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ARCHEOLOGY
Excavated remains finally heading back to first nations community

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 VANCOUVER— From Tuesday's Globe and Mail
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After 42 years, the ancient bones of the Heiltsuk band will be laid to rest once again.

The 1,000 to 6,000-year-old bones and artifacts were first dug up, with the approval of the Heiltsuk Tribal Council, by a Simon Fraser University archaeology team back in 1969. The excavation took place in Namu, a small island near Bella Bella that is part of the traditional territory of the Heiltsuk First Nation. Over the years, logistical concerns – everything from what the boxes would be made of to where the burial would take place – had prevented the Heiltsuk First Nation people from repatriating the ancient remains. But on Tuesday, they will be placed in boxes made of steamed and bent cedar planks, and then transported back to Namu.

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"It will be a great day for the Heiltsuk when we finally take possession of our ancestors again," Chief Harvey Humchitt said on Monday, as he thought back to how, as a young boy, he had curiously watched the dig begin in his village. "I know it's quite an emotional thing for a lot of our people, to bring our ancestors back to their resting place so they can continue their spiritual journey in the afterworld."

Roy Carlson, a retired archaeology professor who had led the dig more than three decades ago, said Namu is the earliest native site in B.C., and prior to the 1970s there had been little archaeological work done on the B.C. coast. Mr. Carlson and his team of students had wanted to reconstruct the past by looking for clues of the migration of early people from Asia to North America. What they found were burial bones, artifacts and artwork that indicate human habitation in Namu had begun as early as 11,500 years ago.

"We also found a continuity in the way of life from about 6,000 years ago, up to the time of European contact, which means probably the same people and descendents had been living there over this 6,000-year period," he said.

A skeleton with a bone spear in its back indicates that there was war, he said, citing examples of the findings. Preserved harpoons and fish hooks made of bone suggest that the people of Namu relied heavily on fish for sustenance, particularly salmon.

Even though the remains will now be reburied, the research continues. DNA samples taken from the skeletal remains will be compared with those taken from current Bella Bella residents. The findings could have significant implications for the Heiltsuk First Nation, said Catherine D'Andrea, chair of SFU's archaeology department.

"This research could yield important results, both in terms of increasing our knowledge about the B.C. central coast's human history and in producing data relevant to significant first nations issues, such as land claims," she said in a written statement.

Heiltsuk and Squamish Nation members, as well as SFU officials, will send off the ancestral remains during a two-hour ceremony on Tuesday. Mr. Humchitt will then transport the remains back to Namu, where they will be formally reburied on Sept. 2.

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