A Unique Pictograph Site in the Context of Political and Ideological Conflicts

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The recent discovery of a pictograph site in the eastern part of the province of Québec has allowed the commencement of a multidisciplinary research effort, the Nisula Project (Arsenault 1994a, b.; Arsenault, Gagnon, Martijn and Watchman 1995). The main purpose of this project has been the scientific investigation of a unique archaeological site, a pictograph site called Nisula (DeEh-1), in its regional context. However, in the course of our research we noticed that the current status of the site was at stake when confronted with the values defended by different interest groups. These values are closely related to distinct standpoints that appear to be in conflict regarding the conservation and management of the Nisula site. In the following discussion, we will scrutinize those revealed by representatives of local organizations involved in economic, tourist and recreational development, by political leaders of the Native communities, and by their spiritual leaders and traditional activists, as well as those put forward by the scholars themselves.

One of the main issues to be discussed here is how the Nisula site can become both a place of commemoration for the Native people and a tourist attraction, without hindering the pursuit of scientific research. In particular, one can wonder whether it will be possible to safeguard the sacred and ideological values attributed to this type of archaeological site by the Native communities, while at the same time making it accessible to visitors. As I will show, if the Nisula Project is to be carried on, it will only be when the actors apparently in conflict have reached an agreement.

THE NISULA SITE

The Nisula site is one of only seven pictograph sites located in the province of Québec. As a matter of fact, it is the easternmost pictograph site known in the boreal forest of Canada. This open-air site is located on one of the high granitic cliffs typical of the Canadian Shield, on the
northern shore of Lake Cassette, about 20 km northwest of the town of Forestville, inland from the Upper North Shore area of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The local area, with its rich natural resources, was part of a territory traditionally exploited by the Innu people (also called Montagnais), but this territory is nowadays a provincial conservation park, open to fishermen, hunters, and other outdoor enthusiasts. It is interesting to note that before its discovery in 1985 by a Finnish tourist, Anne Nisula, neither Natives nor non-Natives knew about the existence of the Nisula site.

The cliff face on which the pictographs were painted is oriented towards the south and southeast. Its elevation ranges between 170 and 190 meters above sea level. The rock surface is smoothly curved and highly polished, a phenomenon due to the scouring movements of glaciers, and to the polishing actions of flow water during the melting of the ice at the end of the last glaciation, approximately 11,000 years ago.

Composed of different geometric and figurative motifs painted with red ochre (mainly hematite), the decorated surface covers an area 6.75 by 2.01 meters, that is, nearly 14 square meters. At the site no less than 145 morphs can be distinguished, unevenly distributed on four contiguous painted areas or “panels”. The main panel (panel II) is between about 2 meters and 4 meters above the summer water level of the lake, and the other panels are even higher; it is therefore difficult to reach the painted panels when seated in a canoe or boat. In their current state of preservation, the pictographs are rather faint. This is why they are quite hard to see, especially when the sun’s rays are reflecting on the rock surface. These conditions could explain why the Nisula site has passed unnoticed until recently.

Although most of the morphs are only vertical, oblique or horizontal lines measuring between 1 cm and 25 cm, one can see about twenty “stick figures” that can be interpreted as figurative motifs. Most of these figurative motifs depict either anthromorphic, zoomorphic or zoo- anthropomorphic figures, whereas the others could be representations of material objects, such as a tent or a canoe. It is interesting to note that a few pictographs seem to be superimposed, especially on panel II, and that there appear to be three distinct tones of red ochre, as if there had been more than one period of iconographic production.
THE NISULA PROJECT

Various specialists have contributed to the study of the Nisula site. On the one hand, archaeologists, geo-archaeologists, art historians, and specialists in conservation methods and absolute dating techniques have proceeded with the recording, sampling, analysis, dating, and interpretation of the site in its physical and cultural setting (Arsenault et al. 1995). On the other hand, ethnohistorians have studied historical archives and old maps (Martijn 1993), and ethnolinguists and ethnologists have interpreted Innu oral tradition (Bacon and Vincent 1994) in order to discover any clues about religious activities, beliefs and representations linked to the past of the Innu that could have been related to the rock art phenomenon in this area. Finally, a close collaboration with representatives of the Innu communities has also been very important to us; thus, we have invited some of them to conduct traditional ceremonies on the site, to interpret its content according to their own world-view, and to take charge with us of the management programme of the Nisula site.

More precisely, at the archaeological level, our fieldwork included different activities that can only be summarized here. First, we proceeded with the careful recording and measuring of the site components on different media. To do so, we had to build a floating scaffold in order to work directly on the painted panels. Thus, for the recording, we used felt pens of contrasting colours which allowed us to trace the site components on transparencies (Mylar paper type). Components such as morphs, lichens and exfoliations were exactly reproduced according to their respective scale and positions. In addition, we have taken many photographs every year since 1992, using sensitive film with different lenses and filters in order to keep a complete visual corpus of the site and its content up to date. Finally, we used Munsell colour charts to segregate and identify the three red tones of the ochre pigment visible on the rock surface. All these data are now in the process of being scanned, using an imaging computerized programme (Adobe’s Photo-Shop); this programme should help us to enhance some features otherwise hard to distinguish in situ with the naked eye.

Secondly, the preservation conditions of the site have been evaluated by my colleagues Louis Gagnon and Alan Watchman, and by me (Arsenault and Gagnon 1993, 1996; Arsenault et al. 1995; Gagnon 1993,
When compared to other rock art sites in Québec, one may note that the state of preservation of the Nisula site appears, at first sight, to be relatively good. However, a detailed scrutiny of the rock surface shows that some natural phenomena occur that continue to alter the integrity of the site structure; it appears that the site has suffered from various stresses caused by continuous and discontinuous environmental pressures, such as rain, snow, exposure to the sun, freezing and thawing, lichen growth, earthquakes, and so forth. However, at the present stage, only some of these elements could be partially controlled or slowed down by mechanical or chemical intervention. For example, in order to clean up those parts of the rock surface overgrown with lichens, fungi or algae, we sprayed a biocide/fungicide to try to stop parasitic vegetation from proliferating on the painted panels. It is also our hope that new technologies will soon allow us to better protect this endangered and non-renewable cultural resource. As a matter of fact, our scientific interventions have been guided by the prime directive that the Nisula site, with its specific components and setting, be preserved for the next generation. But, as I will show later, the in situ conservation of the site components has to be considered in relation not only to environmental changes that happen gradually or even abruptly, but also to the cultural interests of competing groups.

Thirdly, we surveyed the Lake Cassette area in order to better document the prehistoric occupation of that region, and, more specifically, to check whether any archaeological sites occur in the vicinity which could have been contemporaneous with the Nisula site (Arsenault and Martijn 1994). Thus, by making test pits in different places along the shoreline of the lake, we sought out any significant clues that could allow us to find out if prehistoric groups had camped near the Nisula site, and consequently determine their possible relationships with it. At the same time, an underwater exploration led by archaeologists André Lépine and Jean Bélisle was made just in front of the painted panels of Nisula (Bélisle and Lépine 1994). Unfortunately, the archaeological survey has not yielded any conclusive result so far, but the underwater exploration has revealed a huge block of migmatite, weighing more than a ton, that fell from panel III in the past. This block, which now lies about 12 meters under water, could still have some pictographs painted on it. This
part of our fieldwork ought to be pursued in the next few years, and underwater excavations should be undertaken at the foot of the site in the near future. We are confident that at least some of these actions will prove to be productive.

Fourthly, we took organic samples from the site surface, such as lichens and algae, for biological analysis at Laval University, in Québec (Arsenault and Gagnon 1993). The laboratory analysis shows that the site has been infested for years by three different varieties of lichens, as well as by fungi, algae, and some organisms (spider nests and insect cocoons) and micro-organisms (diatoms).

Finally, my colleague Alan Watchman visited the site in 1993 and 1994, and removed a few minute samples of the rock surface expected to contain organic matter (Watchman 1993, 1994). At Laval University, Watchman proceeded to a detailed laboratory examination of the samples collected, and pre-treated them for 14-C dating. He successfully extracted a sufficient quantity of organic matter encapsulated in a thin veneer of amorphous silica (or silica skin) just under the pigment. This extracted material was then send to the Ansto Laboratory in Sydney, Australia, which used the technique of “Accelerator Mass Spectrometry” (AMS) 14-C dating. This technique is similar to conventional radiometric dating, but much less carbon (between 0.001 and 0.3 grams) is required for the analysis; special counters capable of taking measurements from such small samples can thus give radiocarbon dates. Adopted during the 1980s, the AMS dating method has proven to be a radical innovation in rock art research as it henceforth allowed archaeologists to put pictograph sites in a more reliable and accurate timeframe. The AMS analysis of the 1993 sample yielded a date of 2500 ±275 years BP, whereas that of 1994, which contained a smaller amount of graphite, gave an age of 2440 ±610 BP. It appears from these dates that the site cannot be more than 2200 years old, and could even be slightly younger.

Another colleague, Charles A. Martijn, undertook a thorough study of old maps made by a Jesuit missionary, Pierre-Michel Laure, that has shed new light on historical knowledge about the Nisula site (Martijn 1993). Some of these maps, drawn between 1731 and 1733 during the French Regime in Canada and showing the so-called “Domaine du Roy” in Nouvelle-France, show a lake designated by the name Pepéchapissinag-
an, and, beside it, what could be its French translation. The French sentence can be read as “one can see on the rocks some naturally painted figures”; it is also worth noting that the name *Pepéchapiassinagan* has the same meaning, according to Mrs Desneiges Mollen, an Innu woman who translated it for us (José Mailhot, personal communication). Martijn (1993) believes not only that this may be the oldest historical reference to a rock art site in Canada, but in fact a reference to the actual location of the Nisula site. It also suggests that the Native people living in the area at the beginning of the 18th century were still aware of the existence of a pictograph site in their territory. It leads us to believe, then, that the Nisula site was still visited by Native groups (probably the direct ancestors of the present-day Innu), a long time after it had been made.

However, all knowledge of the Nisula site became lost during the next two centuries, probably under the constant religious pressure on the Innu people from Catholic clergymen for whom everything pagan — word as well as work — was a matter of evil which should be eradicated. In fact, the first results of the ethnographic enquiry made by Sylvie Vincent and Joséphine Bacon amongst the Innu people of Betsiamites and Les Escoumins suggest that these latter communities had completely forgotten about the Nisula site (Bacon and Vincent 1994). But it does not mean that the present-day Innu do not know of other rock art sites within their traditional territories, and we look forward to learning more from them on that matter in the near future.

A PICTOGRAPH SITE IN JEOPARDY

As stated earlier, we can now pinpoint some tendencies that are brought out by Native and non-Native actors. Let us start with the latter ones who are members of a few local organizations involved in economic and tourist development. Those individuals, including representatives of the provincial government, are aware that the Nisula site is a unique archaeological resource in their region. Because this region has suffered from a declining economy for several years, any economic tool is welcome insofar as it could attract tourists and help to reduce unemployment. In this context, if the site can be opened to the public, it could rapidly become an exciting attraction and allow local organizations to increase their income. In other words, according to the point of view of
those individuals, the Nisula site should be commercially exploited. Is this standpoint shared by their Native neighbours?

One Native position is that held by the official authorities of the local community, that is, those who are at the head of the Band Council of Betsiamites, an Innu reserve located near the town of Baie-Comeau. The political leaders of this Band Council have shown, up until now, a more moderate attitude than their non-Native counterparts. It is important to note that the Band Council of Betsiamites has been involved in the Nisula Project since the beginning, as administrative partners. Therefore, its leaders are well informed about the research process and its current results. Overall, they have a real interest in the possibility that the Nisula site could be open to the public in the near future. According to some of their representatives, it has become imperative that everyone learn about Native culture and history, and especially about the past of the Innu. And one of the means to do so is to promote its specific cultural and social elements visually by setting up a cultural centre within the reserve territory. In such a centre, visitors could learn from exhibits showing the past way of life of the ancestors of the Innu and their prehistoric characteristics.

Accordingly, for the Innu leaders, the Nisula site represents a tremendous example of their cultural and religious heritage that has to be preserved and exhibited in situ. Such an exhibit could indeed add something fundamental to the educational and ideological orientation of their cultural centre. In their minds, the Nisula site is not merely an economic tool to be exploited by profit-making organisations, but it should also be used as a cultural instrument. Unfortunately, this pictograph site is not part of their actual territory, but the Band Council is willing to reach a compromise on this issue with the non-Native authorities, and to discuss its future exploitation. For instance, some Innu political leaders suggest that tours to the Nisula site should be organized under the authority of the Band Council, and supervised by Native guides.

But the fact that this site is located outside any Innu reserve has led to another problem, with the so-called Traditionalists. According to these activists, who come from different Innu reserves, the Band Council should adopt a more hard-line position. In their minds, the Nisula site should serve as a strong symbolic instrument to be used in the current process
of territorial claims with the Québec provincial government. Since the site is located within a provincial park that was traditionally exploited by the ancestors of the Innu, it now represents a bargaining tool that should be seized at once for claiming the ancestral lands. Becoming an object of contention, it is likely that the site will be closed for a long period of time, not only to the public, but also to scholars and Native people, thus preventing any further activities at the site.

The situation could worsen with the involvement of a third interested Innu group I will call the "Spiritualists". Some of them have been involved in the Nisula Project from the very beginning, either as informants or as fieldwork assistants. From their standpoint, the Nisula site is an integral part of the Sacred Lands and, therefore, must be venerated as a sacred location. They want everyone who comes to the site to show the greatest respect, as one would manifest when in a church, a synagogue or any other temple of worship. This is the reason why they vigorously reject any commercial exploitation of the site, and sincerely believe that it is no good to talk too much about it. Consequently, it would be absolutely disastrous, from their point of view, to allow anyone go freely to the site, because it could be desecrated in many ways. The best solution for them would therefore be to keep access restricted only to those people who have received the Native religious teaching or who show a sincere respect for it.

The present situation is far from simple. How can one reconcile the scientific interest with those other points of view without compromising the conservation and management programme of the Nisula site and, at the same time, keeping open the possibility of rendering it accessible to the public?

First of all, it has rapidly become obvious that it is important for the groups concerned to continue the dialogue in order to express their respective positions, and eventually arrive at a mutual understanding. With a touch of diplomacy, we have been able to set up a committee which aims at developing an effective programme for the conservation and management of this unique pictograph site (Arsenault and Gagnon 1996). Its members come from the Native and non-Native groups of interest discussed earlier, but the traditionalist activists have declined to join the committee for the moment; they are however kept informed about the
current discussions and it is our hope that they will join in when they judge this partnership good for the benefits of the Innu people.

Founded in 1994, the committee for the development of the Nisula site has started to define a policy of management that can later be applied to other rock art sites in the province of Québec. Thus, the committee first stated that this pictograph site can offer a potential for economic and tourist development for all the local communities. Furthermore, its members have acknowledged — though not without a certain reluctance from some non-Native representatives — the sacred dimension of the Nisula site, and the fact that it must not be profaned by improper actions since it could become an Innu sanctuary. They also understand that, for the Innu communities, it has a high cultural value.

However, everyone agrees that the opening of the Nisula site to the public could generate, even in the short term, serious problems in relation to its integrity and sacredness, if precautions are not taken rapidly. In this respect, the committee has reached a temporary consensus that access to the pictograph site will be restricted to the scientific members of the Nisula Project and representatives of the Native Spiritual movement, whose Innu members will be able to perform their ceremonies in situ.

In the meantime, during the next three years and with the consent of all its members, the committee will start developing better facilities and some efficient programmes which can be directed towards public access to the site. This task could be facilitated with the discovery of other rock art sites in the vicinity. In this case, it might be possible to select, among the existing sites, one which could be open to the public, the others then being kept strictly for ritual uses and for scientific analysis.

Alternatively, if there is no other rock art site in the region and the Nisula site had to be kept as it is now, that is, forbidden to the public, it would then be useful to think about developing various concepts for exhibits, including a 3-D reproduction of the site elsewhere, or even a visit to it on screen, thanks to a virtual reality computerized programme.

What will remain important, however, is that every one be informed about, and made sensitive to, the so-called rock art sites of the Native peoples of North America, their religious, cultural and historical values, and the research programmes that help to understand them better.
REFERENCES


