



New light on the personal identification of a skeleton of a member of Sir John Franklin's last expedition to the Arctic, 1845

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 January 2011

Accepted 18 February 2011

Keywords:

Osteology

Human remains

Palaeopathology

Isotopic analysis

Forensic

Facial reconstruction

ABSTRACT

In 1845, an expedition, commanded by Sir John Franklin, set out to try and discover the north-west passage. All 129 men on this ill-fated voyage perished. Over the years, skeletal remains associated with the final throes of the expedition have been located on and near King William Island, Nunavut, in the Canadian arctic. In general, even a tentative personal identification for these remains has proved impossible. An exception is some skeletal remains that were recovered in 1869 and brought back to England and interred beneath the memorial to the Franklin expedition in Greenwich. In the 19th century, these were tentatively identified as one of HMS *Erebus*'s lieutenants, Henry Le Vesconte, a conclusion that has been widely accepted in studies of the Franklin voyage. Renovations to the monument in 2009 provided an opportunity for scientific examination of the remains, and to re-evaluate the personal identification made nearly 140 years before. The current work, which is the first modern scientific analysis of a fairly complete skeleton associated with the Franklin voyage, describes the remains and the artefacts interred with them, discusses the pathological conditions present, and evaluates the personal identification using osteological techniques and isotope geochemistry. Results indicate that the remains are of an adult male of European ancestry. Although some writers have suggested that scurvy or tuberculosis may have been important causes of morbidity and mortality on the Franklin expedition, osteological analysis and, in the case of tuberculosis, DNA analysis, provided no evidence for their presence in these remains. Isotopic studies indicate that the personal identification as Le Vesconte is unlikely to be correct. From the isotopic results and forensic facial reconstruction, HDS Goodsir, an assistant surgeon on the expedition, appears a more likely identification, but the results do not allow a firm conclusion.

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1. Introduction

In May 1845, two ships, HMS *Erebus* and HMS *Terror*, embarked from Greenhithe, England, bound for the Canadian arctic. The expedition, from which none would return alive, was under the command of Sir John Franklin, and its purpose was to pass from the north Atlantic to the Pacific via the North-west Passage. The expedition over-wintered at Beechey Island in the Canadian high arctic (Fig. 1). The following summer, the ships sailed south and west in search of the Passage. On 12 September 1846, the ships were beset in ice north-west of King William Island. The ice failed to release them the following summer. A note left in a canister on King William Island in May 1847 indicated all was well, but an

addendum of April 1848 indicated that 24 men, of whom nine were officers, had died by that time. In April 1848, the 105 survivors deserted the ships and subsequently perished whilst attempting to reach safety overland via the Back River (Cyriax, 1939; Owen, 1978; Beattie and Geiger, 1987).

In the years following the loss of the expedition, many search parties set out to try and ascertain its fate (Ross, 2002). Some of these located skeletal remains, on the southern and western coasts of King William Island and on the adjacent mainland. Subsequent expeditions researching the Franklin disappearance also sometimes encountered human remains, as occasionally did those travelling the region for other purposes. Between 1859 and 1949 skeletal remains representing at least 30 individuals were discovered (Gibson, 1932; Cyriax, 1939, 1951; Beattie and Geiger, 1987), the great majority being scattered surface finds rather than deliberate burials. Other than helping to trace the route of the final

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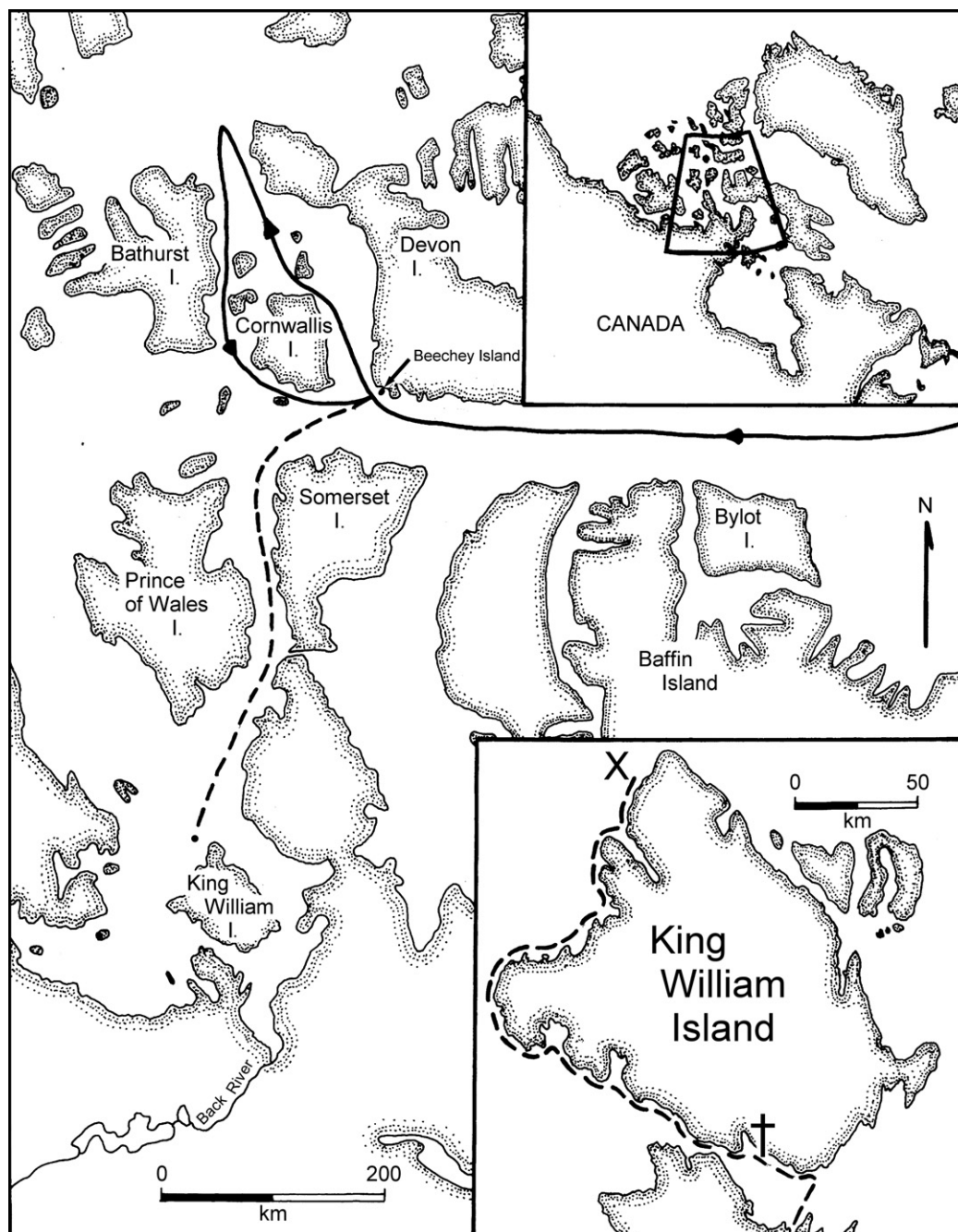


Fig. 1. Canadian archipelago, showing Franklin's 1845 route (solid line), and presumed 1846 route (dashed line). In the inset, X marks the location of the ships when deserted in April 1848, the dashed line is the presumed final journey of the expedition on foot from the ships toward the Canadian mainland. The cross marks the approximate location of the grave from whence the current remains were recovered by Hall in 1869.

march of Franklin's men, these remains were felt to have little further value. Most were simply gathered together and buried in the locale in which they were found, and in general they cannot now be located (Beattie and Geiger, 1987).

The first modern studies of human remains from the Franklin expedition took place in the 1980s. A team, led by Owen Beattie, studied the frozen bodies of John Torrington, William Braine and John Hartnell, three men who died in the first winter of the expedition and who were buried in the permafrost on Beechey Island (Amy et al., 1986; Notman et al., 1987; Beattie and Geiger, 1987). In the 1980s and 1990s, surface scatters of skeletal remains representing at least 20 individuals were located on the southern and western coasts of King William Island, apparently representing

those who died following the desertion of the ships in April 1848. Osteological study of these remains (Beattie, 1983; Beattie and Saville, 1983; Keenleyside et al., 1997) revealed that some bore cut-marks consistent with Inuit accounts of cannibalism during the final throes of the expedition. Lead levels in the bones were high (Beattie, 1985; Kowal et al., 1989, 1991; Keenleyside et al., 1996), as they were in tissue from the Beechey Island bodies (Amy et al., 1986; Kowal et al., 1991), and this has helped advance theories that lead poisoning, from canned foods (Beattie and Geiger, 1987; Kowal et al., 1989, 1991) or other sources (Battersby, 2008), contributed to the expedition's loss.

The current work focuses on a skeleton of a member of the Franklin expedition recovered from King William Island in 1869

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