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Dig may have uncovered lost village Established 10,000 years ago, town was abandoned after smallpox epidemic

BY MEDHA, VANCOUVER SUN AUGUST 9, 2011

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The oral history of the Heiltsuk First Nation tells of the ancient village of Luxvbalis, abandoned after a smallpox epidemic in the late 1800s, its precise location lost because so few were left to tell the tale.

The village may just have been discovered on a site in Hakai Luxvbalis Conservancy on Calvert Island, off B.C.'s central coast 100 kilometres north of Port Hardy.

The village's history could date back 10,000 years.

"People lost information about the exact location after they were decimated during the epidemics in the 19th century," said anthropologist Farid Rahemtulla, director of the archeology project that made the discovery.

"Based on that oral tradition and how old it was, we think this might be that village - but we need to work with the elders of the Heiltsuk nation to conclusively establish this."

It all started with a routine dig as part of the University of Northern B.C. anthropology program's intensive archeology field school.

"Most excavations we have done as part of the field school have been in the Interior. This time I wanted to explore the coast, which has some of the oldest archeological sites in the province," said Rahemtulla.

He chose one of several shell middens found along the central coast of B.C. and previously identified by Simon Fraser University researchers, but not yet explored.

"Shell middens are the result of people discarding food remains, building structures, tools, decorative items, and hunting equipment," explained Rahemtulla.

"They usually indicate ancient settlements, whether permanent or transitory."

The most significant aspect of this site, said Rahemtulla, was its size.

"This midden was very prominent on the landscape.

"And as we kept working on it we realized how big it was - both in terms of spatial extent and depth."

It was more extensive than the team had imagined, extending more than 150 metres along the bank.

"No matter where we put down the pits, we found we were on the midden," said Rahemtulla.

This indicates that it was big village populated by a large number of people, he explained.

The finding is consistent with the stories passed down over generations, said archeologist and member of the Heiltsuk First Nation, Elroy White.

Luxvbalis was supposed to be a winter village where everyone gathered to repair their tools, bring in their summer stores and share stories through song and dance. So by definition, it was a large place, he said.

A large boulder located near the site also matches descriptions in stories, he added.

Another significant feature is the site's possible age.

"On the beach close to the midden, we found a lot of stone tools ...," he said, adding that similar tools have previously been dated as being 6,000 to 10,000 years old.

"It is all very preliminary. We have to wait for results of radio carbon dating to get the exact period, but this is good circumstantial evidence," he said.

So far, the oldest village discovered in British Columbia is at a site called Namu, also located on the central coast. It is estimated to be 10,000 to 11,000 year old.

The team also found a large number of fishing tools - harpoons, bone points, fishing hooks and weights - made from deer bone and antler at the dig.

"It is indicative of the link between use of land animals as a resource by coastal communities," Rahemtulla said.

Animal bone tools have been discovered before, but this link has not explicitly been explored thus far, he said.

The large number of bone tools found could also be suggestive of ancient trade links between land and coastal people, especially given the size of the island and the deer population it can sustain, he said. "This is something we could look at exploring further."

UNBC archeology field school was conducted in partnership with the Hakai Beach Institute, and BC Parks and students worked alongside participants from the Heiltsuk and Wuikinuxv First Nations.

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