

University of Toronto's Sechelt Archaeological Project

David Bilton

This past summer, under the directorship of Dr. Gary Coupland, archaeological investigations were once again undertaken in the traditional territory of and in cooperation with the *shíshálh* Nation. This was the third summer for the Sechelt Archaeological Project, designed to investigate prehistoric socioeconomic organization amongst the Northern Coast Salish by focusing on the localized historical contingencies of an inlet landscape.

While this SSHRC-funded project does not represent a traditional field school, we did have four undergraduates involved who were taking an "independent experiential study project," which is further described on the University of Toronto's Anthropology department website as "an instructor-supervised group project in an off-campus setting." I believe that this is vaguely worded so as to apply to any discipline where field studies may be useful enough to be used toward university credit. Nonetheless, this was most certainly a group project supervised by instructors of varying qualifications. In this case, the students worked as field archaeologists and kept a journal about their experiences. As such, the evaluation fully recognized the independent and experiential nature of the course.

In addition to Dr. Coupland and these four students, there were four courseless undergraduate students present on the dig, three of whom had worked on the project the previous year. Two of Dr. Coupland's graduate students were also present: Bryn Letham, who was conducting a survey of Narrows Inlet, and David Bilton, also the author of this summary. David was accompanied by his pregnant wife, also an experienced archaeologist, and was continuing his doctoral project by conducting test excavations at as many sites as possible throughout the territory.

At Porpoise Bay (DjRw-1), Dr. Coupland continued his previous season's excavations, investigating 2m² archaeological units consisting primarily of shell matrix layers. These were located either along the wave cut bank or in an identified cultural

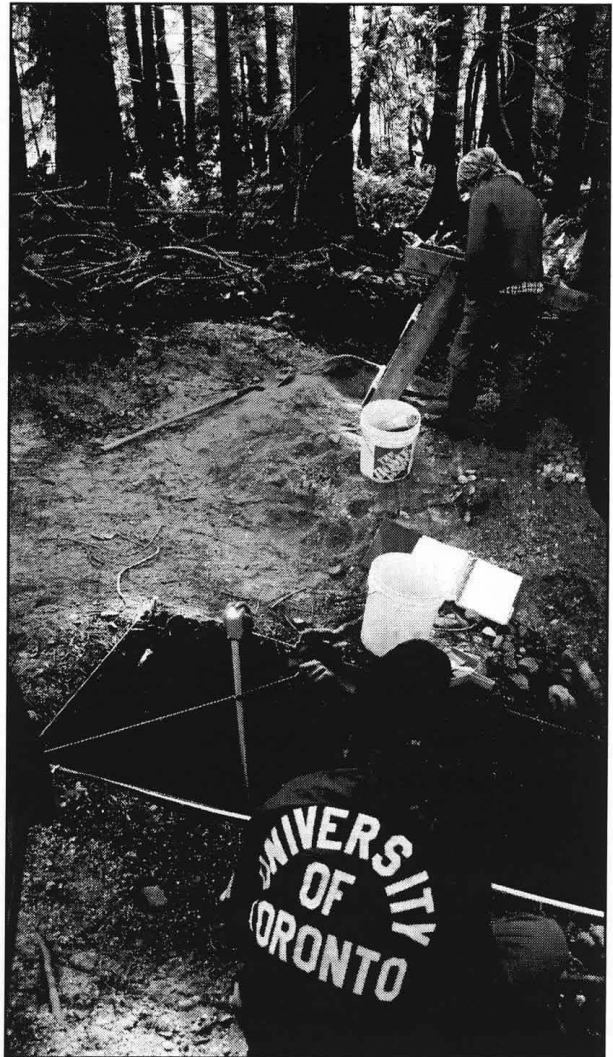


Figure 1 (above). Michelle Bilton takes notes, while Damian Mangar excavates and Lara McFadden-Baltudis screens at Trail Bay (DiRw-28).

Figure 2 (left). The author and Bryn Letham avoid inhaling the dust from Damian Mangar's vigorous screening at Trail Bay (DiRw-28).



Figure 3. The author profiles a deep and dense shell-matrix unit at Trail Bay (DiRw-28).

depression (i.e., a “housepit”). Porpoise Bay is an excellent place to work, it was unanimously agreed, both archaeologically and existentially. The site’s location next to—and probably continuing into—a provincial park, and its washroom (i.e., not outhouse) facilities were also remarked upon.

Students working with the author spent a roughly equal amount of time excavating shell matrices at Trail Bay (DiRw-28), the Madeira Park Lagoon (DjSa-48), and engaging in extended camping expeditions to the Abandoned Bible Camp (DjRw-14) near the mouth of Salmon Inlet. Trail Bay had been the subject of excavations during the previous summers, while the latter two sites had received no prior archaeological attention. Although some of the excavated material from the last site did involve material from Bible Camp, the majority of the finds predated the introduction of Christianity to this region.

Students working at both sites experienced firsthand the intricacy of shell-matrix sites, as multiple cultural layers were identified in units ranging in depth from 1m to over 2m. Well over a hundred artifacts were identified from all the sites and all vertebrate faunal remains were retained from screens, with invertebrate faunal samples acquired in column samples taken from the walls of units excavated to sterile layers. Luckily for the crew, Dr. Gay Frederick was able to spend a few days working with us. She is the faunal analyst for our project and her post-supper tutorials and on-site presence greatly improved both the undergraduate and graduate students’ ability to identify faunal remains and understand their use for reconstructing prehistoric economic activities. The students who had the opportunity to accompany Bryn Letham on his project also learned how to identify shell matrix sites as well as map and test them using bucket augers, soil probes, and other survey methods.

Our archaeological headquarters for the summer was a geodesic dome in Robert’s Creek. This building was conducive to the communal spirit common to the four archaeological digs that I have experienced with Dr. Coupland. Besides discussions of archaeology in general, and specifically our own excavations, we cooked for each other and had many excellent dance parties. We also received several visitors from UBC, SFU, UVic and UCL, some of whom stayed to labour for us in exchange for food and a place to sleep. Unfortunately, there were considerably fewer sports competitions (i.e., football, bocce, badminton, and sprinkler badminton) than the previous summer. Nonetheless, I believe the summer was experientially excellent for all involved.

All photos by Jacob Kinze Earnshaw, used with permission.

David Bilton is a Doctoral candidate in archaeology at the University of Toronto, working with Dr. Gary Coupland. He studies prehistoric subsistence patterns amongst the Coast Salish, and excavates in shishálh territory.



Figure 4. The author and his baby.