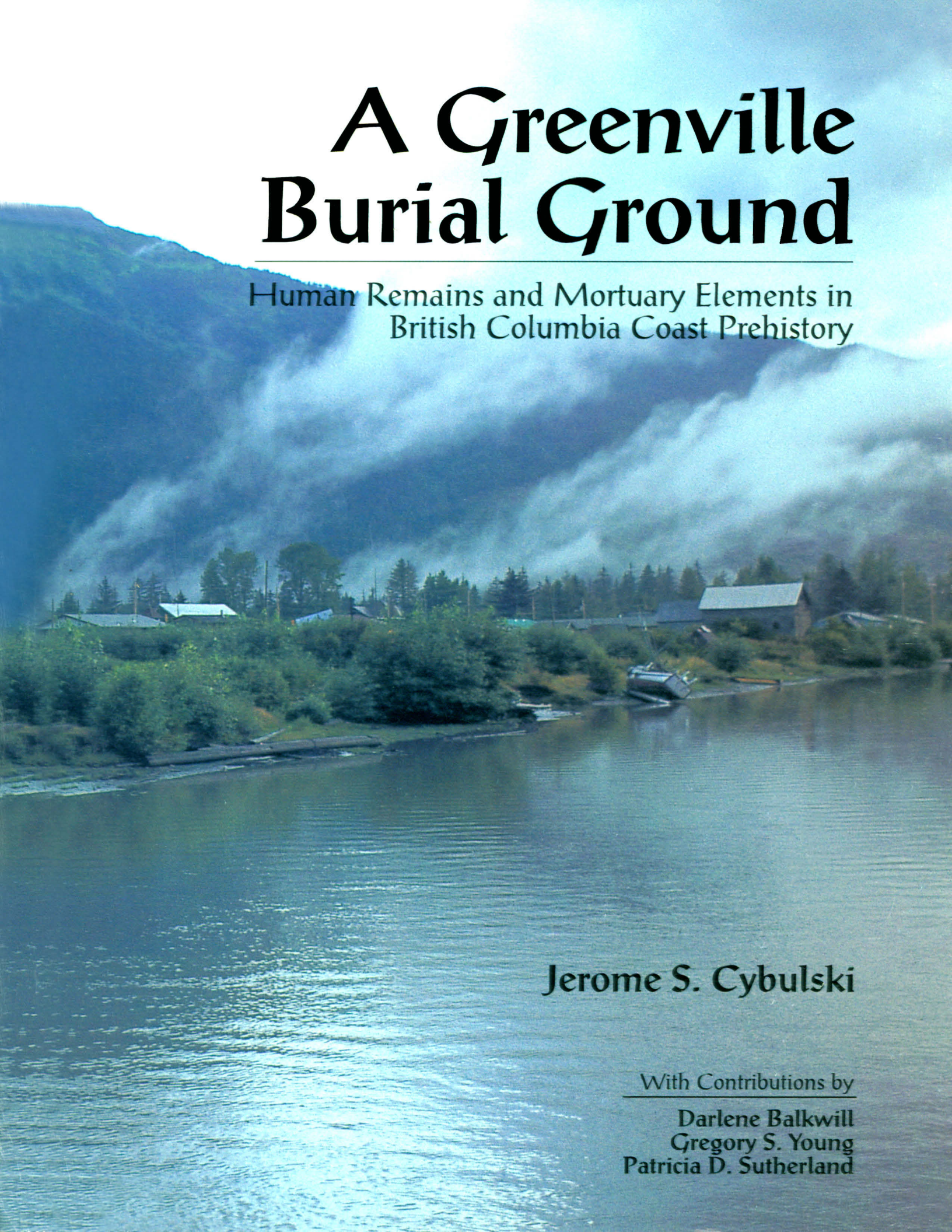




A Greenville Burial Ground

Human Remains and Mortuary Elements in
British Columbia Coast Prehistory

Jerome S. Cybulski

With Contributions by

Darlene Balkwill
Gregory S. Young
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Abstract

A midden excavation in the modern Nisga'a village of Greenville in west-central British Columbia yielded 36 human burial features, the skeletal remains of 57 individuals, 231 cultural artifacts, and 19,389 pieces of non-human bone. Two burial components were identified, one in a shell layer dated A.D. 566 to 1010, the other in an overlying soil layer dated A.D. 1180 to 1290 in calibrated radiocarbon years. Dissimilar age and sex distributions suggest structural differences in the contributing populations, though a single lineage or social class could have been involved.

There was no evidence for habitation in terms of non-mortuary site features, but the faunal debris reflected an expected local ecological orientation in favour of anadromous fish resources, probably including food for the dead. All intact or partly intact human skeletons were flexed, most in square burial boxes or outlines. Sixteen were accompanied by concentrations of elderberry seeds, identifying a secondary use of food-storage boxes as coffins, a Tsimshian origin myth set in the Nass River valley, or "rich food" for the dead. Most of the adult females likely wore labrets, indicated by tooth-abrasion facets, possibly a sign of status attained through family wealth. One or two people were buried with dog crania, and canid bones other than skulls were underrepresented in the faunal assemblage as a whole, possibly also an indication that wealthy people were buried at the site.

Greenville accounts for eight per cent of all currently known prehistoric British Columbia coast burials starting at 5,500 years ago and seventy per cent of those assignable to the Late Developmental Stage, the last 1,300 years of Indian history before European contact. It may represent one of the last examples of midden burial as a significant cultural practice, replaced throughout the coast, possibly by A.D. 1300, by the historically known practices of above-ground corpse disposal. Infants, well represented at historic mortuary sites, may have been relegated to special burial areas in the prehistoric period. An unbalanced sex ratio in favour of males in many north-coast sites may identify female slaving practices related to warfare during the Middle and, possibly, Late Developmental Stages. Cranial morphology suggests the people who buried their dead at Greenville were biologically related to those of Prince Rupert Harbour, possibly denoting a common Tsimshian ancestry to 3,000 years ago. However, these two groups and Blue Jackets Creek on the Queen Charlotte Islands do not present images of a common north-coast, human biological complex in British Columbia for 4,000 or 5,000 years.

Résumé

Les fouilles d'un dépotoir du village nisga'a actuel de Greenville, situé au centre de la côte de la Colombie-Britannique, ont permis d'exhumer 36 éléments de sépultures humaines, les ossements de 57 personnes, 231 artefacts et 19 389 morceaux d'os d'animaux. Deux sépultures ont été identifiées : l'une située dans une couche de coquillages datant de 566 à 1010 apr. J.-C. et l'autre, recouvrant la première, que la datation au carbone 14 a fait remonter entre 1180 et 1290 apr. J.-C. La disparité entre l'âge et le sexe des populations mises au jour semble indiquer des différences structurelles, bien qu'il ait pu s'agir d'une seule lignée ou classe sociale.

On n'a retrouvé aucune trace d'habitation sur le site non mortuaire, mais les restes d'animaux témoignent de l'abondante consommation de poissons anadromes, dont une partie était peut-être destinée aux morts.

Tous les squelettes humains, en partie ou complètement intacts, ont été trouvés recroquevillés, la plupart à l'intérieur de tombes ou de périmètres carrés. Des quantités de graines de baies de sureau ont été trouvées près de seize squelettes, ce qui indiquerait que des boîtes d'entreposage de denrées auraient pu servir aussi comme cercueils. D'autre part, la présence de graines de baies de sureau pourrait ou refléter un mythe venant des Tsimshians de la vallée de la rivière Nass, ou encore représenter la «nourriture de choix» du mort.

L'usure des dents indique que la plupart des femmes adultes portaient, vraisemblablement, des labrets – signe, peut-être, du statut social lié à la richesse de la famille. Une ou deux personnes ont été enterrées avec un crâne de chien, ce qui pourrait aussi laisser croire à l'aisance des gens qui ont été enterrés à cet endroit. Mis à part les crânes, on a trouvé peu d'ossements canins pour reconstituer des squelettes.

Greenville compte 8 p. 100 de toutes les sépultures préhistoriques – remontant à 5500 ans – actuellement connues, sur la côte de la Colombie-Britannique; on y trouve aussi 70 p. 100 de celles qu'on peut attribuer au Stade évolutif récent – les 1300 dernières années de l'histoire des Amérindiens avant les premiers contacts avec les Européens.

Ces sépultures de dépotoir constituent peut-être l'un des derniers exemples d'une pratique culturelle importante. Cette pratique a été remplacée, tout le long de la côte – peut-être vers 1300 apr. J.-C. –, par celle, historiquement attestée, des tertres funéraires.

Les enfants en bas âge, habituellement nombreux dans les sites funéraires de l'époque historique, ont peut-être été relégués dans des lieux mortuaires particuliers au cours de la période préhistorique. Le nombre supérieur d'hommes retrouvés dans de nombreux sites

du nord de la côte pourrait être un indice de l'esclavage des femmes à la suite des guerres du Stade évolutif moyen et, vraisemblablement, à la suite de celles du Stade évolutif récent. La forme des crânes exhumés suggère que les morts de Greenville auraient été biologiquement apparentés à ceux de Prince Rupert Harbour; cela pourrait donc indiquer une ascendance tsimshiane commune vieille de 3000 ans. Cependant, ces deux groupes, ainsi que celui de Blue Jackets Creek (îles de la Reine-Charlotte), vieux de 4000 ou 5000 ans, ne présentent pas les traits d'un bassin humain à parenté biologique commune de la côte nord de la Colombie-Britannique.

Preface

When I began to write this manuscript, my intention was to provide a straightforward site report, describing the excavation of the Greenville burial ground and the analysis of the materials found therein. As I read over the 60 pages produced with that end in mind, it became apparent that much of what I had written would only have meaning within a broader context of coastal British Columbia mortuary sites and human remains. Also, the relatively unique temporal position of the Greenville site in a heretofore known sphere of Northwest Coast mortuary remains dominated by earlier and later sites suggested that a comprehensive review might be in order. Consequently, I have attempted to pull together a body of information just as relevant to the interpretation of Northwest Coast prehistory as the artifactual remains left by those cultures deemed ancestral to today's native peoples.

As will be apparent in the following pages, there are many gaps in our knowledge of human remains on the British Columbia coast with respect to chronology, mortuary practices, and vital statistics, as well as paleopathology and human biology. I would hope that other investigators would help fill in those gaps, as well as test my resulting speculations, with continuing studies of mortuary remains, new thinking, and new site excavations. I would also hope that this book demonstrates to contemporary native peoples some of the intricacies and relevance of studying the human remains of past populations.

The excavation and analysis of the Greenville site was made possible by the Lakalzap Band Council and the people of Greenville. I hope that our work and this report have done justice to their concerns and foresight. Their support, encouragement, interest, and patience are deeply appreciated. I also thank them for welcoming me into their homes and for giving me an opportunity to share a little bit of their lives and history beyond archaeology. I am indebted to my field crews for their expertise, persistence, and patience: Joanne Curtin, Alan McMillan, Deanna Ludowicz, Arlene Yip, Geordie Howe, David Archer, Monica McKay, Sherry Clark, Alvin McKay Jr., Robert Moore, Alvin Martin, and Elmer Azak. Oscar Swanson, Mitchell Stevens, Paul Foote, and several Greenville school children assisted in the fieldwork and helped us in many other ways.

Following our initial exploration in 1981, the excavation was completed under permits 1982-2 and 1983-13 issued by the Archaeology Branch, Victoria, in accordance with the Heritage Conservation Act of the Province of British Columbia.

Funding was provided by the Canadian Museum of Civilization, by Employment and Immigration Canada through its COSEP Federal Internship Programme, and through a cost sharing arrangement between the Terrace District Office of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and the Archaeological Survey of Canada's Rescue Archaeology Programme. The Lakalzap Band Council provided additional support during each of the three seasons of excavation.

I am indebted to Darlene Balkwill for her detailed identification and analysis of the faunal remains from the site and extensive contribution to this book; to Gregory Young for his contribution on the preserved wood remains; to Patricia Sutherland for her expert analysis of the Greenville artifacts. Clifford Crompton and Charles Tarnocai, both of Agriculture Canada, Ottawa, took responsibility for the analysis of the elderberry seeds and soils respectively. Other colleagues helped me to unuddle my brains during the writing of this manuscript: Rebecca Wigen of Pacific Identifications, Victoria; Gay Frederick, Peter Macnair, and Richard Hebda of the Royal British Columbia Museum; Philip Hobler and Mark Skinner of Simon Fraser University; R.G. Matson of the University of British Columbia; Larry Newitt of the Geological Survey of Canada, Ottawa; Bryan Gordon and Richard Morlan of the Archaeological Survey of Canada. I am grateful to Richard Morlan and R.G. Matson for their careful reviews of the final draft and recommended changes during its preparation for publication. David Laverie drew the maps and excavation profiles on Figures 1, 2, 5, and 6. All other charts and graphs, including Figure 14, were created with the aid of Software Publishing Corporation's Harvard Graphics. The stylized background map on Figure 3 is a copyrighted product of New Visions Technologies Inc. Last, but not least, I thank George MacDonald, Executive Director of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, for entrusting me with the Greenville project initially and for providing me with the opportunity to see it through, in the face of my other museum duties, to its hopefully contributory end.

Following their analyses at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the Canadian Museum of Nature, Agriculture Canada, and the Canadian Conservation Institute, all site materials were returned to Greenville for disposition by the Lakalzap Band.

Jerome S. Cybulski

Archaeological Survey of Canada
Canadian Museum of Civilization

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This study provides analytical results from an archaeological excavation of a prehistoric burial site in Greenville, a modern Nisga'a Indian community in the Nass River valley of west-central British Columbia.¹ The site was identified late in the summer of 1981 following an accidental discovery of human bones during lot preparation for a housing development. Controlled excavations were carried out for a two-week period and, subsequently, for six weeks in 1982 and four weeks in 1983 under the auspices of the Canadian Museum of Civilization (then known as the National Museum of Man, National Museums of Canada) and the Lakalzap Band Council of Greenville.

The Greenville site, a shallow midden, yielded over 36 human burial features, the skeletal remains of a minimum 57 individuals, 231 cultural artifacts, and 19,389 pieces of non-human bone. Two partial human skeletons were added to the sample from a nearby location in 1984. This assemblage enables a first-look at mortuary practices, skeletal biology, paleopathology, culture content, and subsistence in the Nass River area during the Late Developmental Stage of Northwest Coast prehistory, a period from about A.D. 450 to the time of European contact. Indeed, the Greenville burial ground is the first clearly identified prehistoric site of any type and time period to have been excavated in the traditional territories of the Nisga'a, major contributors to the ethnographic Northwest Coast culture pattern of native North America (Drucker, 1955).

Circumstances of Discovery

The excavation of the Greenville burial site was completed as part of my staff duties with the Archaeological Survey of Canada, a division of the Canadian Museum of Civilization. In Ottawa, on August 13, 1981, I received a telephone call from George F. MacDonald who was directing an archaeological excavation for

¹ The terms "prehistory" and "history" have been used for convenience throughout this book to differentiate time before and after the arrival of the first European explorers to the shores of British Columbia. They are terms commonly used in North American archaeology, though obviously from the perspective of the white man. To the Nisga'a, as to all First Nations peoples in the Western Hemisphere, prehistory is history.

the Canadian Parks Service and the Canadian Museum of Civilization at a Skeena River site just east of Terrace, British Columbia. George MacDonald, then Senior Scientist with the museum, informed me that human bones had been discovered in Greenville, some 85 km to the north, as a result of construction activity. He received word of the find from officials of the Archaeology Branch, Province of British Columbia, Victoria, who earlier had been notified by the Lakalzap Band Council. A brief inspection in Greenville by one of George MacDonald's field crew members, David Archer, indicated the bones might be from a previously unrecorded archaeological burial site. Concerned for the human remains and also recognizing a possible heritage significance, the Lakalzap Band Council sought to have the bones identified and expressed interest in having the site of discovery further investigated.

George MacDonald notified me because of my previous experience in cooperative mortuary archaeology with First Nations peoples in British Columbia (Cybulski, 1975a, 1978a) and analytical familiarity with human remains from archaeological sites in the territories of the Coast Tsimshian, close linguistic and geographic neighbours of the Nisga'a (Cybulski, 1974, 1978b, 1988a). Following permission by telephone from the Lakalzap Band Council, I arrived in Greenville with three field assistants on August 23. That evening, we met with the Council for formal introductions, to obtain details on the discovery, and to discuss respective concerns about identifying and analyzing the bones, necessary archaeological work, and potential results. We had funding sufficient for a two-week exploration, during which time we examined the bones already found, established a site grid, collected human remains that had been exposed on the surface by rains, carried out test excavations, identified the presence of an apparently prehistoric midden, and recovered several intact or partly intact human burials. On the basis of our findings, the Lakalzap Band Council agreed that more extensive excavation of the site should be completed, the basis for continued work in 1982 and 1983.

The initial discovery of human bones was made on July 21 and 22, 1981, during excavation of a minor drainage ditch in the area of a new housing development. This work was directed by Willis, Cunliffe, Tait/DeLCan (1982), consulting engineers and planners in Terrace, under contract to the Government of Canada Department of Indian Affairs. Paul Foote, senior technician with the firm, provided details about the find and assisted in locating the discovery site, described as a "low-lying mound." The bones had been collected by local RCMP Special Constable Alex Angus and stored in the Greenville Band Office.

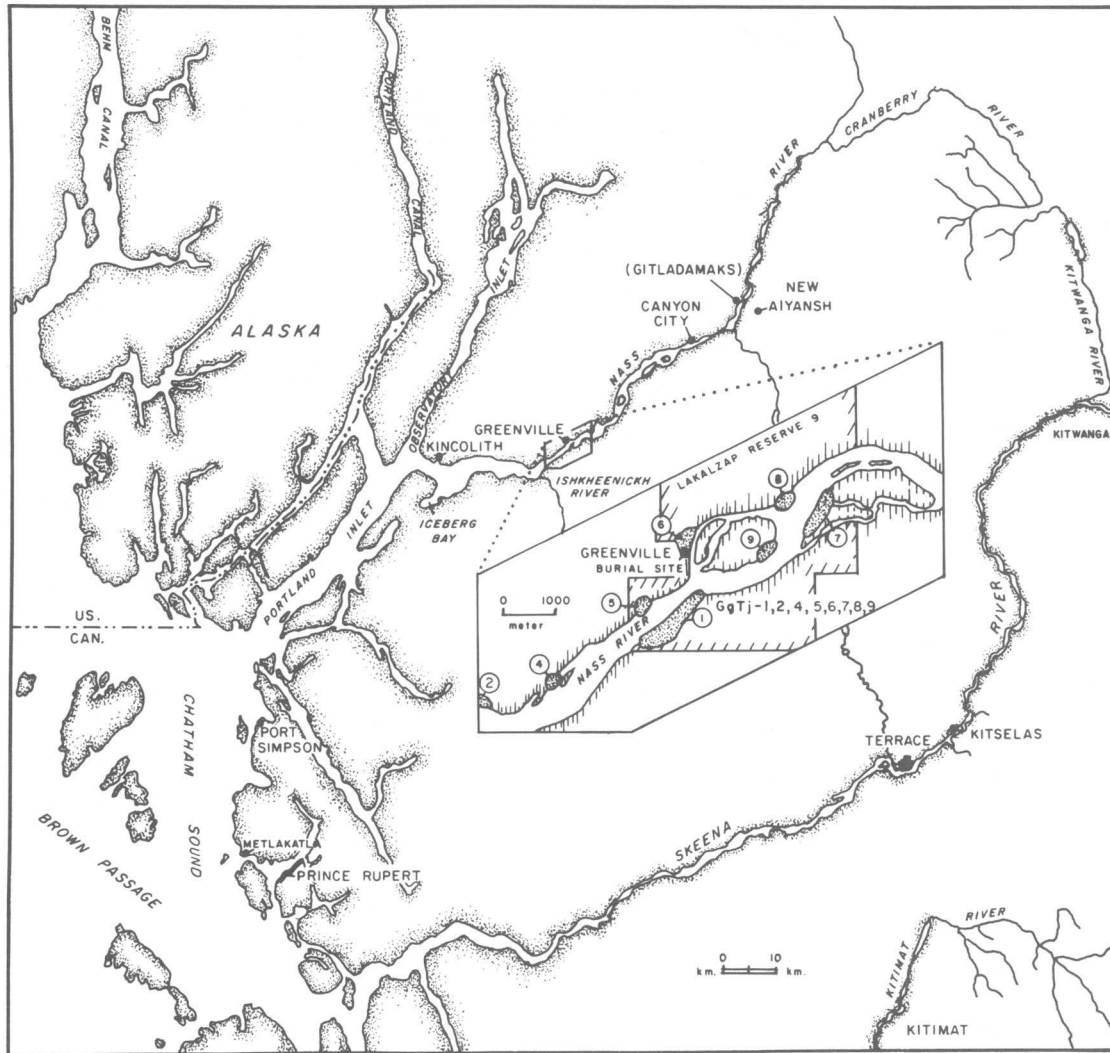


FIGURE 1. West-central British Columbia including Greenville and environs.
(GgTj # locations from B.C. Archaeology Branch site records.)

Site Location and Historical Context

Greenville (population ca. 400) is on the northwest side of the Nass River about 28 km from its mouth where the river empties into Portland Inlet (Fig. 1). Situated in the Coast Mountains, the village is about 1.5 km below the limit of tidal action in the Nass River estuary. The climate is intermediate between the temperate rain-swept coast and the continental interior of British Columbia. In

(TABLE 20 continued)

Variant	Males		Females		Total ¹	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
<i>(Skull base continued)</i>						
Divided hypoglossal canal	5/25	20.00	4/24	16.67	9/49	18.37
- partly divided	4/25	16.00	2/24	8.33	6/49	12.24
Condylod canal absent	2/19	10.53	5/24	20.83	7/43	16.28
Divided occipital condyle	0/21	0.00	0/21	0.00	0/42	0.00
Precondylar variant	2/10	20.00	0/11	0.00	2/21	9.52
Ossified apical ligament	2/10	20.00	0/11	0.00	2/21	9.52
Paracondylar process	0/17	0.00	0/21	0.00	0/38	0.00
Clinoid process variant	0/16	0.00	0/22	0.00	0/38	0.00
<i>Temporal bone:</i>						
Thickened tympanic plate	8/36	22.22	5/25	20.00	13/61	21.31
Tympanic plate dehiscence	11/35	31.43	14/25	56.00	25/60	41.67
Auditory exostoses	0/37	0.00	0/25	0.00	0/62	0.00
<i>Mandible:</i>						
Mandibular torus	10/30	33.33	0/24	0.00	10/54	18.52
Mylohyoid arch	6/19	31.58	0/21	0.00	6/40	15.00
Multiple mental foramina	3/25	12.00	0/23	0.00	3/48	6.25

¹ Totals include mature bones of indeterminate sex from disturbed contexts.

