

Prehistoric Cairns of Vancouver Island by Frank Sylvester

“Handwritten manuscript, on ruled paper with red-lined margin. Pages hand-numbered 1-20. Signed and dated: Frank Sylvester, Victoria, B.C., June 10, 1901. Appears to be notes for a talk that Frank Sylvester gave, concerning burial cairns on Vancouver Island, his method of excavation of the cairns, and his theories as to the meaning of the cairns and the ancestry of the people buried there.”

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Prehistoric Cairns of Vancouver Island

At various places on the Southeastern and Eastern Coasts of Vancouver Island can be found numbers of rude heaps of stone covered with moss, bushes, and even large trees, resembling graves, which are locally known as Prehistoric Cairns. These rude piles of stones, contain the bones of a long vanished race. Their origin or antiquity is unknown, and until late years they were practically untouched. Of late years, the attention of scientists has been directed to them, and numerous and careful investigations have been made, in the endeavour to solve the mystery surrounding them.

I propose this evening (with your permission) to place before you a full and concise statement as to what has been done in the matter, and also my inferences as to their origin and antiquity.

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First I will deal with the construction and contents of these cairns.

The cairns are found promiscuously scattered all over the Southern and Eastern Portion of the Coast of Vancouver Island. They abound in the neighbourhood of Victoria; are to be found all along the sea shore from Sooke to about Nanaimo, and, I am informed, as far north as Comox. At Cadboro Bay, 6 miles from Victoria, they are very numerous, and in that particular locality, the most important discoveries have been made.

They all seem to have been made on one general plan.

An excavation has been made in the soil until hardpan has been reached, which does not usually exceed 2 feet. The excavation was usually about 24 X 30 inches, and around the edges of the same, a rude wall of rough cobbles, or stones of any

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kind has been made. The wall generally appears to be about 1 foot in height. In this receptacle, the body was placed in a doubled up position, the head being between the knees, and the arms over the head. On the top of the body, small stones were then placed to fill up to height of the walls, which were mixed with gravel or earth. On top, 3 boulders were then placed, the largest one being in the centre. A complete wall of rough rocks of all sizes was then formed, all around the enclosure, the wall not coming above a foot or so, above the ground level, and the spaces between the wall and the 3 boulders was filled in with rocks of all sizes and dimensions, until the cairn resembled a rude grave, coming from 18 inches to 2 feet about the ground surrounding. In all cases, they were oblong, or nearly so,

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and the longest axis was north and south or NW and SE. They usually measure about 8 X 15 feet..

As time passed, the loose earth and stones settled, and became hard packed, and bushes grew in them, and over them.

In pursuing our investigations; in opening the cairns, the loose rocks were first removed, and then the 3 large boulders. These were frequently very heavy, some weighing 1000 lbs.

The boulders once removed, by careful work with pick and shovel, the excavation was continued until in close proximity to the supposed position of the body, when digging was suspended and much care and caution used in further operations.

In many cases, the bones were plainly to be seen, but in such a state

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of complete and utter decay, that they could not be removed.

In other cases, the bones had entirely disappeared, and in the space formerly occupied by the body, only a small amount of light grey earth (resembling argillaceous clay) could be found. All other parts and portions of the body had evidently been absorbed by the neighbouring trees or vines, which were no doubt the direct cause of their utter disappearance.

In nearly all the cairns we found a small quantity of clean, bright fir and willow charcoal, which appeared to have been placed immediately over the body.

The bodies, in nearly all cases, were buried with the head placed towards the north, but in one clear instance, we found the body directly reversed.

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The Natural History Society, has thus far, opened examined 30 cairns.

We have visited Cadboro Bay – Pedder Bay – McNeils Bay – Parsons Bridge – Craigflower – and the Naval Hospital grounds, and have spent a great deal of muscular exertion and time, in our efforts.

With one exception (at Cadboro Bay) we found nothing remaining of the bodies, that we could preserve, except one fine skull, which is now in the Provincial Museum.

The one full skeleton we found, was really an excellent one, and in a good state of preservation.

This skeleton was found in an excellently made grave, covered with a large flat natural stone, laying in a gravelly ridge

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at Cadboro Bay. It was 100 feet distant from all trees or vines and laying on the edge of a gentle slope.

It appeared to be the remains of a fine tall man (judging from the length of the femur) and the skull bore the impress of good intellect, the superciliary ridges being well developed, and the top: dome shaped.

From the careful manner in which he had been interred, he must doubtless have been a man of some importance amongst these ancient people

Charcoal was found in the grave, but no ornament or article whatever.

We had on the occasion invited as our guest, Professor Carl von der Stien, an eminent German Scientist, promising him a skeleton, if we found one,

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and being fortunately successful, we have him the skeleton, and it now in a museum in Germany.

Since that time, 1897, we have been unable to find another one.

In the low jaw of this skeleton, the teeth had all been worn quite flat, showing that the food must have been of hard nature, such as the primitive races usually were.

The sides of the receptacle in which we found this body, was made of rough stones, laid as nicely and regularly as possible, but not cemented, simply laid one on another

Now, let us go into some speculation as to the origin and antiquity of these cairns.

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Origin and Antiquity.

Situated as we are on the extreme western coast of North America, we must carefully examine prehistoric probabilities, as to their origin.

The first question to be answered is:

How do we know that these cairns are of an ancient Prehistoric Origin?

My answer is that this mode of burial proves them to be far anterior to the mode practiced by the various Indian tribes now in existence.

History tells us, that before the time of the discoveries of Columbus, the New World, on America, was practically unknown.

Tradition and mythology tells us that the Norsemen settled in America, about the 10<sup>th</sup> century, but we have no authentic record of their place of residence, or final departure. This only refers to the Atlantic

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Coast of North America, as also did the discovery of Columbus, it was not until the year 1500, that any attempt was made to investigate the Pacific Coast.

The Portuguese are certainly entitled to the honor of the first discoveries on the Pacific Coast.

Their voyages were not made for scientific purposes, but strictly for trading purposes, and they paid little or no attention to the manners and customs of the people they mingled with, except in so far as it concerned their trading projects.

For 200 years, the Northwest Coast of America, remained a Terra Incognita, and until the voyage of Captain Cook, the country was practically unknown.

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These discoveries prompted settlement, and so the coast was found to be a prolific field for trade with the simple natives, it was constantly visited by vessels of various nations.

The explorations and researches of archaeologists, have made known to us, the various modes of burial practiced by many nations of the earth.

It seems from all the investigations thus far made, that all the various Indian tribes of America, almost invariably placed some article belonging to the deceased, with the body.

In some tribes, vast and valuable amounts of property were so placed.

In nearly all cases where the mode of burial was in graves, some article is found in the tomb or its vicinity.

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But in the Cairns, we have so far, been unable to find anything whatsoever, to throw any light upon their origins.

In no instance whatever has any arrowhead, stone implement, any rude carving, or in fact, any object of an imperishable nature, been found.

The bodies seem to have been simply entombed, without anything whatever being placed with them

This certainly alone proves that they are not those of any of the existing tribes or their forefathers. The finding of clean charcoal above the body in each cairn, is proof that some mystic incantation was practiced at their burial, for the charcoal could not have been placed there for preservative purposes, as the quantity was too small to be of any use.

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Our knowledge of the habits, manners, and customs of the aboriginal residents of this Island, is very limited.

Previous to the advent of the H.B.Co. in 1843, we have no connected or authentic history of Vancouver Island (only fragmentary) or of its residents.

Throughout Oregon and Washington Territory, there were scattered settlements dating from 1812, but here there were none.

The employees of the H.B.Co. at that time were plain practical men, devoted to their occupation, and though many of them were intelligent and cultured gentlemen, they paid but little attention to scientific pursuits.

So that from their knowledge or investigations of the cairns (if they even paid any material attention to them, we can learn nothing.

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We can consequently find no passable way of arriving at any conclusion as to their probably origin, except by comparison and analogy, coupled with the proofs adduced by careful investigation.

We know from authentic sources, that the Indians (so far as known) always disposed of their dead, especially on this Island, either by cremation, or by placing the bodies in boxes in trees, or in boxes on the ground, but they certainly never used graves such as these cairns.

This knowledge we have from personal observations and the attestation of old residents.

The Indians, as we all know, possess no written language. When the first adventurers came amongst them, in the voyages Cook, Vancouver, Meares and others, they were still using stone implements, and eagerly sought

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for, and purchased at high prices, all the articles of Iron or metal that they could obtain. They were then even, 150 years ago, still in a very primitive condition.

So primitive people can surely have no wellgrounded or steadfast tradition or legend.

The present day science, in its endeavour to obtain some insight into the old manners and customs of the Indians, have been making use of all the legends and myths they can possibly obtain from the older members of the Indian tribes.

To obtain these so called historic legends, the Indians are usually well paid for their services, and the more romantic the tale, the more incongruous the story, the better the reward. Once the story is obtained they are embellished, elaborated, and colored, by shrewd

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clever writers, to suit the present century taste.

Consequently, the so-called legends cannot be considered as any proof whatever of past history of the Indian tribes, or their migrations.

In fact, there are several well equipped legend factories in British Columbia where legends are manufactured by the yard, and cut off in lengths to suit the occasion.

Ranking so low in the scale of civilization, and possessing no written language, under any circumstances their legends could only be perpetuated by a careful memorizing.

Nearly all the nations we read of in history or archaeology had their written, or picture, or hieroglyphic language.

Each year we are unearthing and discovering clay and

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stone tablets containing the life history and achievements of races that have come and gone.

In Egypt, Assyria, Palestine, in fact all through the majority of Asia and Africa, we find plain written or sculptured histories of vanished people, people who had at one time possessed a high sense of civilizations, and the arts.

To endeavour to trace the origin or antiquity of the cairns by questioning the Indians, is utterly useless.

The oldest and most accomplished Liars amongst the various Indian tribes, have been repeatedly questioned, and in spite of their most frantic efforts to invent some plausible theory as to their origin, the invariable result of the interview has been to elicit from the terse but

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euphonious answer Halo Cumtux which in crude, crystallized English means "I'm blessed if I know."

So we can only surmise at their origin.

A general belief exists that the present Indians are descended either from the Japanese or Chinese Races.

In their facial appearances, in their cranial development, in their size and colour, they certainly greatly resemble the Japanese.

It is highly probably that wandering tribes from the Asiatic coast may have, voluntarily or accidentally, migrated to the American Continent.

Numerous instances are known of Japanese Junks being driven far out to sea, and of them have

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come ashore on the Oregon and Washington Coast.

Besides at Behrings Straits and at the Aleutian Islands, the continents are not very far apart.

Ancient Chinese coins have been found in Cassiar in 1883, and lately one at Dawson, all bearing marks of great antiquity, and in Cassiar, 25 feet under the ground.

Should we but find some coin, or any object of an imperishable nature, that may have withstood the ravages and decay of time, in these cairns, we might solve the mystery, but until we should fortunately be able to do so, I am afraid the task is hopeless.

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There still exists a wide field for explorations and investigation of these cairns, by our society, and it could be well conducted in conjunction with a dredging and botanizing expedition.

I trust that the members of the society will not cease in their endeavour to unravel this tangled skein, and that they will use all due efforts, in a further continuation of their former noble and valuable exertions.

Respectfully Yours,  
Frank Sylvester  
Victoria BC June 10, 1901.

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Paper on Prehistoric Cairns read by Frank Sylvester, June 10, 1901.