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People of the Middle Fraser Canyon  
An Archaeological History

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY ERIC S. CARLSON



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## People of the Middle Fraser Canyon

The Middle Fraser Canyon contains some of the most important archaeological sites in British Columbia, including the remains of ancient villages that supported hundreds, if not thousands, of people. How and why did these villages come into being? Why were they abandoned?

In search of answers to these questions, Anna Marie Prentiss and Ian Kuijt take readers on a voyage of discovery into the ancient history of the St'át'imc or Upper Lillooet people, from eight thousand years ago to the present. Drawing on evidence from archaeological surveys and excavations and from the knowledge of St'át'imc people as acquired in interviews, they follow the human occupation of the region from the early peopling of the Interior to the emergence of the first villages. Explanations for the villages' establishment and collapse, they argue, lie in the evolution of food-gathering and -processing techniques, climate change, the development of social complexity, and the arrival of Europeans.

Prentiss and Kuijt's wide-ranging vision of culture and ancient history in British Columbia is brought to vivid life through photographs, illustrations, artist renderings and fictionalized accounts of life in the villages, a glossary and pronunciation guide for the St'át'imc language, and sidebars on archaeological methods, theories, and debates.

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*Leora Bar-el*
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# 1

## Introduction

We were at our field camp at the ancient housepit village of Keatley Creek, located above the Fraser River near the town of Lillooet, British Columbia. It was a warm and dry evening. The wind gently rustled the cottonwood trees, and the day was finally cooling off. Students sat around the campfire discussing some of the day's work. The day's excavation had been hard but productive. As temperatures crossed into the triple digits (Fahrenheit), the crew exposed remnants of a small house floor that had last been occupied about 1,600 years ago: a shallow cooking feature, a hearth, surrounded by a scattering of salmon and deer bones, a few small stone flakes produced by sharpening a tool, and a single spear point. The students had many questions. How did the ancient ones collect and hunt their food? Where did it come from? Who were the people who lived in this village? How did they come to live here?

Sitting with the students was Desmond Peters Sr., a highly respected elder from the St'át'imc Nation, the indigenous people of the Middle Fraser Canyon area. The students, all around 21 years old and hailing from suburban communities in the United States, automatically looked to him for insight. Where did they find their food? Desmond's eyes scanned the landscape: "This is my refrigerator ... my fish comes from down there ... my deer from over there." His hand waved from west toward the river to the mountains in the east.

Desmond's words and gestures conjured up images of a time long past, a time when the St'át'imc Nation controlled the land and water of the Middle Fraser Canyon around Lillooet, a time when the people collected food, traded, married, feasted, danced, and lived their lives without interference from

Euro-Canadian powers, a time that, in some ways, remains lost in the mists of the past yet is deeply important to members of the St'át'imc Nation.

People are interested in the past for many reasons. Some people seek to understand our collective histories, our origins, and our connections with the land. Where did we come from? How did we get here? Others seek explanation. How did the ancient villages of the Middle Fraser Canyon grow to the point where they supported hundreds if not thousands of people? Why were some of the villages abandoned? Others want to know what the past was like. What was it like to live in the ancient world of the Middle Fraser villages? Still others seek wisdom. Does the record of past cultures hold secrets that could help us today and our children in the future?

This is a book about the archaeology of the Mid-Fraser area. We are archaeologists, and in this book we flesh out an archaeological history that answers some of these questions. We recognize there are other pathways to knowledge of the past, such as oral history, but we leave these approaches and topics to other scholars to explore in greater detail. Our interpretations of archaeological data derived from surveys and excavations are, however, strongly enhanced by reference to ethnographic and oral historical sources, and we reconstruct through prose, photography, and art our visions of culture and ancient history in this area of British Columbia. Throughout the book, we draw upon the knowledge and insight of the St'át'imc people, related to us during interviews and recorded by ethnographers, to aid us in portraying their traditional culture in the recent and more distant past. We address a number of significant cultural developments in the Mid-Fraser Canyon and wider Pacific Northwest region. Some of these topics include the archaeological evidence for early peopling of the region, major changes in hunting and gathering strategies, and the development of permanent villages; the emergence of social status inequality; and the collapse and repopulation of major settlements.

Because archaeological research is ongoing in this region, this book is but another step forward in an exciting process. We hope to offer new information about the past and to stimulate the next generation of research on the long-term history of the St'át'imc people and their ancient lands.

### **The Middle Fraser Canyon**

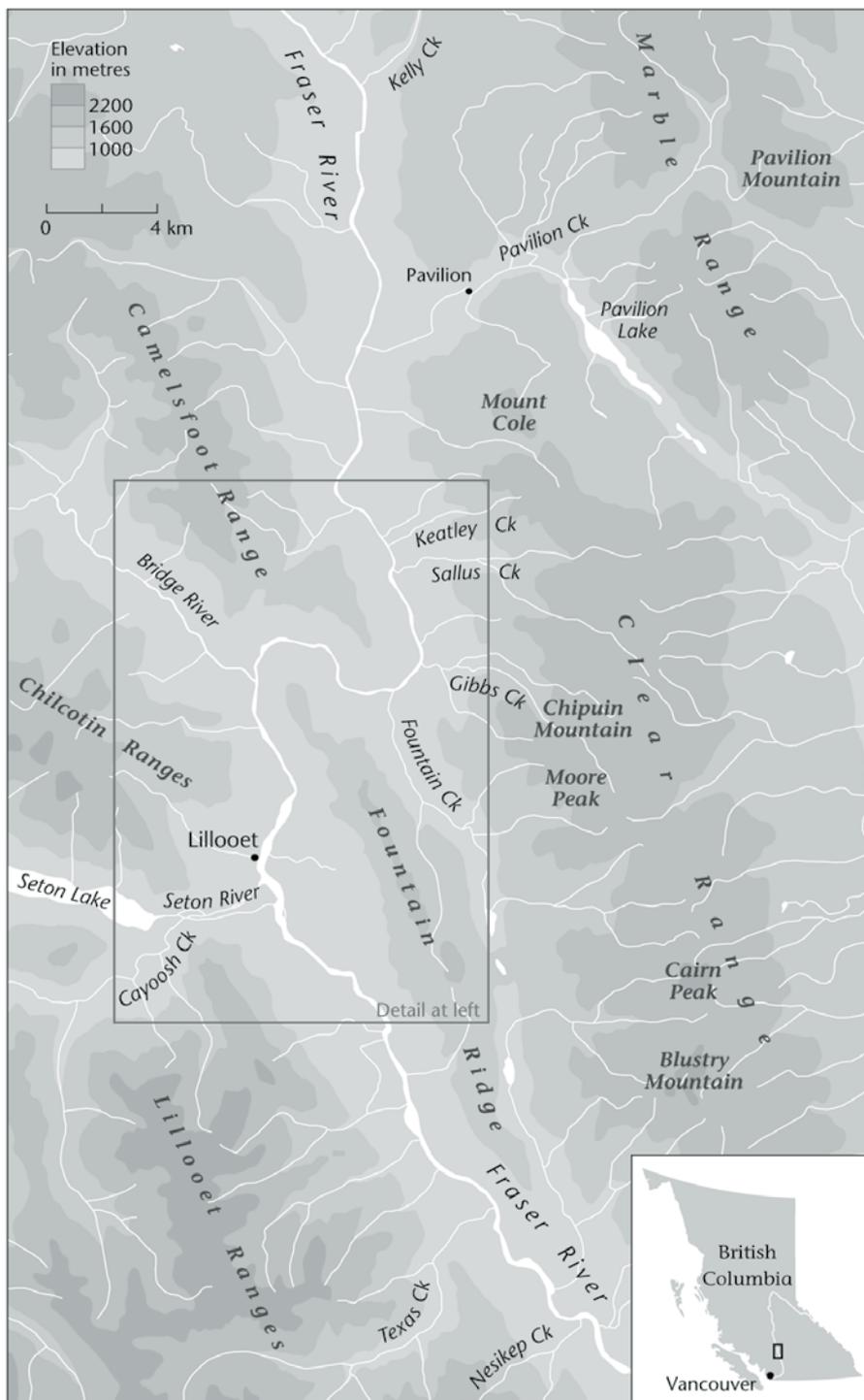
For those of us who did not grow up in the Middle Fraser Canyon, the first visit to this place generates a lasting impression. This is a land of extremes. Ancient villages, surrounded by mountain peaks, perch on the edge of precipices high above the Fraser River (Figure 1.1). The Mid-Fraser region includes the Fraser River and its flood plains, adjacent talus slopes and terraces, and surrounding mountains and high valleys. The Bridge River empties into the Fraser within

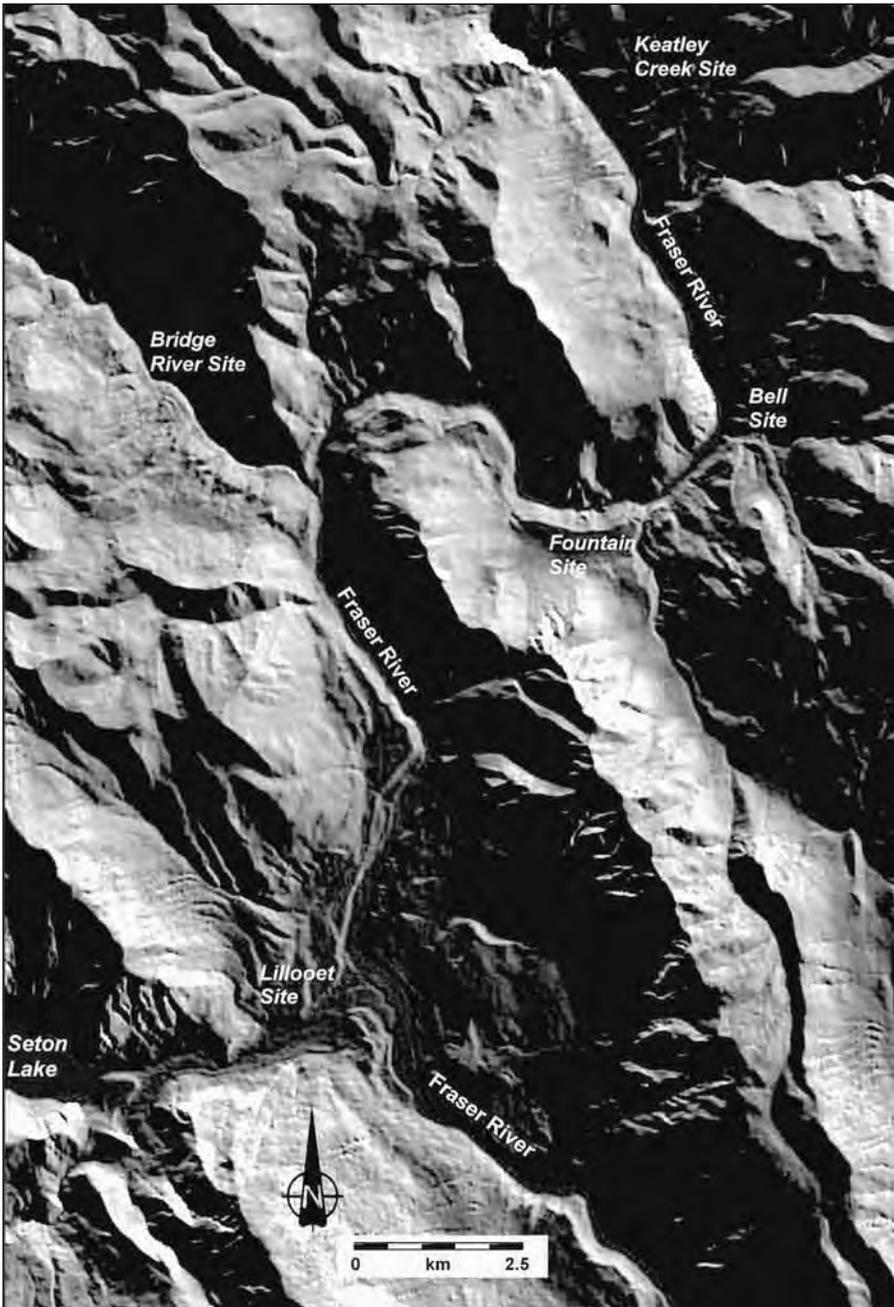


**FIGURE 1.1** The Mid-Fraser Canyon north of Lillooet, showing the narrow river

valley, high benches, and mountains.

*Photograph by Ian Kuijt*





**FIGURE 1.2** Map of the Middle Fraser Canyon with aerial photograph showing major archaeological sites.

this area, adding to the rushing flow of water and creating the most famous St'át'imc fishing spot. The Fraser River is also fed by a multitude of creeks, including Cayoosh, Lochnore, Nesikep, Texas, Gibbs, Fountain, Sallus, Keatley, Pavilion, and Kelly. Collectively, this flow of water travels several hundred miles south toward Vancouver and empties into the Pacific Ocean. A number of mountain peaks – including Blustry Mountain, Cairn Peak, Chipuin Mountain, Fountain Ridge, Moore Peak, Mount Cole, and Pavilion Mountain – dwarf the canyon's steep wall (Figure 1.2).

Visitors immediately feel the effects of the dry, hot, summer air. Technically, the climate is semi-arid. Vegetation ranges from sagebrush and bunch grass on the river terraces to pine forests on the mountain slopes, from open grasslands in higher elevation meadows to dense Douglas fir and spruce in mountain forests and alpine tundra on the highest peaks. The region supports a remarkable range of edible plant resources, including a wide range of berries, roots or geophytes, greens, seeds, nuts, and edible bark. Rich berry species grow along the dry river terraces and well into the montane forests. Forests and meadows produce tree bark, seeds, nuts, and many greens. Open mountain slopes, meadows, and grasslands contain large quantities of root foods. Within all of this bounty, the river held the most appeal for human inhabitants in the past.

A first-time visitor to the Mid-Fraser Canyon, touring on higher terraces or hiking in the mountains, would likely fail to recognize many cultural features hundreds of metres below. Deep in the canyon, scattered along the riverbanks, are hundreds of traditional fish-drying racks, still used today. By drawing attention to the landscape's vast fish resources, they serve as cultural iconography. In fact, the Fraser River is rich with a variety of fish (Figure 1.3), the most famous being salmon, which pass through the Mid-Fraser region during their annual spawning runs. Four species are known to have made their way up to this region in the past: spring or chinook salmon in the early warm season, sockeye in mid-to late summer, and coho in the early fall. Pink salmon rarely made it much past the mouth of the South Thompson. The river is also home to some large sturgeon and a variety of smaller fish. And although they lie outside of viewing range from the canyon, nearby lakes, rivers, and larger creeks are home to trout.

With a little luck, a hiker in the forests of the mountain slopes may see a number of familiar land mammals. Deer, scattered through much of the landscape, live at higher elevations in summer and lower elevations in the winter. Bighorn or mountain sheep and elk still exist in the area, but their numbers have dropped since ancient times (Figure 1.4). Moose were never common, though a rare one is seen on occasion. Mountain goats can still be found in the higher mountains west of the Fraser Canyon. The Mid-Fraser region continues to be home to black and brown bears, mountain lions, bobcats, and coyotes.



**FIGURE 1.3** Fish-drying racks  
along the Fraser River.

*Photograph by Ian Kuijt*



**FIGURE 1.4** Bighorn sheep feeding near Lytton.

*Photograph by Ian Kuijt*

Beavers inhabit forested areas, and a variety of smaller rodents and rabbits live in the area.

### **The St'át'imc Nation**

Although many people now live along the Mid-Fraser Canyon, the St'át'imc people have lived here the longest. (*St'át'imc* is a recent transcription synonymous with a number of other spellings, including *St'átl'imx*, *Stla-Sli-muk*, and *StlatlumH*.) The St'át'imc are Salish-speaking people (see Appendix) and are typically identified as Upper Lillooet in many books and academic articles. The term *Lillooet* is derived from *Lilwat*, a name used in the past to identify the Lower Lillooet people or those who lived to the south between Anderson and Harrison lakes. On a practical level, the St'át'imc Nation is subdivided into a number of bands that have their own chiefs, councillors, lands, resources, and

traditions. These bands include Cayoosh Creek (Selcw'el'was), Lillooet (T'itq'et), Shalalth (Tsal'alh), Bridge River (Xwisten), Fountain (Xa'xlip), and Pavilion (Tsk'way'laxw).

Drawing upon the perspective of archaeology and ethnography, we attempt to understand some of the ancient history of the St'át'imc people and their ancestors. The archaeological record, as material evidence, provides a window into the past. It is, however, only one of several sources of knowledge on the history of indigenous peoples. Other sources include traditional knowledge in the form of passed-down stories about actual and mythical figures and recorded history since the coming of Europeans. Ethnographers such as James Teit and writers such as Trefor Smith also recorded traditional knowledge.

Traditional stories tell of a time when powerful transformers walked the earth. According to one story, transformers were sent to Earth by Old Man to make it habitable. In this story, Coyote, Mink, and the Black Bears travelled up from Lower St'át'imc territory on Lower Lillooet Lakes into Upper St'át'imc lands. While doing so, they taught the people how to do essential tasks such as catching and processing fish. They established peaceful relations between the Lower and Upper St'át'imc people. In another story, Old Man visited Earth to finish the work of the transformers. He turned bad people into birds, rocks, and animals and provided the others with places to live. Still other stories describe the development of traditional villages and activities. In the story of Nkolstem, for example, an abandoned boy helped by the sun eventually gains the powers of a transformer, marries into a new village, and teaches the people how to make and use nets and traps.

Historical literature records the more recent history of the St'át'imc. The history of Native and European interaction in Canada is both tragic and transcendent. Newcomers brought early economic opportunity in the form of trade. This was not to last, however. Epidemics wiped out villages, and government restrictions – for example, those mandated by the Indian Act of 1876 – forced the St'át'imc people from the land and denied them access to traditional cultural practices and resources. Today, times are changing, but it is still an uphill battle for First Nations to redress old wounds, fight for control of traditional resources, and revitalize their rich culture.

Archaeology offers an important complementary perspective on ancient history and plays a role in today's cultural developments. At its most basic level, an archaeological perspective is based upon the recovery, description, and interpretation of material evidence such as stone tools, cooking features, and animal bones. Working closely with First Nations groups, archaeologists today provide insight into cultural developments from hundreds to thousands of years ago in the Mid-Fraser Canyon. The results of archaeological research have been useful

in providing hands-on educational opportunities for a range of people, from children to elders, from people living along the Fraser River to university students living in cities. This research also offers hard data on traditional settlement and subsistence, which can be used in the legal arena.

Archaeological research will be essential for overcoming some of the obvious and not so obvious effects of the Indian Act. This early piece of Canadian legislation and its subsequent amendments had a wide variety of deleterious effects on Aboriginal people. The act provided the government with the exclusive privilege to define who was an Indian, and although it permitted Indian people to hunt and fish in traditional ways, it required them to obtain permission to leave government-defined reserves. Further, Indians were denied Canadian citizenship and were prevented from governing themselves. Government agents controlled most of the actions and activities on reserves, including access to and use of government money. Finally, the act furthered a process known today as ethnocide by making many traditional activities such as the potlatch illegal.

The Indian Act also had more surreptitious effects, the most critical being the consequences of its power to define Indian bands as social and bureaucratic organizations and to determine who qualified as a Status Indian. By redefining Indianness, the government altered traditional social relationships that had been defined by membership in a wide range of organizations, including families, multifamily house groups, clans or clan-like groups, villages, and possibly even multivillage polities. An unanticipated effect of the act's definitions of *bands* was its impact on early anthropologists, who often borrowed the term to describe contemporary and past groups without questioning the term's validity or meaning. James Teit, for example, subdivided the St'át'imc into four bands, which he named Lillooet River, Pemberton, Lake, and Fraser River. In this book, we avoid these terms and seek evidence of traditional social organization that predates the Indian Act.

### **Archaeology of the Middle Fraser Canyon**

The archaeology of the Middle Fraser Canyon, which is scattered throughout the landscape, is one of the world's most valuable records of the human past. In some places, evidence consists of little more than a stone tool dug up in a flower bed; in other places, it is manifested in rock art, ancient paintings, or incised depictions on rock walls. Evidence of the past is also spectacularly visible in the form of ancient villages, as seen at the Bridge River or Keatley Creek sites.

The significance of the Mid-Fraser archaeological record is not measured merely in the frequencies of sites: many of these sites provide a spectacular record of human occupation. The preservation of organic materials such as bark baskets is outstanding, an extremely rare occurrence in most archaeological sites.



**FIGURE 1.5** Aerial view of a house-pit in the Stein River Valley.

*Photograph by Ian Kuijt*

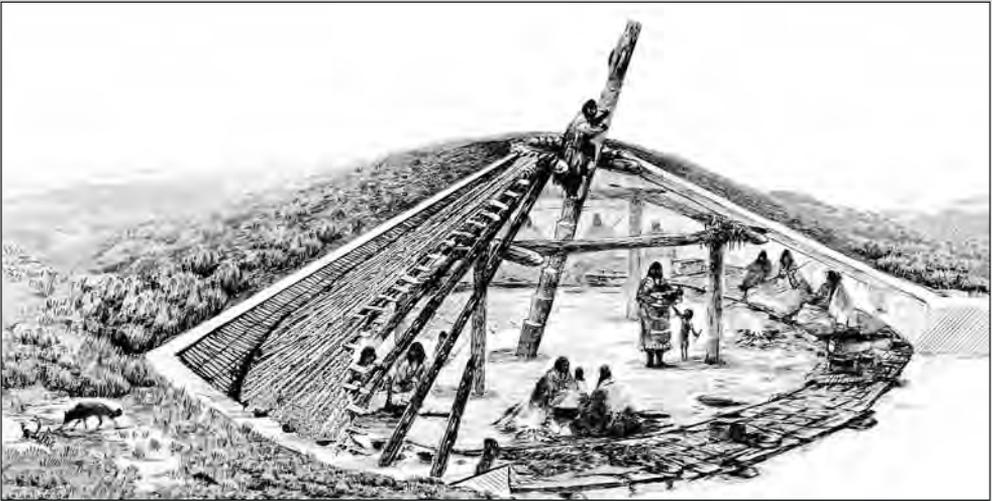
Normally it is in sites that are under water or located in permanently dry rock shelters or caves that materials are well-preserved. Dry caves and water-logged sites do not favour the growth of organisms associated with the decay of organic materials. It is not unusual to find bones, roof timbers, and even fragments of basketry in some dry deposits in Middle Fraser canyon villages.

The villages are composed of large numbers of pithouses: round-shaped residences sunk into the ground and between 5 and 20 metres in diameter (Figure 1.5). Houses generally contain the remains of living floors, which preserve evidence of activity areas associated with the day-to-day activities of household members. The floors are surrounded by rim middens (refuse heaps) composed of discarded food, broken tools, and old hearth and roof materials. These middens are invaluable time capsules that reflect the histories of the houses.

Housepit villages such as Keatley Creek and Bridge River developed over hundreds of years. The archaeological record of many housepits formed through regular reoccupations organized around cleaning and rebuilding activities. An early researcher in this area, Teit recorded that people constructed them by first digging a pit and then acquiring wood for upright posts and horizontal beams (Figure 1.6). The wood superstructure was then built by using strong upright posts to support the horizontal beams. Layers of timbers and matting covered the roof, and in some cases sediments sealed the construction, offering extra insulation (Figure 1.7). People dug pits indoors and lined them with birch bark to store food. They constructed hearths and made benches and storage platforms. Aside from regular cleaning, a family could live in such a house for 10 to 20 years without significant architectural modification.

At some point, however, wood would become dangerously old, and vermin could infest portions of the roof and floor. In these cases, good timbers would be salvaged and the old roof burned down. Families returning from late warm-season food-gathering trips would then rebuild roofs and floors before they re-inhabited the houses. Sometimes rebuilding involved removing all of the burned roof materials and scraping out the old floors. At other times, as with many Bridge River houses, the people would remove burned and collapsed roof materials but not the floors. Instead, they would import new sediments and dump them over the old floors, thereby preserving an even more detailed record of household life over multiple generations.

The materials found at Mid-Fraser villages are invaluable. But even more important is the potential of archaeology and ethnography to answer questions about past human cultures and the processes of culture change. Early archaeological researchers sought answers to historical questions such as when did First Nations people first come to the region? What kind of tools and features did they use, and when did the pithouse villages emerge? What relationships did



▲ FIGURE 1.6 Cross-section view of a housepit.

*Illustration by Eric S. Carlson*

▼ FIGURE 1.7 Historical photograph of a Plateau pithouse, ca. late nineteenth century.



these people have with their neighbours? Building upon this descriptive foundation, archaeologists during the 1980s and '90s began to address new questions, questions on the social and economic world of these villages. Why did the villages evolve? Could the Mid-Fraser villages be explained in relation to changes in ancient environments? Alternatively, was the development of the large villages and their large houses the work of social changes, for instance, the result of actions by emerging leaders and their followers? Archaeologists working in the region continue to explore these questions and many more specific ones. Do the Mid-Fraser villages reflect the emergence of larger sociopolitical units such as chiefdoms? Did shamans live in the villages and, if so, what was their role? Were the early villages organized around clan-like social groups?

### **Creating an Archaeological History of the Mid-Fraser**

This book offers a long-term history of continuity and cultural change in the Mid-Fraser Canyon, a voyage into the past via a crude time machine. We recognize that although our primary focus is the archaeological record, the indigenous peoples of the region did not exist in isolation. Developments in the larger region sometimes had profound effects on the Mid-Fraser cultures. We therefore provide significant archaeological background on regional developments for the period before the emergence of the great Mid-Fraser villages some 2,000 years ago. But before we travel to the ancient past, we must develop some appreciation for how the past is reconstructed using archaeological information. How is archaeological research undertaken, and how are different terms used?

### *Archaeological Basics*

Archaeological research has many goals. One is to understand the past in the sense that archaeological studies can help bring to life images, stories, and objects of ancient cultures. Archaeologists can describe these cultures in a myriad of ways, ranging from simple inventories of artifacts to complex reconstructions of settlement and subsistence, social organization, and even elements of belief systems. Once archaeologists place these cultures in time using radiocarbon dating, they can construct their cultural history. Cultural histories provide basic information, which leads to explanatory research. Since the 1960s, archaeologists have been engaged in understanding the reasons that various cultural forms developed, persisted, and sometimes failed or disappeared. This type of research requires extensive collaboration with other scientists such as paleoecologists, who reconstruct ancient environments. Explanations for change range from those focused on external factors, such as environmental conditions, to internal factors, such as human technological developments. Culture change over the long term requires an understanding of both.



**FIGURE 1.8** A cache pit feature from 1,250 years ago. This feature was partially excavated in Housepit 16 at the Bridge River site in 2009.

*Photograph by Anna M. Prentiss*

Reconstructing past cultures from material remains begins with artifacts, portable items made by people. Artifact function tells us about activities; their shape, style, and design can provide insights into past social organization and identity. Artifacts in the Mid-Fraser Canyon range from stone tools and debris from their manufacture to fragments of birch bark baskets. Artifacts differ from ecofacts, natural items such as animal bones and plant remains that are recovered from archaeological sites. Ecofacts tell us about subsistence, technologies (roof beams, for example), and past environments. Features are nonportable items made by people. Hearths and cache pits (Figure 1.8) are features, as are housepits and rock art. Features tell us about shelter and the built environment, about cooking techniques, and about any intangible elements of culture that may be embodied in artistic images painted on or pecked from stone walls. Archaeological sites are made up of spatially clustered sets of artifacts or features. Sites can range in scale and complexity from a small cluster of stone artifacts, perhaps the result of a brief episode involving stone tool manufacturing, to an immense housepit village such as Keatley Creek, which has more than 115 houses and nearly endless artifacts and smaller features.



▲ **FIGURE 1.9** Graduate student Lisa Smith conducting excavations in Housepit 20 at the Bridge River site in 2009. Notice the large cache pit feature to her right.

*Photograph by Anna M. Prentiss*

▶ **FIGURE 1.10** Students Cynthia Kazanis and Duggan Backhouse-Prentiss screen for artifacts and animal bones at the Bridge River site in 2009.

*Photograph by Anna M. Prentiss*

When archaeologists excavate an archaeological site, they destroy the spatial context of the archaeological materials. It is therefore critical that they record the site in significant detail so they can reconstruct it in three dimensions back in the laboratory. Archaeologists therefore excavate sites slowly (Figure 1.9). An old archaeology professor once remarked, “Archaeology is not a spectator sport.” Archaeologists remove sediments in each layer carefully to expose cultural materials. They sieve sediment to collect artifacts and bones (Figure 1.10) or save it for further laboratory analysis. Although slow and methodical, the long-term results of this painstaking work can be amazing. Over weeks, months and, in some cases, years, archaeologists map artifacts and features as they are exposed. They collect artifacts and sample features for further laboratory studies.

In general, systematic documentation generates two types of spatial recordings, one horizontal and one vertical. Plan view maps show horizontal spatial



relationships between artifacts and features. A horizontal plan map of a housepit floor, for example, illustrates several activity areas from above and highlights clusters of artifacts associated with a hearth feature and food storage pits. The second kind of map is known as a vertical profile. Much like a cut birthday cake, this view of archaeological deposits reveals the layers excavated in an archaeological site. Vertical profiles of the Mid-Fraser villages can be complex. A single profile, for example, may illustrate dozens of superimposed layers, including a series of housepit floors and a complex set of roof and rim midden layers (see Figures 4.8 and 7.2 for examples).

### *Dating and Cultural Chronologies*

One of the first questions people ask when they visit archaeological sites is, “How old is it?” Archaeologists answer this question using a variety of creative

methods. A quick and easy approach is to compare artifacts of known ages. For example, if a specific type of shaped projectile point, dated to 3,000 years ago at one village, is found at a second village, then it is likely that the second projectile point also dates to 3,000 years ago. However, the occupants of the second village might have scavenged the artifact from an older site. To get around problems associated with the reuse of artifacts, archaeologists examine stratigraphy (or layering) in sites to determine which layers are shallower (and presumably younger) and which are deeper (and likely older).

Neither of these techniques, however, provides a precise estimate of age. To accomplish this, Mid-Fraser archaeologists rely on radiocarbon dating. Radiocarbon (or carbon-14) dating is predicated on the knowledge that unstable radioactive isotopes such as carbon-14, which are found in all living things, will break down at a known rate when an organism dies. In the case of carbon-14, it takes about 5,730 years for half of the carbon isotope to disappear (known as a half-life) and another 5,730 years for the next half to go, and so on. Scientists can use charcoal or bone to measure how much carbon-14 remains and calculate the age when the creature or plant died. Unfortunately, the starting amount of carbon-14 varies, depending on how much carbon-14 is in the environment during the life span of the organism. As a result, there can be a mismatch between the radiocarbon date and the actual calendar year of the organism's death. Scientists can use a mathematical procedure that compares the results of radiocarbon testing to tree-ring chronologies to arrive at an adjusted, calibrated calendar date. We rely on the latter method throughout this book.

Once they have analyzed all artifacts, ecofacts, and features in the laboratory, archaeologists can start to reconstruct archaeological chronologies. When a general cultural pattern is recognized to persist for a significant period of time, archaeologists define it as a tradition. They have identified two traditions on the Canadian Plateau: the Nesikep and Plateau Pithouse traditions. Archaeologists also identify horizons. A horizon consists of a geographical distribution of similar cultural materials for a particular area and for a much shorter period of time than a tradition. For example, the Plateau Pithouse tradition is subdivided into three horizons: the Shuswap, Plateau, and Kamloops. Traditions may also be subdivided on a more local level into phases. The late cultural chronology of the Mid-Fraser Canyon, for example, was originally divided into the Kettlebrook, Lillooet, and Fountain phases.

Interpreting the nature of archaeological cultures can be challenging. Generally speaking, archaeological cultures are based on distinctive artifacts and features that reflect a common cultural heritage. This does not necessarily mean that an archaeological culture is the same thing as a linguistic or socio-ethnic group: people who spoke different languages often used the same items.

Likewise, the Shuswap horizon does not refer to the Shuswap (or Secwepemc) people, though it is entirely likely that Secwepemc ancestors did participate in cultural activities that led to the formation of an archaeological record that might be lumped into the Shuswap horizon. But it is equally possible that Lillooet and Thompson ancestors also played a role in the Shuswap horizon. The inhabitants of the Mid-Fraser villages during the last 2,000 years were likely ancestral St'át'imc, though individuals and groups from other areas might have contributed as well. Continuity and consistency in artifact styles and technologies, settlement patterns, and the remembrances of knowledgeable elders support this argument.

### *Archaeological Analysis: Reconstructing Ancient Cultures*

Archaeological research is a complex collaborative process. Gone are the days when archaeologists excavated a site and merely collected and photographed the best tools and art forms. Today, archaeologists collect an enormous range of data that require an almost endless array of analytical specialists. The ultimate goal of modern archaeological work is to develop a detailed understanding of the organization of ancient communities. But to get there we must first figure out the site, as one archaeologist put it. This means sorting out the myriad natural and cultural processes that affected the distribution of materials found in any archaeological site.

People often ask, how do archaeologists know where to dig? Archaeologists use a range of approaches – from probabilistic sampling (driven by statistics) to simple judgmental approaches (“this looks like a likely spot”) – to define excavation areas. Archaeologists can now employ sophisticated research methods that allow them to look below the ground surface (Box 1.1). Termed geophysical research, these methods provide a rough method for identifying the location of larger features but not individual objects. These methods offer new ways to learn about what is below the surface and to target specific areas for excavation. Excavations at the Bridge River village, for example, have been guided by the use of techniques such as magnetometry, electrical conductivity, and ground-penetrating radar, all designed to provide insight into the distributions of buried cultural features such as floors, hearths, and storage pits without having to dig anywhere (see Figure 4.12 in Chapter 4). Once geophysical signatures have been defined, excavation units can be more carefully situated to excavate areas thought to reflect particular activities such as cooking, food storage, or tool manufacture.

The archaeological record of housepits is complicated. Archaeologists must sort out how stratigraphy, the layers of sediments in an archaeological site, were formed. For example, archaeologists commonly expose what they interpret to

be housepit floors. These floors typically are made of clay-rich sediments that contain artifacts, animal bones, and features such as hearths, post-holes (places where house posts were sunk), and cache pits (storage features). The investigators then face a number of questions. What are the floor sediments, and where did they come from? How did they come to be distributed on the house floor? Is there evidence for particular activities embedded within the sediments themselves? To answer these questions, we rely on careful studies of sediment contents and structure or fabric. The best researchers are those with geological and archaeological training, those who can study microscopic layers through micromorphology. Micromorphological analysis requires collecting intact blocks of sediment, impregnating them with resin, sectioning the blocks into thin layers invisible to the human eye, and carefully inspecting the layers under a high-powered microscope.

The collection of archaeological sediments enhances our understanding of other aspects of village life. Soil chemists look for evidence of cultural activities that involved food processing by measuring variations in chemical characteristics (calcium and organic phosphorus, for example). Soil chemists can also use a technique known as flotation to sort sediments and find small botanical remains. They mix sediments with water to separate light botanical materials from heavy soils. The botanical remains are then identified by a paleoethnobotanist, who

## BOX 1.1 ARCHAEOLOGICAL SPECIALTIES

What are some of the different subfields of archaeology? The field of archaeology includes many areas of specialization, and each area has its own unique approach to data collection and analysis. The following are relevant to this book.

*Archaeological geophysics* is the study of archaeological sites and sediments using techniques of applied geophysics. Archaeogeophysicists use a variety of techniques to image buried materials in archaeological sites before excavation. Magnetometry (or, more technically, magnetic susceptibility) allows the investigator to find anomalies or interruptions in the earth's magnetic sphere. These anomalies are normally magnetized sediments that resulted from high temperatures, for instance, from

hearths, burning roofs, or roasting ovens.

Electrical conductivity and resistivity studies rely on instruments that measure interruptions to electrical currents passed through sediments on archaeological sites. These techniques are useful for finding buried house foundations, floors and, on occasion, graves. Ground-penetrating radar allows the researcher to create images or profiles of sedimentary cross-sections similar to those created by archaeologists who map layers of sediment in the wall of an excavation unit.

*Geoarchaeology* is the study of the formation of sediments in archaeological sites. Geoarchaeologists collect data on the form, structure, composition, and chemical characteristics of sediments to figure out the natural and

can provide insights into the use of plants for food, cooking, bedding, and architecture in ancient housepits (see Box 1.1).

A wide range of animal bones are recovered from excavated sediments during archaeological research projects. Zooarchaeologists (see Box 1.1) study these remains to identify species and anatomical parts. In addition, they examine each bone for marks that reveal something about how the animal died, whether it was butchered or cooked by people, and how it came to be deposited in the archaeological record. Archaeological chemists may also measure variation in bone chemistry to determine what the animal was eating. Zooarchaeologists provide important information on ancient diets and, along with paleoethnobotanists, insight into the ecological contexts of housepit occupations.

Stone tools and chipping debris, or debitage, are probably the most common items derived from housepit excavations. Lithic technologists study how ancient stone artifacts were made and used. These specialists collect information on the techniques of tool manufacture. They may, for example, identify the stages through which an ancient knapper (stoneworker) designed and crafted a tool. The analyst then looks at the edges of a tool under a microscope to define patterns of use-wear – scratches, abrasions, and polishes – that reflect how a tool was used. Lithic technologists not only want to understand tool technology and use patterns, they also seek to explain what archaeologists call the organization

cultural processes that affected their development. One particularly advanced approach to geoarchaeology is the study of sediment micro-morphology. Investigators collect intact blocks of sediment (for example, from an excavation unit wall), impregnate it with resin, and use a thin, polished section to look at the microscopic structure or fabric of the sediment. When applied to Mid-Fraser housepits, this method allows investigators to come to conclusions about how floors or rim middens were created or came into being.

*Paleoethnobotany* is the study of plant remains from archaeological sites. These items are normally recovered from sediment samples, but they can also include much bigger elements such as house posts or roof beams.

Paleoethnobotanists analyze data sets collected from diverse sources: macrobotanical items, burned seeds, plant pieces, pollen, and even phytoliths or silica “skeletons” from plant cells. These researchers reconstruct elements of past foodways, technologies, and environments.

*Zooarchaeology* is the study of animal remains from archaeological contexts. Zooarchaeologists analyze animal bones, shell, hair, and other remains of past animal life. Complementing the work of paleoethnobotanists, zooarchaeologists reconstruct how people acquired, processed, and consumed animal foods. They also use animal remains to enhance our understanding of past ecosystems.

of lithic technology, or the underlying cultural and economic logic behind tool production and use. Did the ancient ones have particular tools designed for specific functions? Did they set aside particular raw materials for particular tool types? Were tools made from rare and coveted materials? Is there evidence for trade in tools or raw materials between villages?

Artifacts made from soft organic materials are also recovered from Mid-Fraser archaeological sites, but they are less common than stone artifacts. Production of artifacts from wood, hide, feather, and plant fibres was probably common in the ancient past. These materials were essential for the creation of such things as nets, clothing, furniture, decorations, baskets, trays, and utensils. Yet they are not common in the archaeological record because they decompose far more easily than substances such as stone and bone. They tend to be found in places where sediments are dry and chemically neutral or nonacidic. When found, such items provide priceless insight into facets of ancient cultures less easily reconstructed than from stone and bone.

In today's scientific world, our understanding of the past is advanced daily. Geneticists, for example, are working with archaeologists to extract genetic material from animal bones and, potentially, soil. This research is in the earliest stages but will offer profound insight into patterns of human and animal migration and evolution.

### *Archaeological Inference: What Was It Like in the Past?*

Because we cannot physically go back in time and observe the actions of ancient peoples, we must draw inferences from materials excavated in archaeological sites. Archaeological inferences can be a tricky business. Archaeologists must first work from what we call frames of reference. How do we recognize an activity area associated with normal day-to-day family food preparation and tool manufacture on a housepit floor? How do we know whether there is evidence of status distinctions among families or houses? To answer these questions, we seek to understand the links between human behaviour and its archaeological residue. Drawing upon other work, in this book we explore a number of indicators of behaviours, ranging from tool manufacture to food preparation to social relations. To do this, we examine ethnographic accounts of human practice, such as construction of housepits, to develop their likely archaeological hallmarks. If this information is not available, we rely on experimental archaeological studies designed to fill in gaps in our knowledge. The trick is to maintain an open mind so we can recognize when patterns from the past differ from predictions drawn from ethnographies. Cultures of the ancient past were not always organized quite like those of recent times.

Because similar archaeological signatures can develop from more than one process, we must be careful to consider a wide range of alternative explanations for patterns in the archaeological record. This need for care is nowhere more evident than in the study of animal bones. Archaeologists, for example, debate how dogs were used in Mid-Fraser villages. During excavations at Keatley Creek village, Brian Hayden, an archaeologist from Simon Fraser University, exposed a set of dog bones in a deep cache pit. All told, the bones included the remains of at least one dog that had been killed by a blow to the back of the head. Canine tooth marks on many of the bones indicated that the dog had then been ravaged by other dogs. Archaeologists offer two interpretations. Some argue that the dog had been killed as part of a ritual sacrifice and left to decompose outside the housepit. The bones were then collected and placed in the cache pit. Others argue that the villagers had dealt with a problem dog by killing it and disposing of its body in the pit. To date, the debate has not been settled, though the latter hypothesis carries fewer assumptions. Resolution of such debates requires careful analysis of animal bones to define the post-mortem history of individual animals. It leads archaeologists to collect data on bone breakage, gnawing from other animals, and butchery and cooking marks.

Another important discussion centres on social status distinctions in the past and how they are reflected in artifact distributions on housepit floors. Archaeologists generally assume that status differences among family groups are reflected in some people having more and others having less. For instance, some researchers argue that variations in the numbers of ornaments such as beads, high-cost tools such as ground-stone bowls, rare raw materials such as obsidian or nephrite jade, or the use of special foods such as dog, mountain goat, or elk reflect status differences within communities. But it is not always clear whether some are clustered because of status, the functional use of a given area, or tool and food refuse disposal patterns. On the floor of Housepit 7 at Keatley Creek, for example, high counts of deer bones tend to be associated with relatively low numbers of salmon bones and vice versa. Does this difference mark social distinctions (for example, wealthy folks ate deer and poorer folks ate fish), or does it reflect variability in consumption or discard contexts (for example, dried salmon was eaten in most areas but deer only in certain spots)?

The lesson learned from these discussions is that archaeologists must develop arguments and make conclusions based on many independent sources of information. Explaining the development of animal bone assemblages requires the careful assessment of the formation processes associated with each bone. Likewise, at the more grand scale of sociopolitical inference, multiple categories of artifacts, animal bones, and plant remains must be examined in the hope that all, or at

least most, will point to a single coherent conclusion. Otherwise, we must think further about the nature of these patterns.

Finally, it is important to recognize that there is substantial cultural continuity between the ancient past and the present in the Mid-Fraser area. The cultural memory of St'át'imc elders reaches back deep into time, providing an incredibly valuable and complementary resource for interpreting the archaeological record. Yet we must also watch out for what archaeologist Martin Wobst (1978) calls the tyranny of the ethnographic record. Cultures change over time, and there might have been cultural traditions and structures that differ from the contemporary ethnographic record.

Archaeologists often use an interpretive strategy known as the direct historical approach to understanding the past. Proponents of this approach assume that knowledge of recent cultural patterns can be used to interpret older materials. We can rely on this approach to a degree in the Mid-Fraser context. We must beware, however, of making simplistic analogies between the recent historical period and the more ancient past. There have been significant opportunities for change, and much traditional knowledge has been lost with the passing of earlier generations, particularly when European diseases affected Mid-Fraser peoples so badly.

The archaeological record of the Mid-Fraser Canyon demonstrates that communities were considerably larger in the ancient past. The arrangement of houses in some communities might have been substantially different from more recent arrangements. Their arrangement may imply variation in social groups, ritual practices, and sociopolitical units unknown to 20th-century ethnographers and their informants. These patterns call for alternative interpretations and remain a fundamental challenge for archaeologists working in the region. By acknowledging that many cultural systems might have been even more complex in the past, and by recognizing the unique histories of these people, we affirm our opposition to theoretically and ethically bankrupt concepts of primitivism and progress. We join many of today's archaeologists in rejecting concepts of cultural evolution as a simple march of progress.

### *Visions of the Past: Art and Prose*

There are many ways to convey interpretations of the past. The standard approach taken by professional archaeologists is through technical writing in excavation and survey reports and in scholarly journals and books. Fewer archaeologists have tried to synthesize their research into works for a more general audience. Fewer yet have tried to integrate prose and artistic images. Our hope is that this book transports readers into the past through the use of artistic reconstructions and two forms of prose: discussions of archaeological research and fictional accounts of life in the Mid-Fraser villages.

What did people, villages, and the insides of the pithouses look like? With such a rich archaeological and oral history record as exists today, we can visualize how past peoples gathered together, ate, shared, fought, and worked in different places over time. Art is an effective and powerful means of bringing the past to life, but doing so is surprisingly complicated and challenging. The most challenging issue facing would-be illustrators is identifying unconscious biases about what the past should look like. Our understanding of the past is by necessity coloured in some measure by contemporary ideas about both the past and the present and the relationship between the two. For example, in many artistic reconstructions of the ancient past, women are rarely seen, and when they are present, they are generally depicted in passive roles in the background of the main action.

As we developed the drawings for this book, we sought to overcome as many biases as possible while developing archaeologically informed but ethnographically sensitive views of the past. To accomplish this, we engaged artist Eric Carlson to develop the drawings in collaboration with the St'át'imc people. Carlson travelled to the Mid-Fraser region during fishing season in August 2005. He met with elders and other knowledgeable persons such as Gerald "Bobo" Michel (Figure 1.11) and was taken to a number of critical cultural sites, including the Six Mile Rapids' fishing rocks and ancient villages such as Keatley Creek and Bridge River. He photographed and sketched these places and, interacting with his tour guides and elders, began to develop ideas for the illustrations.

Following his visit, Carlson came to us for our input, and he began to create sketches. Once the first round of drawings was produced, we sent them back to participants in the Mid-Fraser communities for their comments. This process was repeated until everyone was satisfied with the depictions. The illustrations provide a rich addition to the text; they convey images of a past long gone yet in many ways still alive in the knowledge, words, and actions of the St'át'imc people. We do recognize, however, that the illustrations are contemporary creations that will be subject to critique and modification as new information and interpretations come to light.

We also include fictional (yet archaeologically accurate) snapshots of life in the Mid-Fraser Canyon and elsewhere to complement Carlson's images. These vignettes draw on the ethnographic record and our own time spent with St'át'imc people. Like the drawings, they are modern depictions of the past and no doubt reflect the assumptions of their creators. They too will inevitably take on new meanings, depending on the perspective of the viewers. We believe, however, that the vignettes create a sense of immediacy with the past. Some may criticize the vignettes and drawings for failing to reflect ancient Aboriginal mindsets or logic. Our response is that this is an impossible task because we are not those



**FIGURE 1.11** Gerald “Bobo” Michel demonstrates traditional salmon processing for photographer Eric Carlson.

people. We instead seek to set a stage upon which the reader's own imagination can operate. We also seek to convey a sense of some of the realities that people likely faced in the past. Sometimes food was abundant and the weather was good; at other times, food sources failed, and the people faced tough choices.

### *Debating Archaeology and the Goals of This Book*

This is a book about the long-term history of the indigenous peoples of the Middle Fraser Canyon and their immediate environs, as reconstructed primarily from the archaeological record. The Mid-Fraser peoples did not live in isolation. Therefore, to effectively reconstruct their ancient history, we must examine the surrounding areas, particularly elsewhere on the Plateau and the Northwest Coast. We must also address some of the biggest topics of debate in the archaeological community. How and why does culture change? What caused ancient population movements? Why did permanent villages develop? What were the underlying causes of social inequality?

Archaeologists of the Pacific Northwest have paid significant attention to questions about village development and the emergence of ranked societies, as well as the broader problem of general culture change and human migrations. Because archaeologists bring different theoretical perspectives to the archaeological record, interpretations can vary, sometimes significantly, and lead to disagreement and debate. Constructive debate and discussion are good because they drive science forward. Archaeology is no exception to this rule. Debates allow us to resolve differing opinions, or at least draw attention to a range of possible points of view. Throughout this book, we outline what we consider to be the facts of archaeological research and then review current debates. Obviously, we have our own perspectives on the record and, consequently, on the history of ancient Mid-Fraser cultures. Although we present this book as a series of arguments, ones that we think are convincing (see Box 1.2), we recognize that some positions are likely to change as more data become available. We try to identify for the reader when we feel there is strong evidence for our interpretations; in other cases, we draw attention to where more work is needed.

Our primary goal in writing this book is to convey the rich archaeological heritage of the people of the Middle Fraser Canyon, the St'át'imc. Although we rely substantially on archaeological knowledge, we also illustrate how that knowledge is informed by our understanding of traditional St'át'imc culture. For, indeed, the past has not been forgotten in the Mid-Fraser Canyon. The people have seen much change. They live in yet another phase of what we will demonstrate is a long and distinctive history.

## BOX 1.2 CONCEPTUALIZING THE PAST: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Throughout this book, we offer arguments about the activities of ancient human groups and the processes of long-term cultural change and stability. At times, anthropological archaeologists use a bewildering array of theoretical approaches in their research. Some view culture as an adaptive system that evolves from one state to another, much like stages of succession in ecosystems. From this perspective, the shift from a hunting and gathering to an agricultural system is similar to the transformation of an open pine forest to a dense hardwoods ecosystem in the sense that outside forces (such as climate change) precipitate changes to the ecosystem. For cultural contexts, the transformation may mean shifts in human birth and death rates, changes in food production systems, and even alterations in human belief systems and ritual practices. This approach has been critiqued for its lack of interest in the activities of individual persons. Other researchers see culture as simply the byproduct of a seemingly endless stream of interpersonal actions and negotiations. People using this approach are less interested in the underlying economics of human organization and more interested in the thoughts of individual cultural agents. A different group of scholars known as evolutionary archaeologists see culture as an inheritance system much

like that of biology. Whereas genetic codes are inherited in biology, in the cultural context, it is cultural information that is inherited and subsequently manifested as variability in human behaviour.

The framework employed in this book relies on the assumption that individual humans and human groups play an active role in the creation and transmission of cultural concepts and meaning. We also recognize, however, that the cultural process is complicated and that persistent patterns of human behaviour can have social and ecological consequences. At best, the application of efficient economic strategies can lead to success as measured in the continuation of that associated lifeway or growth in the human population. At worst, some strategies lead down blind alleys to historical dead ends and, unfortunately, we cannot always know whether we are in one of those places. Consequently, we expect the long-term history of Pacific Northwest cultures to reflect significant variation in cultural practices as expressed in both short-lived and longer-term archaeological signatures. Human history in every part of the world has been dynamic, filled with starts and stops, and there is no reason that the cultures of the greater Pacific Northwest were not characterized by this same pattern.

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