



UBC's Field School in the Northern Gulf Islands and Desolation Sound

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We set out in early June of 2005 for Cortes Island not really knowing what to expect. Our goal was to investigate defensive sites in the northern Georgia Strait region. Our team was a total of eight in number; six students including myself, the instructor in charge of our fieldwork, Bill Angelbeck, and the teaching assistant, Meng Ying. Together we were one of UBC's four archaeology field schools that summer.

We all had been camping before, of course, though other than Bill and Meng we were all utterly inexperienced in archaeology outside the sterilized environment of the classroom. I personally had not been camping for several years, and even then my previous expeditions were merely week long excursions and incomparable to the intensity of a fieldschool experience. Cortes was definitely going to be new to me. Despite one or two minor setbacks along the road, we arrived on Cortes in decent time and immediately set up our "tarp-city" as a preemptive strike against the ever ominous clouds hanging above us.

The beauty of Cortes was immediately apparent. It is relatively isolated for a Gulf Island, especially if one is familiar with Salt Spring or Galiano. This is mainly due to the fact that one is required to take a total of three ferries and drive nearly the length

of Vancouver Island to reach Cortes from B.C.'s Lower Mainland. As such, much of the island appears largely untouched by modern, urbanized Canada, but of course this is largely an illusion. According to local testimony, the majority of the island was logged approximately eighty years ago and there is little old growth forest left on the main island of Cortes (some smaller surrounding islets have managed to avoid ever being logged). Fortunately however, a young forest consisting primarily of Douglas fir, cedar, hemlock, alder, and some arbutus has densely reclaimed much of the island. The island's faunal life also remains strong, which is a further indication of its healthy floral life. Deer were regularly seen, and we heard local accounts about a wolf, population on the island, with one frequently debated sighting by members of our own team (though it looked like a wolf some recall a collar on the animal, whereas others state there was no such thing). If indeed there are top-level predators such as wolves on Cortes, this would fully illustrate a thriving environment with an intact, complex food chain able to support relatively large predatory mammals.

The areas of Cortes that are developed are clustered rather than spread out, and our primary site of Smelt Bay was well re-

The crew explores a pictograph panel in Desolation Sound and returns to Klahoose I. From left: Erin Hannon, Meng Ying, Stephanie Watts, Matt McGinity, Bill Angelbeck, and Sean Aldcroft (Photograph by Marlowe Kennedy).

moved from such places. After setting up camp that first night, we took our first tour of the site at Smelt Bay.

Traditionally, a site of importance to the territory of the Sliammon and Klahoose First Nations, Smelt Bay is found on the south-west corner of Cortes. It is a colossal site, approximately 800 metres in length. To even the most casual observer, Smelt Bay's topography must seem unexpected, if not downright odd. The site area itself is a low, flat surface that rises only a few metres above sea level until further east, where it becomes a steep cliff up to the B.C. Parks campground (our home base—a mere 10 minute walk away from the site). Running the length of the low, undeveloped portion of Smelt Bay are three clear lines of raised earth running parallel to one another, which are transected by lesser, secondary perpendicular raised lines. Within these raised rectangles are depressions, some of which are actually lower than the natural ground level itself. These rows are most visible at the southern area of the site, which is an open grassy field clear of brush and trees. The northern end of the site has been landscaped and developed, and now a row of modern homes replaces the ancient undulating landscape that is still visible between properties. Some of the owners of these homes have accumulated impressive collections of artifacts, dug up from their archaeologically enriched gardens.

We were not the first to do work at Smelt Bay. In 1963 archaeologist Donald N. Abbott and his team concluded that the site consisted of "Shell midden with trench embankment(s)." In his view, Smelt Bay was a defensive site placed to protect those living upon higher ground: the cliffs (our campground), to the east of the site. He pictured the three rows of raised earth being the foundations for palisades, intermittent with deep trenches dug into the earth. Our field-school, however, resulted in a far different view on the nature of Smelt Bay. Abbott's theory fits within the cultural context for the area of course, as inter-tribal raids were relatively common throughout the Georgia Strait, as were extensive defense structures. In fact elsewhere on Cortes we visited two such defensive sites, but our investigations revealed that Smelt Bay was primarily a residential village.

Our field-school used three approaches to gather our in-



Marlowe Kennedy and Meng Ying recording notes during a mapping session at Smelt Bay (Photo by Bill Angelbeck).

formation: digital mapping, core sampling, and the traditional excavation of test units. I concentrated predominantly on the excavation of a 1-x-1 metre excavation on the northern portion of the site, which reached a final depth of approximately one hundred and twenty centimetres before hitting a basal horizon of sand. Others focused on bucket-auguring and core sampling, and the use of the total-station to produce a three-dimensional digital map. From the first day of work, we had two representatives from the Klahoose Nation, the First Nation whose reserve is found on Cortes, overseeing and working with us. Al Hanson and Mark Harry were assets, to say the least, as their local and cultural knowledge proved itself inexpressibly valuable time and time again. Furthermore, the added pairs of hands and eyes were helpful in that manner as well.

The inclusion of digital mapping proved to be a deciding factor that led us to our conclusion on the nature of Smelt Bay. It gave us the advantage of an interactive aerial view of the site, stripped of trees and bush. The map illuminated the series of lesser raised lines running perpendicular along an east-west axis to the three primary lines running north-south. If there were indeed alternating palisades and trenches here, as Abbott suggested, what would be the purpose of having easily crossable paths running across the dug-out trenches? What seemed far more likely was that we were, in fact, looking at a residential village, not defensive structures. The surface view provided by the digital imaging clearly illustrated rectangular depressions with raised middens around them, a hallmark of house structures in the region.

Excavations and core sampling too, called the "trench embankment" interpretation into question. For example, the walls of my 120-cm deep excavation into the side of one of the earthen embankments, clearly showed stratum of alternating midden and earth layers. Were the people at Smelt Bay to erect foundations for palisades, such work would likely be completed within one episode of earth movement, most likely using the refuse from the supposed trenches. However the excavations clearly showed highly stratified midden layers, typical of a long-term accumulation.

As I have already mentioned, houses at the site were not of uniform size or depth. In fact, one house depression was greater than any other by several metres in size but also depth. Found on the southern portion of the site, one explanation for this house relies on the writings of Homer Barnett (1944), who published a paper in 1944 discussing the occurrence of subterranean houses on the coast of British Columbia. Barnett describes what appear to be typical coastal plank houses except that these have either a removable false floor or a trapdoor covering an excavated subterranean room. Such space could be used for a variety of purposes such as storage of winter food or other items not used on a regular basis. If indeed a false floor within the confines of a house, the planks could also be removed during ceremonies to allow greater numbers of people access to that house, giving the family living there even greater prestige for hosting a greater number of people. Furthermore a removable false floor could be used to hide Elders, women, and children during raids, while the village warriors attempted to draw invading forces to prepared defensive areas. Barnett recorded spoken oral histories of both Sliammon and Klahoose, attesting to their relatively recent ancestors having such semi-subterranean dwellings (a date of 1820



Inside Klahoose I heading deeper into Desolation Sound. From left: Amy Davidson, Sean Aldcroft, Al Hanson, and Ken Hanuse (Photo by Bill Angelbeck).

being suggested as the time of abandonment of these structures). Even more intriguing is testimony of such a house existing on the "west shores of the southern tip of Corte[s] Island" – exactly the location of Smelt Bay. The purpose of this house was described as "not only a shelter for a day but [to be] lived in over trouble periods", suggesting long term use (Barnett 1944:267).

We also took tribal Elders from the Klahoose and Sliammon communities on a tour of the site. All those who had worked on the site or who were visiting that day, formed a circle and with arms outstretched, received a brushing with cedar branches and the blessing prayers of the Elders one at a time. We then burnt a meal of offering to the spirits of Smelt Bay as a thank you. All in all, it was one of the most intensely spiritual days I have experienced.

We also carried out work at another site on Cortes Island and in Desolation Sound. In addition, Ken Hanuse, a Klahoose Elder, gave us a boat tour of Desolation Sound archaeological sites, including several pictograph panels.

Our month on Cortes was one that will not soon be forgotten by any of us there. Unfortunately I have only been able to outline the grossest of facts and experiences in this essay, and have had to leave many, many wonderful memories out. My deepest thanks go to the Klahoose and Sliammon, and the people of Cortes in

general for being so good to us. Much more than archaeological technique alone was learned there.

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