

BOOK REVIEWS

What Can We Learn From Those Who Have Passed On?

Prehistoric Mortuary Variability on Gabriola Island, British Columbia

by A. JOANNE CURTIN

Archaeology Press, Simon Fraser University, 2002. viii + 157 pp., illus., app., refs., index. Price: ISBN 0-86491-227-7, (Sc) \$25.00

Joanne Curtin's publication is a slightly revised version of her PhD dissertation at Ohio State University. One consequence is that the book is organized in the style of a dissertation as opposed to a more narrative format.

The book deals with the analysis of a set of burials from five burial features at two sites on Gabriola Island in the Gulf of Georgia region of British Columbia, and their comparison with burials from the nearby False Narrows midden. The organization follows that of a typical dissertation. In the first paragraph of chapter one, Curtin outlines the problem that she was researching and presents the three hypotheses that she wished to examine, specifically, that the two burial populations recovered on Gabriola Island represent either:

1. "diachronic variation in mortuary practices";
2. "different biological populations with different burial customs"; and
3. "different social groups within the same biological population."

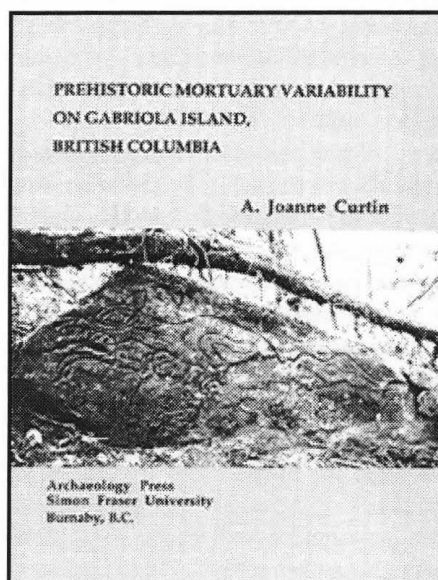
Unfortunately, Curtin does not tell us until sometime later which populations she is referring to. Next Curtin introduces the topic of mortuary analysis, beginning with a brief summary of the development of the subject, followed by observations on its application on the Northwest Coast and on Gabriola Island. Thus, this chapter provides a good introduction to the following description and discussion. It clearly outlines what is to follow and makes it much easier for readers to locate themselves in relation to the data Curtin presents.

In the second chapter, "The Study Area," Curtin describes the geography, geology, and biology of the Gulf Islands, covering the time from the late Pleistocene to the present. It also provides an ethnographic overview of the study area. A regional culture history for the Gulf of Georgia follows, relying on generally accepted chronologies and classifications. Last is a summary of the prehistory of the Nanaimo area, including Gabriola Island. By the end of the first two relatively short chapters, a total of 16 pages, the problem, its theoretical background, and the context

reconstructed parts. A section on comparisons of the Gabriola Island burials that she recovered with those from the False Narrows midden is included, with descriptions of the False Narrows materials, and of the method for determining biological distance, or similarity, between the two sample sets.

In chapter four, Curtin discusses the site reconnaissance of a three kilometer long section of the False Narrows bluffs on Gabriola Island. Three site areas are described, one of which (DgRw 204) is the subject of this study and two of which (DgRw 210 and 213) are not. A second study area (DgRw 199) is mentioned in the previous chapter but is not described in detail as are the three sites presented in this chapter. It would seem useful to have similar descriptions of both study sites in the same chapter.

Chapters five through nine are reports on five burial features from two sites (DgRw 204 and 199). Each provides a description of the feature, the results of the excavations, a description of the matrix of the feature, a listing of faunal remains, a list of artifacts recovered, dates for the features, and a discussion of the recovery and analysis of the human remains. Included in the discussion of buried remains are observations on the conditions of the remains, the spatial distribution of remains, skeletal reconstruction, evidence for burning, demographic information, skeletal anomalies and pathologies, and mortuary practices. The largest of the burial features is DgRw 199 - F1, which is given the longest description and discussion. Some of the remains from this feature and from DgRw 199 - F9 exhibit burning, and some exhibit a variety of pathologies such as degenerative joint disease, developmental defects, dental anomalies, fractures, cultural modification of one individual's skull, and infectious diseases; specifically there were three individuals, and possibly another, diagnosed as suffering from treponemal infections. The data in these chapters are presented in a



and prehistory of the study area have been summarized. While somewhat condensed, this provides the reader with the necessary background information to situate the analysis that follows.

In chapter three, Curtin describes the methods used to address her hypotheses. She outlines the reconnaissance methods for the Gabriola Island sites, including definitions of the recorded data types. A description of the excavation and data collection methods for human remains follows, with appropriate definitions provided. The author describes how she reconstructed and conjoined the various bone fragments and elements found, and how she collected data from the

straightforward manner, which enables the reader to follow the discussion with ease.

In chapter 10, Curtin brings together her results and addresses her three initial hypotheses, although not in the same order that she presents them in her introduction. The first hypothesis, that of population variation as a cause of mortuary variation, is rejected because the biological distance between populations is essentially zero. The second hypothesis, regarding chronological variation as a source of mortuary differences, is rejected. The third hypothesis, relating social differentiation to mortuary differences, is similarly rejected. This leaves the author to present an alternative hypothesis, that the differences in mortuary pattern reflect the manner of death of the individuals. At this point Curtin links the presence of burned bone, infectious diseases, and skeletal pathologies to suggest that they are the reasons that burials at DgRw 199 differ from the midden burials at the False Narrows site (DgRw 4). She supports her conclusion by comparing these burials with a multiple burial group from the Duke Point midden (DgRx 5) that was analyzed by Cybulski in 1978, the members of which seem to have suffered from some form of infectious disease.

In addition to the chapters outlined above, there are three appendices in the book. The first is a catalogue and analysis of all of the faunal remains recovered. The second is artifact descriptions. The third is a set of osteological comparisons for the five features reported; it does not include any comparative data from the False Narrows midden burials.

I find this publication to be reasonably representative of similar analyses of burial sites in North America and elsewhere. The hypotheses being examined are straightforward and provide reasonable alternative explanations for the differences between burial sample sets. Curtin's approach to their analysis is academically sound and also straightforward. I have some quibbles with the manner in which the report is written. I had a bit of difficulty sorting out which sites were being discussed in the earlier chapters,

particularly when it came to the False Narrows midden (DgRw 4) materials. I also wonder why the faunal data are included. These play no part in the discussion of mortuary patterns and are not part of the discussion and conclusions of the study. My feeling is that the faunal data deserve more complete treatment in either a site report or a separate report that relates them to the sites and to the archaeology of the region. A summary of the artifacts found with the burials is pertinent to discussion of burial goods, but beyond that is not particularly relevant to the analysis. Detailed presentation of the artifacts and their attributes also seems more appropriate in a site report than in this analysis.

Overall I find the study interesting and informative and I imagine that many researchers of Northwest Coast prehistory will too, however, I suspect that since it is somewhat dry it will be of limited interest to a general audience. Because the report is based on a dissertation, it treats the analysis of burials quite objectively and impersonally. Curtin succeeds in avoiding any extravagant claims or interpretations and does not glorify the research in any way. This is an important consideration when dealing with the dead, particularly when many First Nations people are reticent about such analyses. The dead deserve to be treated with respect, and Curtin has done so.

Brian Chisholm

Brian Chisholm received a PhD from Simon Fraser University in 1987, and after a year in Japan began teaching at the University of British Columbia in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, where he is now. Since 1978, his research has been based on the use of stable isotopic analysis for the reconstruction of prehistoric diet. He is presently involved in projects in Japan, Thailand, Mexico, Belize, the American Southwest, and in BC.



THE MIDDEN needs a volunteer to manage subscriptions. The position involves maintaining the subscription list, handling subscription correspondence, and mailing **THE MIDDEN** to subscribers and ASBC members

If you are interested in volunteering on **THE MIDDEN** editorial committee please contact Heather Myles, Editor, for more information.

Phone 604.274.4294
or e-mail
heathermyles@shaw.ca

