

Lasqueti Through Archaeology Eyes: The Island in the Middle of Everywhere

It used to be that when I gave talks to Lasquetians about First Nations history on the island, people would invariably say, “Well, people didn’t live here full time. They only came here seasonally to gather clams”. I rarely hear that nowadays, as people have opened their eyes to the many large, ancient settlements on Lasqueti and the potential in the past – just like today – to live here year round. The island offers sheltered bays, drinking water, and rich and varied terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems that supplied people with abundant food and non-food resources.

Part of our understanding of Lasqueti’s past involves recognizing how these ancient settlements fit within the pre-colonial social, economic, and cultural spheres of the Salish Sea and beyond. Today, Lasqueti’s position in the middle of the Gulf of Georgia, relatively far from both Victoria and Vancouver, makes us think that we’re living “in the middle of nowhere”. This is, of course, a Euro-centric view of the social-economic goings on in the Salish Sea. When access through the Strait was via canoe, Lasqueti would have been the obvious stopping place. This would have situated Indigenous Lasquetians *at the center* of regional communication and trade routes.

In the past, when Lasqueti and the neighbouring islands were densely populated, Lasqueti was integrated into many overlapping social spheres. Historic evidence tells us that the people living in the Salish Sea were connected through a common language, elaborate exchange systems, and marriage networks. People from eastern Vancouver Island, for instance, would regularly travel to the Fraser Canyon to harvest salmon in the territories of their Fraser River kin. Archaeologically we see these linkages in shared burial customs, region-wide artifact styles, and in traded items (e.g., camas from Vancouver Island found in an archaeological site in the Harrison watershed). In the past, there were a myriad of social connections that both maintained the Salish Sea as cohesive social-cultural region and linked the Salish Sea to other neighbouring cultural groups.

The very fact that Lasqueti has the remains of so many large, archaeological sites is a reflection of Lasqueti’s place among these ancient social connections. Although now largely destroyed by recent land use activities, the archaeological record tells us that False Bay/China Cloud Bay, Conn Bay, Maple Bay, Spring Bay, and Marshall’s Beach/Lennie Lagoon all supported enormous permanent settlements in the past. Without detailed archaeological investigations we can’t know the size of these settlements, but I am sure each had many houses, of at least 10 – 20 people per house. Do the math! Smaller settlements, with four or five small houses are also evident at places like Rouse Bay, Boat Cove, and Tucker Bay. We don’t yet understand how these smaller communities integrated with those living in the larger settlements, but they were somehow connected to these complex social nets.

The number and extent of “lookout sites” is another indication of the connections of Indigenous Lasquetians to larger, regional social spheres. In various places on the island we find thin, but widespread shell midden sites located in hard to access

spots well above the ocean. The sites we know about are located so that they have commanding views of the Strait, especially looking northward beyond the Salish Sea. We have found such sites on the Finnertys, in Conn Bay, China Cloud Bay (including way above the bay), and Tucker Bay. I suspect there are one or two of these lookout sites associated with every large settlement on the island. Living in the center of the Salish Sea, it makes sense that the permanent residents had a well-worked out system to notify islanders when friends and foes approached. I am hoping to get funds in the near future to obtain radiocarbon dates from some of these sites.

Finally, the artifact collections from Lasqueti demonstrate that it was indeed “in the middle of everywhere”. We have currently only a small collection of seven obsidian (volcanic glass) artifacts from Lasqueti. With the permission of the keepers of these artifacts, I submitted them to a laboratory to determine from what volcanic source the obsidian originates. Half of the small collection comes from Oregon or from Squamish – which is what we expect based on known obsidian trade networks in the Salish Sea. However, what is very odd about our small collection is that the other half are from volcanic sources the laboratory couldn’t identify. It is highly unusual today to have *any* unknown sources, since the laboratories have huge reference collections. This suggests that the Indigenous Lasquetians, unlike other communities, were so well connected to regional trade networks that they were receiving obsidian from the main obsidian sources as well as from small obscure sources that haven’t yet been identified by the laboratories.

So, on these dark days when you delight in being “away from it all”, imagine instead that you’re living in a place that was, not very long ago “in the middle of everything”. We are lucky beyond words to live in such a beautiful place that holds the record of a deep, rich history – a history that is nested within the larger Coast Salish region. It is, indeed, a history worth preserving for generations to come.