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SFU to return ancient remains Heiltsuk ancestors to return home after four-decade detour in their spiritual journey

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SFU archeology instructor Rudy Reimer shows a replica of the bentwood boxes that will be used to house the remains of first nations people removed from an ancient village site on Namu. Reimer helped plan the interment of the repatriated remains.

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The ground at Namu is prepared and waiting for the return of bodily remains of ancient first nations people removed from Heiltsuk traditional lands on B.C.'s central coast by archeologists in the 1960s and 1970s.

Dozens of members of the Heiltsuk First Nation will attend the two-hour ceremonial repatriation at SFU today to welcome their ancestors back from a detour in their spiritual journey, according to Heiltsuk Chief Harvey Humchitt.

"We believe in an afterworld," said Humchitt. "When the person passes, he begins a spiritual journey. By repatriating our ancestors we are bringing them home to continue their journey in the afterworld."

From Simon Fraser University, the remains will travel north to Port Hardy, Bella Bella and then home to Namu for interment on Friday. The partial and full remains from 142 people are to be placed in 47 ornate bentwood cedar boxes created last year by senior students from the first nations community, said Humchitt. The boxes are to be reburied near the site of the original excavation. The site will be covered with a concrete slab to protect the remains.

The remains were removed for study — with the permission of the Heiltsuk — in the course of excavations of midden material led by University of Colorado archeologist James Hester and later by SFU archeologist Roy Carlson. Middens are deep troves of discarded shell and bone that often contain human remains, cooking vessels and broken tools.

The oldest of the remains is about 5,000 years old, the newest about 2,500, a time period that roughly encompasses the height of the great Egyptian and Greek civilizations

"It's amazing when you think about your ancestors in those terms," said Humchitt. "The archeology helps reinforce the things that we were taught, the oral history that connects us with the land and these places."

For thousands of years of first nations pre-history, the village of Namu was a crossroads for trade, manufacturing and food processing, said Carlson, who will accompany the remains to Namu on behalf of SFU.

Evidence suggests Namu was a small permanent year-round settlement that served as a busy gathering place during the summer months. Obsidian tools found at the site suggest trading routes from inland B.C. were active up to 9,000 years ago.

The earliest samples from the village site at Namu are about 11,500 years old, said Carlson, who has worked on the project since 1969.

The oldest human and animal remains are about 6,000 years old, but earlier deposits may be under water due to rising sea levels or they were simply not preserved due to the composition of the midden material. Large amounts of shell tend to preserve animal and human remains as well as tools and fishing equipment made of animal bone.

"Although we don't really dig for human remains, we do find them and they can provide a lot of information," said Carlson. "Their DNA can tell us who they are related to and we can learn what kinds of resources they used, salmon or sea mammals."

A few luxury items such as beads and jewelry were recovered from the site.

Carlson continues to study genetic material from the ancient remains and from living members of the Heiltsuk First Nation, which may reveal information about the distribution of peoples over traditional territories and their movements over the millennia that may prove vital to such contemporary concerns as land claims.

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