

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Archaeological sites on the Northwest Coast of North America have yielded evidence for a variety of mortuary practices, including midden interment, tree burial, cremation, cairn or mound burial, and surface disposal in caves, grave houses, mortuary poles, or canoes. The meaning of this variability is unclear, although social differentiation and chronological change have been suggested as possible explanations. This project examines the problem of mortuary variability in the Gulf of Georgia region of the Northwest Coast through analysis of two burial samples from Gabriola Island, British Columbia, that exhibit widely differing burial practices: primary midden inhumation and secondary surface disposal in rockshelters and caves. Demographic, osteological, and radiometric data will be used to examine three hypotheses:

1. That the two burial samples represent diachronic variations in mortuary practices;
2. That the two burial samples represent different biological populations with different burial customs; and
3. That the two burial samples represent different social groups within the same biological population.

### Mortuary Variability

It has long been recognized by ethnographers, social anthropologists, and archaeologists that burial customs vary widely throughout the world. Inter-group variability in mortuary practices can often be satisfactorily explained by differences in ecology, economy,

ideology, religion, social complexity, and past histories of migration and cultural interactions. The origins and meaning of intra-group variation, however, are less readily explained, and have generated much discussion and research, particularly in the past forty years.

Late 19th and early 20th century students of mortuary behavior tended to view their data from a normative perspective, that either ignored variability, or perceived it primarily as evidence of the overlay of foreign elements onto what was originally a uniform practice, as a result of population movement or the diffusion of ideas. The first serious challenge to this perspective occurred in 1927, with Kroeber's review of burial customs in aboriginal California. Kroeber found such diversity in methods of disposal of the dead, apparently uncorrelated with cultural, climatic, or geographic boundaries, and such rapid changes over time, that he questioned the utility of funerary remains for meaningful cultural analysis. He suggested that mortuary practices, due to their "affect-laden" nature, and what he perceived as their dissociation from core cultural features such as subsistence, material culture, law, religion, and social organization, were inherently unstable and better characterized as labile "fashions" than as significant cultural traits.

Kroeber notwithstanding, social scientists have continued to search for meaning in mortuary variability, focusing since the early 1970s on exploring the social dimensions of mortuary practices. The first, critical links between funeral practices and social structure had been established in the early 20th century by sociologists Robert Hertz (1960 [1907]) and Arthur Van Gennep (1960 [1909]). They interpreted the fu-

neral as a rite of passage, whose function, according to Hertz, was to facilitate three major transitions: that of the deceased from 'dangerous' corpse to relatively innocuous skeleton; that of the soul or spirit from the real world to the "land of dead"; and that of the survivors from a liminal state of mourning into a reintegrated society without the deceased.

It is this recognition of mortuary ritual as an act of social reintegration that permits the development of general principles for interpreting mortuary variability cross-culturally, and forms the rationale underlying most recent studies of the social dimensions of mortuary practices.

The funeral is one occasion where the ideal norms of the social roles of the survivors and the dead are played out with the greatest clarity...so, something of the ideal social structure is captured in the funerary process....On the one hand, the status of the deceased affects the scale of rites necessary to achieve separation; on the other hand, the reintegration of the mourners with the living requires restatement of the social structure and the relationships of the living to the dead (Morris 1987: 32-33).

The most significant theoretical development in mortuary studies in recent years is what has come to be known as the Saxe-Binford program (Brown 1995), which draws heavily on role theory (Goodenough 1965; Linton 1936) in accounting for systematic differences in mortuary treatment, particularly with reference to issues of social complexity. The basic premises of the Saxe-Binford program are that an individual's treatment in death bears some predictable relationship to: (1) the individual's state in life; and (2) the organization of the society to which the individual belonged. From these premises, Saxe (1970) developed eight testable hypotheses which predicted how the social persona of the deceased and the social structure of the group would be differentially represented within the disposal domain.

Binford (1972) addressed himself more directly to Kroeber's claims of inherent instability in mortuary practices, and their independence from core biological or social behaviors, using empirical data drawn from the ethnographic literature and the Human Relations Area Files. He found (contra Kroeber), that there existed considerable variability in the stability of mortuary practices, and more importantly, that mortuary behavior was intimately connected to the organiza-

tional principles of a society. Binford identified some of the personal variables or dimensions that may be distinguished in mortuary ritual (including age, sex, social standing, occupation, clan membership, and manner, place, and time of death), and demonstrated that the number and types of dimensions so distinguished were determined in part by the complexity of social organization. Like Saxe, Binford developed specific, testable hypotheses that predicted how mortuary ceremonialism would covary with social complexity.

## Mortuary Archaeology

Although their hypotheses were derived from and tested with ethnographic data, the explicit aims of both Saxe and Binford were to develop a methodology applicable to the explanation of variability in archaeological remains, and their publications have stimulated an outpouring of research in mortuary archaeology (e.g., Brown 1971; Chapman et al. 1981; Beck 1995). Applications of the Saxe-Binford program have been numerous and varied, employing a variety of analytical techniques and theoretical approaches (including component analysis, cluster analysis, formal analysis, systems theory, role theory, communication theory, information theory, and set theory), in the examination of many different lines of funerary evidence, including burial treatment, artifact associations, energy expenditure, and spatial patterning (Brown 1971; Goldstein 1981, 1995; Larson 1971; Peebles 1971; Saxe 1970; Tainter 1975, 1978; Voorrips and O'Shea 1987). This research has most commonly been directed to the identification of rank and status differences in archaeological cultures (Brown 1971, 1981; Peebles 1971; Peebles and Kus 1977; Larson 1971; Orton and Hodson 1981), but has also examined such diverse social factors as deviancy (Shay 1985), ethnicity (Beck 1995), marriage and residence patterns (Saxe 1971), and lineal descent groups (Charles 1995). All, however, have shared the basic underlying assumption that aspects of the structure of past social organization could be determined by the appropriate analysis of mortuary remains.

The Saxe-Binford program has not met with unqualified acceptance, however (Brown 1995). Some have pointed out the numerous ethnographic exceptions to the predicted isomorphism between social organization and mortuary treatment (Childe 1945; Leach 1977; Ucko 1969), including cases where mortuary ritual is used to manipulate or even subvert the social order (Chapman and Randsborg 1981; Trinkaus 1984). Pearson (1982) made the case that mortuary practices are conservative, and tend to reflect traditional roles as a reaffirmation of the past. In a similar

vein, Morris (1987) suggested that mortuary ritual reflects an *idealized* social structure that may deny, reflect, or exaggerate empirical relationships of authority. Even those who accept the postulated relationship between mortuary ritual and social organization may question how accurately archaeological data reflect the behaviors that generated the remains. Archaeologists typically deal with only one facet of mortuary behavior: that concerned with disposal of the corpse (Bartel 1982). But, as Morris (1987: 29) notes, "burial is only part of a funeral, and a funeral only part of the social circumstances surrounding the biological fact of death". Equally importantly, burial is only one of many possible methods of corpse disposal, but the only one likely to be identifiable archaeologically (Leach 1977; Ucko 1969). If some members of a past society were left exposed, or placed in trees, or deposited in the water, all evidence of these alternative burial treatments, and the true complexity of the mortuary program, would be lost.

Burial samples are often recovered incidental to other archaeological research programs, raising problems of inadequate or inconsistent data collection (Humphreys 1981). Entire cemeteries are rarely excavated, introducing the possibility of sampling bias, particularly for rare or unusual burial types, or where there exists unrecognized spatial patterning (Peebles 1971; Tainter 1978). The collection of samples large enough to draw statistically valid conclusions is always a problem archaeologically, but large samples may present equally vexing problems of diachronic distortion (O'Shea 1984). Spurious organization may be introduced by post depositional transformation processes (O'Shea 1984) while other organization and information may be lost due to differential preservation (Brown 1995). Finally, there are problems of interpretation, including distinguishing idiosyncratic variation from emically meaningful differences (Ucko 1969), and the selection of appropriate methods of analysis (Braun 1981).

Attempts in recent years to overcome some of the more obvious limitations of mortuary archaeology have resulted in a shift away from the study of individual burials from a single site, to the examination of burial data from a regional perspective (e.g., Beck 1995). Although something of the true range of variation will inevitably be lost through archaeological transformations, it is expected that the broader perspective provided by a regional focus will provide a more representative picture of the prehistoric mortuary program.

## Mortuary Analysis On The Northwest Coast

In the past, interpretations of mortuary variability on the Northwest Coast have tended to focus on diachronic change as an explanatory model. This emphasis on temporal variation is a natural outgrowth of the cultural-historical paradigm that has directed much of the previous archaeological research in the region. The major goal of such research has been the construction of a classification of normatively-defined cultures in time and space (Nash 1983). In keeping with this cultural-historical perspective, burial remains were examined primarily in an attempt to determine the "typical" mortuary practice(s) characteristic of each cultural-chronological unit. For example, burial position (extended versus flexed) is one of the traits used by Carlson (1970) to distinguish Mayne phase from Marpole phase components in his San Juan and Gulf Islands excavations. Burials with abundant and/or exotic grave inclusions, especially beads, were generally assumed to date to the Marpole period (Hall and Haggarty 1981; Calvert 1970; Murray 1982; Burley 1980). Borden (1970) lists midden interment among the traits distinguishing the Locarno Beach, Marpole, and Whalen II phases in the Gulf of Georgia, with inhumation being replaced by disposal in above-ground mortuary houses in the subsequent Stselax phase.

With an increasing number of sites excavated, and the accumulation of more abundant and varied data, previous perceptions of prehistoric mortuary practices have been modified and refined. The search for "normative" burial patterns has yielded to the recognition that all cultures are characterized by a variety of burial treatments, which are correlated with such variables as the individual's age, gender, social status, and the circumstances or manner of death. Earlier normative interpretations are now seen to be too simplistic and often erroneous. For example, it is now known that Mayne phase components contain both flexed and extended interments, and that extended burial occurs, albeit infrequently, throughout the temporal and spatial continuum of the Northwest Coast culture area (Curtin 1999). Application of radiometric dating techniques to human skeletal remains has demonstrated that lavish grave goods, including abundant beads, are not limited to Marpole burials, but occur in both earlier and later contexts (Curtin 1999; Cybulski 1991b).

Coincident with the realization of the limitations of the normative approach and the recognition of variability in mortuary practices within cultures, there

has occurred a shift in research objectives away from cultural-historical reconstruction and towards the understanding of cultural processes. On the Northwest Coast, this shift in theoretical perspective has led to an increased interest in the use of mortuary data to identify social patterns, and in particular to detect the presence and/or possible origins of social stratification (Burley 1989; Burley and Knüsel 1989; Brown 1996; Curtin n.d.; Thom 1995). So far, these attempts have met with only moderate success, due in part to the limitations of the available data.

Diachronic change has not been entirely abandoned as an explanation for at least some of the apparent mortuary variability, however. Borden's (1970) suggested shift in disposal methods in the Fraser Delta region has been enlarged on and applied to the entire Northwest Coast culture area by Cybulski (1992) who postulates a radical shift from exclusively subsurface midden interment to exclusively above ground disposal occurring sometime around A.D. 1250. In particular, the use of caves and rockshelters as burial sites is thought to have a very recent history, dating to the protohistoric or early historic period (Cybulski 1978, 1992).

## Mortuary Variability On Gabriola Island

The False Narrows site on Gabriola Island has yielded one of the largest, well-documented prehistoric human skeletal samples in the Gulf of Georgia region. Excavations of this large shell midden in the late 1960s recovered 49 burials containing the remains of 82 individuals (Mitchell 1967; Gordon 1974). These included flexed, semi-flexed and extended inhumations, some of which were associated with rock features, and many of which contained elaborate grave goods. The majority of the False Narrows burials were attributed to the Marpole culture type (ca. 2500-1500 BP) on the basis of their stratigraphic provenience and associated grave goods; the remainder were assigned to a Developed Coast Salish component (1500 BP - Contact). None of the burials was directly dated. The sample was analyzed by Marjory Gordon as part of her M.A. research at the University of Calgary (Gordon 1974), and has lately been reexamined in an attempt to identify the presence of ascribed status (Burley 1989).

Recently a cluster of small caves and rockshelters containing human bones was discovered about one kilometer inland from the False Narrows site, at the base of a steep sandstone bluff (Wilson 1987). Surface skeletal remains were collected in an attempt to discourage pothunting at the sites; a preliminary examina-

tion of this material suggested that they represented secondary surface disposals, some of which had been cremated. Because of the physiographic context, it was initially assumed that the remains were of late prehistoric or early historic provenience (Skinner 1991), but radiometric dating of four of the recovered skeletal elements produced unexpectedly old age estimates ranging from 2170-2760BP. Therefore the inland cave/rockshelter burials therefore appear to be roughly contemporaneous with, or slightly older than the False Narrows midden burials, assuming that the latter's Marpole attribution is correct.

The inland bluff burials of Gabriola Island represent a unique form of prehistoric disposal practice, previously unknown in the Gulf of Georgia region, and one that is in imminent danger of destruction through pothunting and land development. Their relationship to the nearby midden burials is unclear, although three possibilities are suggested: they may represent a different biological population with different mortuary customs; they may represent diachronic changes in burial practices within the same group; or they may represent differential mortuary treatment of one or more segments of the same population.

A small-scale survey and excavation program was initiated in 1989 to locate additional burial features along the inland bluffs of Gabriola Island, and to recover the human remains interred there (Curtin 1991b). The goal of this project was to recover a sufficiently large sample of cave/rockshelter burials for comparison with the existing collection of midden burials from False Narrows, and to examine the biological and physical attributes of the skeletons in an attempt to determine the relative contributions of temporal change, population differences, and social differentiation to the observed variability in mortuary practices.

## Organization

Chapter 2 places the study in regional context, describing the physical setting, the ethnographic peoples, and the history of archaeological research in the area, with a focus on burial remains. Chapter 3 outlines the methods of data collection and analysis employed in all four phases of investigation: burial site survey, excavations, osteological analysis, and hypothesis testing. The following six chapters are primarily descriptive, presenting the results of the site reconnaissance and the excavations of five selected burial features, respectively. The three hypotheses are addressed in turn in Chapter 10 which also summarizes the characteristics of the Gabriola Island cave/crevice burials and their place in regional prehistory.