point were very close in time, perhaps overlapping. For that reason and with his encouragement, our 2001 investigations focused on the relatively undisturbed Late Dorset occupations in other areas of this extraordinary site, including the longhouse (Park 2002).

The longhouse was discovered during McGhee's fieldwork and photographs of it taken at that time have been published elsewhere (McGhee 1996: 219; Plumet 1985: Planche 60). The longhouse is situated approximately 35 m inland from the southeast coast of Brooman Point at an elevation of 7 m above sea level (Figure 1). It is oriented parallel to the coast on a gently sloping beach ridge that appears to be slumping through solifluction. The west end of the longhouse is adjacent to a boulder field, presumably the source of some or all of the boulders used to construct the walls of the longhouse. Several individual hearths and small rock caches were also identified in the vicinity of the longhouse, especially in the area just to its north. Three discrete hearth rows were identified to the east of the longhouse. Hearth Rows 1 and 2 each contained seven hearths. In general the hearths of Row 2 were constructed of fewer but larger rocks than the hearths of Row 1. The hearths of Row 3 are the most complex and can be seen in a photograph taken by Robert McGhee and published in Plumet (1985: Planche 60). This row consists of eight hearths, each constructed of many more rocks than in the hearths of Row 1. Each of the hearths in Row 3 was also flanked 1 or 2 m to the south by an additional much smaller hearth structure. Schledermann (1996: 98-99) has suggested that similar small flanking "hearths" at his Ellesmere Island site were actually features for boiling bags. We did not observe any artifacts on the surface within or adjacent to the Brooman Point hearth rows.

Turning to the longhouse itself (Figure 2), its original length and width are both difficult to ascertain precisely although for different reasons. Solifluction appears to have transported the boulders of the south wall towards the coast, meaning that the

present internal width of the longhouse (about 4 m) is probably slightly greater than its original width. The exact original length of the longhouse cannot be determined due to the fact that its east end was dismantled, probably by the Thule, to construct a burial cairn which we did not disturb. But assuming that the east end of the longhouse fell somewhere within the area now covered by the burial cairn, the internal length of the longhouse would have been between 12 and 15 m. An entrance gap is clearly evident in the longhouse's west end but it is not clear if the side walls of the structure were originally continuous or interrupted by additional gaps. The seemingly more intact north wall is essentially continuous near the west end of the structure but there are gaps near the east end. The south wall is even less continuous, perhaps due in part to the solifluction. In July 2001, we excavated the entire accessible portion of the longhouse's interior: 61 m<sup>2</sup>. The matrix within the longhouse was coarse to medium gravel with no organic overlay. Cultural materials were almost all confined to the top 3 cm so no stratigraphy could be identified. There was only one feature identified within the longhouse: a small slab-lined feature tentatively interpreted as a box hearth although it contained no evidence of combustion. However, scattered tiny fragments of charred material were found elsewhere within the longhouse.

In an attempt to get a better sense of the internal use of space in this structure, I decided to explore the horizontal distribution of finds within the longhouse. Examination of Robert McGhee's artifact catalogue indicates that only four items were surface-collected from the interior of the longhouse during his investigation of the structure: a microblade core fragment, an endblade fragment, a fragment of ground slate, and a needle fragment. Thus, I assume that the distribution of our finds is representative of what was actually left behind in the structure. In addition to scattered faunal bones, our finds from within the longhouse included a variety of Dorset culture items: an adze head, amulet box fragments, a complete spatula and a portion of another, needles, mostly fragmentary, a harpoon foreshaft and several harpoon head fragments. Several miniature harpoon heads were also found. Other miniature items included fish spears, the leg of an articulated doll, and carvings of a seal and falcon. Lithics found within the longhouse included several microblades, bifaces, core fragments, and some debitage. Figures 3, 4, 5 and 6 show the distribution of different functional categories of artifacts. In Figure 3 it can be seen that artifacts associated with hunting (full-sized harpoon heads, harpoon foreshafts, and endblades) are clustered around the middle of the longhouse in the general vicinity of the hearth, and are not found in the west end of the longhouse. In Figure 4 it is evident that items having potentially symbolic or ritual importance — miniature implements and carvings — are distributed along the length of the longhouse but appear to be restricted to the midline of the structure and to the walls. Microblades and especially needles have elsewhere been associated with the task of clothing manufacture, and thus with women's activities based on ethnographic analogy (*e.g.*, McGhee 1979: 112). Figure 5 shows that needle fragments are distributed throughout the structure. Figure 6 demonstrates that microblades, with one exception, are all found in the west half of the structure.

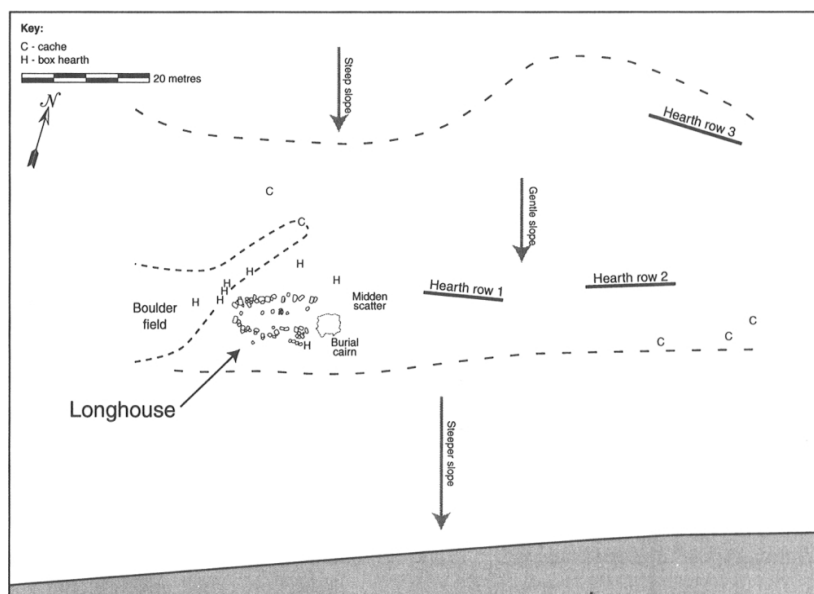


Figure 1. Site map of the eastern portion of the Brooman Point site (QiLd-1)

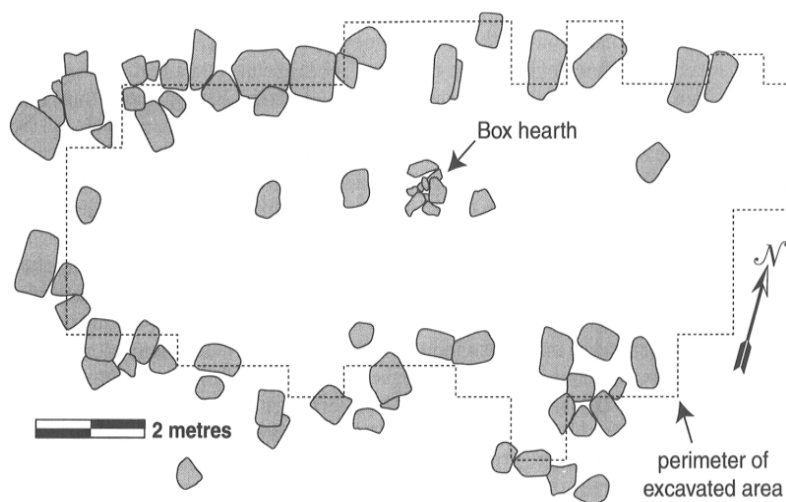


Figure 2. Plan-view drawing of the Brooman Point longhouse, showing the location of the probable box hearth and the perimeter of the excavated area

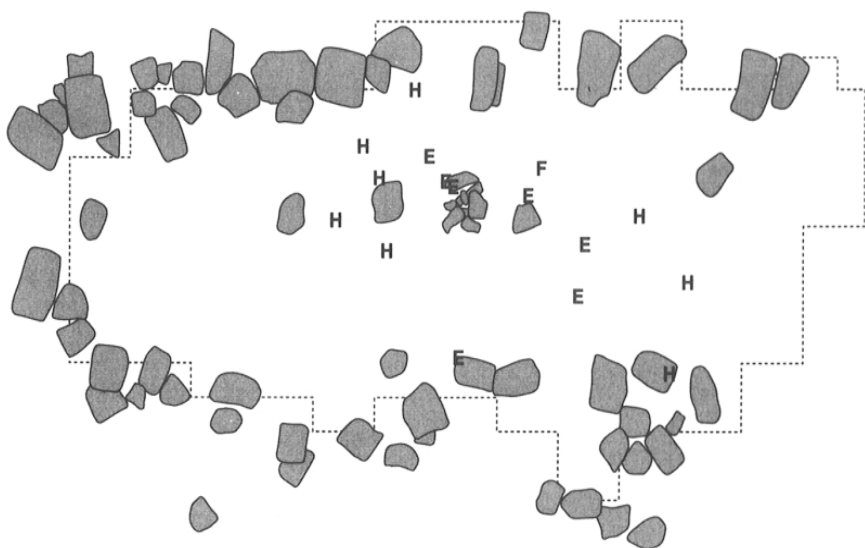


Figure 3. Distribution of artifacts associated with hunting. H-harpoon head; E-endblade; F-harpoon foreshaft

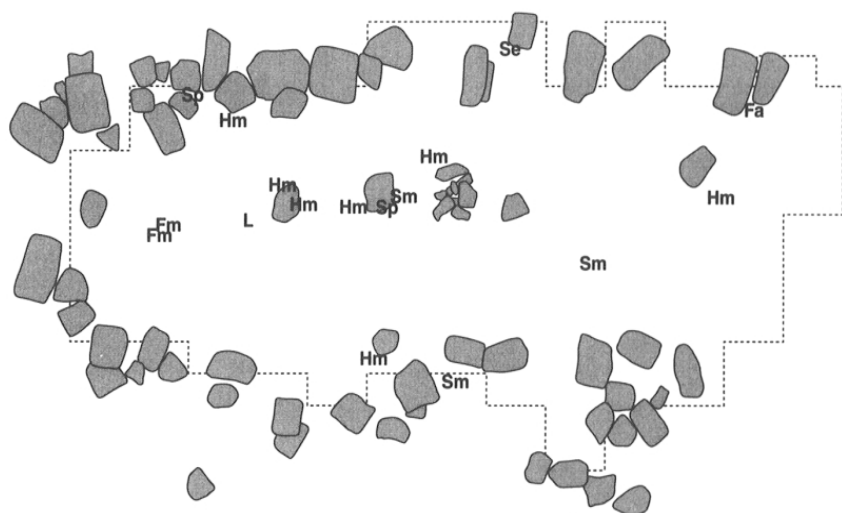


Figure 4. Distribution of miniature artifacts and carvings. Hm-miniature harpoon head; Fa-carving of falcon; Fm-miniature harpoon foreshaft; L-doll leg; Se-carving of seal; Sm-miniature fish spear; Sp-spatula

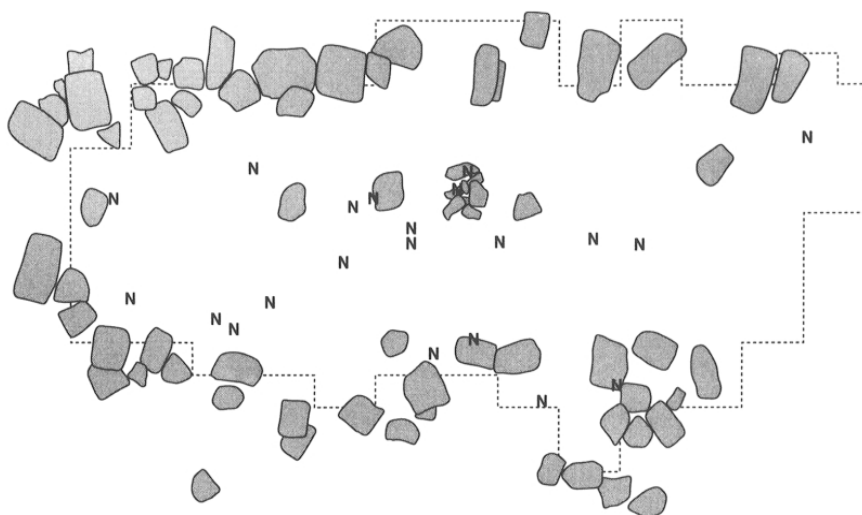


Figure 5. Distribution of needle fragments. N-needle

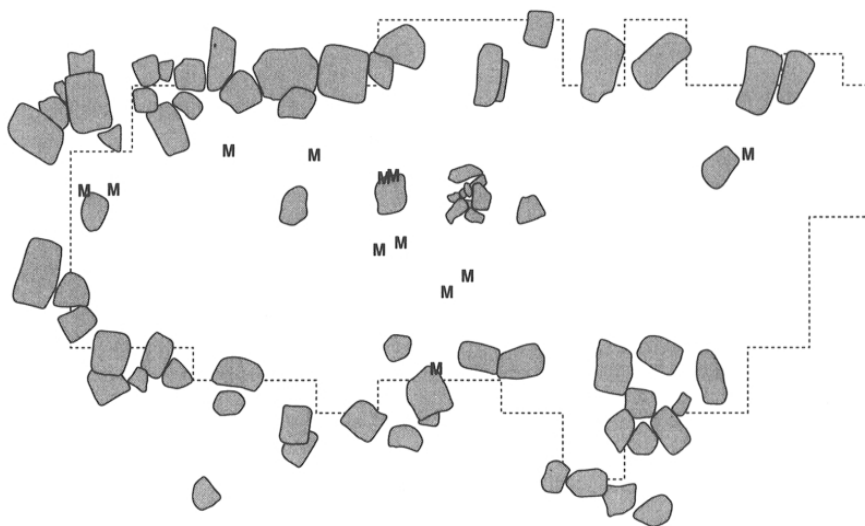


Figure 6. Distribution of microblades. M-microblade

Thus, the distribution of these artifact classes appears to reflect a complex patterned use of space within the longhouse. One interpretation of how longhouses were used suggests that many individual families each occupied a delimited segment along the length of the longhouse, approximately two metres in length (Schledermann 1996: 93). If that was the only way in which the space within the longhouse was used, one would expect a homogeneous distribution of artifact types throughout the longhouse, perhaps consistent with the distribution of needle fragments within the Brooman longhouse. The clustering of the harpoon parts in the central section of that structure, in the vicinity of the hearth, would seem inconsistent with that interpretation. The way in which miniature items and carvings are restricted to the midline and walls of the longhouse suggests that these items were discarded or lost in the context of yet another distinct use of the space within the structure. In order to better ascribe meaning to these differences in patterning it is useful to consider some of what is known about the use of longhouses by the Dorset.

### **Longhouses in context**

Dorset longhouses remain an incompletely understood though fascinating phenomenon. Even the nature of their superstructure is not firmly established although the general consensus seems to be that they were not completely roofed (Appelt 1999: 35; Damkjar 2000: 175-176; McGhee 1996: 207; *cf.* Plumet 1985: 225-226, 230; Schledermann 1996: 92), and some researchers have questioned whether they were even habitations — *i.e.* places where people resided and carried out normal domestic activities (Appelt 1999: 35). Instead we are left with the inference that longhouses were constructed for a somewhat restricted set of activities, partly or largely symbolic in nature. That inference is supported by the somewhat limited quantity and diversity of artifacts recovered from excavated longhouses in comparison to Dorset residential structures (Appelt 1999: 29; Schledermann 1996: 94, 96-97).

More importantly, however, archaeologists seem to be in universal agreement that sites with longhouse were places where local bands who spent the rest of the year dispersed into small groups came together into a substantially larger aggregation for some relatively short period of time during the spring or summer (Appelt 1999: 35; Damkjar 2000: 177; Friesen 2000: 214; Maxwell 1985: 157; Murray 1999: 477; Schledermann 1996: 93, 100). Researchers have suggested that at these aggregations people engaged in a wide range of activities including festive socializing, contests, dances, performances, the arranging of marriages, and the trade/exchange of raw materials and of ideas (Appelt 1999: 35; McGhee 1996: 207-208; Schledermann 1996: 100). Of course, it would be contrary to many ethnographic examples to suggest that normally dispersed groups would *not* have participated in these kinds of activities during times when they aggregated together. However, as Friesen (2000: 214) has observed, the ground plan of longhouses appears inconsistent with what is known about the layout of ethnographically known aggregation sites where people and dwellings would cluster together so as to facilitate interactions between individuals.



Turning specifically to Inuit ethnography, the structures built to accommodate communal events, which often included performances by shamans, generally appear to have been configured so that everyone assembled would be close enough to be able to hear and (assuming adequate lighting) to see what was going on, and to interact relatively freely (*e.g.*, Balikci 1970: 62-63; Burch 1988: 27, 105-106; Dawson 2002: 468, 471). Those structures certainly did not have the narrow elongated configuration of Dorset longhouses, which would have made those kinds of interaction much less convenient. Damkjar (2000: 176) rightly points out that the relative darkness inside a covered longhouse would have been conducive to shamanistic activities such as transformations, but I am nonetheless struck by how awkward and difficult other kinds of social interaction would have been. The usual interpretation seems to be that within the narrow confines of a longhouse each family would occupy its own space, perhaps two metres in length (*e.g.*, Schledermann 1996: 93). That would allow each family to interact with the families adjacent to it but would make informal interactions with families further up or down the structure quite inconvenient. It is of course plausible to argue that the activities carried out within the longhouse itself would primarily be ritual in nature, in which case we would expect the principal locale for informal social interactions to have been outside the longhouse. An obvious location at many sites would be the hearth rows, but their linear configuration would produce exactly the same awkward setting for informal interaction with anyone beyond the immediately adjacent families.

Another activity that we would definitely expect at an aggregation is commensality: communal preparation and consumption of food (*e.g.*, Friesen 2000: 214). Because of the large variability in the presence of internal hearths (Damkjar 2000: 173; McGhee 1996: 207; Schledermann 1996: 93) it is not clear to what extent food preparation took place within the longhouses themselves. The Brooman Point longhouse contains just one internal hearth and some longhouses had none at all. The hearth rows seem far better candidates for food preparation locations. However, the multiplicity of hearths in each row suggests that every family would have prepared its food individually and, just as in the longhouse, the linear layout of the hearths would make it awkward to share with anyone except the families adjacent to you in the row. Maxwell (1985: 157) suggests that food cooked at the hearth rows may have been carried into the longhouse for communal consumption. This is plausible although at least some hearth rows are not associated with longhouses (Schledermann 1996: 98), indicating that hearth rows were not invariably used for preparing food for consumption within longhouses.

For all these reasons, I think it possible to question the extent to which informal socializing was an important activity at longhouse sites. I believe Damkjar's (2000: 175) description captures this nicely: "It is not difficult to envision that these gatherings were infused with a great deal of symbolism and involved ceremony and *structured* social activities [...]" (emphasis added). If informal socializing and interaction did take place, it either did so in a fashion that left little architecturally visible evidence or it took place away from the longhouses and hearth rows. Damkjar (2000: 174) notes the existence of what he interprets as multipurpose activity areas containing hearths, caches and miscellaneous rock concentrations paralleling one or both sides of some

longhouses. The scattered hearths and caches north of the Brooman Point longhouse fit this pattern. If these nondescript features are contemporaneous with the longhouse and hearth rows, they may represent the only evidence for informal socializing at this location, if any took place.

### **What do longhouses represent?**

We thus have sites characterized by architecturally distinctive features — the longhouses and the hearth rows — where the Dorset interacted in a highly structured fashion. We also infer that the people who took part in those activities normally lived in scattered local groups and that they aggregated together at the longhouse sites. Can we infer anything else based on the limited data available to us? McGhee (1996: 207) suggests that the walls of longhouses served as "a symbolic boundary to mark the communal ties of local bands that joined together for a portion of their annual cycle." Friesen (2000: 214) puts forward the similar but more specific hypothesis that longhouses developed as elongated versions of normal Dorset dwelling structures, and that the people gathered at the longhouse site were establishing their membership in a single symbolic family by living and eating within this single house. While these hypotheses are entirely possible, I do not find them completely persuasive for two reasons. First, I do not observe any specific architectural features in longhouses that would link them conclusively to Dorset dwellings. Second and more important, the multiple hearth rows at many longhouse sites would seem to indicate that the house metaphor was not the only concept guiding the assembled people since many of their symbolically structured activities clearly occurred outside the walls of the longhouse.

Accepting the conclusion that the longhouses themselves were not primarily or solely dwelling structures but were instead constructions built in that particular shape for the performance of activities that required them to be shaped that way, we must ask why people outside the longhouse, preparing food at the hearth rows, still had to arrange themselves in that linear fashion. In other words, when they were not actually performing ritual within the longhouse, why could families not have arranged themselves in some configuration that would have better facilitated the festive and enjoyable kinds of interactions discussed above? The answer must be that it was necessary at all times to arrange themselves in a row. However, it was not done to align themselves with some particular geographic or celestial phenomenon since longhouses vary in orientation both with respect to the adjacent shoreline and with respect to compass orientation (Damkjar 2000: 172; Schledermann 1996: 90), and even within sites the longhouses and hearth rows are not always parallel with one another (*e.g.*, Appelt 1999: Fig. 20; Schledermann 1996: 91). But if not for that reason, then why?

As a partial explanation I wish to submit the idea that for the Dorset, the most fundamental underlying concept made tangible through "longhouses" was not "house" — instead, it was "long." To me, linearity is the principle that is being expressed most clearly at longhouse sites, both in the longhouses and in the hearth rows. While it is of course impossible to know with any certainty, I submit that linearity must have been a central metaphor in Dorset worldview and that this metaphor was made tangible in all

the constructions at longhouse sites. The contemporary analogy that strikes me and will be familiar to many is the cruciform ground plan of nave and transept seen in Christian churches. The cross is a central metaphor in Christianity and one of the ways it is expressed is through the ground plan of churches. Anyone familiar with Christianity can probably produce the basic explanation for the significance of the cruciform shape of churches — I expect that all Dorset people would similarly have been able to explain the significance of the linear configuration of the longhouses and the hearth rows. But since the Dorset and their culture disappeared long ago, we are forced to try to draw inferences concerning the possible meaning of linearity for the Dorset by searching for patterning in material culture, an approach that can nonetheless sometimes produce intriguing results (*e.g.*, McGhee 1977).

In that spirit, I cannot resist linking the linearity expressed in the longhouse sites with another kind of linearity evident in Dorset material culture. One of the most distinctive characteristics of Dorset artifacts, and one that clearly demarcates Dorset from both their Palaeoeskimo predecessors and their Thule successors, is the complete absence of circular (drilled) holes. Dorset perforations were created by incising or gouging and, although their proportions vary significantly, most are substantially longer than they are wide. It has long been agreed that the reason for the Dorset manufacturing their holes in this manner is far more likely to have been symbolic or ideational rather than functional (*e.g.*, Maxwell 1985: 128). McGhee (1996: 142, 144) offers a plausible and appealing explanation based on the process of manufacturing the holes: that the rotating motion associated with drilling was tabooed. In the same speculative spirit, I would like to offer the alternative suggestion that perhaps Dorset holes were an expression of linearity — in other words, holes were required to have elongated proportions.

If that was the case, what was the significance of these elongated proportions? Perhaps the passage to another world was conceived of as having that elongated, linear, shape. Given the apparent importance of the sea ice environment for the Dorset subsistence (*e.g.*, Maxwell 1985: 135-137; McGhee 1996: 120-121, 146), perhaps the linear metaphor might refer to leads in the ice which, as passages between the realms of air and water, might have inspired the linear shape of Dorset gouged perforations. An even more speculative interpretation is based on the multiple gaps that are normally observed in the long walls of longhouses (*e.g.*, Damkjar 2000: 173), combined with the semicircular lines of rocks curving in from the side walls of at least one longhouse (Schledermann 1990: 203). In this scenario the longhouse would represent the body of a sea mammal with the curved lines of rocks representing its ribs and the gaps in the long walls representing the intercostal spaces. The openings at either end of the longhouse might represent the mouth and anus. Of course, the sub-rectangular ground plan of longhouses does not otherwise seem to resemble a sea mammal but in this interpretation I draw inspiration from the Dorset "spatulas" which incorporate an incised skeletal motif to represent an animal's body in an otherwise largely rectilinear form. Plumet (1989) has similarly speculated on a link between longhouse form and animals as represented in Dorset art. And Odgaard (2001) has explored a possible metaphor underlying mid-passages throughout Palaeo-Eskimo culture although, as noted above, I do not see enough linkages architecturally between Dorset dwelling

structures and longhouses to justify extrapolating her interpretation to the longhouses and hearth rows.

These ideas are entirely speculative but they show how such a metaphor might link together these disparate but intriguing aspects of the archaeological remains of the Dorset. Whatever the actual metaphor, in their day-to-day life the Dorset may have expressed it through all their perforated material culture but on occasion, perhaps annually, they also expressed the metaphor socially and much more rigorously by aligning people in a linear fashion both within the longhouse and while using the hearth rows. The hearth rows were not simply places where food was prepared to feed the people who were participating in the longhouse activities, but were actually a central part of the same or a related performance. This is suggested by their linearity but also by the fact that multiple hearth rows are known from many longhouse sites, and the fact that some sites have hearth rows even in the absence of longhouses (Appelt 1999: 32; Damkjar 2000: 173-174; Schledermann 1996: 94, 98). The existence of multiple hearth rows has been taken to indicate multiple episodes of site use (*e.g.*, Appelt 1999: 32). But why were new hearth rows created each time the site was used if the longhouse itself could be re-used? I conclude that the *creation* of a hearth row was an integral part of the process. Schledermann (1996: 93) reports lots of charred bone and wood from some Ellesmere Island hearth rows, and Damkjar (2000: 176) found considerable quantities of burned fat and bone at hearth rows from Somerset Island. Conversely, Appelt (1999: 35) was led by the lack of burned material and artifacts at the David site hearth rows to question whether the hearths had a purely utilitarian function. Thus, there is at least some archaeological basis on which to doubt whether every hearth or hearth row was used for food preparation.

## Aggregations

Clearly, the linear arrangement of people was an imperative during visits to the longhouse site even when they were not taking part in rituals within the longhouse itself. But if linearity was so important, perhaps it was even more important than the actual number of people present. In other words, if the whole purpose of being there was to create some linear relationship with the universe, then the length of the longhouse and the number of hearths in the row may have been determined not by the number of people present but instead by some preconception of the desired length of the longhouse and hearth row. If true, this proposition threatens the assumption that each hearth in a hearth row was invariably created and used by a single family, and that an accurate estimate of the number of families resident at the site can therefore be made by counting the hearths (*e.g.*, Damkjar 2000: 173-174; Schledermann 1996: 92-93). Damkjar (2000: Fig. 111) very convincingly demonstrates a relationship between longhouse length and number of hearths but for me, it is entirely possible to imagine a few families cooperating to construct a row of many hearths in order to fulfill some other requirement — *i.e.* not just to provide one hearth for each family present. In this interpretation I draw upon Wobst (2000: 47), who notes that the massive size of some Palaeolithic structures does *not* provide:

[...] evidence that Palaeolithic group size was such and such, but of material action to get a social unit of that size established, in a contested stream of precedents. The situation would have been viewed as sufficiently dubious to warrant the massive expenditures of time, personnel and material to affect or effect group size.

In other words, the size of "massive" structures is not necessarily a dependent variable in relation to the size of the population at a site. Construction of the Dorset hearth rows by just a few families would better account both for the uniformity of hearth construction *within* rows and for the differences between rows at sites like Brooman Point, which otherwise must be explained by rapidly changing styles in hearth construction. This inference — that at least some of the population aggregations at longhouse sites may have been smaller than is usually assumed — is just a possibility rather than a probability, but if aggregations were smaller, it might solve another problem. Damkjar (2000: 176) and Schledermann (1990: 223) both note that although there are often Dorset dwelling structures in the general vicinity of the longhouse sites, there are too few of these dwellings to house all the people usually assumed to have gathered at the longhouse. The implicit inference is that for the duration of the aggregation the people gathering at the longhouses must have camped in the open or sheltered behind windbreaks, since we do not find large numbers of tent foundations or convincing evidence that the longhouses themselves were completely roofed. If I am correct that the aggregations at the longhouses were smaller than is often assumed, then perhaps the residents indeed lived in the nearby dwellings. A smaller aggregation size would also be more consistent with the lack of evidence of architectural configurations suitable for informal socializing, since the constituent groups might be more likely to meet and do their informal socializing at other times of the year.

## Conclusions

Architecturally, the Brooman Point longhouse and its associated hearth rows fall comfortably within the range of variability that has been observed at other longhouse sites excavated in the High Arctic (Damkjar 2000: 172-173). This portion of the Brooman Point site was thus likely a place where several Dorset families came together for at least several days sometime during the warm months of the year. This occurred on at least three separate occasions to judge by the three hearth rows, but perhaps more often than that. Many interpretations of what took place at longhouse sites like Brooman Point envisage a wide range of activities, from general socializing and trade, all the way to structured ritual. However, the architectural evidence would seem to indicate that unstructured socializing was not in fact an important activity at these sites. Instead, almost all the behaviours for which archaeological evidence exists appear to have been highly structured by a principle of linearity. That principle is most clearly exhibited in the architectural characteristics of the longhouses and hearth rows but also shows up in an interesting fashion in the distribution of material culture within the Brooman longhouse. The objects with presumably the greatest ritual/symbolic importance — the miniature items and carvings — are restricted to the midline and the walls of the longhouse. Thus, they exhibit a much stronger linear configuration than the other classes of items recovered from the longhouse. All this evidence suggests that a

fruitful avenue for future research would be a broad survey to determine if analogies for this kind of linear arrangement of people and activities can be found elsewhere in the ethnographic record of small-scale societies, and to explore the ideological rationales underlying such patterning.

## Acknowledgements

Funding for the Brooman Point excavations came from a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Standard Research grant to the author and to Douglas R. Stenton. Invaluable logistical support in the field was provided by the Polar Continental Shelf Project. The field team included the author, Eric Damkjar, Brooke Milne and Tara Grant (Assistant Curator, Archaeology, Canadian Conservation Institute). The field assistants were Tabitha Lawson, Pauline Mousseau, and Tara Park. I am very grateful for all their hard work during the field project. I would also like to thank Sylvie LeBlanc and Murielle Nagy for organizing the St. Pierre symposium and encouraging me to think about these issues. My co-investigator Douglas Stenton offered several helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper, as did Murielle Nagy and two bracingly skeptical anonymous reviewers. However, I of course retain entire responsibility for all errors of commission or omission.

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