



MARK HUME

Anthropologist believes he has found B.C. village that may be 10,000 years old

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When Farid Raheemulla and his anthropology students began to dig in the forest floor on Calvert Island, he pretty much knew what to expect – lots of clam and mussel shells.

But shortly after the team from the University of Northern British Columbia started to sink pits into a shell midden (refuse dump) on the Central Coast, he realized it was much bigger than anyone imagined – so large he now believes it is part of a long-lost, ancient village called Luxvbalis.

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In the recently finished dig, Dr. Raheemulla, an anthropology professor at UNBC, has found evidence of human occupation that may date back 10,000 years.

"Archeology is a very, very slow process when you are digging in shell bins because the screening takes a very, very long time because there is so much material," he said. "We were only able to get down about a metre and a half this year, but we estimate through our coring that the site is probably between three and four metres deep, which to me would suggest a very, very ancient time period."

How old?

"We won't know for sure until we are able to get some radio carbon dates back," he said. "But we do know there's one intriguing bit of evidence. In the inter-tidal zone adjacent to the bank of the site ... we found some stone tools [of a type] which I know were dated at another site between 6,000 and 10,000 years ago. That doesn't give us a positive date ... but it certainly indicates there is an older component to the site that we didn't get to this year."

Dr. Raheemulla worked in conjunction with the Heiltsuk and Wukinuxv bands, which claim the area as part of their traditional territory. He was drawn to the location because it was known to have an exposed midden. Middens are scattered all along the B.C. coast and are sometimes signs of village sites, although many are small deposits left by transitory groups that harvested shellfish and then moved on.

The site on Calvert, first documented about 40 years ago by researchers from Simon Fraser University, also happened to be in the area where Heiltsuk legend said the lost village of Luxvbalis (pronounced looks-bal-ease) was located.

Working with the Hakai Beach Institute, a non-profit organization that supports science and conservation work and which has a facility on Calvert Island, Dr. Raheemulla moved a team of students in this spring and began to dig.

The big surprise, he said, was that wherever they put down excavation pits, they found they were on the midden. The site – which spreads over 150 metres – is so extensive it could only have been created by a large number of people.

"We were amazed at how big this site really is and we barely touched the surface," he said. "Nobody is sure where the village was located. But just looking at the landscape and where this site is located, it seems like a good candidate."

Screening through the old refuse dump, the researchers found ample proof the people who once lived there subsisted largely on a marine diet of clams, mussels, salmon, herring, sea lions and seals.

There were also an array of implements made from deer antler bones, rocks used to grind points on hunting tools, and weights for fishing nets.

Dr. Raheemulla said similar bone tools found at another site, Namu, have been dated back 8,000 to 9,000 years.

And the stone implements, which apparently had been eroded from deep within the site by sea waves, look to be a similar age.

"This is kind of an exploratory year...this is a first step," said Dr. Raheemulla, who hopes to return for a more extensive dig next year.

Harvey Humchitt, an hereditary chief of the Heiltsuk, said the find is exciting, and fits with oral history.

"Luxvbalis was one of the winter villages of the Heiltsuk," he said. "Growing up, we didn't know too much about it, but we often went over there [to Calvert Island] for family gatherings."

He said Luxvbalis translates as "always rolling, sort of thunder rolling," and adjacent to the archeological site is a beach where big waves pound ashore from the open Pacific.

Mr. Humchitt said the story is that Luxvbalis had existed for a very long time when it was abandoned after a smallpox epidemic swept the coast in the 1800s.

Relocating the site, he said, would mean a lot to his people.

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