

SIXTEENTH CENTURY BASQUE WHALERS' CLOTHING FROM RED BAY, LABRADOR

Élise Dubuc

AN EXCEPTIONAL DISCOVERY (1)

In 1977 excavations began at a series of sites at Red Bay, Labrador, on the north shore of the Strait of Belle Isle (fig.1). They have continued since that time under the direction of James A. Tuck, Memorial University of Newfoundland. The sites are those utilised by French and Spanish Basque whalers during the latter part of the sixteenth century. Among the remarkable finds that have been made at Red Bay are virtually complete and fragmentary garments, dating from the Basque period, which appear to be the oldest European clothing yet found in North America. The clothing was encased in cold, water-saturated, bog-like burial environments which are well known to preserve animal fibres (2).

Very few European garments dating prior to the eighteenth century are found in museum collections; even less common are the everyday costumes of the working classes. The Red Bay garments, therefore, offer a unique opportunity for costume historians. Yves Delaporte states that with the rise of the "new history", the costume is no longer considered as "a form of which we trace the evolution from one period to another" but as "a fact having social and economic dimensions" (3). From this point of view the Red Bay discoveries are important. In the words of Margareta Nockert describing the costume of the Bocksten man, they tell us "how a man with a certain position in society was dressed at a particular time" (4).

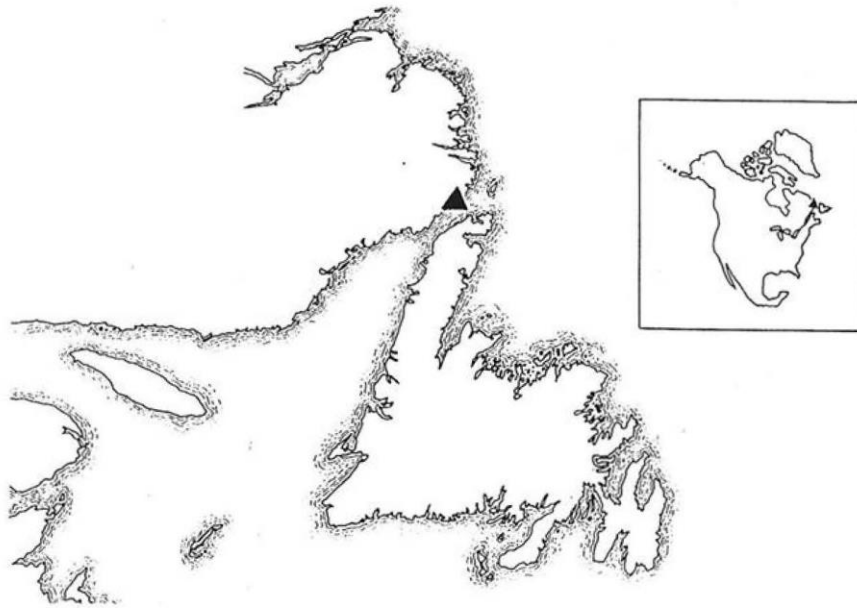


fig.1 Situation of Red Bay on the north shore of Strait of Belle Isle.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Beginning early in the sixteenth century Strait of Belle Isle, the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the St. Lawrence Estuary were visited numerous Europeans. Shortly after the voyage of Cabot (1497), and while the voyages of discovery of Corte Real (1500, 1501), Verrazano (1522), Cartier (1534, 1535 - '36) and Gomez (1525) were still taking place, fishing flotillas from Portugal, the Basque Provinces, France and England were arriving each summer to exploit vast stocks of codfish found in these waters. These fishermen were quick to notice the large quantity of whales, which migrated annually through the Strait of Belle Isle and within a few decades began to hunt them (5). Fishing and whaling grew in importance during the sixteenth century and, during the latter decades, w

supplemented by at least a limited trade in furs with native people. Despite this intensive exploitation no permanent settlements were established before the seventeenth century. Occasionally the rapid onset of winter trapped the crews of whalers on the Labrador coast. Deaths were common among the overwinterers, probably as much a result of scurvy as of a lack of food or shelter.

RED BAY HARBOUR

Of all the ports along the north shore of the Strait of Belle Isle, Red Bay was the most heavily utilized by Basque whalers. Archaeological evidence indicates that about one-half of the ships which left France and Spain each year established their shore bases at Red Bay. The remainder was scattered at a dozen or so smaller ports along the Labrador coast. In the peak years of the whale fishery as many as 1,500 men may have been at Red Bay each summer. Beginning in the late 1530s shore stations were set up where whales were flensed, oil rendered from their blubber, casks manufactured and repaired and where many of the whalers lived and died. Whaling continued into the early seventeenth century but decreased rapidly after the 1580s. Many explanations have been offered for the decline of the whale fishery, including the defeat of the Great Armada in 1588 and deteriorating economic conditions in Spain. Regardless of the cause, Basque whaling in Labrador ceased in the early 1600s and the Basques hired themselves out to the English and Dutch, whom they taught the art of whaling in the waters around Spitsbergen and Jan Mayen Islands.

THE RED BAY CLOTHING

All of the garments found at Red Bay are made from wool. The same wet and acidic soils which preserved these animal fibres have caused vegetable fibres to disappear. Thus linen

undergarments, and even the thread with which the woollen clothes were sewn, have long since vanished (6). All of the garments are of a brownish colour caused by humic acid staining. Laboratory analysis, however, is able to detect traces of the original dyes or natural pigments, thereby revealing the original colours of the garments (7).

The most interesting textile finds have come from a cemetery on Saddle Island, which shelters Red Bay Harbour from the Strait of Belle Isle and which was the location of many shore stations during the late sixteenth century. This paper will focus on two sets of clothing excavated in 1984 and 1986. The remainder of the textiles are still undergoing examination and analysis.

Individual I (1984 season)

The skeleton of this individual was completely dissolved by acid ground water but the garments remained in their original positions and indicated clearly the burial position. Because of ground pressure the garments are now only a few centimetres thick but they still retain the creases and folds which were present at the time of burial (8).

The costume of Individual I (fig. 2) consists of a short madder dyed woollen shirt (9), worn inside large mariner's breeches originally dyed indigo. The breeches are well-preserved but the shirt is extremely fragile. Small fragments of off-white woollen cloth found inside the breeches are probably the remains of a pair of hose (stockings). The dyed costume, consisting of a red shirt, blue breeches and white stockings was very colorful.



fig.2 Individual I, drawing by Élise Dubuc.

Individual II (1986 season)

Again, virtually nothing of the skeleton of this individual remained (10). The burial was made in a natural spring and covered with large rocks. The rocks and seasonally running water were probably responsible for extensive damage to the left side of the costume (fig. 3).

Individual II was completely clothed at the time of burial. He wore two shirts, one over the other, the sleeves of both were turned up at the wrists. Irregularities in the weave indicate that the same woollen twill was used to manufacture both shirts. The fabric shows a highly decorative motive created by using natural fibres of white and brown wool. The warp consists of narrow stripes of the two colours and the weft of wide bands of the same fibres. The shirts were worn over mariner's breeches made of dark brown twill, entirely pleated at the waist and covering the legs below the knees. Hoses were made from a light reddish-brown tabby cloth, also containing only natural pigments. Originally the hoses may have been tied under the knees with garters, but these have long since disappeared. Also found with this individual was a pair of leather shoes, without heels, which covered the ankles and were tied on top of the foot with leather laces. A knitted woollen cap covered the head. None of these garments was dyed, the different tones of the costume being produced by the natural pigments of the threads used to weave the fabrics.

What the garments tell us: pattern as a tool to understanding clothing

One of the first steps in understanding the Red Bay costumes was to analyze their cut. Taking the pattern of a garment is the best way to understand its structure (11). As Roland Barthes has said, the schematic design of a pattern re-

produces analytically the different steps of the garment's construction (12). After cleaning (13) patterns were taken.

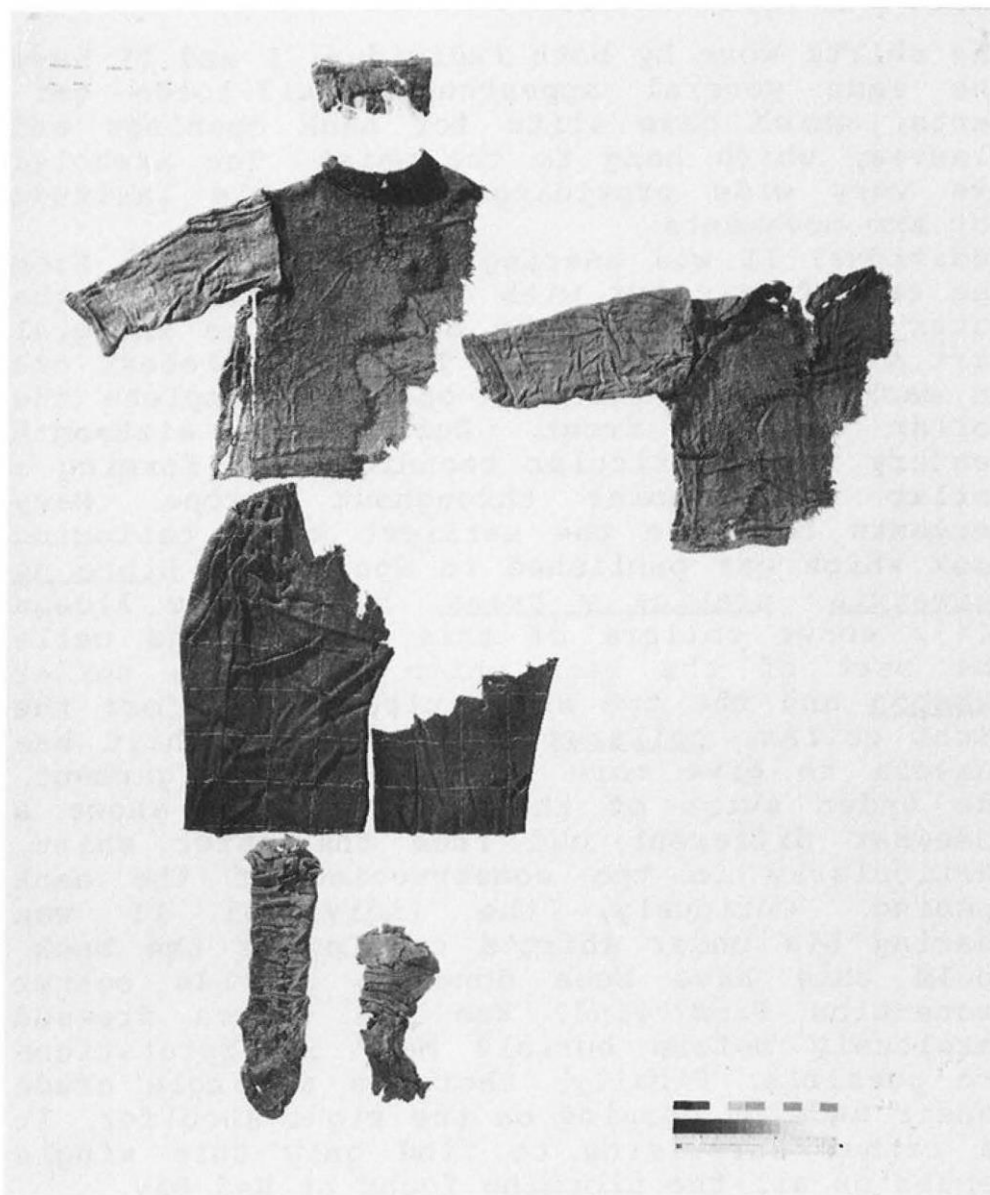


fig.3 Individual II, photo: Canadian Conservation Institute, published by permission of Memorial University of Newfoundland.

The following paragraphs present the principal findings to emerge to date from analysis of the Red Bay textiles and patterns.

The shirts

The shirts worn by both Individual I and II have the same general appearance: half-loose garments, which have slits for neck openings and sleeves, which hang to the waist. The armholes are very wide providing considerable latitude for arm movements.

Individual II was wearing two shirts, made from the same fabric but with different cuts. On the outer shirts (fig.4) the collar is an integral part of the shirt's back. Two small pieces, one on each side of the neck-opening, complete the collar on the front. During the sixteenth century this particular technique for forming a collar was popular throughout Europe. Many garments found in the earliest known tailoring book which was published in Spain, the Libro de Geometria, pratica y traça, by Juan de Alcega (14), shows collars of this cut. Alcega calls the part of the back which forms the collar cabeçon and the two small pieces that form the front collar, collares (15). The top shirt has gussets to give more fullness to the garment. The under shirt of the Individual II shows a somewhat different cut from the outer shirt, particularly in the construction of the neck opening. Curiously, the Individual II was wearing his under shirt's opening at the back. Could this have been done to provide better protection from wind? Was the corpse dressed carelessly before burial? Many interpretations are possible. Finally, there is a single crude repair made by darning on the right shoulder. It is rather surprising to find only this single repair on all the clothing found at Red Bay.

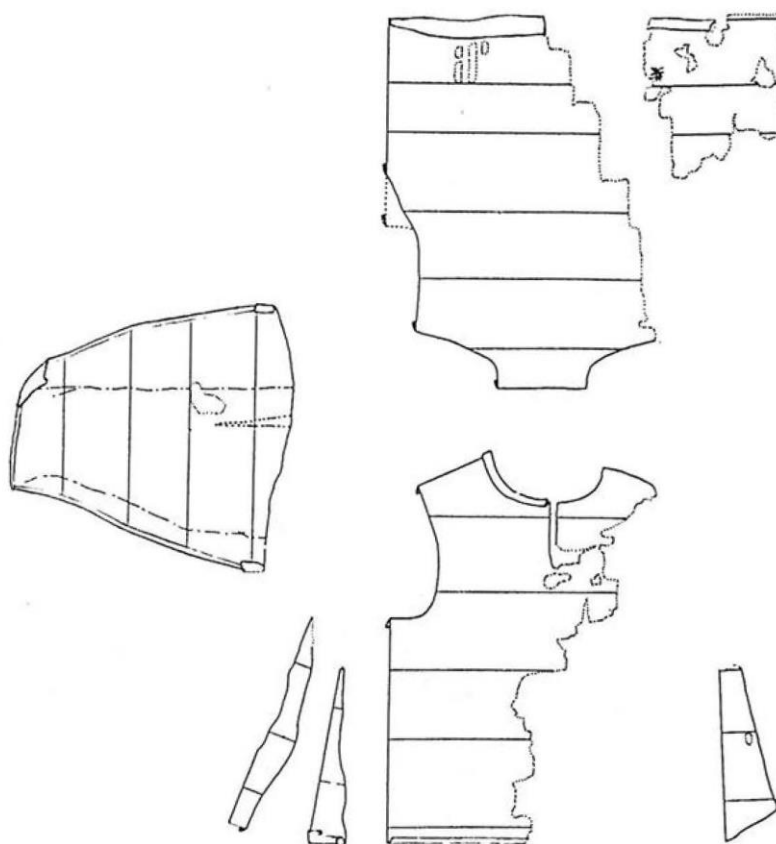


fig.4 Pattern of the outer shirt of Individual II (on this drawing the front parts of the collar are not shown). Pattern taken by Élise Dubuc, 1988. Courtesy of National Historic Parks and Sites, Canadian Parks Service.

The shirt on Individual I is in extremely friable condition and it was impossible to take a pattern from it. Close examination, however, reveals some interesting details. On each side of the collar slit there are small holes indicating the presence of eyelets. The edges of these eyelets were probably embroidered with

linen thread which has now disappeared. This suggests the presence of lacing on the shirt front, the first evidence for this manner of closing garments found at Red Bay.

Spanish, French and Dutch illustrations of sixteenth century sailors' clothes exhibit many shirts which resemble closely those found at Red Bay and suggest that such garments were in wide use during period (fig. 5).

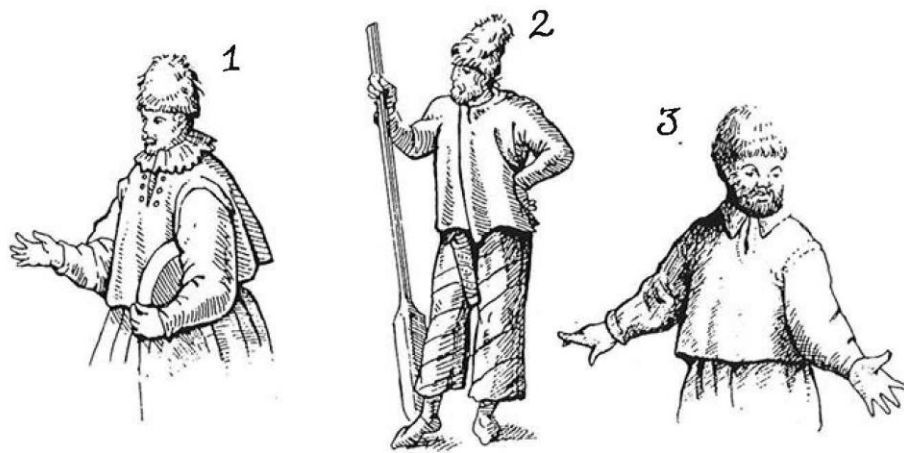


fig. 5 Facsimile by Francis Back

1. Cesar Vecellio, Habiti Antichi e Moderni, Venise, 1598.
2. Jost Amman's Städtebuch, Francfort, 1568.
3. G. de Veer, The Three Voyages of Barrents to the Arctic Regions, 1609.

1, 2, 3; The shirts worn by those sixteenth century English, German and Dutch seamen have the same characteristics. A front slit allows to pass the head, the opening is closed by hook or lace. The sleeves are long with very wide armholes. The garments shown in these drawings are quite similar to the shirts found at Red Bay.

The mariner's breeches

The breeches worn by Individual I and II are very different in cut. Those from Individual I are somewhat surprising: each trouser leg is made from a semi-circle of fabric, the arc of which is gathered entirely at the waistband. The enormous quantity of fabric just under the waistband would have made a very "puffy" silhouette at the hips but much less so at the knees where it ended.

These breeches were probably both comfortable and warm to wear. The large quantity of cloth around the hips would have provided considerable protection from the cold.

The breeches from Individual II are much simpler in cut and construction (fig.6). Each trouser leg is made from two rectangles slightly cut out to form the seat and the inner leg; large pleats were made at the waist. There are no gathers at the knees, and the cut appears to provide a good example of the mariner's breeches (also called "slops" in English) as described and illustrated during the sixteenth century.

The hoses

To make the most efficient use of fabric elasticity, the hoses were cut on the bias. The cut of these cloth hoses is quite similar to that of knitted hoses (16). The thread used to sew the pieces which formed the hoses was probably of vegetable fibre, explaining its absence, although the fabric retains the marks of the stitches. The pieces of the hoses have been sewn together in such a way as to create no ridges in the garments, thus giving more comfort to the feet (fig.7).

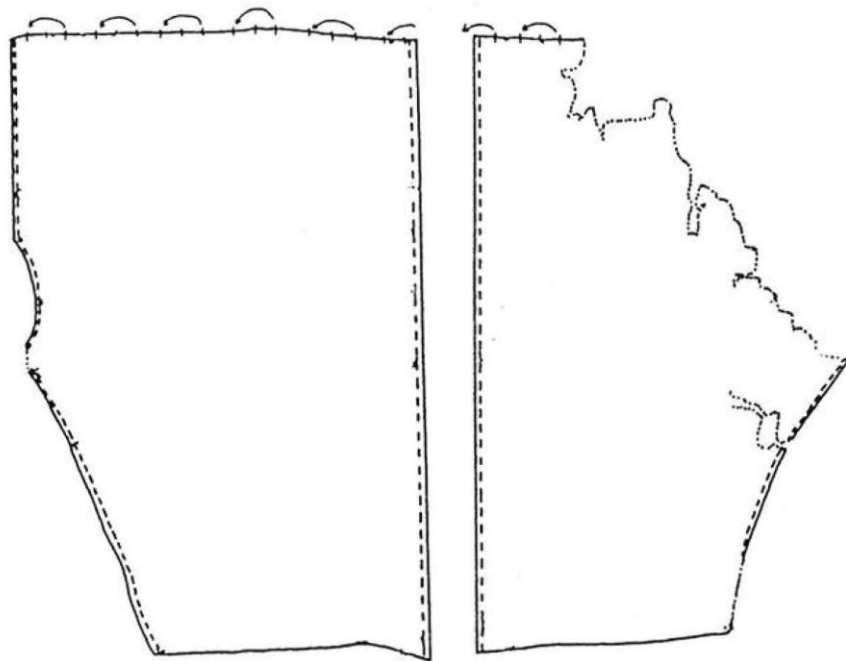


fig.6 Pattern of the breeches of Individual II, right side. Pattern taken by Élise Dubuc, 1988. Courtesy of National Historic Parks and Sites, Canadian Parks Service.

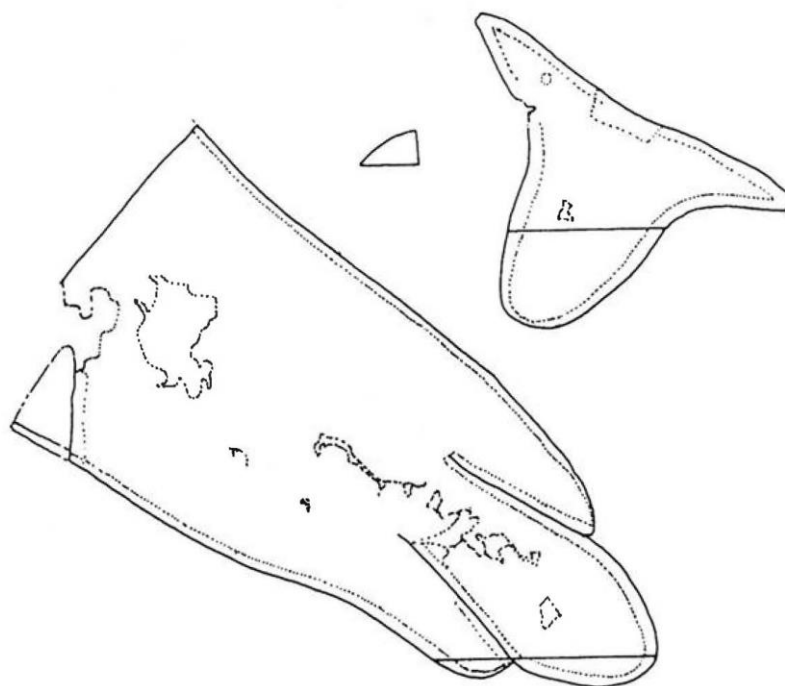


fig.7 Pattern of the right hose of Individual II. Pattern taken by Élise Dubuc, 1988. Courtesy of National Historic Parks and Sites, Canadian Parks Service.

CONCLUSION

The Red Bay textile discoveries are important for many reasons. It is now possible to visualise the appearance of the sixteenth century seamen who first visited the New World. In North American context, the Red Bay costumes are the oldest examples ever found and reproductions of them will be on exhibit in the new Canadian Museum of Civilisations, scheduled to open in the summer of 1989.

For costume historians the Red Bay garments provide an important example of working class dress at the end of the sixteenth century, and show the particular dress of seamen's everyday costume. Archival references and pictorial evidence provide a good impression of this type of dress, but actual garments can give information that neither of these sources can match. Archaeology holds the possibility to provide increasingly accurate information on costume through the ages.

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