

MARPOLE

Anthropological Reconstructions of a Prehistoric Northwest Coast Culture Type

INTRODUCTION

Over the past quarter of a century, archaeological research within the Gulf of Georgia region of southern British Columbia and northern Washington has expanded at an incredible rate. Intensified in the Canadian portion by the establishment of a cultural resource management program, large scale site surveys have been carried out through most of this area. In conjunction, a number of sites have been tested and, where immediate destruction imminent, excavated. The end result has been the collection of a mass of data from which one might expect a clear and concise picture of regional prehistory. This is not entirely the case. In fact, beyond the gross establishment of a culture historical sequence of some 9,000 years, we know little of the prehistoric inhabitants or their lifeways.

Even in the area of culture history, the presumed strength of coastal archaeology, most researchers point out major inadequacies. Lacking full published accounts for many of the type sites, rigorous definitions of individual taxonomic units are absent. This situation has been further compounded by several competing chronological schemes for varying intraregional locales, not to mention an unending debate over the most appropriate conceptual framework for chronology building. However, despite such problems, most would agree that the bare essentials of a culture historical sequence are presently laid out. Moreover, at least one prehistorian has argued that "for general classificatory purposes, it would be hard to see what modifications the present scheme would need" (Matson 1974: 113).

To undertake an intensive examination of all aspects of Gulf of Georgia prehistory in light of the current data base

would be a gigantic task. Rather, here the attempt is made to examine but one segment, that termed the Marpole culture type. The major objective is to acquire an understanding of this unit in the context of Northwest Coast prehistory as thoroughly as the data allow.

The format of this investigation has what might best be described as three major themes. The first sets the stage, so to speak, for the second and third. Following a brief synthesis of paleo- and recent geography, an introductory summary is given of the prehistory of the Gulf of Georgia and adjacent regions. This summary finally leads me to address questions of theory and method bearing directly on subsequent conclusions. Specifically, these questions concern sampling and the concept of phase.

The second theme is oriented towards culture history. Initially, there is an extensive review of the basis for a Marpole taxonomic unit. This includes a historical overview and evaluation of currently defined diagnostics. Subsequently, Marpole articulation with earlier and later units is examined as also are the spatial boundaries for this culture type. Finally, a quantitative analysis of interassemblage variability among 18 putative Marpole sites is undertaken.

The final theme attempts a lifeway reconstruction for Marpole peoples. Models of socio-political organization, economic pattern, intergroup relations and ritualistic behaviour are proposed by interweaving the little relevant archaeological data with ethnographic analogy. As a second aspect, a theoretical discourse on the evolution of both the Marpole culture type and the local variant of Northwest Coast culture is provided.