The Sechelt Archaeology Project (2008 - present)

David Bilton and Bryn Letham

In 2008, after more than two decades of archaeological research in and around Prince Rupert Harbour, Gary Coupland began a research program in the Sunshine Coast region of British Columbia, in the territory of the *shíshálh* Nation. This project has investigated the organization of complexity among prehistoric hunter-gatherers in this region by excavating village sites, testing smaller sites, and conducting a regional survey (Coupland et al. 2012).

The project proposed two basic research questions: (1) how did *shíshálh* hunter-gatherers organize production, both locally at the level of the household, and regionally; and (2) how did social practices, in particular the domestic routines of everyday life, make systems of stratification within the region possible? These questions were to be investigated through the following four specific objectives:

Figure 1 - Shishalh and University of Toronto students excavating at DjRw-1. (photo: author)

Figure 2 - Coastal survey through Salmon Inlet (photo: Jacob Earnshaw)

1. Organization of Production: the excavation of archaeological house features - the material correlates of ancient households - to investigate how households were organized to produce, how labour was allocated, how subsistence and prestige economies were structured, and whether or not

organizational variability existed among households.

2. Household Practice: an examination of the ordering of household space in archaeological house features to look at how structures of social stratification were inculcated and reinforced through daily domestic routines.

3. Regional Settlement Patterns: a regional survey examining how *shíshálh* settlement patterns developed in the context of aquatic mobility and how this mobility was linked to emergent complexity.

4. Subsistence Patterns: the identification of the subsistence strategies upon which hunter-gatherer complexity was built amongst the *shíshálh*, whose adaptation was not the same as Coast Salish groups in immediate proximity to the Fraser River. *shíshálh* territory is cut by many deep fjords and has many protected inlets, streams and rivers. How were *shíshálh* subsistence practices organized in this distinctive context?

Figure 3 - Test excavations in Narrows Inlet (photo: author)

This article briefly overviews our field research in the area and reviews key results that are relevant to these research objectives, as well as some that have taken us down somewhat unpredicted research avenues.

In July, 2008, Coupland, Bilton and a small crew were shown sites on *shíshálh* band lands that had been identified as village sites by Peter Merchant, an archaeologist working for the *shíshálh* Nation. *shíshálh* chief and councillors took part in some of these site surveys. In subsequent years, the project has also operated as a field school for University of Toronto undergraduate students and as a training program for *shíshálh* Nation members.

Sites DjRw-1 (Porpoise Bay) and DiRw-28 (Trail Bay) were initially selected as targets for intensive excavation because they were large and had deep sequences of cultural material. Both sites also had visible "house pit" features reminiscent of those found at village sites in the Prince Rupert Harbour region. In the following years, we excavated these sites and four others, and conducted surveys of Narrows Inlet and Salmon Inlet.

DjRw-1, Porpoise Bay

DjRw-1 is one of many identified archaeological sites on Porpoise Bay at the south end of Sechelt Inlet. There was a historic village site known as *slhalt* here; its location on the inland side of the Sechelt isthmus, the only narrow and low elevation land access to the series of inlets located east of the Sechelt Peninsula, made it a strategically important place. Excavations at this site identified two main prehistoric components.

Radiocarbon dates indicate that the early occupation lasted from around 4000 cal. BP until about 2800 cal. BP. These older deposits are many meters back from the modern shoreline and contain scatters of small stone disc beads and a smaller number of shell disc beads. Present evidence indicates a hiatus in the occupation of DjRw-1 from about 2800-1800 cal. BP. Most likely, human occupation shifted away from DjRw-1 to other parts of Porpoise Bay for a period of time, as there are many other sites recorded in the bay.

By ca. 1800 cal. BP, use of DjRw-1in the areas we excavated resumed, this time closer to the

Figure 4 - Porpoise Bay excavation (photo: author)

modern shoreline. Radiocarbon dates indicate that the later occupation of DjRw-1 lasted until about 750 cal. BP. However, the upper layers of this site were leveled in modern times and it is entirely possible that the site was occupied right through into the colonial period. Artifacts were not abundant, but were typical of the archaeological cultures represented in the Salish Sea region (e.g., Matson and Coupland 1995).

A rectangular house feature was identified at DjRw-1, partially obliterated by the modern development. This feature is defined by a flat floor area, and raised ridges or berms on the west and north sides. The rectangular floor was oriented parallel to the beach and was about 10 metres wide and at least 10 metres long. Excavations here revealed probable floor deposits, but no architectural or household features such as hearths or posts. Radiocarbon dates indicate that this feature may have been occupied as a house about 3000 cal. BP.

With regards to faunal remains, all assemblages from DjRw-1 are dominated by local fishes – herring, salmon, dogfish, flatfish, and surfperch. In the early component herring are the most common taxon overall but salmon are also abundant while dogfish are a distant third. In the later component herring become overwhelmingly abundant but the other taxa remain present. Shellfish collecting and processing consistently focused primarily on littleneck clams, butter clams, basket cockles, and bay mussels in both components. There is a noteworthy increase in the proportion of land mammal at the end of the early component (c. 3000 cal. BP) – most of which is probably deer – otherwise, mammals and birds are not strongly represented.

Overall, the faunal remains suggest that this site was used year round – herring in spring; salmon in spring/summer/fall and, if preserved for storage, winter – especially in the earlier component. The later occupation appears to have been more focused on herring harvesting and processing. Other observed subsistence resources were available locally and year-round.

DiRw-28, Trail Bay

DiRw-28, within the area known as *ch'átlich*, encompasses most of the shore land surrounding Trail Bay, on the outer coast of *shíshálh* territory, on the Gulf of Georgia. It is somewhat well-known as the recovery location of the "Sechelt Image", a 50-cm-high granite statuette weighing 32 kg that depicts a mother holding a child. At the southern terminus of Trail Bay, there was an ethnographically recorded large wooden wall surrounding a large oval shaped defensive palisade on a granite dome with a lookout tree (Peterson 1990:28). The site also contains discontinuous shell midden deposits along the shoreline, and dense shell deposits and possible house depressions in a relatively undisturbed area about 25 metres above the high tide line at the centre of the bay. The shell midden here is unusual for its high elevation and distance from the shoreline (about 50 metres). We conducted excavations in the upper shell mound, the house depressions, and in the

shoreline midden (Bilton 2014).

The upper shell mound is oval-shaped, roughly 60 metres in length east to west, and 30 metres in width, north to south. It consists of up to 2 metres of stratified crushed shell and charred/cracked rock (CCR). Artifacts were not abundant but, as at DjRw-1, typical for Salish Sea sites of this age. Six U-shaped depressions, five of which were about four metres wide and five metres long, are located in front of the shell mound. Excavations in two of these features uncovered moderately compacted loamy soil deposits with no evidence of recognizable house floors or floor features. We recovered few artifacts and faunal remains (and no shell) from these excavations. As such, the function of these features remains unknown. We are of the opinion that they were culturally produced but the only evidence that they are the remains of habitation structures is the shell mound behind them, which clearly shows that this upper elevation area of the site was used by the occupants for domestic or, perhaps, feasting purposes.

Radiocarbon dates indicate that the upper mound was deposited over the same period of time as the shoreline shell midden. An earlier period of intensive occupation dates to about 3000-2500 cal. BP and a later occupation dates to about 1500-600 cal. BP. The site was not likely abandoned during the interim, but areas of DiRw-28 may have been used less or left unused at this time. We did not obtain any dates from the cultural depressions. Unlike DjRw-1, there is little archaeological evidence for the site's use in the late prehistoric or early colonial period, which is corroborated by ethnographic accounts (Hill Tout 1978; Peterson 1990).

Fish account for the vast majority of the faunal remains recovered at DiRw-28, with herring, salmon, and flatfish being the most common taxa. Shellfish, especially bay mussel, were an important resource throughout the site's occupation. There is very little change through time in the faunal assemblage, but there are some distinctions between the upper and lower shell middens: 1) the overall density of fish is lower in the lower midden; 2) the proportion of herring is much lower in the lower midden; and 3) the proportion of salmon is much higher in the lower midden. These distinctions could be the result of seasonal use of space: the higher density of fish and proportion of herring, possibly accompanied by the consumption of processed (boneless) salmon, could indicate winter/spring occupation at the upper part of the site; the higher proportion of salmon bones (salmon processing?) may indicate a summer/autumn occupation at the lower part. Another possibility is that these middens represent two segments of a village, one of which had privileged access to salmon.

DjSa-48, Madeira Park

DjSa-48, within the area known as *sálálus*, is located just west of Madeira Park in the southeastern portion of Pender Harbour. Pender Harbour is a protected series of bays on the outer coast of the Sechelt Peninsula. Radiocarbon dates indicate that the prehistoric component of *sálálus* extends back

Figure 5 - Stone fish trap in the inlets (photo: author).

~1200 years and seems to have been actively used into the colonial period, when it was a fishing station and garden (Merchant 2012:35). The site consists of an area of shell midden up to 1 m deep along the shoreline of a small peninsula and a canoe skid and a stone fish trap in the adjacent intertidal zone. Two 1 m^2 test units yielded only a few artifacts, but there was an abundance of faunal remains that includes herring and other small fishes. Salmon were notably rare. Shellfish, especially bay mussels and a variety of clams, were also abundant in the archaeological deposits.

Pender Harbour itself was the centre of the *shíshálh* settlement system in the colonial period (Barnett 1955; Hill-Tout 1978). The intensive past settlement and use of Pender Harbour is evidenced by the number of archaeological sites along its shores and its importance in ethnographic records (Barnett 1955; Hill-Tout 1978.) The ethnographically recorded winter aggregation village of *séxw?ámin* is located about 1 kilometre north of DjSa-48 (Barnett 1955). Our crew identified cultural deposits over 3 meters in depth at *séxw?ámin* (DjSa-3) under modern buildings. Many of the settlement and camp sites in Pender Harbour, such as DjSa-48, may have been satellites centered on the main settlement at *séxw?ámin*

Figure 6 - Letham augers site (photo: author)

Salmon and Narrows Inlet Surveys and Inlet Site Excavations

In 2009 and 2010, we surveyed the shorelines of Salmon and Narrows Inlets, north of the town of Sechelt, to assess the nature of occupation and land-use on the inner-coast area of *shíshálh* territory, and to place the intensively excavated sites into a broader context of regional settlement patterns (Johannesen 2010; Letham 2011, 2014). Forty-eight previously unrecorded archaeological sites were identified, combining with 43 previously recorded sites to make a total of 91 recorded sites on the shores of the inlet system. The majority of the newly identified sites were small habitation sites with shell-bearing components, though site size was mediated by the availability of habitable space along the steep inlet shores. Nearly any place where one could land a canoe and set up a camp has archaeological remains, indicating thorough use of these waterways. The largest habitation sites in the inlets are clustered around limited economically-productive spaces such as large tidal flats and tidal narrows and/or areas that could have been strategically important for monitoring or controlling movement through the narrow inlet system (Letham 2014).

Preliminary seasonality estimates based on several faunal indicators from archaeological bulk samples from the sites suggest spring-through-fall use of the inlets, which would be consistent with the ethnographically-observed settlement pattern in which populations gathered in large villages on the outer coast of the territory (such as *séxw?ámin*) during the winter, and dispersed to smaller camps throughout the territory during the rest of the year (Barnett 1955; Letham 2014). Trail Bay and Porpoise Bay both appear to be large aggregation-type villages on and near the outer coast, respectively, that would have had winter occupations. Radiocarbon dates from several inlet sites indicate that these areas were occupied by at least 6500 cal. BP, though the majority of dates fall within more recent millennia.

In 2012, we conducted small test excavations at two newly identified sites, DkRw-22, in Storm Bay, near the mouth of Narrows Inlet, and DkRw-26, near Tzoonie Narrows mid-way up Narrows Inlet. Both of these sites are large (285 m^2 and 1500 m^2, respectively) relative to most other habitation sites in the inlets, though significantly smaller than those excavated near the outer coast (>10,000 m^2

in many cases). We selected each for excavation because they had rectangular terraces visible on the surface topography that we hypothesized could be house platforms; the sites were likely small seasonal villages with ~3-6 small houses. In six 1 m^2 units at DkRw-22 we found a hard-packed, clean, flat surface consisting of ash and burnt crushed mussel shell that covered a wide area that we interpret as having been a living surface inside of a small structure. In a single 1 m^2 excavation at DkRw-26 we found several small (<1 m) circular depressions filled with this distinctive ash and burnt crushed mussel that were stacked on each other and surrounded by typical shell midden matrix. While consisting of a similar matrix as that which made up the potential house floor at DkRw-22, these features did not cover an area wide enough to logically be a floor surface, though they may have been features within a sequence of more ephemeral floors. Radiocarbon dates place the occupation of the terrace between 500 years ago and just prior to European contact. The terrace that we excavated at DkRw-26 was occupied between 900 and 500 years ago.

Figure 7 - Test excavation, Narrows Inlet (photo: author)

At DkRw-22 there was a surprising dearth of vertebrate faunal remains, though of those analyzed, the assemblage was about 50% (land) mammal and 50% fish. Of these fish remains (n=112), almost half were salmon. At DkRw-26 vertebrate faunal remains were much more abundant; in this case over 95% were fish. The assemblage is diverse, with herring, flatfish, and rockfish being the most abundant and salmon being only a minor contributor. This suggests different functions or subsistence practices between these two inlet sites; DkRw-26 was situated for convenient access to the productive Tzoonie Narrows, which likely yielded the diverse set of fish that were found there. Overall, it is apparent that the inlets were an important part of prehistoric settlement patterns and were utilized for a wide range of resource gathering.

Furthermore, places in the inlets held immense spiritual importance for prehistoric occupants. One of the most important finds of the inlet survey was at DjRw-14, beneath an abandoned Bible Camp in Salmon Inlet. The site had been previously recorded as a small lithic scatter and shell-bearing component by CRM archaeologists, though we discovered a much larger area of shell midden that extended beneath nearly the entire Bible Camp that had been heavily disturbed by the construction of buildings and roads for that facility. The pre-contact archaeological remains at the site are the most extensive of any observed in the survey; DjRw-14 is the largest shell-bearing site in Salmon and Narrows inlets. During an evening stroll through the abandoned wreckage in 2009, Letham came upon thousands of tiny ground stone disc beads similar to those observed in the early components at Porpoise Bay eroding out from a bank that had been cut into for the construction of a Bible Camp building that no longer stands. These mudstone and shale beads were also observed *in situ* in the exposed profile as a layer about 10 cm thick and 1.1 m wide, leading Letham to realize that there were at least tens of thousands of beads in a single deposit, which he speculated could be associated with a burial. The find was reported to

the *shíshálh* Nation, and in 2010 Bilton and Letham were granted permission to conduct test excavations at DjRw-14, and we returned in 2011 and 2012 to continue work at this site. These excavations were conducted in collaboration with a team of archaeological technicians who worked with Kenzie Jessome from the *shíshálh* Nation; including Darryl Jackson, Keith Julius Jr, and Tyrone Joe-Mayes.

In 2010, we excavated several test units, including one directly above the bank exposure with the ground stone disc beads. Suspicions of a burial were soon confirmed. After alerting and consulting with the *shíshálh* Nation archaeologist, permission was granted to excavate the burial, which was at risk of erosion and destruction by recreational users of the popular beach stopover. The burial included nearly the entire skeleton of an adult male who had been buried with strands of at least 350,000 ground stone and shell disc beads, easily the most bead-rich burial discovered to-date on the Northwest Coast (Coupland et al. 2016). Remarkably, the individual dated between 3900 and 3600 cal. BP, contemporaneous with several other recently-discovered burials and non-mortuary contexts throughout the Salish Sea and Lower Fraser River region that also contain a large amount of very similar disc beads (Coupland et al. 2016). The dates are also contemporaneous with the early component at Porpoise Bay that contained ground stone disc beads.

In 2011, we were joined by Dr. Terence Clark from the Canadian Museum of History, who directed further excavations at DjRw-14 that uncovered two more burials with relatively large numbers of disc beads as well as a large cache of beads and beautifully crafted ground slate and chipped stone points (Coupland et al. 2016). The other individuals all dated between 3900 and 3500 cal. BP, indicating that this area had been a cemetery for presumably very important individuals during this time. Furthermore, it appears that there were large numbers of ground

Figure 8 - Evening in the inlets (photo: Jacob Earnshaw)

stone disc beads being produced and circulated throughout the region during these centuries, which we argue are indicative of coordinated systems of craft production and pronounced wealth and status inequalities relatively early on (Coupland et al. 2016). The disc bead phenomenon seems restricted in space as well as time; ground stone disc beads have not been found in such large quantities outside of the Salish Sea and Lower Fraser River.

The faunal assemblage from DjRw-14 is unlike those from other *shíshálh* sites. Dogfish are the most abundant fish species in components from 4000-3000 cal. BP, followed by salmon, herring, and rockfish. Around 3000 cal. BP the use of DjRw-14 shifted, seemingly away from being a cemetery site towards being a residential site; shell midden, consisting mostly of clam shell, was deposited across the site. A large stone fish trap constructed on the beach may date from this time. The fish remains, again, indicate a diversified local practice; five of the taxa present (dogfish, salmon, herring, rockfish and perches) each contribute over 10% of the NISP. Deer contributed an NISP greater than any single fish family identified at DjRw-14. Other than some dog remains, there were no other significant mammal remains. The importance of deer at this site is noteworthy and, following the Master's project of Lara McFadden Baltutis (McFadden-Baltutis 2014), this research continues. The construction of the Bible Camp in the 20th Century has heavily impacted the surface of the site, though it is likely that this ideal and important location was used in more recent millennia prior to this disturbance as well.

shíshálh Student Training Program and Future Directions

In 2012, Coupland and Clark initiated an archaeological training program for youth from *shíshálh* Nation. For the last three seasons, our team has included up to a dozen high-school aged *shíshálh* students who have learned archaeological methods and skills alongside university students from the University of Toronto. This program has also included field trips throughout *shíshálh* territory and visits and lectures from *shíshálh* council and elders, as well as other archaeologists and specialists. *In Situ Consulting Inc.*, a local CRM company with a crew of predominantly *shíshálh* Nation archaeological technicians, has also joined us for guidance and project planning.

In its current form, the *shíshálh* Archaeological Research Project (SARP) exists as a fully collaborative initiative between the Canadian Museum of History, the University of Toronto, and the *shíshálh* Nation. This community-based project works to strengthen archaeological collaboration between academics and local communities, provide cross-cultural training and learning and promote potential careers in the social sciences, and increase our understanding and promote awareness of the archaeological record of long-term land and resource use on *shíshálh* lands.

Conclusion

Returning to the research questions posed at the outset of the project, we note with some irony that we have conducted a household archaeology project that learned very little specifically about houses. Instead, our findings have taken us in other 'larger scale' directions. *shíshálh* territory has proved to hold a truly remarkable archaeological record that sheds new light upon many 'classic' research themes in Northwest Coast archaeology, such as how and when did systems of pronounced social and wealth stratification emerge?, what was the nature of subsistence economies that did not have direct access to the large runs of salmon that early archaeologists considered so important for the development of Northwest Coast cultures?, and what was the regional breadth of different exchange and settlement systems?

The 4000-3500 year old bead-rich burials throughout the region demonstrate that there was an economy based around the mass production and circulation of these beads within the Salish Sea and Lower Fraser River region, seemingly as wealth or ritual items that were buried with high status individuals, though we note their occurrence in domestic contexts and other non-mortuary contexts as well. The extraordinary material wealth buried with individuals at DjRw-14 suggests a stratified political system and demonstrates that there was a place in

society for a significant volume of non-utilitarian craftwork by at least 4000 BP (Coupland et al. 2016).

Our studies of settlement and subsistence indicate that both the inlets and the outer coast of *shíshálh* territory were intensively occupied and used, and the diverse range of resources available within the region supported the populations there. The large steep-sided inlets and imposing mountain ranges in the region effectively produce landscapes through which movement can be easily monitored or controlled, and the inhabitants of the area seem to have situated sites to take advantage of this geographical quality, which may have contributed mechanisms for individuals or households to accumulate material wealth or non-material influence and power. Furthermore, our data suggest that the classic model in which systems of pronounced social stratification were built upon a base of economic surplus provided by salmon from the massive Fraser River runs (e.g., Burley 1979; Mitchell 1971) is untenable for this region. The archaeofaunal remains recovered from the sites we excavated indicate that *shíshálh* people supported themselves just fine on a locally adapted subsistence economy that was not dominated by salmon (Bilton 2014). Elucidating the processes or events that contributed to the fascinating historical developments in the region continues to be a focus of study for the Sechelt Archaeology Project.

References:

Barnett, Homer
1955 *The Coast Salish of British Columbia*. University of Oregon Press, Portland.

Bilton, David
2014 Northern, Central, Diversified, Specialized: the Archaeology of Fishing Adaptations in the Gulf of Georgia (Salish Sea), British Columbia. PhD dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON.

Burley, David
1979 Specialization and the evolution of complex society in the Gulf of Georgia region. *Canadian Journal of Archaeology* 3:131-143.

Coupland, Gary, Gay Frederick, David Bilton, Bryn Letham, Terence Clark, Jerome Cybulski, and Gretchen Williams
2012 Final Report of Archaeological Investigations in the *shíshálh* Nation Territory, 2008-2011. Report on file with Province British Columbia, Ministry of Tourism, Sports and the Arts, Archaeology Branch Permit 2008-177.

Coupland, Gary, David Bilton, Terence Clark, Jerome S. Cybulski, Gay Frederick, Alyson Holland, Bryn Letham, and Gretchen Williams
2016 A Wealth of Beads: Evidence for Material Wealth-Based Inequality in the Salish Sea Region, 4000-3500 Cal. B.P.. *American Antiquity* 81(2):294-315.

Hill-Tout, Charles
1978 Report on the Ethnology of the Siciatl [Sechelt] of Briish Columbia, a Coast Division of the Salish Stock (1904). In *The Salish People, the local contribution of Charles Hill-Tout, Volume IV: The Sechelt and the South-Eastern Tribes of Vancouver Island*, edited by Ralph Maud, pp. 93-125. Talonbooks, Vancouver.

Johannessen, Lisa
2010 The Salmon Inlet Survey Project: A Preliminary Assessment of How Regular Boat Use for Travel and Transport Affects Settlement Patterns and Subsistence Resources Utilized in Salmon Inlet, British Columbia, Canada. Masters Research Paper, Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON.

Letham, Bryn
2011 The Ancient Cultural Landscape of the Sechelt Inlet System. Master's thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON.

2014 Settlement and Shell-Bearing Site Diversity in the Sechelt Inlet System, BC. *Canadian Journal of Archaeology* 38(1):280-328.

McFadden-Baltutis, Lara
2014 What Remains Behind: A Zooarchaeological Assemblage from an Ancient *shíshálh* Burial Ground. Master's Thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON.

Merchant, Peter
2012 *shíshálh* Responses to the Colonial Conflict (1791-Present): Resilience in the Face of Disease, Missionaries and Colonization. Master's Thesis, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC.

Mitchell, Donald
1971 Archaeology of the Gulf of Georgia Area, a Natural Region and Its Culture Types. *Syesis* 4, supplement 1.

Peterson, Lester
1990 *The Story of the Sechelt Nation*. Sechelt Indian Band and Harbour Publishing, Madeira Park, BC.

Authors (left to right) Bryn Letham and David Bilton, hard at work (photo: Jacob Earnshaw).

Bios:

Bryn Letham is currently a PhD Candidate in the Department of Anthropology at UBC, studying the relationship between human settlement and sea level change in the Prince Rupert Harbour region. He has been part of the Sechelt Archaeology Project since 2009, during which he completed his M.Sc. under the supervision of Gary Coupland (University of Toronto) and surveyed the Sechelt Inlet system. Bryn also works on the University of Toronto Wadi Quseiba Survey Project in northwest Jordan, and has previously excavated and surveyed in eastern Jordan, the Broken Island Group, and the Dundas Islands.

David Bilton is a teacher at Central Park Public School in Markham, Ontario, and has been a part of the Shíshálh Archaeology Research Project since its inception. His PhD research focused on fishing practices in the Salish Sea region over the last 5000 years. He is the father of two wonderful children.