

STEATITE PLAQUE AND A CARVED TOOTH FROM SEMIAHMOO SPIT

By Don Welsh

This steatite plaque (Figure 1) and carved bear tooth (Figure 2) were excavated in site 45WH17 – Semiahmoo Spit. The following article attempts, in retrospect, to provide ethnographic and archaeological context to these most interesting artifacts. The steatite plaque was uncovered in pit 16-F-73 cut one, quad B during the Sehome High School field school, directed by the late Milton Clothier, from 1970 to 1973. I would like to thank his widow for providing the manuscript of the excavation report. Although requested, no one seems to know what happened to the artifacts, the site map, or excavation plans. So there is a repository number for artifacts but no one knows where they repose, the definite location of the pit in which they were recovered or in fact where the pits were located within the site.

The Semiahmoo Spit Site

Semiahmoo Spit, (45-WH-17), is a large complex shell midden site situated at the base of Semiahmoo Spit where it contacts the Birch Point uplands (Figure 3). Semiahmoo Spit, just south of the Canada/U.S. border, is a sand spit trending northeast and separating Drayton Harbor (on the east) from Semiahmoo Bay (on the west). Wayne Suttles recorded this location, from interviews with Julius Charles and Lucy Celestine, as the Semiahmoo winter village S'eeluch on the west side of the spit and Nuwnuwulich on the east side. S'eeluch was allegedly a high class village while Nuwnuwulich was second class. The burial ground was reported to have been where the two villages met. A large rock, nine feet high, was mentioned near the houses at S'eeluch it was used to promote good weather by throwing water on it or hitting it with a paddle. From the burial ground to the end of the spit were family owned duck net locations (Suttles nd: 7-8). The



Figure 1. Steatite Plaque From Clothier 1973 (accession # 245-73-1).

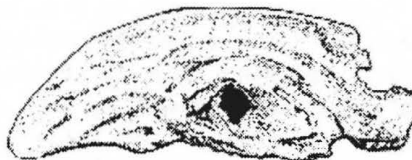


Figure 2. Carved Tooth (full size) (accession # 69-73-4).

shell heap was seven metres deep and formed a large, generally triangular, ridge from the spit base and was presumably between the two rows of houses. The main midden ridge is 100 metres by 70 metres and a secondary beach ridge, measuring 400 metres by 10 metres and with varying depth, covers much of the spit.

The spit has grown to the northwest over time and separates two ecological zones – an active wave-washed spit (on the Semiahmoo Bay side) and a sheltered bay (on the Drayton Harbor side). Large beds of butter clams and horse clams exist on the wave swept side. There is the suggestion that these beds were family owned in the same way as the duck nets. Trolling for salmon purportedly ran from Birch Point (South Bluff) to Ocean Park (North Bluff)¹. Silver smelts were also fished for by means of paddles – used to throw the massed spawning smelts out of the water. Deer and elk were available in the surrounding area (Suttles 1951: 27–30). It comes as no surprise that the faunal analysis of the excavated matrix stresses ungulates (deer and elk), fish, birds (ducks and diving birds rather than geese or swans), and shellfish. The only surprise is the amount of Stellar's sea lion bones, the hunting of which was not mentioned in the ethnographies.

Excavations at Semiahmoo Spit

Although the exact location of Clothier's 1973 excavation is not known, he mentioned a large glacial erratic on the Drayton Harbor side of the spit which he used as a datum. This may be the rock mentioned in Suttles' ethnography as being near the houses of the high status village on the Semiahmoo Bay side of the spit. As no erratic is currently visible at the site, it cannot be used to locate the Clothier excavation area. At the time of Clothier's excavations only one carbon date had been secured (4100±500 years) which came from a hearth on the basal gravel of the site. Clothier divided occupation of the site into four divisions: Semiahmoo I, Semiahmoo II, Semiahmoo III and Semiahmoo IV. These are identical in dates and cultural material to: Charles Culture, Locarno

Beach Culture, Marpole Culture and Gulf of Georgia Culture in Mitchell's Gulf of Georgia sequence (see Gaston 1975: 107) and these terms will be used preferentially here.

Jeannette Gaston reported the results of her excavations in this site in 1975. She found the site appeared to have an occupational gap during the Marpole Culture. She reported Clothier's excavation included Charles Culture, some Locarno Beach Culture and a bit of Marpole Culture. This was the only Marpole manifestation excavated at the site. Most of Gaston's excavation was in deposits dating from the proto-historic Gulf of Georgia Culture. She reported Clothier's date of 4100±500 years (WWSC, no number), and obtained another date of 2875±65 years (UW332) at the bottom strata. She noted that it was from a similar layer to Clothier's earlier date (Gaston 1975: 106).

Grabert et al published further excavations and more dates in 1978. In this report, Clothier's excavations were reported to have been on the east side of the midden ridge. A string of carbon dates were obtained: 350±50 years (UW461); 580±60 years (UW462); 830±60 (UW458); 2370±70 years (UW457); 2715±55 years (UW463); 2830±65 years (UW459); and 3015±65 years (UW460). These dates are all in uncalibrated radiocarbon years.

The opinion of the Western Washington University archaeologists was that Marpole was not well represented at this site (Gaston 1975: 106–108; Grabert, Cressman and Wolverton 1978: 211–217). Marpole Culture's manifestation appears to be to the east of the main shellheap, in the area excavated by Clothier (Gaston 1975: 106). Since this area was outside the Blaine sewage plant proposal, it was not reexamined by Western Washington University archaeologists for dateable material. Although the Western Washington University archaeologists concluded that Marpole was not well represented in the areas they excavated, they also qualified this statement with the opinion that it could still be located elsewhere in the site.

Possible Cultural Affiliation of the Plaque

These conclusions imply that the sculptured plaque could have originated during Marpole Culture or earlier in Locarno Beach (or even earlier) deposits but it is unlikely to be from the more recent proto-historic occupation given the part of the site from which it came. The proto-historic occupation is closely related to ethnographic descriptions of the Semiahmoo village of this location that placed the low class village on this side, east of the shell heap where, presumably, the Marpole occupation recorded by Clothier also occurred. Therefore unresolved archaeological questions remain.

Very little sculptural artwork has originated from this site. As much of this type of artwork is attributed to Marpole Culture, the lack thereof may correspond with an occupational hiatus during the Marpole time period. At the same time, across the bay on Point Roberts at the Whalen Farm and Beach Grove sites, Marpole house remains have been reported with significant numbers of sculptures. The Semiahmoo Spit site may have remained relatively unsettled during this time although it appears to have been used at least as a resource utilization site. This must remain speculative until the Marpole aspect of this site has been further investigated.

It must be noted here that little evidence of house structures was found in the test units on the outside of the shell heap where the ethnographic description would have them. The excavators also noted that there was considerable historic disturbance in this area that likely destroyed the evidence. Their choice of excavating a number of pits across the area proposed for the sewer plant may have also affected the visibility of house floors. A long trench with a continuous profile or shallow excavation of a wide area is more likely to reveal house outlines. Considerable post moulds, both large and small, are expected in house deposits, as for instance at the Tsawwassen Site where excavations entered house locations recorded ethnographically by Homer Barnett. In the case of Semiahmoo Spit,

only one post mould was noted in the excavation units. It is possible that the excavations missed the historic house sites. It is also possible that this site was used seasonally but did not constitute a winter village with permanent plank houses. This later suggestion, however, contradicts the ethnographic data, which is quite extensive for this site.

The Image on the Plaque

The image on the plaque was incised into a flat piece of soapstone and resembles two examples of Lummi masks (Figure 4; Figure 5). The Lummi people are closely related to the Semiahmoo People; both speak the same dialect of the North Straits language, both groups are closely intermarried and share common ancestors. After the Treaty of Washington in 1846, and Point Elliott Treaty in 1855, some of the Semiahmoo settled on the Lummi reservation while some remained at Campbell River in Canada. When we talk of the Lummi

Tribe today it includes members of Semiahmoo ancestry and has legal jurisdiction over American Semiahmoo territory. The Semiahmoo First Nation in Canada represents people of Semiahmoo ancestry and has legal jurisdiction over Canadian Semiahmoo territory. Both groups claim ancestral ties to Semiahmoo Spit. Museum records do not necessarily reflect this same degree of legal hair splitting. It is safe to say that both were and are in close cultural contact and share local art styles.

Morrie Alexander, a Lummi carver, created the most recent mask (Figure 4) in 1970 (Alexander and Charles 1971: 28). This was the same year that Clothier began his excavations so it seems unlikely that Alexander saw the artifact prior to the carving. Clothier cited an interview with Morrie Alexander in 1971 so the possibility remains that the plaque influenced the woodcarving. The two images are similar in that both have broad eyebrows, double eye circles, and they

share the general shape of the mouth; they differ in that the archaeological plaque has teeth and a curvilinear formline incised into the cheek.

The second similar image is the much older Lummi bear mask from 1800 that is conserved in the San Diego Museum of Man (Figure 5) (McQuiston and McQuiston: 36-37). Details of this mask's acquisition are missing but the date of assumed manufacture predates the legal division of the Semiahmoo and the subsequent merger of one division with the Lummi Peoples in the mid-1800s. This mask shows all the design elements utilized in the soapstone plaque: broad eyebrows, double eye circles, square teeth (most are missing), a curved nostril treatment, and the formline defining the cheek. These are the same design elements repeated in northern bear images. The northern approach would also include ears and prominent canine teeth.

These comparisons suggest that the image on the plaque is a representation of a bear. It may be argued that, if this



Figure 3. Topographic Map showing Registered Archaeology Sites in Relation To Traditional Semiahmoo Place Names Recorded by Wayne Suttles.



Figure 1. Steatite Plaque From Clothier 1973 (accession # 245-73-1).

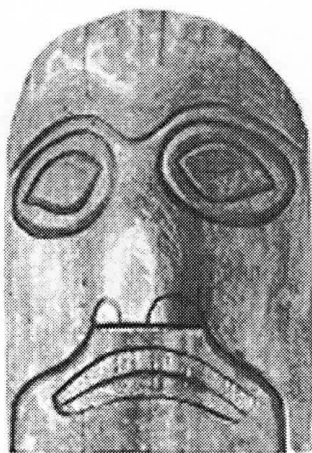


Figure 4. Lummi Mask: 1970 by Morrie Alexander.

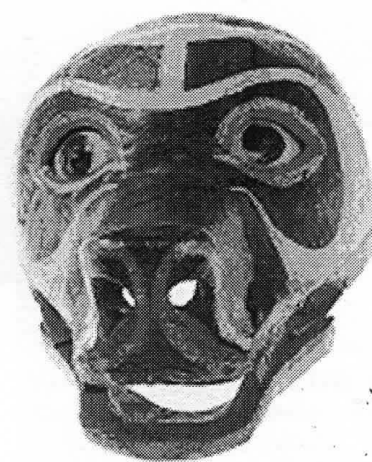


Figure 5. Lummi Mask: 1800 From McQuiston & McQuiston 1995).

is the case, it must be recent like the masks. It does seem that 1500 years is a long time for an image to persist. On the other hand, the consistency of the design elements over the entire northwest coast for the bear image argues for great age for this convention. Clothier provided neither a record of the depth of this item, nor profiles of the unit in which it was found, so the Marpole attribution remains speculative, as does the more recent origin. I leave this as an open question.

The second artifact relates to the first in abstract subject matter (Figure 2). This is a bear tooth that has been modified by shallow incisions to form an eye. Two holes were drilled at the base of the tooth for attachment, presumably to a costume or thong. The overall shape of the tooth suggests an eagle or thunderbird head and is similar in form to eagle heads carved from teeth that are sold on the powwow circuit today. This item could have been a fetish or charm.

Semiahmoo territory was good black bear hunting territory, unlike most of the island territories inhabited by the Straits Salish. Suttles recorded examples of ritualism associated with bear hunting among the Semiahmoo (Suttles 1952: 92-95). Since both carved items recovered during Clothier's excavation indicate a level of bear ceremonialism, I suggest that both were bear hunting charms.

Notes:

1. North Bluff and South Bluff were names proposed by Captain Vancouver. The name North Bluff has survived, at least until recently: North Bluff Road was the original name for 16th Avenue. The North Bluff bus ran along this road until just a few years ago when it was renamed Crescent Beach/Vancouver.

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