



DR. CLAIRE ALIX

ALASKA QUATERNARY CENTER, UAF; UNIVERSITE DE PARIS 1 PANTHEON-SORBONNE

TRACKING THE BIRNIRK-THULE TRANSITION – NEW INSIGHTS FROM THE CAPE ESPENBERG BIRNIRK PROJECT

Despite its importance for understanding the emergence and spread of Inupiaq/Inuit culture in the Arctic, the Birnirk to Thule transition remains a poorly defined archaeological period due in part to the excavations of most Birnirk sites in the first part of the 20th century. Birnirk sites are few in numbers and usually found in coastal settings and the Rising Whale site (KTZ-304) on beach ridge E-6 at Cape Espenberg in Northwest Alaska has only recently been recognized as a Birnirk site. Continued Excavations in 2016 and 2017 revealed two differently shaped houses with differing diagnostic artifact assemblages within a shared cultural tradition and non-overlapping ages of occupation. Extremely well-preserved Feature 12 consists of connected rooms with an uncertain entrance. Feature 21 is a more common Thule-type house with a larger main room entered by a lengthy tunnel and connected by a shorter passage to a side room that witnessed repeated fire activities. Both houses show signs of long distance trade and exhibit distinctive caribou-intensive faunal assemblages. Our 2016 and 2017 fieldwork “followed the wood,” employing enhanced photography to infer Birnirk and Thule architectural strategies and, coupled with tree ring analysis, diagnostic assemblages and radiocarbon dating, further refine cultural filiations by comparison to Siberian Birnirk and Thule within a high-resolution chronology.

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