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The Midden

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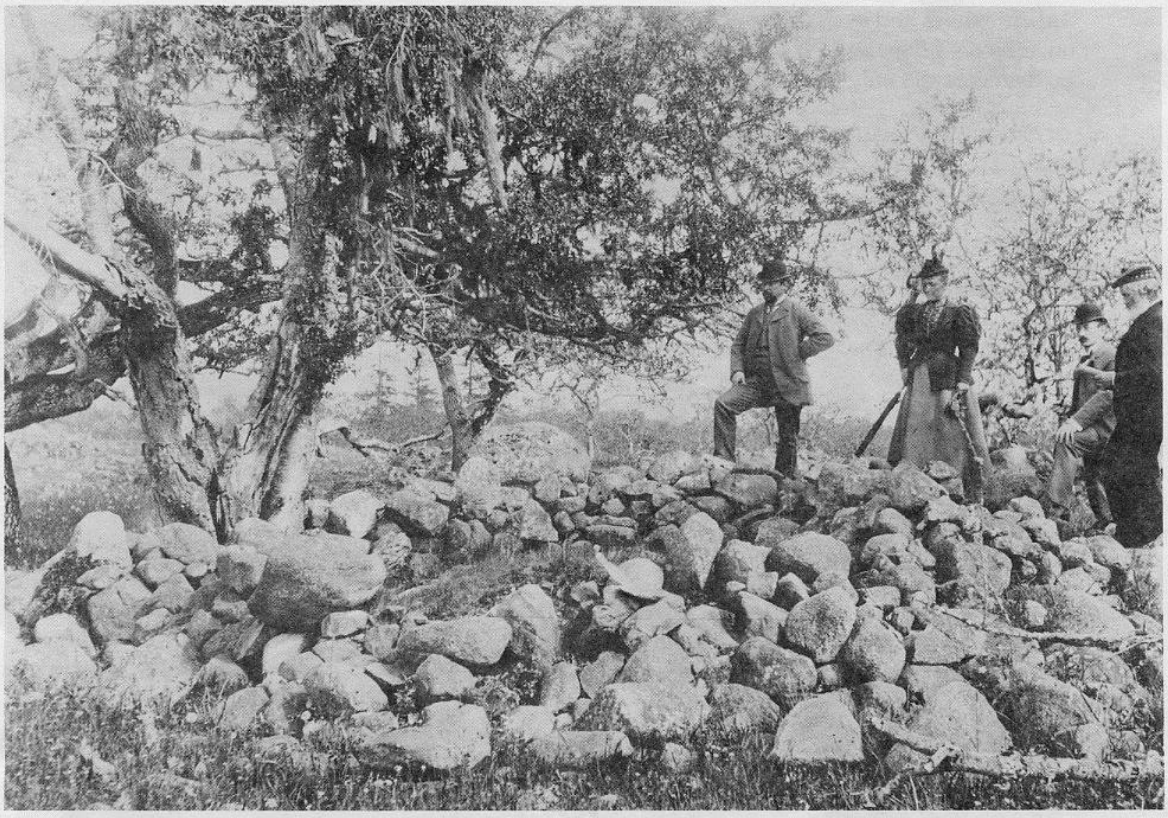

INSIDE

Fortified Defensive Sites and Burial Cairns of the Songhees Indians

by

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

Defensive Sites

Defensive sites were used as places of refuge in times of hostilities between Indian groups. They were usually located on the point of a raised peninsula partially separated by an intentionally dug trench about two metres deep and several metres wide. Others were located on the edge of a steep bluff. The dirt 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.

Last year, with the assistance of Museum staff, I excavated the last piece of the Lime Bay Peninsula Defensive Site, *DcRu 123,* at the entrance to Victoria Harbour. The basal shell midden deposits date to A.D. 1410 (540 +/- 80 B.P.; SFU 383). 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 3,000 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

THE CADBORO BAY CAIRNS, located in what is now known as the Uplands in the municipality of Oak Bay, intrigued the early immigrants who saw in them a resemblance to cairns back home in the British Isles.

The mystery of their origin enticed both amateurs and scientists. They were first excavated in 1854, and over the next fifty years many of the cairns were pulled apart.

In 1871 Sir James Richardson conducted an investigation for the Canadian Geological Survey; and in 1897-1898 Harlan I. Smith and Gerard Fowke (Jesup North Pacific Expedition) excavated 42 cairns. Between 1898 and 1907 there were five official excavations by the Natural History Society of British Columbia (predecessor of the B.C. Provincial Museum).

Housing development has over the years continued to destroy the cairns. In the 1960s John Sendy of the BCPM mapped the surviving remains of 48 cairns, many of which had been disturbed. Today, the mystery question is: How many are left?

Members of the Natural History Society of British Columbia removing the large central stone from a burial cairn in the Uplands west of Cadboro Bay, on June 1, 1907. Photo courtesy of the BCPM, Victoria.

growth and expansion probably saw increasing competition for local resources. Defensive sites, I would suggest, are a product of a period of intensified warfare due to competition over resources.

Burial Cairns

Burial cairns are often found on, next to, or within 250 metres of 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 meters 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. Considering the clusters separately, a maximum size range of about 50 cairns may be a more accurate figure for a large burial complex.

There have been many accounts since the 1860s claiming a "great antiquity" to the large stone burial cairns. Their age has often, even recently, been ascribed to a time period in excess of 2,000 years ago. Several small burial cairns have been recovered from the surface, or buried beneath the surface at sites with late prehistoric artifact assemblages. One of these burials from a Cordova Bay shell midden, *DdRu 81*, has two radiocarbon dates placing it in the 12th century A.D.

Early this year I received a radiocarbon date of A.D. 1340 (610 +/- 440 B.P.; SFU 247) on a burial found within a large cairn composed of small to very large boulders. This cairn complex, *CdRu 52*, is on a sloping hillside about 250 metres inland from a defensive site. Even though the date has a large plus-or-minus factor, the 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.

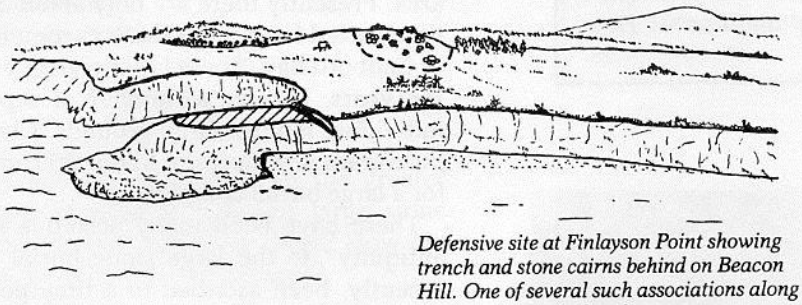
Certainly more dating of the two site types and detailed studies of the skeletal material are needed to come to any definite conclusions, but I would like to suggest some possible connections between defensive sites and the larger stone cairns.

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

Status Symbols

expenditure of wealth was likely a prerequisite to mobilizing a workforce 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, indicating the quality of their ancestry. To be able to subtly point out that your direct ancestors are buried under some of the larger stone cairns would speak well of one's background.

It may have been believed that the practice of placing large burial cairns near defensive sites provided the owner with special hidden 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 to keep enemies at a distance.



Defensive site at Finlayson Point showing trench and stone cairns behind on Beacon Hill. One of several such associations along the open Victoria shoreline. Reconstruction of area as it may have looked before European settlement (at low tide.) ***G. Keddie.***