

DISCOVERY

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Fortified Defensive Sites and Burial Cairns of the Songhees Indians

An examination of prehistoric settlement patterns in the greater Victoria area reveals an interesting association between large stone burial cairns and fortified defensive sites. What are these? How old are they? What do they reveal about the prehistory of the area?

Defensive sites were usually located on the point of a raised peninsula partially separated by a trench about two metres deep and several metres wide. Others were located on the edge of a steep bluff. The soil from the trench was piled on the seaward side to support the base of a wooden palisade. The combination of trench and palisade made access to the inside more difficult for attackers. The sites contain shallow deposits of midden within the trenched-off areas.

Some defensive refuge sites are in isolated locations while others are adjacent to old shell midden village sites. At present there are about 18 such sites known in traditional Songhees territory on Vancouver Island.

In 1983, with the assistance of museum staff, I excavated the last piece of the Lime Bay Peninsula Defensive Site at the entrance to Victoria Harbour. The basal shell midden deposits date to A.D. 1410. The similar shallow depths of midden deposits at other intact defensive sites lead one to speculate that this type of archaeological site became a common phenomenon in the last 700 years before European settlement. What could be the reason?

In a preliminary overview of the local settlement pattern I concluded that: "The general scenario over the last 3000 years is one of Indian groups operating out of an increasing number of shoreline centres on the south end of Vancouver Island. This trend reversed itself in the late prehistoric and historic periods." Especially during the period A.D. 1100 to A.D. 1400 there appears to have been an expansion of major sedentary villages to new shoreline localities. This time of maximum population growth and expansion probably saw increasing competition for local resources. Defensive sites are generally a product of intensified warfare due to competition over resources.

Burial cairns are often found within or near defensive sites. They vary greatly in size and structure. In many of the larger ones the body was placed in a stone-lined rectangular pit wrapped in mats and/or surrounded by wooden boards. The pit was covered over by rock slabs or small cobbles, and large boulders sometimes weighing several hundred pounds were placed in one or two circles around the central pit. On top of this more rocks were piled. Burials are also found next to naturally occurring boulders of many tons with smaller rocks piled over them. Large cairns exceed three



metres in diameter and two metres in height.

Early accounts refer to cairns occurring in the thousands in the Victoria area. Presently there are only about 25 known complexes, which at one time varied from several cairns to more than two hundred, as in the case of Cadboro Bay. These latter cairns, excavated by many individuals over the years, include a number of separate clusters that may represent individual family burial grounds.

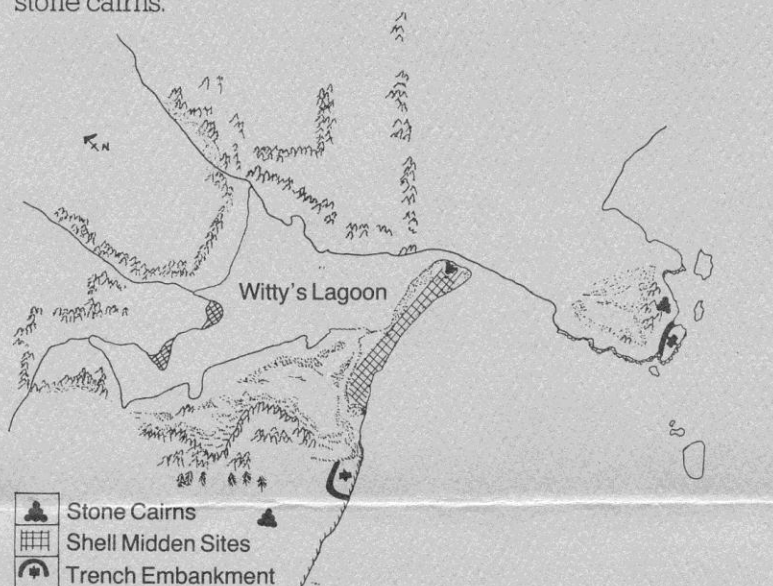
There have been many accounts since the 1860s claiming a "great antiquity" to the large stone burial cairns, even as old as 2000 years ago. However, one of these burials from a Cordova Bay shell midden has two radiocarbon dates placing it in the 12th century A.D.

Early in 1984 I received a radiocarbon date of A.D. 1340 on a burial found within a large cairn composed of small to very large boulders. This cairn complex is on a sloping hillside about 250 metres inland from a defensive site. Even though the date has a large plus-or-minus factor, a range of A.D. 940 to A.D. 1740 clearly places it in the late prehistoric period. This corresponds with the suggested age of defensive sites.

Why are many of the large cairns located in prominent, highly visible positions near the defensive sites — especially isolated defensive sites? Why weren't the bodies buried back near a main village? Recovered skeletons of men, women and children show no obvious signs of combat fractures. This tends to negate the idea that the burials are

simply those of people who were killed at the defensive sites.

Certainly more dating of the two site types and detailed studies of the skeletal material are needed to come to any definite conclusions, but I would like to suggest some possible connections between defensive sites and the large stone cairns.



The settlement pattern at Witty's Lagoon 10 kilometers S.W. of Victoria shows the main village site on a sandspit with defensive sites on both sides. In this situation both the bluff and peninsula trench — embankment sites are represented.

I think it is safe to assume that defensive sites were owned by the wealthier individuals who could mobilize supporters to build and defend them. Defensive sites were a visible sign of status for their owners. The expenditure of wealth was likely a prerequisite to mobilizing a work force to construct large stone cairns and to participating in the associated ritual of the burial ceremony. The family burial grounds of these wealthy individuals would also be a sign of status.

It may have been believed that the practice of placing large burial cairns near defensive sites provided the owner with special powers provided by his ancestors to help him fight his enemies. But the prime reason was likely the bringing together of two visible images of status in a period when the survival of the wealthy depended on attracting a large contingent of supporters.

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