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A bed of ochre

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4 Social and Mortuary Variability

"It is not the dead individual but the living community which determines and maintains the cultural frame within which mortuary practices and perceptions occur."

(Dethlefsen 1981:137).

4.1 Social Structure and Mortuary Attributes

The first studies on death-related behaviour and religion were conducted in the 19th century. In 1860 the anthropologist Bastian presented his theory on the *Elementargedanken* (basic beliefs) channelling human social behaviour. One of these 'Elementargedanken', shared by all societies, was a belief in an afterlife (Bartel 1982). At a later date ethnologists of the rationalist-idealist school of thought, such as E.B. Tylor and J. Frazer, started to look for functional relationships in human social behaviour. They considered ideas and religion as the main determinants for cultural and social differences, similarities and changes (Binford 1971). In the early 20th century an important contribution to the understanding of mortuary behaviour and variability was made by the French anthropologists Durkheim (1995 [1912]) and Hertz (1960 [1907]). They argued that mortuary practices were dependent upon other social factors and that this behaviour must be considered as one of a number of co-varying components in a dynamic social system.

According to Van Gennep (1960 [1909]) the social life of an individual can be separated into the stages unborn, child, adult and dead. The society celebrates each transition from one stage to another with the 'rites of passage'. Each change of state consists of three phases namely, a

separation from the old status, a liminal period, and a phase in which the new status is acquired (*ibid.*). Death is seen as an initiation, as a passage from the visible to the invisible society. In the case of the life-death transition, specific mortuary practices (rites of passage) may exist for the first and the last transition phases. Birth is often perceived as a transformation comparable to death, but in reversed order. As with other rites of passage, mystical dangers are involved which must be guarded against by means of purificatory rites (Hertz 1960:80).

Each society has its own distinct set of mortuary practices, or rules for the disposal of the dead (O'Shea 1984:33). These rules are mainly determined by the shared ideas and religious beliefs, *i.e.* the ideology of a society (Ucko 1969). Ideology can be defined as the totality of forms of social consciousness (McGuire 1988). The influence of ideology on the disposal of the dead is illustrated by the mortuary practices of the Christian, Islam, and Buddhist cultural traditions, where death is seen as a transition to an egalitarian society, as opposed to that of the living world. The inclusion of grave goods therefore is usually prohibited (Trinkaus 1984).

Which mortuary practices are being conducted and what those practices mean varies significantly between different cultures (Hultkrantz 1979:129). As argued by Durkheim (1995) and Hertz (1960), these mortuary practices co-vary with other aspects of social life. For instance, in societies where reciprocity is the most important way of exchanging goods and services, moveable property of the deceased is usually buried or destroyed, as there are no rules of inheritance. In societies with mainly non-reciprocal exchange, on the other hand, the moveable property of the dead usually will be divided among one or more heirs, according to the rules of inheritance (Precourt 1984).

A very important aspect of mortuary practices is the reaffirmation and stabilisation of a society's social structure (Petersen 1966-1967, Saxe 1970:10). The mortuary practices being conducted usually are dependant upon the social and political positions the deceased had during life. These practices unite the survivors and show that despite death these socio-political positions, for which the appropriate rituals are being practised, still exist and have only become vacant (Saxe 1970:10). In fact some of those practices, usually grave goods, could reflect claims of some of the buriers to the vacant socio-political position. If changes in the social structure of a society are taking place, resulting in a re-ordering of socio-political positions, mortuary practices can help to consolidate these new positions. Therefore societies that are in a social transition phase, possibly caused by contacts with other cultures, usually exercise more elaborate mortuary practices than societies with more stable social structures (Childe 1945, Parker Pearson 1982). The greater the number of different kinds of socio-political positions in a society, the more complex is its social structure and the more mechanisms which are present for the affirmation of the components in that social structure. One of

those mechanisms is mortuary behaviour. The mortuary practices can be seen as a set of traditional 'certainties' which help to unite the survivors emotionally and politically. Whether or not the members of a particular society are aware, mortuary practices reallocate the duties and rights among them (Barrett 1990). However, mortuary practices are not a direct reflection of the actual social relations which existed between the deceased and the survivors, but of an idealised version of these relations (Parker Pearson 1982). Also social structure is not necessarily completely and isomorphically reflected in the mortuary practices (Hodder 1980; Bloch 1981; Chapman & Randsborg 1981).

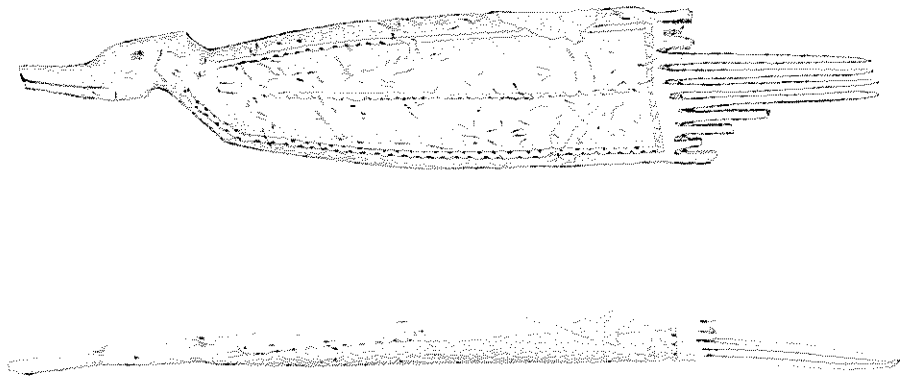


Figure 4.1. Comb (attribute 114) from burial A 3. Length of the object is approximately 15 cm. Drawing by Katherine Scott. (*EeBi-2:87*).

The dead are granted the mortuary treatment which the society considers appropriate to their social positions. The social position of an individual within a society is determined by the set of acknowledged social identities (Goodenough 1965:7) he or she occupies. Examples of such identities are brother, father, husband, and chief. This sum of social identities forms the *social persona* of an individual. Each individual is related to the other members of the society by means of a number of identity relationships (*ibid.*:6), which form a social network. Communication between two people is usually structured by more identity relationships at the same time, and during an interaction only a part of the social identities the individuals have is taken into account (*ibid.*:7). Connected to each of those identity relationships are several rights and duties concerning

mortuary and other social behaviour. So the survivors have specific obligations towards the dead, and the dead have specific rights. What determines these rights is indicated by Van Gennep;

"Everyone knows that funeral rites vary widely among different peoples and that further variations depend on sex, age, and social position of the deceased."

(Van Gennep 1960:146).

This social position is dependent upon sex and age. An individual's social position is mainly determined by his/her sex and age, and also by his/her multiple membership of social groups; by his/her social affiliations. These are the basic elements of the social structure in every society, whether prehistoric or contemporary (Binford 1971).

From an anthropological point of view it would be better to use the social classification 'gender' instead of the biological designation 'sex'. The idea of what is 'female' and what is 'male' varies between cultures (Conkey & Spector 1984). Among most Native American cultures gender crossing was practised. Gender crossing can be defined as *"the adoption of the dress, occupations, and behaviours of the opposite sex by anatomically normal persons"* (Gill & Sullivan 1992:98). Because the archaeological method has to work with biological determinations in order to detect 'female'/'male' related mortuary attributes, the designation 'sex' rather than 'gender' was used in this research. The relatively rare occurrence of gender crossing makes it hardly detectable in archaeological population samples.

Apart from different sex and age groups, the social structure of a society can include the presence of two or more corporate groups. A corporate group was described by Honigmann as follows;

"It is enduring (outlasting a single generation), carefully selective and stable in membership, confers specific rights and duties on its members not possessed by outsiders, and is identified clearly. The members work together for specific goals, the group owns wealth independently of individual members, and in its name members can be disciplined and rewarded. Clear-cut leaders are characteristic of corporate groups."

(Honigmann 1959:360).

The existence of such corporate groups within a society is often related to the control of resources by (small groups of) individuals. Many early forms of stratified societies are characterised by the presence of such corporate groups holding exclusive rights (Hayden & Cannon 1982). Archaeological indications of former residential corporate groups can be in the form of two or more contemporary sub-groups in a settlement (*ibid.*). It can also be inferred from the presence of distinct burial grounds (Saxe 1970:119). One of the objectives of the Port au Choix study was to detect whether the three burial clusters of locus II represent the burial grounds of three such corporate groups. Another kind of corporate group is the institution, or sodality; a

group of people that has joined together for religious, political, or economic reasons (Hayden & Cannon 1982). Because members of institutions do not live together, such groups can hardly be detected archaeologically.

In societies with little complexity in social structure, which is the case in many hunter-gatherer groups, the most important social dimensions are sex and age, and the social positions of the individuals are mainly determined by their personal abilities and achievements (Service 1962). Sodalities hardly ever exist. Thus the status positions are achieved by the individual rather than ascribed by the society. This results in a limited differentiation in mortuary practices when compared to societies with more complex social structures. In societies with little social complexity very young individuals, who have not yet been able to acquire a great number of identity relationships and important social positions, have a very limited number of people who have obligations towards them. This results in a minimal energy investment in their mortuary treatment (Hertz 1960:84; Binford 1971). On the other hand, if infants are granted mortuary treatment which requires more energy expenditure than the treatment of some adults of the same sex, a form of social ranking by birth, or ascribed status, might have been present (Saxe 1970:8). However, wealthy children's graves are often reflecting associative status; the status of the child's family, rather than the status ascribed to the child itself (O'Shea 1996:20). Only in the case when two or more distinct stratified status (burial) groups are present, independent of sex and age, can we conclude that the society under study was ranked (Peebles & Kus 1977, Flanagan 1989) or divided into lineages.

"The seeds of status differentiation are present in all groups of hunter-gatherers (...) Harmony and equality may be more a Romantic figment of ethnographers' imaginations."

(Price & Brown 1985:12).

As indicated above by Price and Brown status differentiation is present in all human groups. Hierarchy, which implies the presence of inequality between persons, occurs in non-ranked societies as well (Flanagan 1989, Paynter 1989). There are three sources which can give some indication of the degree of this differentiation. The first is the energy expenditure principle. If the mortuary practices which a specific society conducts can be separated into sets of mortuary attributes, representing distinct levels of energy expenditure, the more energy consuming treatments are usually reserved for individuals with the more important social positions (Binford 1971; Tainter 1977). These energy expenditure levels could also reflect horizontal differentiation, such as lineages (O'Shea 1984:20). The second source of information on status differentiation can be the presence of specific symbols of authority, for example rare and valuable grave goods which occur independently of sex, age, or personal quality (Brown 1981, Chapman & Randsborg 1981). The third information source forms the human remains themselves. If the demographic structure of a skeletal population differs

significantly from what can be expected biologically, with regards to sex and age distributions, this can then be an indication for the presence of status dimensions to which different sex and age groups had unequal access (*ibid.*). Also possibly connected with status are differences in the kind and variety of food which was consumed by the people. Such differences can be traced with stable isotope analysis of skeletal samples, which gives information on the average diet of approximately the last ten years of someone's life. Thus the analysis of mortuary treatment and prehistoric diets can give information on the presence and the degree of social stratification, in terms of hierarchy or ranking.

In addition to the individual's social positions during life, other factors may influence his/her mortuary treatment. The cause and location of death, for example a violent death, suicide, accident, disease, may change the obligations the survivors have towards the dead, which results in an alteration of the regular mortuary treatment (Ucko 1969; Binford 1971). It is possible that parts of the regular treatment are cancelled or, on the other hand, that some extra tribute is made to the individual. This unusual treatment is also dependent upon the *social persona* of the deceased (Shay 1985). Also reported by Shay is that less complex societies make no distinction between volitional and non-volitional forms of deviancy and therefore treat those comparably at death (*ibid.*).

Different (corporate) groups within a society may use the mortuary treatment of their dead as means to compete with each other, for example rich elaborate funerals are conducted in order to impress rival groups (Parker Pearson 1982). Other causes of mortuary variation are economic circumstances (Miles 1965). Apart from the mortuary behaviour determined by the society's death protocols, quite often a certain amount of idiosyncratic variation is acceptable. This individualistic variation is usually determined by the wishes of the deceased or those of the survivors that had important identity relationships with him or her.

As mentioned earlier the scale of chronological change in mortuary practices must also be taken into account. In the first place the mortuary practices considered appropriate for particular social groups in a society are subject to change. There can also be a change in which social groups are granted specific combinations of mortuary practices (O'Shea 1984:31). Changes in mortuary practices therefore do not necessarily and isomorphically reflect changes in social structure. It has also been demonstrated that changes in mortuary practices are not necessarily caused by changes in religious beliefs (Ucko 1969). An important cross-cultural study of changes in mortuary practices was conducted by Cannon;

"Mortuary practices change because they serve as media for social expression and because they derive meaning through contrast with contemporary and past expressions."

(Cannon 1989:446).

Based on diachronic case studies, Cannon postulates that mortuary practices follow a cyclical pattern of change. First in such a cycle is an elaboration of mortuary practices caused by an increase of wealth, socioeconomic flux, and uncertainty about status positions. In order to express their status and also the status to which they aspire, social groups invest more and more energy and material wealth in the disposal of their dead. At a certain moment this reaches a peak, when all groups have reached the most elaborate display possible. After this a decline sets in, and some forms of mortuary expression will even be forbidden. New uncertainty about status positions can result in another cycle of mortuary elaboration. In the cases studied by Cannon, such cycles were hardly or not correlated with changes in social structure, religious belief, or emotional feelings for the deceased (Cannon 1989).

4.2 The Archaeological Resolution of Mortuary Practices

The purpose of archaeology is to reconstruct the behaviour of prehistoric and protohistoric people. This has to be done through the study of the material remains and traces of the past (Childe 1945). One of the most intriguing classes of remains of our ancestors are their cemeteries, where we can see the remains of the people themselves, and the objects which were important to them. Lubbock (1869) tried to reconstruct the beliefs in an afterlife by means of studying grave goods which, he thought, were directly correlated with those beliefs. However, Ucko (1969), among others, showed that grave goods cannot be equated with belief in the afterlife. Comparable objects may have different symbolic meanings in different cultures, and in one specific culture several different objects may symbolise the same concept. A simple universally applicable explanation of mortuary behaviour does not exist (Metcalf & Huntington 1991). Therefore we have to study the mortuary practices of each society independently and empirically in order to detect how they correlate with sex, age, and status, the basic elements in any human society.

Archaeological data are always incomplete. Archaeology has often been described as an attempt to put together an unknown jig-saw puzzle, most of whose pieces are missing. In our attempts to reconstruct prehistoric social structure by means of mortuary analyses three major hurdles are encountered. The first is the extent to which the social differentiation present in a society is reflected in its mortuary practices and whether or not these result in material, observable, mortuary attributes. As mentioned above,

these reflections vary among societies and in addition to social structure other factors may influence mortuary behaviour.

The second hurdle is the post-depositional processes which affect the material state of the mortuary attributes and also those of the interred human remains. Examples of such processes are decay of organic materials, soil erosion and animal disturbances (Wood & Johnson 1978). Human activities can be included in this set of processes as well. Such activities can be the digging of new graves that cross-cut and disturb older burials, or the plundering of graves. These post-depositional processes do not affect all the mortuary attributes and human remains to the same extent, but they may bias the original 'pattern' of material remains to a considerable degree. Organic grave goods, which are perishable, are less likely to be retrieved by the archaeologist than interred stone objects. The preservation of organic materials is dependent upon their chemical and physical compositions. Bones of human adults have strong biochemical structures and are much more likely to survive the centuries than the weaker and smaller bones of children. Therefore children's burials have smaller chances to be represented in the archaeological record (Gordon & Buikstra 1981). Differential preservation of mortuary attributes can result in biases in the 'reflected' social structure. O'Shea conducted a mortuary analysis of three Athapaskan societies of which ethnographic information was available. It was discovered that horizontal (kin-based) differentiation was expressed by a few perishable grave goods, and therefore was much harder to detect archaeologically than vertical (social) differentiation, which was expressed by large differences in energy expenditure (O'Shea 1981:49).

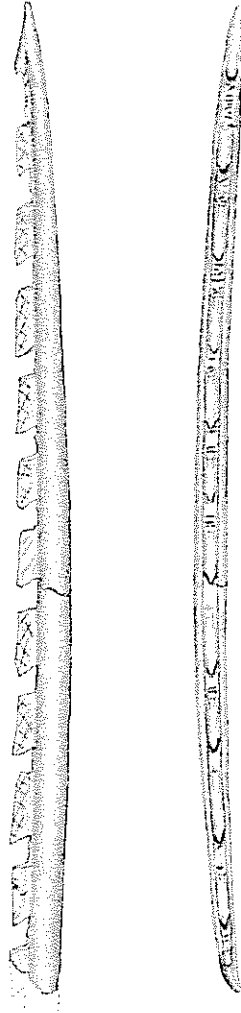


Figure 4.2. Square barbed antler point (attribute 87) from burial B 16. Length of the object is approximately 23 cm. Drawing by Katherine Scott. (EeBi-2:466).

The last hurdle involves the limitations of the archaeological method concerning the analysis and interpretation of the mortuary attributes. The extent to which the observed mortuary attributes can be decoded into aspects of prehistoric behaviour is limited. One of the main archaeological problems is diachronic variation. As mentioned above, societies and their mortuary practices are not static entities; they change over time. Depending

upon the rate of change in mortuary practices within a society and the time it has used a particular cemetery, a number of different chronological sub-phases is to be expected in that burial ground. For the best control of the chronological and social variation it is useful to analyse a cemetery in connection with other comparable and/or associated burial grounds in the vicinity (Beck 1995, O'Shea 1995). Furthermore, for a reconstruction of prehistoric social structure, mortuary remains preferably need to be studied in context with other culturally associated archaeological remains, such as settlements (Sears 1961, Bartel 1982). However the first Maritime Archaic settlement in the Port au Choix area has only recently been discovered and is in the process of being excavated (Renouf & Bell 1998; Renouf, pers. comm.). This precludes such an approach for the locus II cemetery to date. Nevertheless, as we will demonstrate, Port au Choix-3 locus II provides a high level of social structural and chronological resolution.

4.3 The Four Mortuary Domains

We are able to reconstruct only part of the prehistoric mortuary practices. These practices can be inferred from the observed patterning in the archaeological material, *i.e.* from the encountered mortuary attributes. These attributes can be categorised in four groups or mortuary domains.

The first mortuary domain which can be analysed archaeologically is the placement in the cemetery. The interment of more people in one grave, or the grouping of certain graves in clusters, may be a consequence of the fact that those people died and were buried at the same time, but it also may reflect terminal status differentiations, descent or family groups, or other corporate groups within a society (Tainter 1976, Goldstein 1981:57). If contemporary spatial burial groups have comparable sex and age-distributions, they possibly reflect the existence of distinct lineage groups which may have had different rights to use and control specific resources (Saxe 1970:119). If significantly different sex and age-distributions occur in these spatial groups, it is more likely that they represent different, terminal, status groups, which were not always equally accessible to each sex and age category.

The second mortuary domain is that of grave construction. In the case of a burial, whether an inhumation or a cremation, we are usually able to find some remains which give information on prehistoric mortuary practices. The other customs of disposal of the dead, such as laying the dead uncovered on the soil surface, a scaffold, an icefloe, or in a boat, hardly ever produce any recognisable traces. Regardless of how important these kinds of mortuary practices may have been in prehistory, their repercussions are beyond the

scope of archaeological monitoring. What we can study then, are the graves and their contents. A grave can vary from a little hole in the ground for the disposal of some cremated remains, to a giant burial mound or a pyramid. In almost every cemetery, prehistoric or contemporary, variation in grave construction can be observed, referring to the differences in social positions and/or status of the dead. The differences in grave construction in the cemeteries of hunter-gatherer societies, such as Port au Choix-3 locus II, are usually smaller than in those of food producing societies. This is because hunter-gatherer social systems are usually less complex and wealth and status differences are smaller than those in food producing societies (Binford 1971).

Body position and treatment is the third mortuary domain. Many of the observable attributes in this domain are connected to the position of the body. Whether an individual is buried on its left or right side, with the head east or westwards, facing north, south or the sky above could, but not necessarily so, be dependant upon his or her membership of a particular social group within a society, and be dictated by the spiritual beliefs of that group (Binford 1971). A study of burial orientations was conducted by Rahtz (1978) who, in addition to correlations with sex, age, and status, also recognised a number of other factors determining these orientations, such as the localities of holy places or buildings, areas of origin, fishing or hunting grounds, settlements, paths and roads, natural features, e.g. the sea, and astronomical entities such as the sun, moon and stars. Another specific attribute in this domain is the degree of flexing of the body. In the ethnographic record three reasons were found for burying the deceased in a flexed position. In the first place flexing is seen as a symbol of rebirth because it is a copy of the position of the foetus in the womb. In the second place flexing the body could have been the result of binding legs and body together in order to keep the spirit from walking and bothering the living (Binford 1971). The third reason is purely economical: the grave pit can be smaller if the body is buried in a flexed position. Other mortuary attributes in the body position and treatment domain are, for example, embalmmnt, placement in a coffin, re-burial of (part of) the body (Miles 1965), and covering the dead in blankets.

The last of the four domains is that of grave goods. Worsaae's Law (Rowe 1962) states that the items present in a burial were in use at the same time. The objects that accompany the deceased were either his/her personal belongings, or gifts from the people that he or she had left behind. Grave goods can consist of artifacts, such as tools, ornaments and clothing, or of natural materials, such as unworked stones or animal bones. The latter could possibly be remnants of food gifts. In many societies a number of the items used as grave goods, especially tools and ornaments, are buried with only one of the two sexes (Rothschild 1983). In addition to sex, the occurrence and the number of certain grave goods can be dependent upon age. Children could be considered too young to join, for example, a hunting party and to possess the

required tools for that activity. In the case that the society includes only personal belongings in the burials, those tools will be absent from the burials of young children. Obviously those children could have other grave goods instead, such as kinds of ornaments not present in adult graves. The third major factor which may have its impact on the grave inventory is status. The status of an individual before his or her death could be reflected in the nature and number of the accompanying artifacts. Some tools, ornaments or raw materials may be very expensive and difficult to obtain. It is possible that only some individuals could be wealthy and/or powerful enough to acquire those items. It has to be taken into account however, that the artifacts used during daily life are not necessarily considered appropriate as grave goods. The artifact assemblages found in burials therefore are not a mirror image of the material world of the deceased in daily life.

4.4 The Interpretation of Mortuary Variability

In order to explain the mortuary variability encountered in prehistoric cemeteries ethnographic analogies are being used. Such analogies can be used to detect new kinds of patterning in archaeological data (Binford 1967). The direct historical analogy is the best framework to interpret archaeological cultural patterning (Dalton 1981). For such analogies, ethnographic societies are being analysed which are thought to have the strongest possible or the most comparable historical relationships to the prehistoric society. The differences between the ethnographic and the prehistoric societies, with regards to time, space, ecology, technology and subsistence strategy, need to be as small as possible (*ibid.*).

The use of ethnographic data however, is problematical for a number of reasons. The first reason is the small number of properly described first hand observations that are available, most cultures had been affected by western civilization before all their characteristics could be studied;

“The primitive manners and customs of the North American Indians are rapidly passing away under influences of civilization and other disturbing elements.”

(Yarrow 1880:1).

As explained below this problem is not so prominent with the ethnography of societies in Labrador and other northern areas. The second reason is that the ethnographic reports are often too incomplete and biased to be suitable as proper analogies for archaeological cases (Clarke 1978:394; Wobst 1978, but see Burch 1980). This is mainly because ethnographic information, whether on mortuary practices or on other behaviour in a society, usually has much smaller time and space dimensions than are desired by the archaeologist. Also

the presence of an ethnographer in a society he/she studies can have serious effects on the behaviour of the people, and thus on the observations of the ethnographer. Such biases are present in the analogies which were used in the Port au Choix-3 locus II study. A third reason is that during his or her fieldwork the ethnographer observes only a few funeral ceremonies. As a result, cause and effect relationships which can lead to different mortuary behaviour are generally overstated. This can lead to biased results regarding the potential mortuary variability in a particular society (O'Shea 1984:20). Therefore the ethnographic data and the results of the archaeological analyses must be compared in order to complement and supplement each other.

The results of the Port au Choix-3 locus II analysis were compared to the ethnographic data on a few northeastern Algonquian-speaking societies. As stated earlier the Maritime Archaic people were likely to have been part of the Algonquian language family. The ethnographically described societies are the Penobscot, Micmac, Cree, Montagnais and Naskapi. In addition to a common heritage of the same language family (see Siebert 1967), these groups live roughly in the former Maritime Archaic culture area and are pedestrian hunter-gatherers with a similar technology and range of subsistence-strategy choice. Particularly among the societies of Labrador, historical contacts with Europeans have been limited (Fitzhugh 1972:46), which means that the ethnographic reports on those societies describe a relatively undisturbed aboriginal way of life.

Similarities between the ethnographic record and the results of the Port au Choix-3 locus II analysis (Chapter 8) suggest that despite the time gap of 4200 to 4000 radiocarbon years, the northeastern Algonquian analogies are suitable for the interpretation of the mortuary variability and diagnosed patterning of Port au Choix-3.

The methods and techniques which were used to detect this patterning are described in Chapters 5 and 6. In Chapter 5 the statistical methods are discussed.

