

Investigations at the Maurer Site near Agassiz

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The Maurer Site

DhRk8, located on the property of Fred Maurer, is a pithouse site situated in the upper Fraser Valley about seventy-five miles from the mouth of the Fraser River in Southwestern British Columbia (Fig. 13). The site is approximately two air miles southwest of the municipal hall in Agassiz and rests on a seventy-five foot promontory directly above the Fraser River, on the north side. Along the east side of the promontory is a slough which is almost dry in the winter and inundated annually by the rise of the Fraser River during the summer months. The promontory is a short southeastern extension of Hopyard Mountain which is about one-half mile wide by one and a half miles long, extending southwest to northeast. The mountain rises gradually from three hundred fifty feet in the south to seven hundred fifty feet in the north.

Ethnographically, there is no evidence of this site having been occupied by the Indian inhabitants of the upper Fraser Valley. The nearest sites to the Maurer site, as recorded by Duff (1952:35), are Siyita and Pilalq, both located in ethnographic Pilalt territory and each about three-quarter miles distant, west and north-east respectively. But, there is a site, not included in Duff, of which I was informed by Archie Charles, presently the chief of the Seabird Reserve in Agassiz. This site is located on the very southwestern tip of Hopyard Mountain, on the Fraser River, and was a fishing station called "Hook-nose". It is situated about one-quarter mile west by south-west of the Maurer site.

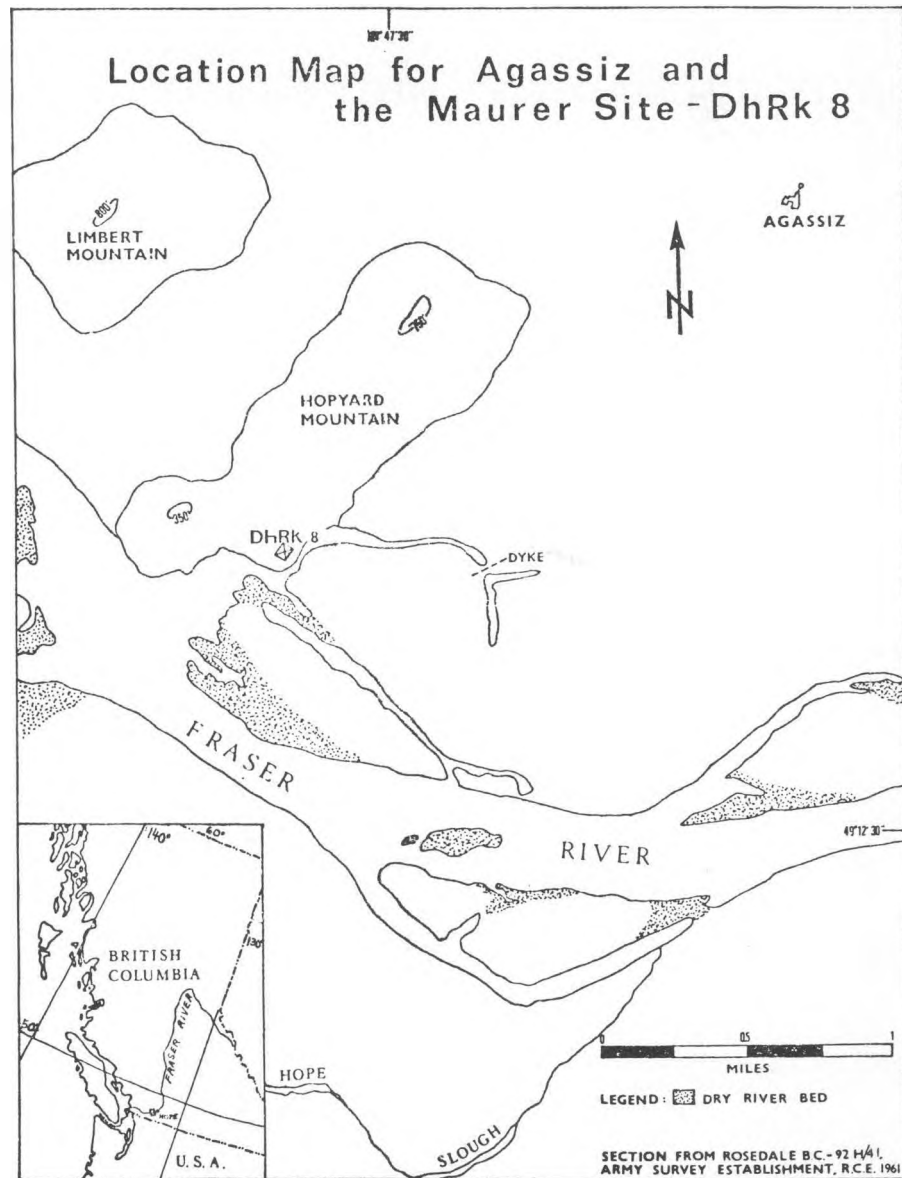
From the late Nineteenth century to the present day Hopyard Mountain and more specifically the Maurer property has been the scene of

much human activity. Beginning in the late 1890's logging operations, lasting until ca. 1912, removed most of the larger flora: Douglas fir, hemlock and cedar. By 1912, limestone outcroppings were being mined on the south-east end of the mountain, on the perimeter of the site, and a grist mill was established to facilitate these operations. At the same time a crew-camp was set up on the alluvial floodplain about forty feet below the site on its west side. The mining continued off and on until 1945 when logging operations, including slash and burn techniques, were resumed on Hopyard Mountain.

The logging and mining operations terminated ca. 1950 and the mountain lay fallow until Fred Maurer purchased the property at the south-end of the mountain in 1960. He had been landscaping the property from 1960 until 1971 when archeological investigations were initiated at the Maurer site.

The archeological excavation of the Maurer property began on August 7, 1971 when Richard Percy, curator of the Simon Fraser Archeology Museum arrived at the site and with a volunteer crew from Agassiz excavated one three by six foot pit on the south-east side of Maurer's house (Percy 1972a:160-161). On the same day Percy discovered a large, deep depression on the north side of Maurer's house but did not test it. In the following summer, 1972, Thea de Vos, a graduate student in archeology at S.F.U., spent about six week-ends with a volunteer crew excavating in and around the deep depression on the north side of Maurer's house. Finally, in the summer of 1973, two summers of test excavation culminated in a major, systematic archeological investigation on the Maurer property.

Fig. 13.
Location of the Maurer Site on the Fraser River near Agassiz.



Excavation

During the summer of 1973, from May 14 until September 3, excavations, funded by an Opportunity for Youth grant were conducted on the Maurer property. This was a major salvage excavation aimed at systematically solving the problems of the nature and prehistoric antiquity of the site. Therefore, with these problems in mind, Maurer's property was surveyed and some

testing was done to determine the site universe and the feasibility of excavating in areas other than those where testing had already occurred (summers of 1971 and 1972). The results of the survey were negative. Combined with the topography of the property, the destruction caused by historic logging, mining and landscaping proved that excavation apart from the south

slope (R. Percy 1972a) and the pithouse depression would be fruitless. Some cultural material could be recovered but associations would be extremely skewed. Thus, the limits of excavation were defined as those areas already tested on the north (pithouse) and south sides of Maurer's house.

Excavations were horizontally controlled by a grid laid out in metric units mainly consisting of one by two metre pits. Vertical control was established by the use of arbitrary ten centimeter levels. The vertical measurements were taken from both the ground surface and a horizontal datum plane above the site. The actual excavation was conducted by discreetly using shovels and five inch trowels according to the nature of the matrix being excavated. Although the units of measure and the control employed

were the same on each side of the site the cultural phenomena present dictated different restraints. For example, the pithouse on the north side of the site, being the only definite evidence of architectural remains was defined at the outset as of prime importance for site interpretation and would require total excavation in order to acquire knowledge of architecture and a good representative sample of artifacts associated with this feature. On the other hand, the south slope because of its size and the lack of any feature resembling architectural remains dictated that a random sampling technique would test adequately the utilization of this side of the site. Therefore, since the site was divided into two areas I shall discuss, in general, the work in each separately and then relate them as a single unit.

The Pithouse Excavation

Excavation of the pithouse (Fig. 14) was continuous from May 25 until August 24. The design of the depression, when I arrived at the site, indicated that it was probably a circular feature that had been moulded almost rectangular by natural forces occurring after the occupation. The pits excavated in 1972 were still open and considerable wall slumpage had occurred. The pits were cleaned up before excavation began. Since the field notes and artifacts were not available for the 1972 season, no information concerning the provenience of architectural features, the artifacts recovered and the possible number of components could be utilized. Therefore, except for orienting the grid system with the ten pits already excavated, I proceeded as if no work had been done.

The first two pits excavated were placed strategically around the rim of the depression and the third on the inside wall of the depression in order to determine the depth of the cultural deposits and their relationship to the natural stratigraphy. The results indicated that the cultural deposits ranged from one and a half to two meters in depth and were contained within a light yellow-brown deposit. Also, at this time there was an anomaly in the soil color within the light yellow-brown stratigraphic unit. The anomaly was a dark yellow-brown deposit about one meter deep which began below the humus and was apparent only in the interior of the depression. Near the perimeter of the depression this deposit merged into the light yellow-brown unit.

There was also a charcoal lens a few centimeters thick below the dark yellow-brown deposit (about one meter deep) and sterile below this. This lens appeared continually during our excavation of the depression and has been interpreted as the remains of a burned superstructure covering the house floor. The house floor rested on what should have been the olive brown stratigraphic unit but was a grey-brown color. This color was only evident within the house itself as defined at the completion of excavation.

During the summer, excavation revealed gradually that the house was not circular, oval or sub-rectangular but actually rectangular in shape. Architecturally, it had a central depression about seven and a half meters long by five and a half meters wide surrounded by a one meter bench raised thirty to forty centimeters, measuring eleven meters long by seven meters wide on its outer perimeter. The house was oriented in an almost magnetic north direction. Although a roof entrance might possibly be inferred for this feature, there is evidence on the east side for a ground entrance cut through the bench. The hearth was located at the south end of the central living depression. It was an elongate subterranean feature oriented east-west (with a slight convexity on the north side), three meters long and fifty centimeters wide. There were firecracked rocks at both ends and charcoal in the middle.

Twenty-five post moulds, all apparently associated with the house were recorded. There were six large upright posts on the perimeter of

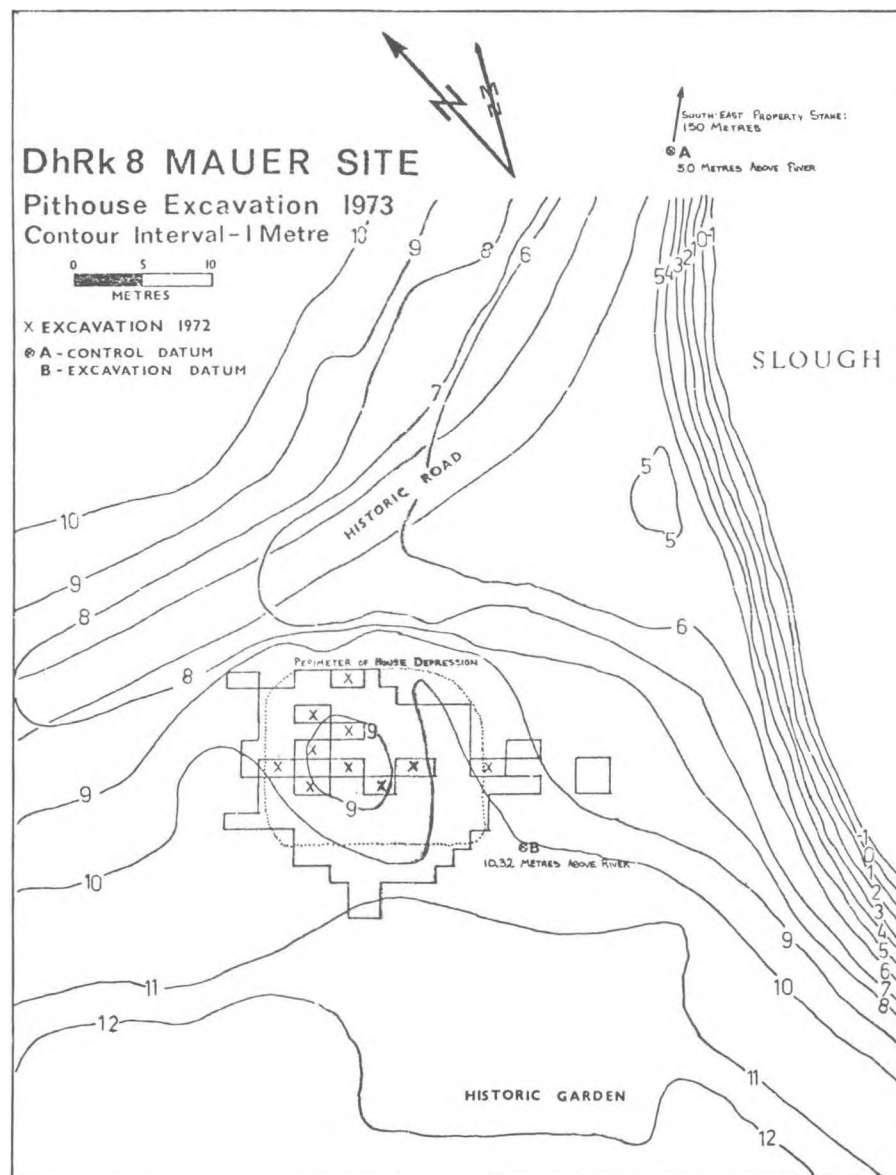


Fig. 14.
Plan of the pithouse excavation at the Mauer Site.

the central depression — one in each corner and one in the middle of each long side. The post mould pattern on the outside edge of the bench indicated gabled walls and the angle of declination suggests a height of six to seven feet for the roof. The roof itself was probably flat, supported by the six large interior posts. The cultural deposits above the house floor were uniform. There was no definitive break in the dark yellow-brown stratigraphy which could be interpreted as another living floor. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that all the post moulds

recorded were associated with this pithouse.

The artifacts recovered from the dark yellow-brown deposits above the house floor from the light yellow-brown deposits outside the house and from the house floor appear to represent a single component. The raw material and artifact types are consistent within the culture-bearing strata.

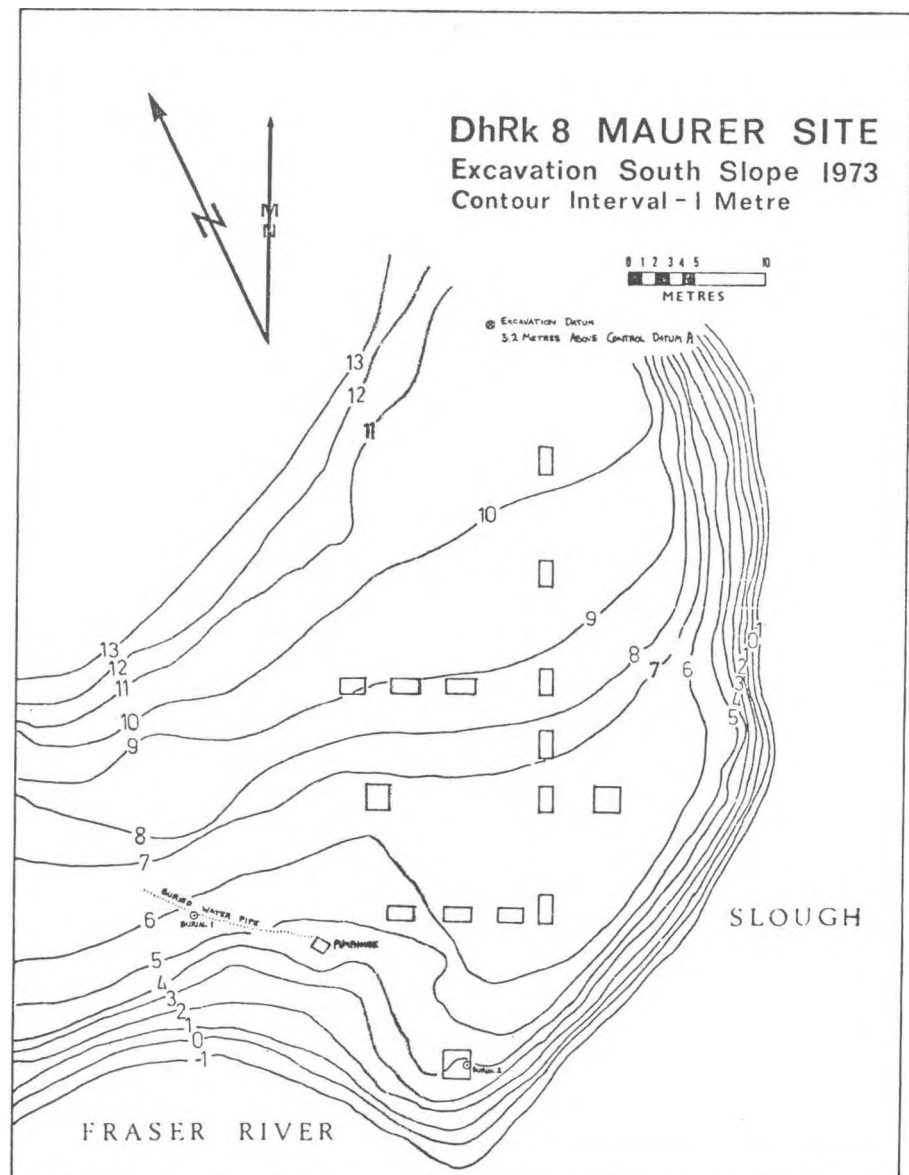
The depth of the cultural strata above the house floor (1 — 1.5 metres) can be attributed to slump from the earth on the roof and walls subsequent to occupation.

The South Slope Excavation

The excavation procedure on this side of the site (Fig. 15) was designed to sample as adequately as possible an area sixty meters in length by thirty meters in width. To do this three major trenches were gridded — one north-south, fifty five meters in length; and, two east-west, twelve meters in length. The trenches were not totally excavated. We excavated a pit every two or three meters along each trench. In all, twelve one by two meter pits and three two by

two meter pits were excavated. There was one post mould, two burials and two large concentrations of charcoal — not defined as hearths — recorded on this side of the site. The natural stratigraphy consisted of two major stratigraphic units (from latest to earliest): a light yellow brown deposit and an olive-brown deposit resting on bedrock. The depth of these soils below the humus varied in thickness from a few centimeters resting on bedrock to two meters plus.

Fig. 15.
The south slope excavation at the Mauer Site.



This was because of the very irregular bedrock formation which tended to be close to the surface on the south east half of the slope. Again, as around the pithouse depression, the cultural deposits primarily coincided with the light yellow-brown stratigraphic unit and the artifacts had the same raw material range and types as those found in and around the pithouse. Therefore, on the basis of the natural stratigraphy, the cultural stratigraphy, the raw materials, and the artifact types recovered it appears that there is good evidence to suggest a synchronous occupation of both sides of the site either at one point in time or over a long period.

Two burials recovered from the south slope of the site definitely suggest a second, much later, component for three reasons. First, there was no bone (other than calcined fragments) recovered from anywhere else in the site below

the humus, probably because of the acidic soil conditions. Second, Burial 1 was greatly disturbed by the excavation of an historic water pipe but preservation was still fairly good. Burial 2 did not display any historic disturbance, was flexed and in good condition. Thirdly, because of the homogeneity of the light yellow brown deposits in which both burials were found it would be possible to have burials without discernible intrusions in the stratigraphy. When the burials were placed here is not exactly certain. There were no discernible grave goods found with the burials; preservation of bone does not appear to have been good on the site, the site is not mentioned at all in Duff (1952); Burial 2 has occipital cranial deformation. Therefore, as a result of this evidence I suggest a conservative estimate of from 150 – 200 years for the length of interment.

Artifacts

Approximately six thousand prehistoric artifacts were recovered from the Maurer site in 1973. Except for a few charred wood fragments, some calcined bone fragments, and some burned shell fragments, the artifacts are all lithic. The lithic material used for the artifacts is vitreous basalt, crypto-crystalline grey chert, red jasper or obsidian. Of the lithic assemblage about

fifteen hundred artifacts can be called tools. These tools have been further classified into four major groups: unifaces, bifaces, cobble tools and cores. Also, there are general types within these groups. Thus, for the purpose of this report only a brief description of each group and its types is presented.

Unifaces

The unifaces represent the largest group in the assemblage (ca. 72%). They are flakes of all shapes and sizes characterized by either primary or secondary retouch. Also, in this group, in almost every case, the flakes are fragments and exhibit flake scars on the ventral face.

Unifaces with primary retouch. These utilized flakes are the most common tool in this group. They appear to have been selected at random for their cutting or scraping edge or end. Flakes were multitudinous on the site and

the fact that there are many with primary retouch is not surprising.

Unifaces with secondary retouch. These are unformed flakes with some secondary retouch usually on only one edge or end, caused by pressure flaking, and are not as common as those with primary retouch. They indicate a more enduring purpose. The selection of these flakes seems not as random as those previously mentioned since they have generally thicker working edges and probably some pre-meditated plan for use.

Bifaces

The bifaces are approximately 5% of the total collection and can be classified into three types: knives, projectile points, and drills

(Figs. 16–17).

Knives. In general, the knives are characterized by crude pressure and percussion

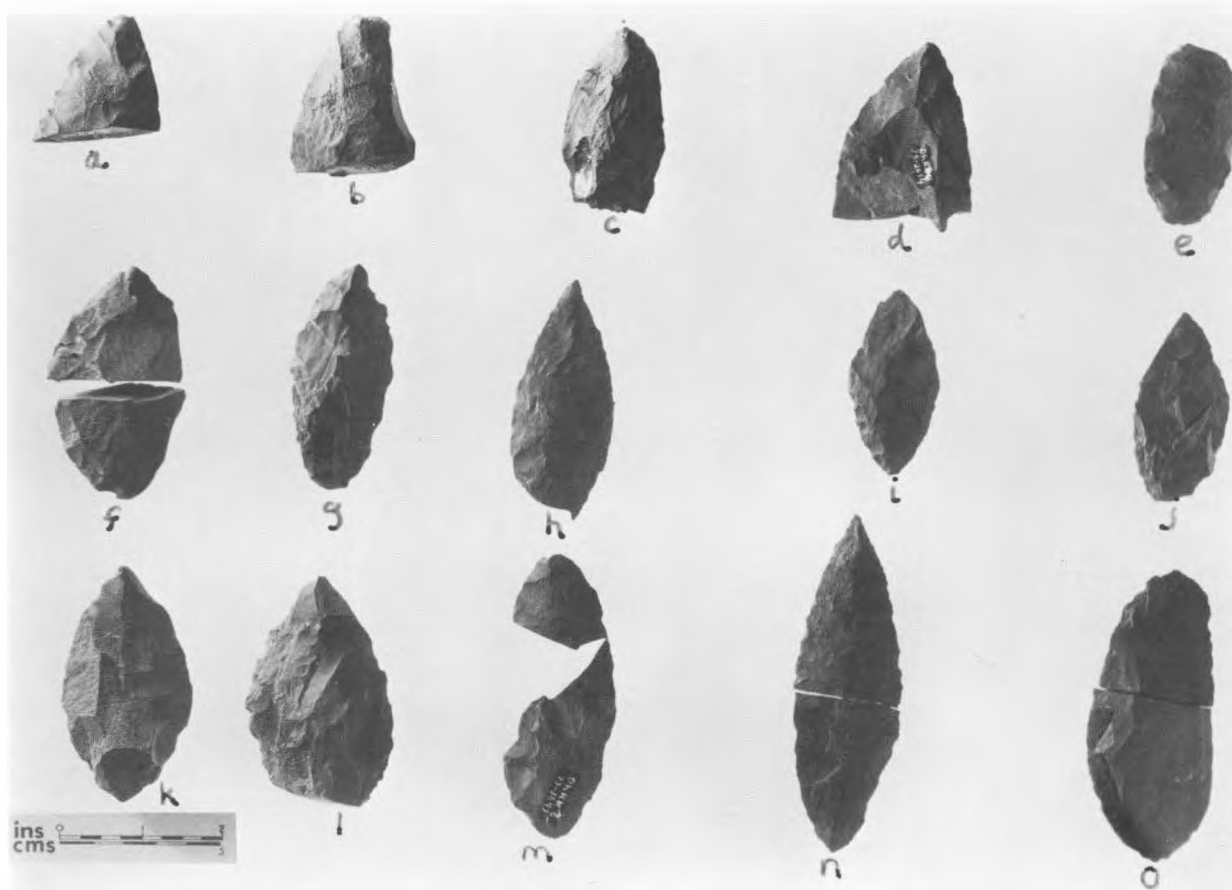


Fig. 16. Bifacial knives from the excavations. a, b, e, f, k, l, m, n, o are basalt; the remainder are red jasper.

flaking, a thick mid-section (compared to the points) and an asymmetrical form.

Projectile points. The points include four types: lanceolate, leaf shaped, leaf shaped with contracting base, and side-notched. They are

characterized by fine parallel or oblique flake scars and thin midsections.

Drills. Only two drills were recovered and both exhibit a definite form created by fine parallel pressure-flaking on both faces.

Cobble Tools

There are three types included in this group: choppers, spall tools, and hammerstones. This group comprises about 8% of the assemblage.

Choppers. These are basalt river pebbles modified by percussion flaking and exhibiting flake scars from utilization on the retouched

end. Retouching is predominantly unifacial and ranges from retouching at a steep angle on one end to the removal of flakes from three quarters of the retouched face. The working edge on these pebbles ranges from slightly convex to extremely convex or pointed (Fig. 18).

Spall tools. The spall tools are flakes,



Fig. 17. *Bifacial projectile points from the excavations. b, c, are of red jasper and k is of a grey chert. The remainder are basalt.*

generally large, removed from river pebbles and usually retouched unilaterally on the dorsal face at the distal end. Infrequently there is retouch on all edges of the dorsal face.

Hammerstones. These tools are not readily

apparent in the assemblage and when they are discovered are usually broken. They have an elongate shape and exhibit some battering on one end.

Cores

This group is very common, representing about 15% of the collection. Disregarding the many core fragments there are two main types of cores: pyramidal and polyhedral.

Pyramidal cores. These cores range in size from one to five centimeters thick and are characterized by their pyramidal shape. The examples range from the small cores being ex-

tremely peaked on the top, with steep flake removal to the larger cores which are slightly convex on the top. In all cases there is cortex on the base. The reason for including the larger convex cores in the pyramidal type is that cores go through stages of development and the larger cores are probably an early stage in the process leading to the extremely peaked pyramidal core.

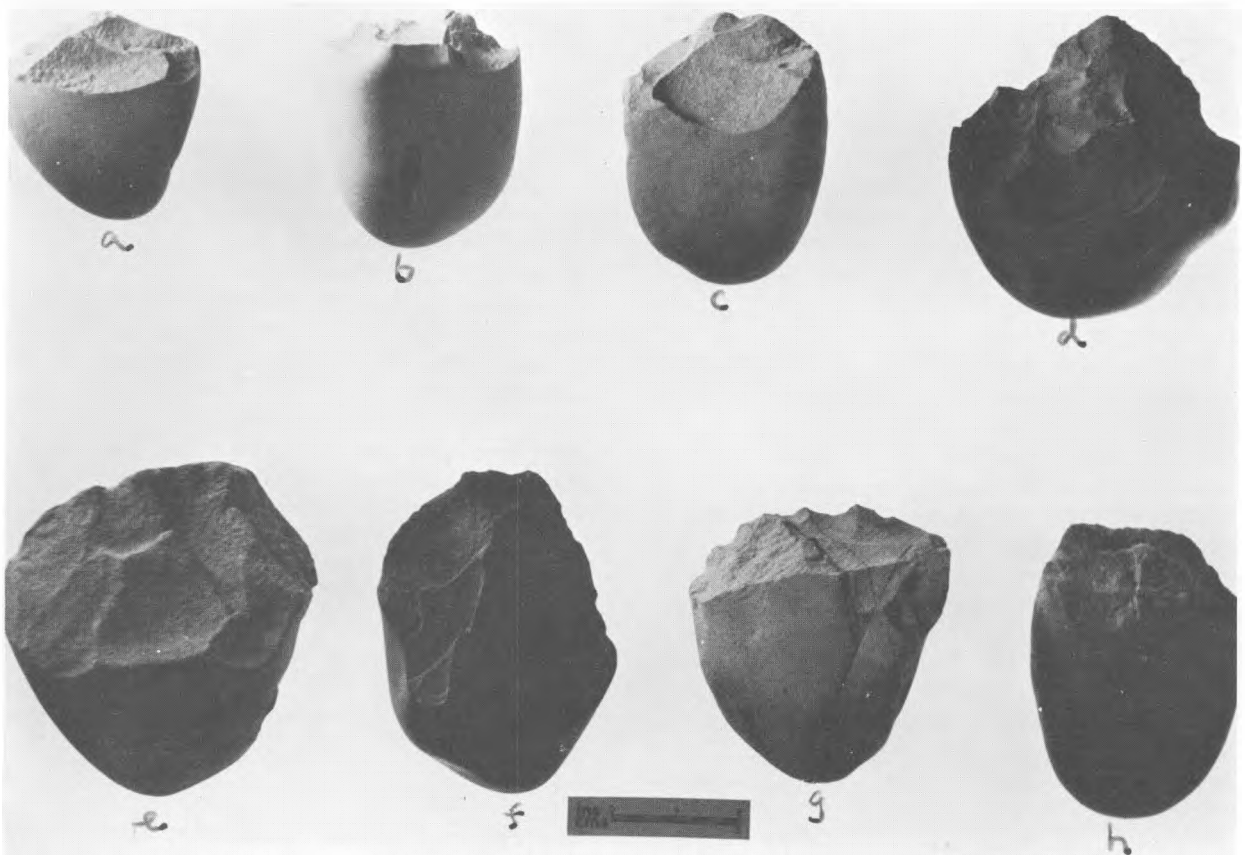


Fig. 18. Cobble choppers from the excavations.

Some are easily classifiable as microcores for the production of microblades.

Polyhedral cores. These cores are generally circular in shape and have flakes removed

from all sides. In one case it appears that the core was almost a round pebble from which the cortex may have been removed before flakes were struck off.

Miscellaneous Artifacts

This category includes a very small percentage of the assemblage and contains blades, pièce esquillées, pigment and a palette. Some of the blades appear to have been struck deliberately from blade cores and are classifiable as microblades. It is possible that others are the result of using pièce esquillées of which there are at least two examples.

The pigment recovered from the site is red ochre and was found in association with the pithouse. A stone palette, not in association with red ochre, but having the ochre ground into the surface on one face was found at the north-east end of the pithouse. It is a flat, round river cobble about one centimeter thick and twelve centimeters in diameter.

Summary

The following discussion is directed at placing the Maurer site in the context of a chronology already defined for the Fraser Valley. This will be a relative relationship based on the tool typology as presented in this report. Since this is not a final report it should be realized that the context within which the site is placed is subject to change.

The tool types previously discussed in this report were all found in association with the pithouse. Notably, there was no ground or pecked stone recovered and no bone artifacts were present. This last item could have been destroyed when the house burned down but if bone artifacts were present in the house one might expect to recover large calcined fragments since small calcined bone fragments were recovered from the house floor. Nevertheless, the absence of a bone technology places greater emphasis on the lithic technology and this is apparent from the tool types recovered. For example, the projectile points range from lanceolate to contracting base to side-notched; each of

these types was found in association with the pithouse. The same is true of the other tool groups; there is a broad range of types associated with the pithouse. Therefore, the problem is to find an assemblage with which that from the Maurer site can be compared.

The absence of ground and pecked stone from such a large tool assemblage as that recovered from the Maurer site indicates an age probably earlier than the first millennium B.C. Therefore, Dr. Borden's Fraser Canyon sequence was reviewed and it appears that there are a number of similarities with the Eayem Phase, dating between 1500 and 3500 B.C. Seven radiocarbon estimates were made by the Gakushuin laboratories in Japan (GaK 4919, 4920, 4921, 4922, 4923, 4926, 4927). Five of these estimates gave dates between 1910 and 2830 B.C. The other two estimates which gave ages of A.D. 540 ± 90 and A.D. 1340 ± 70 should be discounted as they do not reflect the true age of the site.

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