

**Maintaining Complexity: Changes in Social Inequality During the  
Marpole-Late Transition in the Gulf of Georgia Region**

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Paper Presented Northwest Coast Symposium, 61st Annual Meeting  
of the Society for American Archaeology,  
New Orleans. April 10-14, 1996

**Abstract**

Until recently, most archaeological research on the issue of social complexity on Northwest Coast culture has focused on "origins". A model is presented here which suggests the context for cultural changes that occurred once social complexity was clearly established. The model proposes that the culture changes which occurred in the Gulf of Georgia region between 1500 and 1000 BP were a part of the shift in who people defined and maintained social inequality. Changes in mortuary practices, economic relations and, to a limited extent settlement patterns, are described and examined. Using this model to explain the changes observed, it is suggested that a reorganization of how elites maintained their status occurred.

**Introduction**

One day a few years ago, one of my fellow graduate students asked me why I was interested in the Late Period of the Gulf of Georgia region. He claimed that anything we might want to know about this period could be better obtained from the ethnographies, and that archaeology is best suited to describing earlier material and explaining the origins of the ethnographic Northwest Coast pattern. This comment bothered me for some time. About a year later, when working on a study of Halq'eméylem place names in this same area, my Native colleague asked me why archaeologists were always interested in "the oldest sites", "the most elaborate artifacts" and "the origins of things". He told me that what he often wondered about was the differences between the culture his grandparent told him about and that of his ancestors found in archaeological sites. He gave the example the burial mounds at the Scowlitz site, which is at the confluence of the Harrison and Fraser Rivers. His grandparents always talked about their burials being in trees, often with an entire family buried in a single elaborate tomb, or burial

house (see Duff 1952; Suttles 1990; Jenness n.d.). At Scowlitz, only 1200 years earlier, the remains were buried singly, in large burial mounds and in smaller rock cairns (Thom 1995). Although there is enough continuity in both oral tradition and the archaeological record to say that at the site is the remains of the ancestors of my colleague, their life-style differed significantly from that of my colleague's grandparents. Like some Northwest Coast scholars have said before, it is clear that we needed to ask new questions about the nature of culture and cultural change in the periods immediately preceding contact (Ames 1991; Moss and Erlandson 1995).

While working on my M.A. thesis, I became further vexed with the problem of explaining cultural changes in the past 2000 years. In reviewing the literature for this time period, I found that many scholars agree that by at least 2000 years ago, the "Developed Northwest Coast pattern" had emerged (Matson and Coupland 1994; Ames 1994). The archaeological evidence points to societies having had large scale villages, specialized resource use, ascribed social status, and a heavy reliance on marine resources, that when taken as a package has been interpreted as representing fully "developed" Northwest Coast cultures (Matson & Coupland 1994). However, explanations for culture change since then seemed to me to be very unsatisfying. These explanations have included ideas such as a possible migration of people from the southern Interior (Borden 1970:109; Carlson 1970:122); technological adaptation to changes in environment (Carlson 1970:122); and the idea of a gradually increasing adaptation of technology for exploiting resources (Carlson 1970:122; Matson & Coupland 1994:218). There seemed to be very little effort in the literature to explain the social, political, economic and cultural changes which occurred in the most recent 2000 years of history in this region.

In this paper I present a model in which I try to explain the cultural changes which have so far been observed in the archaeological record. Coast Salish ethnographers such as Wayne Suttles (1960), Pamela Amoss (1978), and Bruce Miller (1989) have convincingly shown the importance of social networks in historic and contemporary Coast Salish communities. I propose that these networks may have undergone a period of intensification during the late Marpole period (ca. 1500 BP) as family connections became increasingly important for accessing the surplus resources needed to maintain high social status. Such intensification may have resulted in a subtle shift in settlement and subsistence patterns, and in the symbols used to demonstrate social status and authority. I propose that what had once been a highly competitive, ranked society like that of the historically known northern Northwest Coast, became a more stratified class society, ancestral to the historic Central Coast Salish.

In order to make a preliminary evaluation of this model for social change, I review existing archaeological evidence for settlement patterns, artifact assemblages, subsistence and burial practices. I will conclude with some suggestions for future directions in research.

### **Social Networks - A Model for the Development of Central Coast Salish Social Classes**

Social networks are the spheres of interaction that people have with each other. Individuals participate actively in social networks by having social, economic, and ritual relations with others. In contemporary western society these social networks commonly include the affinal and consanguineal relatives a person chooses to see; friends from school, church, sports or other social activities; business or work colleagues. In smaller scale societies, such as the Central Coast Salish, social networks are often more tightly defined. Relatives through birth and marriage are often the people with whom a person interacts in social, ceremonial, and

economic contexts. Having detailed knowledge of who your distant and close relatives are is important for defining and maintaining this social network. Elites in any society can use their social network as a strategy to become more successful over-all. Knowing who to interact with and how to behave is important for gaining the ties that can increase one's status and prestige. In a society where status competition between individuals is great, negotiating one's social network can make a difference between being successful and not.

In the ethnographically documented Central Coast Salish society, social networks were formed between elite families who would inter-marry with each other. It was important for a successful person to marry into the right family because kin-groups held the rights to productive resources, names and ritual activities. Not all kin-groups had equal access to these important resources. Lower-class families could claim no inherited rights and privileges, and because they did not often receive important knowledge of kin relations, they had little opportunity to become upwardly mobile (Suttles 1960). High-class families had inherited rights to productive resources, which would be publicly validated through public feasts where wealth was distributed to other elites, extended family members and followers. Less public exchanges between members of the extended family would occur when co-parents-in-law visited each other to share surplus food. Diverse resources could be obtained by knowing who your family was and what resources they had access to exchange with you. These bonds were frequently symbolized in the mortuary ritual and artistic expression that high-class people had access to.

Increased social networking between elites in a small-scale society changes the amount of diversity of resources needed to be extracted by individuals or nuclear families. Successful social networkers can rely on producing fewer goods in surplus to share, exchange or trade for

other goods produced by other members of their social network. Individuals and families who become successful in this social network will use their resource locations intensively to extract a more limited range of resources, whereas previously they may have sought to get a broader range of goods at the same sites. As people become able to extend their social networks over a broader area, they gain access to a wide range of resources that would not normally be locally available. Bringing these back to the communities from which they came, and sharing or exchanging them with other community members would increase their status and prestige within that community. Suttles (1960) has described such a mechanism for the Central Coast Salish area where food is exchanged with affinal kin to increase wealth and prestige.

As social networking becomes a more important means of elite competition, tight high-status family networks are created. When these social networks limit the access to wealth to people who are members of connected families, there becomes an opportunity for the formation of social classes. Elite families wishing to reify their status claims would likely change the symbols used to define who has status and who does not. Such changes in symbolism would almost certainly be visible in the archaeological record.

### **The Gulf of Georgia Region in the Marpole/Late Transition**

The Gulf of Georgia region is possibly the best documented archaeological region in the Northwest Coast (Ames 1994; Matson & Coupland 1994; Mitchell 1990; Moss & Erlandson 1995). This area is geographically defined by the Lower Fraser River, Strait of Georgia and Northern Puget Sound, and southeastern Vancouver Island. The Native people who live in this area are commonly referred to by ethnographers as the Central Coast Salish, and are made up of speakers of the Halkomelem, Northern Straits Salish, Clallam, Squamish, and Sechelt

languages (Suttles 1990).

Local culture historical sequences have been defined extending back approximately 10,000 years. The period beginning about 2,500 years ago and ending sometime around 1,500 years ago is commonly known as the "Marpole Period". The time from about 1,500 years ago to contact is commonly called the "Late Period". The general traits of this cultural sequence were originally defined by Borden (1968) and Mitchell (1971), based on artifacts types that are found at sites from these time periods.

Typical Marpole assemblages include technologies of ground-slate knives and points, chipped stone points, celts and hand mauls, perforated stones, distinctive unilaterally barbed antler points, large bone needles, elaborate stone and antler sculpture, native copper ornaments, very elaborate burials, and cranial deformation on some individuals (Matson & Coupland 1994:201-203; 208-210).

The end of the Marpole period has been difficult to define precisely on the basis of artifact assemblages alone. Terminal dates for Marpole deposits range from 1,500 to 1,000 BP (Matson & Coupland 1994:203). Matson & Coupland have suggested that this difficulty is, in part, because late Marpole period deposits tend to be very similar to Late period deposits in their relative abundance of bone and antler tools and the absence of chipped stone.

The archaeological deposits change after about 1,500 BP. Assemblages from the Late Period include a predominance of bone and antler points and bi-points, composite toggling harpoon valves, flat-topped mauls, continued use of pecked and ground stone objects, very few below-ground burials, and trench embankments (Matson & Coupland 1994:268, 270). Chipped stone tools are almost completely absent, with the exception of small bifacially flaked "arrow

points".

Roy Carlson has recently summarized the characteristics of the Marpole and Late periods as being very similar, with "little evidence for changes other than in style" between them (Carlson 1995:224). The stylistic changes which occur include differences in burial practices (Carlson 1995:224; Ames 1994:224; Burley & Knüsel 1989; Cybulski 1994; Thom 1995); some changes in style in ornamentation of objects (Ames 1991:940; Mitchell 1990:348); and stylistic changes in flaked stone, ground stone points, barbed bone points, and hand mauls (Burley 1989:41; Mitchell 1990:347). Other changes which occur between Marpole and Late include a marked increase in bone and antler and ground stone objects, and a major decrease in abundance of chipped stone objects (Ames 1991:942; Burley 1989:41; Matson & Coupland 1994:218). There is also some evidence to suggest that there was an increase in the number of limited activity sites around 1500 BP (Matson & Coupland 1994:271; Ames 1994:219; Thompson 1978:68). Most authors agree that by at least 2000 BP, a complex hunter-gatherer-fisher society existed in this region of the Northwest Coast, with the pointing to the presence of slavery, warfare, wealth, the potlatch, production of craft and food supplies (Carlson 1995:224).

So if all the attributes of Northwest Coast cultures existed by 2000 BP, then what could the changes which do occur in the archaeological record indicate? Changes in settlement pattern and resource use; symbolism in burial practice and art; and an increase in violence are all significant indicators of cultural change at this time.

Changes in the settlement pattern and resource use from the Marpole to the Late period may be seen from a number of different lines of evidence. In an early study of changes in settlement patterns in the Gulf of Georgia and Puget Sound areas, Gail Thompson noted that

sites occurred in a greater number of different kinds of areas in the Late Period than they did in the Marpole period (Thompson 1978:121-123). She interpreted this as reflecting a shift from more generalized use of sites to sites being used on a more seasonally specific, limited activity basis. This has tended to be supported by the evidence uncovered since her study, where Late period sites excavated are nearly always limited use, seasonal camps and the kinds of resources exploited were expanded by utilizing a number of different kinds of sites in a wide range of areas (Ames 1994:219; Kornbacher 1989; Hanson 1991; Monks 1987; Thom 1992; Matson & Coupland 1994:271).

This shift in the intensified use of a wide range of resources from very particular locations corresponds with a general change of tool types. Stylistic changes in ground stone points, barbed bone points and vastly increased numbers of bone & antler composite tools likely corresponds with this intensification of resource use from different environments. Although further functional studies should be done, Ames (1991:942) has suggested that bone and antler pieces were used in compound tools which were needed to efficiently obtain a wider range of resources. Finally an extensive examination of faunal remains from the Late period has been conducted by Hanson (1991; 1995). Her faunal evidence supports the previous observations in that there was wide range of resources obtained from limited activity sites during the Late period. Although no comparisons to the Marpole period faunal assemblage were made, she was clear that this was a different pattern from that known from the 19th century ethnographic record, where salmon tends to be emphasized as the most important resource (Hanson 1991).

These changes in settlement pattern, tool types and intensification of use of resources may have been the result of in terms of an increase in the importance of social networks. People



with access to abundant, specialized foods from specific family owned sites would be able to take their surpluses to other people in their social network in exchange for food, wealth or future obligations in ritual or economy. These exchanges, which are well documented by Suttles for the Central Coast Salish (Suttles 1960), emphasize the importance of food for the creation of wealth and prestige. As members of extended families became increasingly involved in these exchanges, their social networks would become more and more important. High ranking individuals would now rely more and more on their extended families to provide food or wealth in exchange for the surpluses they could themselves organize. As their desire to increase their status increased, their social networks would become wider, and their use of seasonal limited activity sites became more specialized and intensified.

The symbolism used in burial practices and in artistic expression also changed between the Marpole and Late Periods. During the Marpole and preceding periods, simple midden burial was by in-large the primary form of interment, with the deceased usually being flexed and placed in shallow pits dug into midden (Burley & Knüsel 1989). Evidence from the Pender Canal site (Carlson and Hobler 1993) and the False Narrows site (Burley 1989), among others, show that occasionally some of the graves of men, women and children had very elaborate grave goods associated with them. Between about 1,500 and 1,000 years ago, some individuals were buried in elaborate mounds and cairns at certain sites in the Gulf of Georgia region (Thom 1995). Like the midden burials, these graves usually contained single individuals but were buried beneath very elaborate piles of stone and massive heaps of earth. Men, women and children are all represented in mounds and cairns, and in many cases the burials contained grave goods. Around 1000 years ago, the practice of below-ground burials virtually disappears. It is widely thought

that this is when the practice of placing the deceased above ground in a box, canoe or mortuary house (Cybulski 1993). These kinds of burials are well-known from local ethnographies (Suttles 1990:465). Often entire families were interred together in the same container and high class families had very elaborate very elaborate carvings which symbolized their relationship to the spirit world. While some families had very simple boxes, others had very elaborate carvings on or beside the container for the dead.

Such a radical change in mortuary ritual likely indicates the importance of displaying and perpetuating the social status of elites. In the Gulf of Georgia region around 1500 BP, as more and more people competed for high social rank, the display of prestigious symbols in funerary ritual became more wide-spread. Elaborate, permanent and visible burial markers such as cairns and mounds were initially important to promote visible kin connections to resource rights. As these rights became more exclusive, particularly through inter-marriage of elites, the symbols used to express kin connections and social status would be changed. When elaborate mortuary rituals were changed from mounds and cairns to above-ground graves, only those people with the ability (for instance) to hire artisans to produce new symbols to connect people to the spirit world, were able to make high status claims. Those families who did not have access to wealth were not able to create these kinds of symbols and had to use a lower-class grave marker. This is in contrast to the large groups of followers and supporters which would have been required to construct elaborate burial mounds and cairns. Restricted private knowledge of carving may not have been necessary to create these mounds and cairns, while demonstrated leadership ability, needed to get people to create such large monuments, would have been.

It is interesting to note that hand mauls also change style at this same time, from ones

which have nipple tops and other more complex designs to a simple flat-topped maul (Mitchell 1990:347). Artistic designs on objects tend to be more geometric than representational during the Late Period (Ames 1991:940; Borden 1983:160-163; Mitchell 1990:348). These other changes in style of objects - which are less related to function and more related to the symbolism presented - may again indicate a conscious effort of elites to control the symbols which reinforce the status of their users.

The final significant change that occurred between the Marpole and Late periods was the dramatic increase in number of trench embankments (Moss and Erlandson 1992:86; Ames 1994:223; Mitchell 1990:348) and deaths due to violence (Cybulski 1994:83) in the Gulf of Georgia region around 1200 BP. In the Gulf of Georgia region, Charlton (1980:56) suggested that the bow and arrow were introduced to the area from the southern Interior between 1900 and 1600 BP. The increase in trench embankments and violent deaths indicate a level of inter-community raiding unsurpassed in previous periods. This increase in violence, facilitated in part by technological innovations (Maschner 1991), may have also played an important role in the intensification of social networks and the formation of social classes. Leaders in raiding would also increase their social network by creating a following of people required to have a successful raid. If the raid was retaliatory, additional social obligations would be created between the offended party and the war leader. Slave raiding may have been key in the formation of social classes, providing the extra labour needed to maintain high status. This increase in violence and slavery during the beginning of the Late period provides additional support to the idea that social networks intensified during that time.

## **Conclusions**

Changes in settlement patterns, tool assemblages, subsistence techniques, burial practices and an increase in violence, occurred between the Marpole and Late periods. I have presented a model which, on preliminary evaluation, suggests that intensified social networking during the Marpole Period caused a shift in how elites maintained their social status. The inter-marrying of elites from different families created a tight network of high-status people. These people began to intensify the procurement and production of resources from seasonally occupied limited activity sites, so that they could fulfil their obligations of exchange and trade within their social network. Given that access to key productive resource areas were limited to certain families, people outside the extended family network of the elites had little opportunity to produce surplus food. This circumscription of the ability of non-elites to work hard and produce surplus goods played a key role in the creation of the ethnographically documented Central Coast Salish social classes. Symbols used in mortuary ritual and in the production of visible art, changed to reinforce these new class ties.

A great deal more research is needed in both the development of theory and the application of data to the model presented. Future studies should investigate more closely the timing of the cultural changes between the Marpole and Late periods. Further subsistence studies need to be conducted to compare Marpole and Late period assemblages and to describe Late subsistence patterns for fall, summer and winter village sites. Stylistic changes in material recovered from wet sites may reveal more of changes in symbols used between the Marpole and Late Periods. The Marpole-Late transition in the Gulf of Georgia area presents an interesting problem in interpretation for archaeologists. It also provides an opportunity for Native people to look at the historical changes between their culture and that of their ancient ancestors.

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