Royal BC Museum
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Archaeology in British Columbia

For most of the time that people have lived in what is now British Columbia, histories were shared through oral traditions rather than written records. Archaeological sites, together with the stories, knowledge and teachings passed down through oral traditions, help us learn about Indigenous peoples' rich and enduring connection to these lands for more than 12,000 years.

First Peoples have lived in what is now known as British Columbia since time immemorial. While Indigenous communities share deep connections to their lands and histories, cultures and lifeways have evolved over time and varied across regions. People moved, traded, intermarried, formed alliances, and exchanged knowledge with neighbouring nations. At times, relationships were cooperative and mutually beneficial while at other times, conflicts occurred. Environmental changes, including shifting sea levels and changing resource availability, as well as innovation, adaptation and expanding trade networks, influenced how communities lived and interacted, leading to the development of diverse cultural practices and technologies.

First Nations peoples have always learned from and adapted to the lands and waters around them. Using materials such as plants, bone, antler, wood and stone, they created tools and objects for everyday life, including fishing, hunting, food preparation, building homes and canoes, and making clothing and art. Many items also held cultural and spiritual importance. Over time, unique artistic traditions developed in different regions, reflecting the knowledge, creativity and identities of diverse First Nations communities.

Archaeologists study clues from the past, including food remains, tools, and features such as house pits and longhouses. Many of these clues are buried underground, while others, such as cultural depressions, can still be seen on the landscape today.

Abalone Pendant – Arch 22

This pendant is made out of abalone, a marine snail with many species worldwide. The local species found in British Columbia waters is called the northern abalone or pinto abalone (*Haliotis kamtschatkana*). The inside of an abalone's shell has an optical phenomenon called iridescence, also found in certain gemstones. In Coast Salish

archaeology, abalone shells demonstrate long-standing traditions of adornment, trade and cultural expression.

Faunal Deer Leg Bone – Arch 28

The hard, straight bones of a mammal's lower legs make excellent barbs and points for spears, arrows and harpoons. Archaeologists think that bones like these were likely used for preparing and working plant materials to make baskets, mats or clothing.

Chert Scraping Tool – Arch 32

Chert is a sedimentary rock that is often made through the remains of marine planktonic organisms. This type of rock is used often in prehistoric times for many stone tools. Scrapers or scraping tools are used to scrape material off, such as scraping connective tissue from hides or wood in woodworking.

Dacite Flake – Arch 34

In archaeology, a flake is a piece of rock that has been dislodged from a larger rock piece through the deliberate pressure. This could be done through hitting the flake material with other tools to cause flaking. Dacite is a volcanic rock that is made through the rapid cooling of lava.

Petrified Wood Scraper – Arch 35

Scrapers or scraping tools are used to scrape material off, such as scraping connective tissue from hides or wood in woodworking. Petrified wood is a kind of fossilized wood, where minerals slowly replace the wood tissues until there is no tissue left. What is left behind is a fossil in the shape of the original wood.

Fire-Altered Rock – Arch 51

Fire-altered rocks are commonly found at archaeological sites. They are rocks that have been used in or by a fire where the fire has changed the rock in some way, whether that be through changed colour, texture or shape through cracking or fractures.

Sea Lion Toe Bone – Arch 63

The lower leg and arm bones of many mammals make useful tools including hunting tools, needles, carving and art. The denser bone of marine mammals such as sea lions would add more durability.

Elk Tooth – Arch 96

This is an elk incisor tooth of unknown origin and species. Elk teeth throughout history have been used for adornment or as evidence of food consumption.

Seal Humerus

This bone is part of the upper part of a seal's forelimb (same as our bicep). The lower leg and arm bones of many mammals make useful tools. The denser bone of marine mammals such as sea lions would add more durability.

Chert Projectile Point

Chert is a sedimentary rock that is often made through the remains of marine planktonic organisms. This type of rock is used often in prehistoric times for many stone tools. A projectile point is a sharp object made to be attached to a weapon meant to be thrown. Most often these weapons are made of wood, which rarely survives the archaeological record. Examples include javelin, dart or arrows.

Ochre

Ochre is a natural pigment made from clay and ferric oxide. Ochre has been used by many cultures for a long time, dating back more than 300,000 years ago. It has been used in countless ways, but some common uses include paint for art or adornment and burial rituals.

Deer Antler Tool

Antler is a unique material that is extremely durable, made up of bone, cartilage and fibrous tissue. Antlers are extensions of an animal's skull of the Cervidae family. The unique material of antler makes it useful as a flaking tool.

Bone Hide Scraper

Scrapers or scraping tools are used to scrape material off surfaces such as connective tissue from hides or material from wood.

Bone Tube with Grooves

This bone is of unknown origin and species, most likely a deer's back metatarsal. The bone matrix (spongey middle) has been removed.

Hammerstone Replica

A hammerstone is a hard stone that is used to strike off flakes from another stone. This is a very old and universal tool that has been used all over the world throughout history.

Hand Axe Replica

One of the oldest tools in human history. It is a large stone that has a wider end for holding in hand, and a pointed end that is the cutting surface. They are cutting tools and would primarily be used in animal butchery.