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HAIDA BURIAL PRACTICES: THREE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXAMPLES

The Gust Island Burial Shelter
The Skungo Cave, North Island
Mass Burials from Tanu

GEORGE F. MACDONALD

THE GUST ISLAND BURIAL SHELTER: PHYSICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

JEROME S. CYBULSKI



National Museum of Man
National Museums of Canada
Ottawa, March, 1973

Musée national de l'Homme
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Ottawa, Mars, 1973

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ABSTRACT

The Haida of the Queen Charlotte Islands used a variety of mortuary practices, including; mortuary houses, elevated mortuaries, burial caves and shelters, and occasionally cremation and tree burials. These practices are examined with reference to historical sources, and this examination is followed by a report on three Haida burial areas excavated by the National Museum of Man in 1966 and 1967: a burial shelter on Gust Island, Skidegate Inlet; a burial cave on North Island; and two mass graves at Tanu village on the southeast coast of the Islands.

RESUME

Les Haidas de l'archipel de la Reine-Charlotte pratiquaient différents rites funéraires: maisons mortuaires, mâts et échafauds funéraires, grottes d'inhumation, abris sous roche et parfois incinération et sépultures dans les arbres. En étudiant ces coutumes et en s'appuyant sur des renseignements historiques, le Musée national de l'Homme a pu exhumer, en 1966 et 1967, trois sites mortuaires des Haidas, comprenant notamment un abri sous roche dans l'Ile Gust, dans l'Inlet Skidegate, une grotte d'inhumation dans l'Ile du Nord et deux fosses communes dans le village de Tanu sur la côte sud-est de l'archipel.

HAIDA BURIAL PRACTICES

The Haida of the Queen Charlotte Islands practiced a variety of ways of disposing of their dead as did other tribes of the Northwest Coast culture area, in marked contrast to the rather restricted range of practices throughout the rest of Canada in prehistoric times. The West Coast Indians were not by any means homogeneous in the mortuary practices they favoured (Drucker 1950), but the range itself is significant for the area.

Cremation was a common practice among the Tlingit and their Athapaskan neighbours but was rare among the Haida. Further south the Bella Coola and Kwakiutl favoured tree burials, which was also infrequent on the Queen Charlotte Islands.

The preferred Haida practice was the use of communal mortuary houses or burial caves where the members of a lineage were kept close together as they were in the communal house during their lifetime. This sense of corporateness of a lineage is highly developed among the Haida. In some cases the mortuary houses were scaled down versions of the gabled plank house, complete with a frontal pole carved with the crests of the owners.

Evidence of such mortuary houses survive today only in photographs and the occasional model in a museum collection. Burial caves and shelters, on the other hand, have survived in many cases because of their remote and secret locations.

This report describes three burial areas on the Queen Charlotte Islands that were investigated because they were in immediate threat of destruction.

A brief review of known Haida mortuary practices is included since no treatment of this topic has previously been published. The main sources are Swan (1887 ms) Deans (1893 ms) Dorsey (1897) Murdock (1936) Swanton (1905) and Newcombe (from the Newcombe collection in the British Columbia Provincial Archives).

The most common form of disposal of the dead at the historic villages for which documentation exists was in mortuary houses. The largest of these structures attained dimensions of up to 20 x 30 feet

and they were built on essentially the same principle as the plank house with a gable roof. Because of their smaller size, however, the mortuary houses usually had six roof beams instead of the eight or ten of community houses. Examples of these are known from Tanu, Cumshewa, Skidegate and possibly Ninstints. A smaller variety were shed roofed, often with a single crest animal carving at the top of the roof over the door. Examples are known from Cumshewa, Skedans, Xaina, Skidegate and Masset. Both types of mortuary house were built by lineages on property they owned within the village, usually directly behind their dwelling house (or houses).

The accounts of traders and missionaries give us some indication of the interior of these structures. James Deans who visited several in Masset about 1890 describes them thus: (1893:73)

"The tomb was eighteen feet square. In the centre of the house a large frog three feet in height had been placed in a sitting posture. Around this frog, forming a square twelve feet were placed three tiers in height boxes holding the dead of the frogs. In them the bodies had been placed with knees drawn up under the chin, and finally covered with mats and bog myrtle".

His description of the second tomb is interesting because it was for a single chief:

"A platform had been built, on this the body wrapped in mats and blankets. His head had been placed on a little wooden beaver instead of a pillow. A house had been built over all, on the roof of which stood a huge beaver, his crest".

A model of a shed roof mortuary house was made as part of a model of the village of Skidegate by Haida carvers for the Chicago Worlds Fair in 1893. It is now in the Chicago Field Museum. Fortunately the interior details have been reproduced with extreme accuracy and are revealed by removing the roof of the model.

The same authors provide some insight into the sequence of events which accompanied the deposit of the deceased in the mortuaries. An important distinction was made between the treatment afforded the nobility and that given to commoners.

At the death of a commoner after the period of mourning ceremonies were completed the body was placed in a mortuary box, wrapped in a

cedarbark mat and pieces of myrtle were placed inside the box before the lid was fastened on. The box was then deposited among the stacks of relative's coffins along the walls of the mortuary house.

A chief, on the other hand, was afforded much more elaborate treatment which often lasted as much as a year before he came to final rest. Following a short period of a few days of lying in state within the lineage house he was deposited in a decorated coffin draped with his Chilkat or button blanket in the centre of the mortuary house on a special coffin support. This support was usually a large carving of his crest-animal six to eight feet long, portrayed in a recumbent position so that the coffin of the chief could be placed on its back. The term for this monument in Haida was MAnda (Swanton 1905:132). When the chief's mortuary pole had been carved and the wealth assembled for a funeral feast he and his MAnda were removed from the mortuary house. The chief's coffin was placed inside the mortuary pole and the MAnda was set beside the pole in front of his lineage house.

Commoners, however, remained in the mortuary house until it was full, when presumably a new one was built and the old one allowed to deteriorate and eventually collapse.

A type of mortuary common in the north coast Haida villages was an elevated type supported by two stout posts up to twelve feet high. Square niches were carved into the posts to receive huge planks which formed a large rectangular chamber. As many as a dozen coffins could be placed inside such a structure. The front panels of these mortuaries were decorated by painted or carved crests.

In the southern Haida villages double post mortuaries were infrequently used and always contained but a single individual laid out in an extended position. Examples of this type are known from Skidegate, Cumshewa and Skedans.

Special treatment was afforded to Shamen who were removed to small islands near the village and installed in peculiar crib-like structures with carved shaman figures at the front corners. Without digressing into the details of shaman burials, which were highly ritualized, it is interesting to note that they were extended full

length in their coffin rather than tightly flexed. They were also accompanied by all of the Shaman's paraphernalia, whereas it was rare to include items other than clothing and personal adornments in other burial boxes.

Tree burials, which are common further south on the coast, particularly among the Kwakiutl, appear to be relatively rare among the Haida, at least in historic times. Although vague reports of tree burials have come from the villages in the North Island area of the Queen Charlottes.

Cremations which were extensively practiced among their immediate neighbours to the North, the Tlingit, are also rare among the Haida. Swanton claims the Haida cremated only those who died while on journeys far from their home villages, such as was the case with warriors killed on expeditions away from their home islands.

Interments in the ground did not occur until historic times when it was greatly encouraged by the missionaries. The Tanu burials described later appear to have been an example of this influence. A second example is provided by Deans who claims that a special day was set aside in Skidegate in the late 1880's when all of the coffins were removed from the mortuary houses and poles and interred in the Skidegate cemetery.

The final category, that of burial caves and shelters, is known throughout the Queen Charlotte Islands. Examples have been recorded from Ninstints in the extreme south (Duff and Kew 1957). Tasu (Clifford Armstrong, personal communication 1970) on the west coast and the villages of Kiusta and Dadens on the north coast (Swan 1887 ms).

The limiting factor on the use of burial caves appears to be the proximity to the village of suitable rock formations. The majority of such features appear to be in the western half of the islands which are mountainous or at least have extensive rock outcrops not present in the eastern half. Rock shelters on the other hand are more widespread.

Deans comments (1893 ms:20-71).

"In the steep and rugged conglomerate and limestone cliffs, which everywhere abound in the Queen Charlotte's Islands are numerous cliffs hollowed out by the erosion of the waves Every cave

of any dimension near to a village is full of boxes, containing past generations of these villages. They are piled up in tiers in the recesses of these caverns. These boxes are square. In them the bodies had been placed with knees drawn up under the chin, wrapped in cedar blankets and covered with mats".

Of the three following examples described, the most significant one in terms of the data it provides, is the Gust Island Shelter which follows Deans description closely.

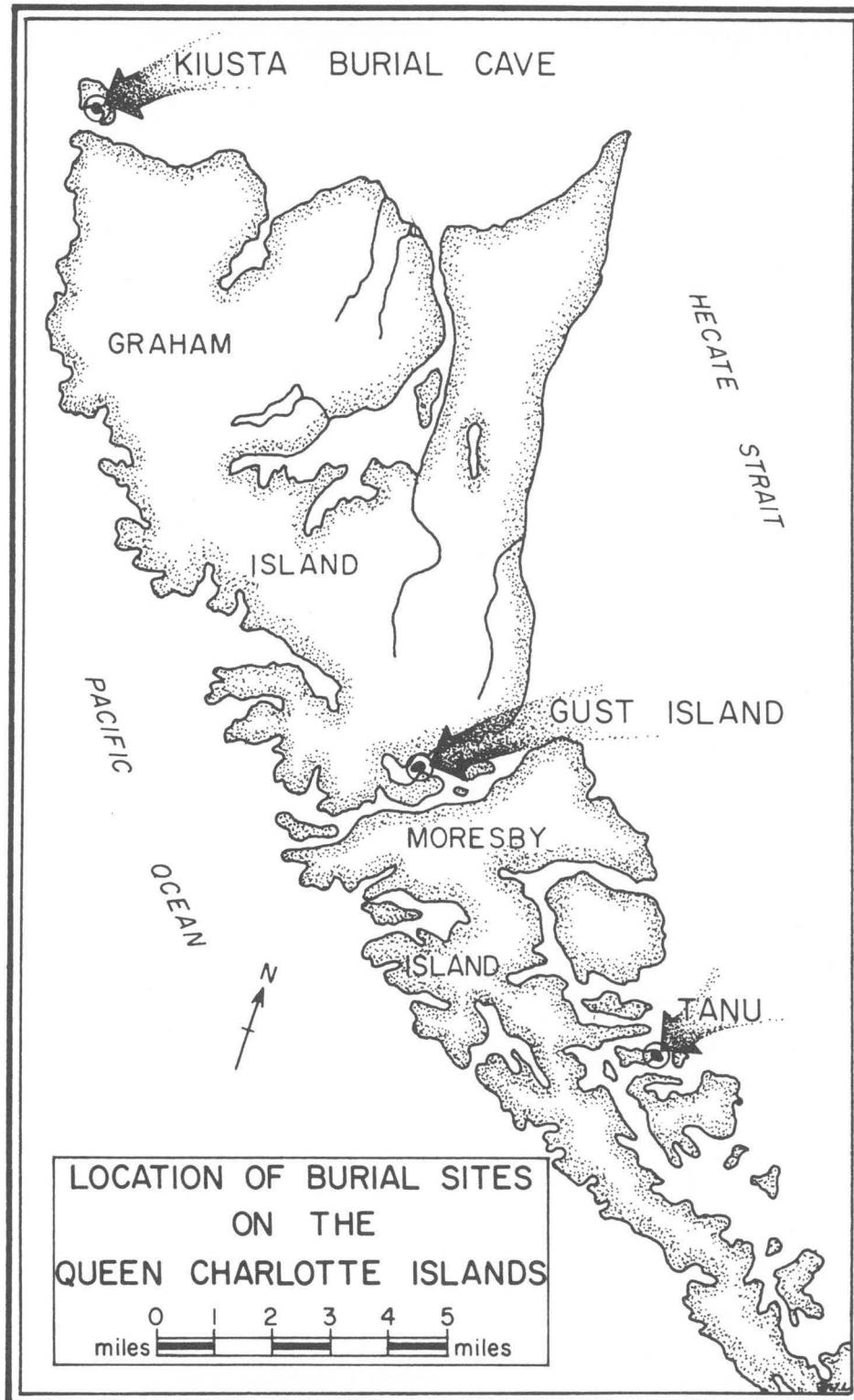


Plate 1.

THE GUST ISLAND BURIAL SHELTER (FhUb-1)

In 1966 the Archaeology Division of the National Museum of Man began a major research project to investigate native cultural development on the northern coast of British Columbia.

During the 1967 field season an urgent request was forwarded to the project by Mr. Wally Easton, the agent for the North Coast District, Department of Indian Affairs, that a burial shelter was threatened with destruction by logging activity on a small island in Kagan Bay in Skidegate Channel. I immediately contacted Mr. Johnny Williams a Councillor of the Skidegate Band, to notify him of the situation and suggest to him that the shelter be salvaged by a museum team before it was totally destroyed. Reports at the time indicated that some painted burial boxes had already been removed from the shelter and that further depredation was inevitable. Mr. Williams agreed that something should be done to save the remains and stated that our activities would be covered by a permit from the Band Council issued earlier that year to enter upon reserve lands and collect research samples.

In mid-August I took five members of the Prince Rupert Harbour project crew, Don Clark, Annette McFadyen Clark, Stephen Archibald, Roger Cole and Joanne MacDonald, to Queen Charlotte City. From there we went by chartered boat west on Skidegate Inlet to Gust Island (Pl. 2).

Reports on the exact location of the burial shelter were vague and approximately one-half hour was required to locate the site among the rock ridges which transect the island. The site proved to be about 200 feet inland from a rock bound shore near the edge of the timber cutting area. The vegetation in the gully between the ridges consisted primarily of hemlock with heavy moss carpeting under the canopy (Pl. 3). The slope of the overhanging ridge at the shelter was about 40° with the drip line no more than eight feet from the base at the widest point. The human remains were deposited within the drip line in steps down the slope created by placing planks on rock bases as platforms for the coffins. Most of the rocks were from the roof but some had barnacles on them and had obviously been brought up from the shore. In several places huge blocks from the overhang had fallen on the



Plate 2. View of Gust Island from Skidegate Channel. The burial shelter is hidden in the forest at left.



Plate 3. The Gust Island shelter from the bottom of the gully.
The overhang of the shelter begins at the top centre of the picture.

coffins below. Remains of boxes extended for 24 feet downslope and in some places they were several layers deep.

On first inspection prior disturbance was obvious from the scattered fragments of boxes and human bones well beyond the drip line of the shelter. That this disturbance was due to man rather than animals seems obvious from the fact that scattered box fragments were as numerous as scattered bones. Furthermore, there were no decorated boxes to be seen, although fragments of several were later found jammed between two other boxes. The lids of all the boxes in the uppermost layer had been removed and no grave items were found in them. Most boxes had sides which were kerfed and bent from a single red cedar plank and all but a few had sprung apart at the seam. Nevertheless, human depredation was relatively slight compared to other Haida burial shelters I had seen where all the skulls had been removed by curio seekers.

Excavation

The first stage of activity was to lay out a tape measure and take a photographic record of the remains. Because of the slope, photography of the entire area was difficult (Pl. 4 and 5). A close inspection of the area revealed that there were at least 12 burials in the shelter, with additional ones beneath. Numbers were assigned to those obvious from the surface beginning at the uphill end at point 0 on the tape. The numbers were put on tags and pinned beside the appropriate remains.

Excavation began at the top of the slope with burial no.1 and it was soon evident that subscript numbers were required for those encountered underneath. A close observation was kept of approximate age, sex and condition of each burial so that scattered bones could be assigned to the right individual. Although the remains appeared hopelessly mixed at first as the excavation proceeded it became obvious in which direction the boxes had spilled, which aided in the assignment of burial numbers. This was cross-checked by Cybulski during the laboratory analysis.

Approximately half the individuals were still completely contained

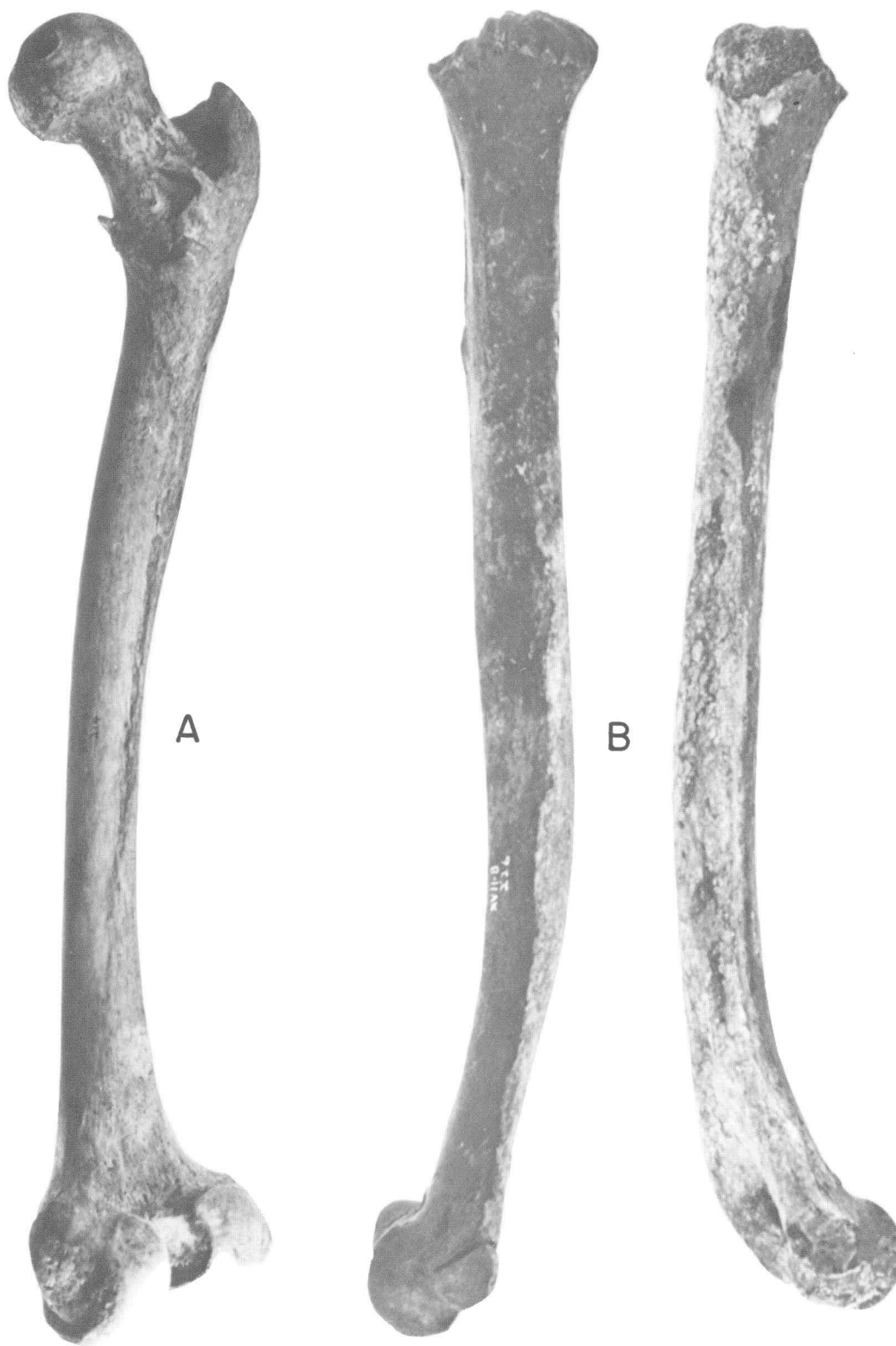
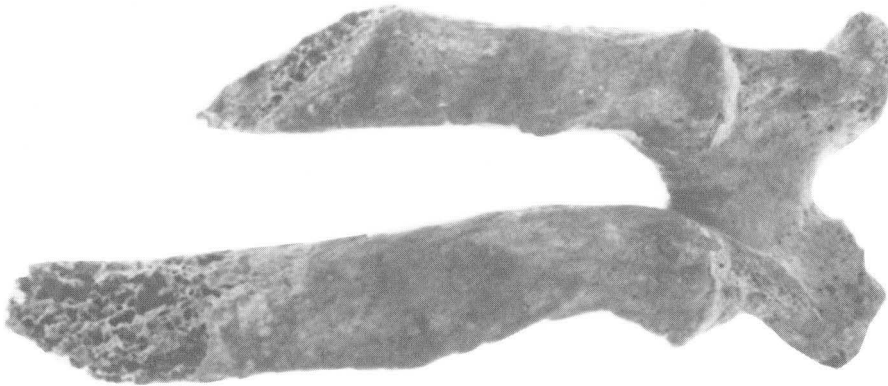


Plate V. (A) The right femur of XVII-B-214 with exostoses at the lesser trochanter and intertrochanteric crest. (B) The curved humerus shafts of the subadult XVII-B-226.



A



B

Plate VI. (A) Fused ribs in the assemblage of bones XVII-B-229.
(B) The maxillary dentition of XVII-B-210. Note the rotation of
the second premolars. The left side tooth is missing, but rotation
is reflected by the socket.