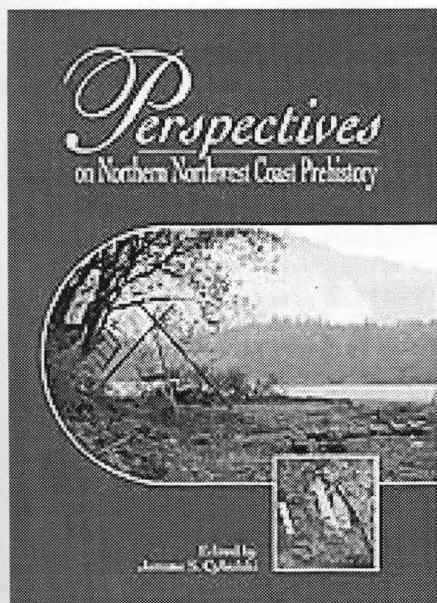


Perspectives on Northern Northwest Coast Prehistory

edited by Jerome S. Cybulski.

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The northern area of the Northwest Coast — from roughly Prince Rupert to the north end of the Alaskan panhandle — presents an interesting face to archaeologists. The natural setting is stark and dramatic, seemingly touched only in a limited way by the modern world. This region has hosted some of the richest cultural traditions recorded on the Northwest Coast, and the archaeological record holds clues as to the identity and origin of some of the earliest inhabitants of this hemisphere. It is therefore useful to have a book devoted specifically to the character of the region, its aboriginal societies, and the archaeological record that documents their prehistory.

As editor, Jerome Cybulski has assembled a cast of thirteen authors offering contributions that cover a wide array of topics of recurrent interest to archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, and the interested general reader. The eleven chapters in the volume derive from papers presented before a special session at the 1996 meetings of the Canadian Archaeological Association in Halifax. Represented are studies both broad and specific, including discussions

of prehistoric environmental change, biological affinities of northern coast cultures, intersocietal relations and trade, subsistence and settlement patterns, and concerns about the preservation of the very archaeological record upon which these studies draw.

In terms of focus, the Prince Rupert Harbour area is well represented (seven of eleven chapters) in the volume. This is not surprising given that this area is probably the most accessible region of the North Coast, and thus (relatively) well-explored by archaeologists. But it is also a result of the initial conference papers having been presented to mark the passing of three decades since the implementation and execution of the North Coast Prehistory Project. This project, directed by George MacDonald in the late 1960s and staffed by many of the paper contributors, focused primarily on the archaeology of the Prince Rupert Harbour region. Complementing these localized studies are papers that take a broad, regional perspective in addressing the questions and issues raised. Some papers have clearly been significantly revised and/or supplemented following their initial presentation in Halifax, while others are brief enough to indicate that little has been added. In either case, bibliographies include few references more recent than 1996.

Appropriately, the first chapter is a summary of the results of George MacDonald's investigations conducted in the late 1960s. These data have not been reported in full previously, and, while this chapter is no substitute for such a report, it perhaps provides the most useful summary to date. An impressive array of sites dating to the last 3,500 years were investigated by MacDonald and crew, and information from these sites has played a pivotal role in conceptualizations of North Coast prehistory over the last four decades.

A critical long-term discussion is provided in Chapter 2 by Fladmark, who contextualizes the prehistory of the North Coast in its environmental history, particularly the dramatic changes that characterized the early postglacial period prior to 10 000 years ago. Paleoenvironmental data (pollen, sea level records) can make for a dry read, yet Fladmark presents a completely accessible

treatment, weaving data with their most critical implications for the earliest cultures of the region. His interpretations are in the tradition of his long held view that the B.C. coast provided a suitable corridor for movement of North America's earliest inhabitants past the ice sheets to more southerly parts of our hemisphere. Coupled with the recent findings of Daryl Fedje and colleagues on Haida Gwaii (e.g., Fedje 2003; Fedje and Christensen 1999; Fedje et al. 2001) — work which is unfortunately absent from this volume, I might add — the coastal perspective on the route of the initial peopling of the New World is alive and well. While submerged data has always been a critical problem for establishing a coastal route for the early peopling of the Americas, it seems the more we look, the more we find.

With the exception of Fladmark's contribution, all papers pertain to developments that occurred in the last 5000 years. During this time fundamental and monumental changes have occurred in Northwest Coast societies. Perhaps the most significant is the emergence of so-called "ranked societies" sometime (as Archer argues in this volume) during the last two millennia. Such societies, where social life involved relations of economic and status inequality, are a critical research question on the Northwest Coast, and indeed, in anthropology most broadly. The term "ranked society" also acts as a sort of shorthand description for a series of traits (e.g., large-scale storage of resources, permanent villages) that made Northwest Coast societies quite unique amongst hunting and gathering societies of the world, including ancestral cultures of the same area. The archaeological record of the North Coast has much to contribute to understanding the critical elements of this transition, and many papers directly or indirectly tackle this topic, including contributions by Sutherland, Marsden, Cybulski, Croes, Archer, Prince and the team of Coupland, Martindale and Marsden.

A major conclusion I drew from these papers as a group, and in at least this respect they are in concordance, is that the changes that accompanied the development of rank society were widespread, far reaching, and involved the reconfiguration of relations both within and between North Coast societies. The

rich burial traditions evident at a number of sites in the harbour document that conflict may have been an important factor in such social changes. As an archaeologist working mostly in southern coastal B.C., I find the rich grave tradition, and particularly the warfare symbolism in "high-status" graves at the Boardwalk site, particularly striking. Clearly status and warfare have been inextricably linked for many millennia on the North Coast.

But conflict is clearly not the whole answer as to why societies of the North Coast underwent fundamental changes and developed highly structured systems of social inequality. This point is made clear by Coupland, Martindale, and Marsden. They consider the notion that the wealthiest local groups in terms of their access to natural resources may have been the highest-ranking groups in the region. Contra some earlier studies (Donald and Mitchell 1994), they find no correlation in the north, however, and suggest that we cannot employ such one-dimensional explanations to explain the process everywhere we look.

Archer tackles the issue of when such "ranked societies" arise more directly with archaeological data, specifically using village patterns and differences in house size as a measure of the differences in wealth and, presumably, status among households within villages. A number of village sites with a few very large houses appear quite quickly after 100 A.D. in the region, which Archer suggests reflect the appearance of high ranking and wealthy households and thus "ranked society". While differences in house size are not the only nor perhaps even the most effective way to measure differences in wealth and status, clearly some fundamental changes were happening in village life in the early second millennium before present.

Papers by Sutherland, Marsden, Cybulski, and Prince emphasize that the development of ranked society occurred in tandem with increasing regional relations of trade, interaction, and conflict, as well as population movements. In particular, conflicts over resources, space, and power are central though perhaps unfortunate elements of the expanding scale (and expanding scale of

inequality) in small-scale societies, at least those of the North Coast.

In addition to thematics, the coverage of Prince Rupert Harbour is expanded significantly in papers by Croes and Kathlyn and Frances Stewart. These papers focus primarily on materials analyses — basketry in the former and animal bones in the latter — and nicely complement the more problem-oriented research. Since my impression is that no major report on the North Coast Prehistory Project will be arriving in the mail soon, the coverage presented here allows this volume to suffice in the interim.

While much of the book explicitly involves "looking back" over almost four decades of archaeological research, the final chapter by Simonsen looks squarely into the future. It is unfortunately standard practice these days to have to punctuate such insightful research with the point that the wonderfully rich archaeological record that forms the basis for such research is at high risk for destruction. A great deal of data has and will continue to disappear before any archaeologist will have a chance to document their context. Even on the seemingly remote North Coast, the relentless pace of development, forestry, natural erosion and even human recreation engender highly destructive forces and results. Simonsen prescribes that, in light of the almost embarrassing lack of federal policy on heritage conservation, increased involvement of First Nations in a system of more local management initiatives may be one way to develop credible and effective approaches to conservation, both politically and pragmatically.

In style and format, the volume receives generally high marks. A satisfying combination of academic weightiness and general accessibility is achieved, which provides for a pleasant read for both scholars and general readers alike. Despite that a few papers are quite brief and consequently somewhat general in their conclusions, there is certainly more than enough here to wet the appetite of archaeological specialists. The editor should be commended for this approach. The illustrations are well produced and the large type size creates a visual accessibility that often eludes similar data-

rich publications.

Is the book worth the money and a space on your bookshelf? I would say at under \$30 this volume represents an excellent value. Its shortcomings are minor compared to its strengths, and, as the authors of the first chapter point out, regional syntheses are few and far between on the Northwest Coast. This volume should be a useful addition for any interested person for some years to come.

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