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A small inland midden DgRw-251 at False Narrows

by Nick Doe

In comprehensive surveys of the archaeological sites at False Narrows in 1987¹ and 2002,² it was noted that the area has three different types of site in addition to the major village site at El Verano (DgRw-4). These are:

- burial sites
- petroglyph sites, and
- inland shell-midden sites.

Although burial and petroglyph sites have been investigated in some detail, the inland shell middens are usually forgotten once initial surveys have been recorded. Because these middens are often small and shallow, they are easily damaged or destroyed by development.

Curious about one such small midden, DgRw-251, which is on the north side of South Road inland from DgRw-4, I did what I could to discover something about it while staying within the requirements of the Heritage Act that nobody disturb an archaeological site without a permit.

Previous investigations

There are no earlier reports of DgRw-251, but small inland middens in the vicinity

previously reported are as follows.³

DgRw-62

Mostly destroyed.⁴ Probably originally about 30 × 45 m in area and almost 0.6 m deep. About 100 m above sea level. All clamshells, no bones. Numerous fire-cracked rocks.

DgRw-196

A destroyed midden⁵ not far from the Stokes Road petroglyph site DgRw-198. Discrete patches within a 400 × 100 m area, the main site being about 52 × 16 m and 0.2 m deep. About 70 m above sea level. Clamshells and fire-cracked rocks. One ground slate point fragment was found “reminiscent of larger Marpole types”. A *greenstone* flake was also found there.⁶

DgRw-200

A destroyed midden⁷ on the bluffs about 130 m above sea level. Clamshells and fire-cracked rocks. The site was radiocarbon

¹ Ian R. Wilson, *The False Narrows Bluffs—Archaeological Investigations on Gabriola Island*, Permit 1967-40, Wilson Consultants, December 1987.

² Darcy Mathews, *Archaeological Inventory and Impact Assessment—the NE ¼ Section 3 and SW ¼ Section 8, Gabriola Island*, Permit 2002-201 Wilson Consultants, October 2002.

³ There are also a few small beach middens, for example, DgRw-108 and DgRw-? in the Community Cemetery, but I’m excluding these because their locations are not intrinsically puzzling.

⁴ Wilson, pp.43–45.

⁵ Wilson, pp.45–46, and Mathews, pp.21–25.

⁶ *Greenstone* is an uncertain identification. It may have been green-tinged *basalt* (pillow lava) or *olivine-basalt*. *Basalt* is common on Gabriola’s shingle beaches. It is dark grey, but its weathering rind can be jet-black, red, green, purple, or even white. *Olivine-basalt* cobbles are also present, but are not so common. They are dark or olive green.

⁷ Wilson, pp.46–48, and Mathews, pp.37–43.

dated at 2490 years BP (before present). Assuming this is an uncalibrated measurement, which it probably is; this is equivalent to **410 AD**.⁸

DgRw-202

A midden⁹ not far from the Brickyard Hill petroglyph site DgRw-201 about 65 m above sea level. Shallow shell deposits about 0.15 m deep. *Basalt* and *chert* fragments and flakes were collected at this site.¹⁰

DgRw-203

Another heavily damaged midden,¹¹ this one near cave burial sites, about 140 m above sea level. Shallow discontinuous shell deposits about 0.15 m deep.

DgRw-205

Top of Ferne Road,¹² about 140 m above sea level. About 50 × 30 m with shell deposits up to 0.30 m deep. Probably not far from the petroglyph site DgRw-254.

DgRw-206

Also top of Ferne Road,¹³ east of DgRw-205. Only partially disturbed. About 60 × 40 m with shell deposits up to 0.35 m deep.

DgRw-207

A heavily damaged small midden,¹⁴ on Brickyard Hill about 120 m above sea level. Deposits around 0.15 m deep.

DgRw-208

A relatively undamaged site at the base of the bluffs about 80 m above sea level.¹⁵ About 30 × 15 m with shell deposits up to 0.25 m deep.

DgRw-209

An extensive midden¹⁶ at the base of the bluffs, maybe as large as 250 × 150 m with shell deposits perhaps up to 2 m deep.

DgRw-226

A small exposure of a shell midden¹⁷ near the Stokes Road petroglyph site DgRw-198. Very shallow.

The new site DgRw-251

This is a very small midden, 7 × 7 m and probably shallow, though this is not known for certain. It is just a few minutes walk from the main DgRw-4 site and near a good source of freshwater.

Shells are mainly butter clams, whole and broken, and have been brought to the surface

⁸ Calculated using the Deo/Stone/Stein variable ΔR . Using the standard 390 ΔR correction, the result is **365 AD**. See Nick Doe, *Additions and corrections to dates for archaeological site around False Narrows*, *SHALE* 21, pp.43–52, July 2009.

⁹ Wilson, pp.48–50.

¹⁰ Brickyard Hill has several outcrops of Geoffrey Formation conglomerate that contain well-rounded cobbles and pebbles. *Chert* is reported to be a common mineral in this conglomerate, see for example, P.S. Mustard, *The Upper Cretaceous Nanaimo Group, Georgia Basin*, GSC Bulletin 481, p.87, 1994. Despite this, I haven't found much *chert* on the hillside myself; yet, what I would call *quartzite* is everywhere. *Basalt* is common in Gabriola's glacial diamict and on beaches.

¹¹ Wilson, pp.49 & 51, and Mathews, pp.44–47.

¹² Wilson, pp.49 & 52.

¹³ Wilson, pp.53–54.

¹⁴ Wilson, pp.53 & 55.

¹⁵ Wilson, pp.53 & 56.

¹⁶ Wilson, p.53 & pp.57–58.

¹⁷ Mathews, pp.54–57.

by the growth of shrubs. It would be about 12 m above sea level.¹⁸

A shell picked up on the disturbed surface was dated as follows:

Beta Analytic Radiocarbon Dating Laboratory using the MARINE04 database together with a 390-year local reservoir correction:

Sample 10 was reported as:
2190 ± 60 BP ¹⁴C conventional¹⁹
which the BARDL interpreted as:
150 AD, 90–240 AD (1-sigma)

With the Deo/Stone/Stein variable ΔR correction⁸ the result is:

290 AD, 232–385 AD (1-sigma).

Discussion

My favoured theory before making the radiocarbon measurement was that this small site was a place of refuge. From about 1000 AD on, warfare became endemic in the Strait of Georgia (Salish Sea) area. In Jennie Wyse's story of the *Last fight of the Cly-Alt*,²⁰ she describes a deadly raid on the large village that once existed at El Verano on False Narrows by the Lekwiltok people. Upon the alarm being sounded, she says:

Inside the houses all were hurrying and shouting. The women calling their children to them, giving each child a handful of dried fish or clams to carry with them as, clinging about their mothers they crept through the thick woods at the back in the hills.

After the raid, the village was abandoned. This would probably have been in the 1840s.

¹⁸ See Nick Doe, *New radiocarbon dates for False Narrows*, *SHALE* 15, p.36, July 2007.

¹⁹“Conventional” ages are results after applying standard ¹³C/¹²C corrections to measured ages.

²⁰ *te:ltx*^w. *SHALE* 4, pp.5–8, June 2002.

With this story in mind, I confidently expected my sample to be about 160 years old. Instead, it is well over ten times older than that.

Adding the small midden's date, **290 AD**, and the date for DgRw-200, **410 AD**, to the dates so far obtained for the midden at DgRw-04 gives us **375–1180 AD**,²¹ compared to the False Narrows Bluffs burials', assuming a 100% marine diet, **70–980 AD**.²² This new date suggests either that the inland middens were in use in the early days of the rise in population at False Narrows in the classical Marpole era; or, that the DgRw-04 dates are currently skewed and underestimate the antiquity of the site by a few hundred years.

What the inland sites were “for” exactly remains a mystery given the apparent heavy reliance of the people on obtaining their food from the sea.

Petroglyphs

There is a hint, no more, in the studies of the inland middens near the major petroglyph sites at Stokes Road and Brickyard Hill that the petroglyphs belong to the inland-midden era, if there ever was one. But to extend this notion to say that all petroglyphs on Gabriola are of this age is clearly going much further than the evidence gathered so far will allow. ◇

²¹ The 1-sigma of 11 samples, excluding Thetis DgRw-141, but including a charcoal date previously excluded, and including Mudge DgRw-25, with the Deo/Stone/Stein variable ΔR correction. All results are in the range **260–1445 AD**. With the standard ΔR correction of 390 years, the equivalent range is 345–1340 AD with all results in the range 150–1600 AD.

²² The 1-sigma of 19 samples (no exclusions) with the Deo/Stone/Stein variable ΔR correction. All results are in the range **800 BC–1250 AD**. With the standard ΔR correction of 390 years, the equivalent range is 40–1040 AD with all results in the range 670 BC–1360 AD.