

## JACQUES CARTIER'S CROSS:

# Raised on Penouille point, says two mariners

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GASPÉ: – Two Percé professional mariners are contributing to the debate about the site where Jacques Cartier raised a cross in 1534. According to them, it wasn't erected on O'Hara point, where downtown Gaspé is located today, but on Penouille point, also called Peninsula, on the other side of Gaspé Bay.

Their opinion is guided by several years of whale watching tours in those areas navigated by Cartier. "A hypothesis has to hold water when you're on a ship. Cartier didn't go round the Gaspé Peninsula by car or by train!" says Martin Ouellet, a wildlife veterinarian, cowriter with Donald Cahill of an article published in *Acadiensis*, a historical journal.

Mr. Cahill, a marine artist, is doing historical research as a guide for his historical paintings.

In July 1534, Cartier arrived from Percé after having explored the Chaleur Bay. He sought shelter in the Gaspé Bay because of strong contrary winds and fog. During his stop, on July 24, he raised a cross, a symbol of the territory's official possession, in the name of the king of France.

According to some historians, Cartier anchored at O'Hara point, at the mouth of



Photo: G. Gélinas

*A commemorative cross is erected on the site Gaspé: Birthplace of Canada in downtown Gaspé.*

the York River, which flows into the Gaspé Bay. At this location, there is a granite commemorative cross and the Gaspé: Birthplace of Canada site, a historical reconstruction of the old Gaspé wharves and buildings.

But from a mariner's point of view, to seek shelter and raise a cross at O'Hara point "doesn't make much sense," says Mr. Ouellet. Cartier was "in hostile environment. He

had to keep space for manoeuvre and escape in case of problems. The explorer had no reason to steer his vessels through this intricate passage to York River (...), taking the risk of running aground, while he was already in perfect safety in the harbour," the authors write.

When writing "the harbour", the authors discuss the

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waters west of the Sandy Beach sand bar. A pilot contemporary of Cartier described this place as the perfect harbour. Today, it shelters the industrial port of Gaspé.

The cross wasn't only marking the possession, but was also and essentially a navigation landmark, a guide for mariners to enter the Gaspé harbour safely, the authors insist. It would have been "fairly discrete" to raise it at the York River mouth, says Mr. Cahill, on a site hidden from ships entering the bay. To the contrary, a beacon light is still located on Penouille point for the safety of modern mariners, the authors point out.

The Iroquois were present when Cartier's crewmen raised a nine-meter-high wooden cross. They had travelled from the St. Lawrence River Valley to the Gaspé Bay and fished mackerel. "There's no mackerel in fresh water (at the York River mouth). The good places are Sandy Beach and Penouille," Mr. Ouellet points out.

The Iroquois were on Micmac territory and they needed the broad view from Penouille to remain safe. Penouille point, close to their fishing grounds and where a fresh water stream flows, was "the ideal site," for a campsite, Mr. Cahill says.

Mr. Ouellet "in no way questions" the site of the gran-

ite cross in downtown Gaspé, on O'Hara point. "We're not at war. But from a mariner's point of view, the O'Hara point makes no sense (as the real location of the 1534 cross). We think that the Forillon Park (authorities) shouldn't be afraid of talking about Cartier on Penouille point."

### **Another historian contests**

Gaspé historian Mario Mimeault, a specialist in maritime history, is not convinced by Ouellet and Cahill's argument. Their article is "full of weaknesses," he says. "There are procedural flaws which lead me to not trust their argu-

ments." There's no relevance in "bringing back an old debate," dating back to the 1920s and the 1930s, Mr. Mimeault adds, as Gaspé was preparing to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Jacques Cartier's arrival.

Other historians are inclined towards the Penouille point hypothesis, Mr. Mimeault reminds. But according to him, water is not deep enough in Penouille and only the York River mouth and its O'Hara point could have sheltered Cartier's ships from the north/north-east wind blowing when they were forced to seek shelter inside the bay.