The Prehistory of the Cook Valley &

Suggestions for Further Research

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**Introduction**

The current composition of information regarding the prehistory of the Cook Valley is derived from scattered, disjointed, and altogether unsound sources. This being the case, there are still a series of conclusions we can make about the “Waika”—the term used to denote Native Silurians. This region has been occupied for at least the last 8,500 years, and its inhabitants have undergone a series of transformations in subsistence practices, economy, and settlement patterns throughout this occupation. As we will see, however, it is presently difficult to discuss such changes as we have only a fragmentary understanding of who these Waika are, or if such a general term can be applied to all Native Silurians without combining culturally distinct peoples under one label. Before such topics as the sources of cultural change can be explored, our understanding of those subject to such change must be deepened.

**Background**

One of the earliest dates we can ascribe to Cook Valley occupation is B.P. 8200 ± 150 via radiocarbon dating of charcoal from the Newport Midden, a site which has been poorly and sporadically excavated since the mid-19th century.[[1]](#footnote-1) Our information regarding this site comes from the 1967 excavations by graduate student P. Mott, and since his excavation occurred after many others, it should be noted that the site was probably heavily disturbed prior to his excavation and that the resulting assemblage may be similarly affected.

Mott divided the sequence of layers at the Newport Midden into three distinct periods. Period 1 corresponds to lithic artifacts such as microblades fashioned from blue chert, red chert, and obsidian; projectile points; bones of wild deer and pig; and a barbed bone point. These findings would seem to indicate a mobile hunter-gatherer people. Shell depositions indicate the beginning of Period 2 and a lifestyle more interwoven with marine life. There is a large decrease in the number of identified deer and pig specimens in Period 2, while the number of seal, eel, flounder, cod, and halibut specimens increase dramatically. Wooden longhouses, storage pits, burials, and large quantities of deposited mussels and clams outside the houses imply a sedentary, long-term occupation. Two radiocarbon dates of human bone, 4800 ± 150 and 2720 ± 100 B.P, are supposed to have belong to this period. This leaves at least a 3,000-year gap between confirmable Period 1 and Period 2 occupation. It is thus difficult to say whether Period 2 shows cultural and socioeconomic change in the people of Period 1 or represents a new, culturally distinct people occupying the same space; much can happen in the span of 3,000 years. In the late 1960s, Mott wrote that environmental change may have forced the indigenous populations to adopt new subsistence strategies, and while this may certainly be the case, the available evidence does not rule out the possibility that the people of Period 2 had been using similar subsistence practices since the time of Period 1, and it was only later that their settlements expanded to include the land once inhabited by the hunter-gatherers—a number of similar hypotheses that do not rely on environmental change to influence subsistence could be made. This emphasizes the point that future studies regarding New Silurian prehistory should be more focused on building a sturdier, more cohesive picture of the cultures which inhabited the area before exploring factors that may have led to changes in these cultures.

Period 3 at the Newport Midden shows another socioeconomic shift—longhouses are replaced by small, circular huts; the frequency of freshwater eel declines while deep sea fish become more common; and side-notched projectile points are completely replaced by corner-notched points. Since Mott did not report any findings of burials or storage pits in this period, it seems more likely that the inhabits of this period followed a pattern of seasonal occupation of various sites. This could also explain the replacement of longhouses by small huts. In fact, in James Cook’s brief account of his visit to New Siluria—our first source of information regarding the area or its people—he describes witnessing “a cluster of crude shelters…deserted, with weeds growing over the cold fireplaces.” Cook notes that it seemed the desertion of the village could not have been for many months before his winter arrival. These people, like those occupying Period 3 of the Newport Midden, may have only occupied such areas during specific seasons. This idea is further evidenced by the account of Dutch explorer van Huygen; arriving 13 years after Cook, he barters with the inhabitants of what may have been the very same settlement Cook came across, obviously occupied this time. Radiocarbon dating of charcoal gives our only confirmable date of Period 3 occupation to be 1200 ± 110 years B.P., which leaves a potential gap of ~1,500 years between Periods 2 and 3. Again, it is difficult to say whether such cultural discrepancies are due to environmental change forcing populations to change their lifestyles, culturally distinct peoples immigrating to this area, or some combination of these and other factors.

A variety of other sites have been excavated, although few have thorough documentation, and there have been no systematic surveys of the region. A more cohesive understanding of the people who lived here is required before discussions about the causes of cultural, social, economic, or technological change can begin. Who are the Waika? The origin of this term is not given—likely it is the name given by the people who interacted with first European missionaries in the area to themselves, but even if this is the case, it is not clear how specific the label was meant to be. How many distinct populations occupied the Cook Valley before European colonization? How many communities were quietly extinguished by disease, as occurred so many times in post-Columbian America? The variety of environments in the Cook Valley—mountain ranges; river valleys; dry, interior plains and wet, coastal plains—necessitates a corresponding variety in subsistence strategies, and it is possible that there existed a diversity of societies in New Siluria prior to European immigration. The purpose of future studies in New Silurian prehistory should be to investigate…In the next section, I will attempt to statistically identify distinct cultural patterns based on similarities between the archaeological assemblages found at each site.

**Statistical Exploration**

A screenshot of a computer

Description automatically generated with low confidence The Coast Range and Central Range mountains flank the Cook Marsh and effectively separate the Cook Valley into four geological quadrants. Obsidian can be found in northwest section, which contains part of the Central Range as well as the dormant volcano Mt. Crater. The northeastern section is home to several red chert outcroppings along. In the southwest is a slate deposit along the Coast Range mountains, and in the southeast are blue chert outcroppings. These geological features play a significant role in the archaeological assemblages of the Cook Valley, and analyzing the quantities of lithics corresponding to each material can inform us about movement, trade, and technology in New Silurian populations. Figures 1 & 2 show percentages by site and layer of flaked lithic raw material, first ordered by position in the east-west axis (Fig. 1) and then by position in the north-south axis (Fig. 2) in order to investigate geographical patterns in lithic assemblages.

Figure 1. A series of charts indicating the proportions of material found at each site, ordered from the most-east to the most-west (left to right, top to bottom).

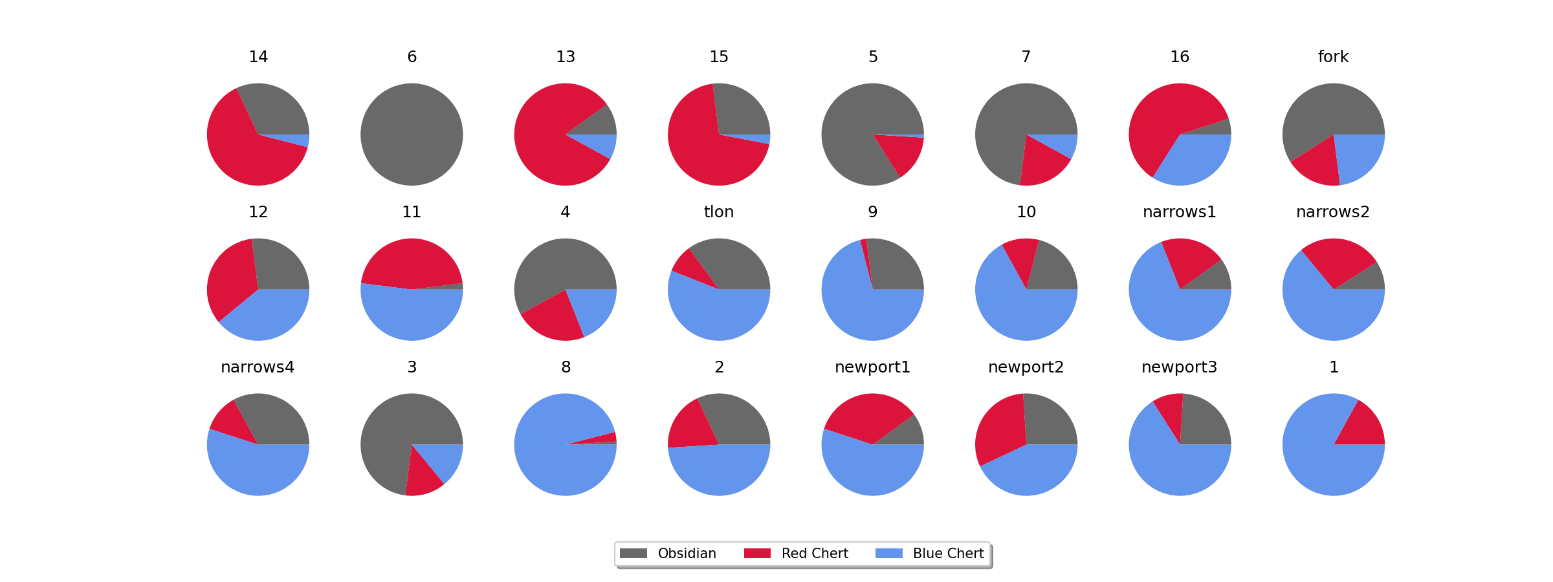


Figure 2. A series of charts indicating the proportions of material found at each site, ordered from the most-north to the most-south (left to right, top to bottom).

Figures 1 shows a predominance of obsidian in the easternmost sites with a shift towards blue chert—and occasionally red chert—as one moves to the west. Some outliers exist, such as site “2”; here, blue chert makes up the largest proportion of material despite its eastern situation and distance from the western blue chert outcroppings. Figure 2 shows a similar mix of obsidian predominance—though occasionally red chert—in the northernmost sites,

**Notes**

* Seasonal settlement where James Cook found abandoned shelters
* Both Cook and van Huygen visited the inlet
* Village at end of inlet
* Could not find the fields or farms despite long explorations
* Sweet roots and vegetables
* Gift economy
* Roots are baked in great pits
* Eel hunting
  + Drive stakes into shallow river bottoms, woven to form fence
  + Large wooden rakes with point of bone to rake eels
* Ancestor carvings outside like statues
* Villagers buried beside their houses, chiefs in earthen mounds
* Fire-cracked rock -> hearth, earth oven for cooking roots

Future Analysis

* Pottery? Is there any?
* Linguistics?
* Roots (cultural/cosmological significance)
* Economy
* Environmental Change -> Relation to Subsistence
* Establishing region-wide periods and cultures
  + How connected were people?
  + Are different technologies indicative of development over time or contrasting contemporary practices?
  + We have a few clusters by statistical analysis, but it is unclear what degree assemblage differences owe to time or separate culture

Narrows Site

* Occupation 1: Period 1
* Occupation 2: Period 1
* Occupation 3: Period 2
* Occupation 4: Period 2- 3
* Dates:
  + 8200 ± 150 (charcoal, period 1)
  + 4800 ± 120 (human bone, period 2)
  + 2720 ± 100 (human bone, period 2)
  + 1200 ± 110 (charcoal, period 3)
* Findings:

Tlon Site

* Raised, flat-top mounds where houses were grouped in a loosely integrated village
* Large, finer lithics
* Deer, wild pig, domestic pig
* Root-roasting pits
* Dates (late prehistoric):
  + 1510 ± 120 (Charcoal)
  + 540 ± 80 (human bone)

Newport Site

* Period 1
  + Microblades (blue chert, some red chert/obsidian)
  + Projectile points
  + Deer/pig bones
  + Barbed bone point
* Period 2
  + Mussels and clams
  + Wooden longhouses
  + Burials and storage pits
  + Barbed bone points, bone bipoints (maybe eel rakes)
  + Flaked chert
  + Ground slate knives and chipped stone points
* Period 3
  + Small circular huts
  + Cod
  + Chert and obsidian points
  + Ground stone axes
  + Flaked stone tools
  + Shell fish-hooks

Outline

1. Introduction
   1. Go over what we know
      1. Subsistence
         1. James Cook came across a seasonal hunting settlement, which would not likely be characteristic of an agricultural community
         2. Van Huygen trades with a community that has (domesticated?) pig and harvested roots
      2. Economy
      3. Settlements
         1. Newport, showing signs of occupation for 8,000 years
            1. 1: Microblades and projectiles, deer and wild pig, bone points
            2. 2: Shells, wooden longhouses, burials, storage pits, large shift towards marine subsistence, similar to Tlon
            3. 3: more deep-sea fishing, longhouses change to small, circular huts
   2. What we don’t know
      1. “Archaeological studies in the Cook Valley area have been sporadic. There have been no systematic surveys of the region.”
      2. The current information is fragmentary and unreliable, we need a more holistic and cohesive understanding of the people who lived here before we can begin discussions of how their culture changed over time
      3. Who are the Waika? Are all the indigenous people the Waika? How many communities may have silently passed away from disease, as occurred so many times in post-Columbian America?
      4. How many cultures?
         1. The variety in environments—mountain ranges, river basin, interior plains, coastal plain—means that subsistence strategies must vary widely across New Siluria.
      5. How does culture change over time?
      6. Before we investigate how environmental change affected indigenous groups, we need to know what ingenious groups are actually being affected—this will help us understand the effects of environmental change. We need to know who is being affected before we the cause.
2. Statistical attempt at defining cultural groups
3. Proposal
   1. LiDAR surveying to detect village settlements
   2. Excavations
      1. Jewelry, amulets, bracelets
      2. Axes
      3. Ancestor Carvings
4. Conclusion

1. The earliest date comes from P. Mott’s excavations at the Narrows site where radiocarbon dating of charcoal shows the earliest date to be 8760 ± 220 B.P. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)