

The First Visit by White Men

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Abstract: The following story about the first white men to be seen in Mainland Comox territory fits into the greater historical narrative of three Elizabethan coins being found on the coast of British Columbia.

Keywords: Mainland Comox, historical narrative, European exploration

1 Introduction

In the summer of 1973 Bill Charlie told two short narratives about the first time that white men were seen in the territory occupied by speakers of Mainland Comox. The narrative does not tell the nationality of the first white men, but it does give details of the interactions during the brief visit. The narrative contains some subordinate constructions of interest which might not have been easily elicited.

2 The visit

The first ship in Comox territory called in at Blubber Bay, which is on the northern tip of Texada Island. The men on the ship were all dressed in white. They could not easily speak with the people living at Blubber Bay but were able to communicate their needs. The visitors received venison and in return gave coins to the men. The men then gave the coins to the children of the village, who threw the coins into the water, presumably skipping them like stones. In December 2013, a shilling from the time of Queen Elizabeth I was found in the mudflats of the Gorge in Victoria. Earlier discoveries reported are of a 1571 sixpence dug up in Victoria in 1930 and a Tudor-era coin found on Quadra Island in 1994. Quadra Island and Blubber Bay were both in Comox territory. Comox territory before the mid to late 1800s is shown on the map at the end of this essay.

3 Persistence of memory

In 1976 Kenneth Whistler and I, two linguistics graduate students in Berkeley, were working late in the Survey of California and Other Indian Languages. The linguistics department was closed and the office lights in Dwinelle Hall were all out, except in the room where we were. Ken Hale of MIT was visiting at the time. He came in and told us that he was going to dinner and asked if we wanted to join him. Of course, we dropped what we were doing and showed him to the Melting Pot by North Gate just outside campus. We spent dinner over fondue, listening to Ken Hale tell us stories about his research in North America and Australia. One of the stories he told was about working on the Cape York Peninsula, where the people there have an oral tradition of the time when the sea level was so low that the Great Barrier Reef was above water. That could have been 8,000 years ago. Local memory along the Strait of Georgia has not been documented to go that far back, but local memory may well go back several centuries.

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D. K. E. Reisinger, Hannah Green, Laura Griffin, Marianne Huijsmans, Gloria Mellesmoen, and Bailey Trotter (eds.). Vancouver, BC: UBCWPL, 2021.

4 Bill Charlie's story (transcribed with the assistance of Mrs Mary George)

- (1) *hig.alh 'ewh k'we.neg.et.olh 'e kw qaymiwh kw mamalha 'e te tat.lawhnach*
 [hɛɣɬ ʔɬçʷ kʷɔnɪgɪtoʔ ʔə kʷ qaimiçʷ kʷ mamaʔa ʔə tə tatlaçʷnɬç]
 first.time that see.PASS.PAST OBL ART people ART whiteman ʔə ART Blubber Bay
 'The first time that the people saw white men (was at) Blubber Bay'
- (2) *hi 'ewh k'wen.anan.neg.et.olh*
 [hɛ ʔɬçʷ kʷɔnanɬnɪgɪtoʔ]
 thus that see.quality.PASS.PAST
 'This is how they looked'
- (3) *'iy xatl'.s kw mamalha kw qigath*
 [ʔɛi χaʎs kʷ mamaʔa kʷ qɛɣɬθ]
 and desire.their ART whiteman ART deer
 'And the white men wanted deer'
- (4) *'iy whe texw.nîg.et kwen.as tam kw xatl'.s*
 [ʔɛi çʷɔ tɔχʷnɛgɪt kʷɔnɬs tam kʷ χaʎs]
 and not know.STAT.PASS whether what ART desire.their
 'And the people wondered what they wanted'
- (5) *xwoxw.mot 'ey texw.no.m s qigath.s kw xatl'.s*
 [χʷoχʷmot ʔiɪ tɔχʷnom s qɛɣɬθs kʷ χaʎs]
 long-time.very and know.PASS that deer.it ART desire.their
 '(It took) a long time (before) they knew that they wanted deer'
- (6) *t'axam k'we qigath kw xatl'.s*
 [tɔχɬam kʷə qɛɣɬθ kʷ χaʎs]
 six reportedly deer ART desire.their
 'They wanted six deer'
- (7) *xwa'a.t.em 'e kw na'a hays qaymiwh ni'.olh 'e ta'an*
 [χʷaʔatəm ʔə kʷ naʔa hais qaimiçʷ nɛʔoʔ ʔə taʔan]
 ordered.PASS OBL ART uh great man there.PAST OBL there
 'The head of the people there said this'
- (8) *kw qem.ow.it haha.s na'a z'iy.'em 'e kw qigath*
 [kw qámowit hahas naʔa tʰɛiʔəm ʔə kʷ qɛɣɬθ]
 ART together.PAST.their go.their uh seek.TRANS OBL ART deer
 'to get together and go look for deer'
- (9) *k'we sem 'alhteg.am 'e kw mahaychen tintin qwel' hig.iw.t*
 [kʷə səm ʔaʔtɪɣɬam ʔə kʷ mahaiçɪn tintin qʷəlʔ hɛɣɛot]
 reportedly future inside.location OBL ART half hour come return.they
 '(and) come back inside half an hour'

- (10) *'opan k'we 'ey kw sa'a kw qay.t.et*
 [ʔopɒn kʷə ʔi kʷ saʔa kʷ qaitit]
 ten reportedly and ART two ART kill.PASS
 'Having killed twelve'
- (11) *hoy 'ey gayalhten kw na'a kiapten.s kw na'a tinpot.s mamalha*
 [hoi ʔiɪ gayɛtən kʷ naʔa kʷæptəns kʷ naʔa tinpots mamaʔɒ]
 finish and ask ART uh captain.of ART uh ship.of whiteman
 'Then the captain of the whiteman ship asked'
- (12) *kwen.as k'win.os xatl'.s*
 [kʷɒnɒs kʷɛnos ʔaʔs]
 whether how.much.money desire.their
 'How much money they wanted'
- (13) *whekwt gat texw.niwh kwen.as 'i'inat*
 [çʷɒkʷt gɒt tɒχʷnɛçʷ kʷɒnɒs ʔɛʔɛnɒt]
 nothing who know.STAT whether say.what
 'Nobody knew what they were saying'
- (14) *xana.t.em k'we 'e kw mamalha 'e kw na'a gold hiy kw silver*
 [χanatəm kʷə ʔə kʷ mamaʔɒ ʔə kʷ naʔa gold hɛi kʷ silver]
 give.PASS reportedly OBL ART whiteman OBL ART uh gold and ART silver
 'The whitemen gave them gold and silver (coins)'
- (15) *whekwt.olh 'e kw piypa tala 'e kwa'an kwes xwoxw.olh*
 [çʷɒkʷtoʔ ʔə kʷ pɛɪpɒ tala ʔə kwaʔan kʷɪs χʷoχʷoʔ]
 nothing.PAST OBL ART paper money OBL there ART.stative long-time.PAST
 'There were no paper dollars there long ago'
- (16) *xana.t.em kw chey.chuy'*
 [χanatəm kʷ çɪçuiʔ]
 give.PASS ART plural.child
 'They gave (the coins) to the children'
- (17) *wha' xwoxwas, 'ewk'w z'ap.'em kw cheychuy' 'e kw qa'ya*
 [çʷaʔ χʷoχʷɒs ʔuɒkʷ tʰapʔəm kʷ çɪçuiʔ ʔə kʷ qaʔyɛ]
 not long.time all throw.TRANS ART plural.child OBL ART water
 'It wasn't long (before) the children threw them all into the water'
- (18) *jiaqa ch'ia hi sz'ok'w 'e kw 'axtiys kw qaymiwh na'm.esh.as kw payp sents*
 [jʲæqæ çʲɛ hɛ stʰokʷ ʔə kʷ ʔaχtɛɪ.s kʷ qaɪmiçʷ naʰmɪʂɒs kʷ paɪp sɛnts]
 wish that today OBL ART same.their ART people throw.they ART five cents
 'I wish (if only!) people would do the same today, throw their five cent pieces'

5 Bill Charlie's second telling (transcribed with the assistance of Mrs Mary George)

- (19) *hig.alh 'ewh ho.s tes kw qaymiwh 'e te na'a tat.lawhnach*
 [hɛgɬ ʔəç^w hos tɬs kw qaimiç^w ʔə tə naʔa tatlaç^wnač̥]
 first.time that go.their close ART people OBL ART uh Blubber Bay
 'The first time that white people arrived at Blubber Bay'
- (20) *k'wen.ewh.as qwel' na'a lha.lhay.esh*
 [k^wʊnʊç^wɬs q^wɔlʔ naʔa ʔatayiš]
 see.they come uh IMPF.toward.shore
 'They saw it coming toward shore'
- (21) *ni'it k'we ga 'elh kwekwithayalh.as*
 [nɛʔɛt k^wə gɬ ʔəʔ k^wʊk^wθayɛɬɬs]
 say reportedly polite.particle kind.of small.island
 'They said it might be some kind of a small island'
- (22) *kwekwithayalh.as kwen.as tam*
 [k^wʊk^wθayɛɬɬs k^wʊnɬs tam]
 small.island maybe something
 'A small island or something (else)'
- (23) *hay hiya kw ni'i.t.em na'a schooner*
 [hai hɛyɬ k^w nɛʔɛtəm naʔa schooner]
 so it.was ART say.PASS uh schooner
 'It was called a schooner'
- (24) *qax.mot kw yawup.s*
 [qaxmot k^w yawups]
 many.very ART cloth.its
 'It had lots of sails'
- (25) *sey.say' kw nigaptey, kwum.iw tho*
 [siisɬiʔ k^w nɛgɬpti k^wumɛʊ θo]
 frightened ART women uphill.they go
 'The women were scared, went up (to the forest)'
- (26) *tho ga kw tem.tumesh hojo.thot*
 [θo gɬ k^w tɬmtumiš hoʝoθot]
 go polite.particle ART plural.man ready.reflexive
 'The men got ready'
- (27) *hojo.t.as lheq'w.s, 'ewk'w tam*
 [hoʝotɬs ʔɔq^ws, ʔuok^w tam]
 ready.they bow.their every thing
 'They readied their bows, everything'

- (28) *ch'etq.amin.s, 'ewk'w tam hojo.t.as*
 [çitqamɪns ʔuokʷ tam hoʃotʌs]
 cut.instrument.their every thing ready.they
 'Their knives, everything they readied'
- (29) *lheq'amin.s*
 [ʰlqamɪns]
 spear.their
 'Their spear(s)'
- (30) *qwel' lhayt 'ey k'we.newh.as heyt s wha'.s na'a kwekwithayalhas xexqem*
 [qʷɔlʔ ʰait ʔiɪ kʷonotʃʷʌs hiit s çʷaʔs naʔa kʷokʷθayɛʰʌs χʌχqɛm]
 come to.shore and see.they now that not.it uh small.island moving
 'It got to shore and they finally saw that it wasn't a little island moving'
- (31) *jiaqaʔ k'we qay.ew.miwk kw ni' na'a 'iyawulh mamalha*
 [jʲæqæʔ kʷə qayuwɪçʷ kʷ nɛʔ naʔa ʔɛyʌwotʰ mamʌʰʌ]
 unexpectedly reportedly people ART there uh aboard whiteman
 'The people there aboard were white men'
- (32) *higalh 'ewh k'we.newh.as kw mamalha*
 [hɛgʌʰ ʔʌçʷ kʷonotʃʷʌs kʷ mamʌʰʌ]
 first.time that see.they ART whiteman
 'The first time they saw white men'

6 The wider context of this story

On page 278 of his *The Secret Voyage of Sir Francis Drake*, Samuel Bawlf writes:

... some Indians came out to meet them in their canoes. They were members of the *Nuu-chah-nulth* tribe, whose territories extended from Cape Cook down the coast to the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Their oral history contains many vivid and detailed accounts of the visits of Captain Cook and the Spanish two centuries ago. However, one band who resided near Checleset Bay has a tradition that the first Europeans visited them many generations earlier.

As with all the tribes of the northwest coast, the *Nuu-chah-nulth* observe the elaborate traditions of the potlatch, or gift-giving feast. By custom, the first gift is presented to the most honored guest, usually a visiting chief. Yet the Checleset people have a different custom than other *Nuu-chah-nulth* bands: They carry the first gift down to the sea and dedicate it to the “great chief” of the bearded men who visited them in his “floating house” long before Cook and the Spanish came. It is doubtful that Drake saw their village, but they were whale hunters, and he would have been impressed by the size and quality of their seagoing canoes. Probably, he presented them with some gifts.

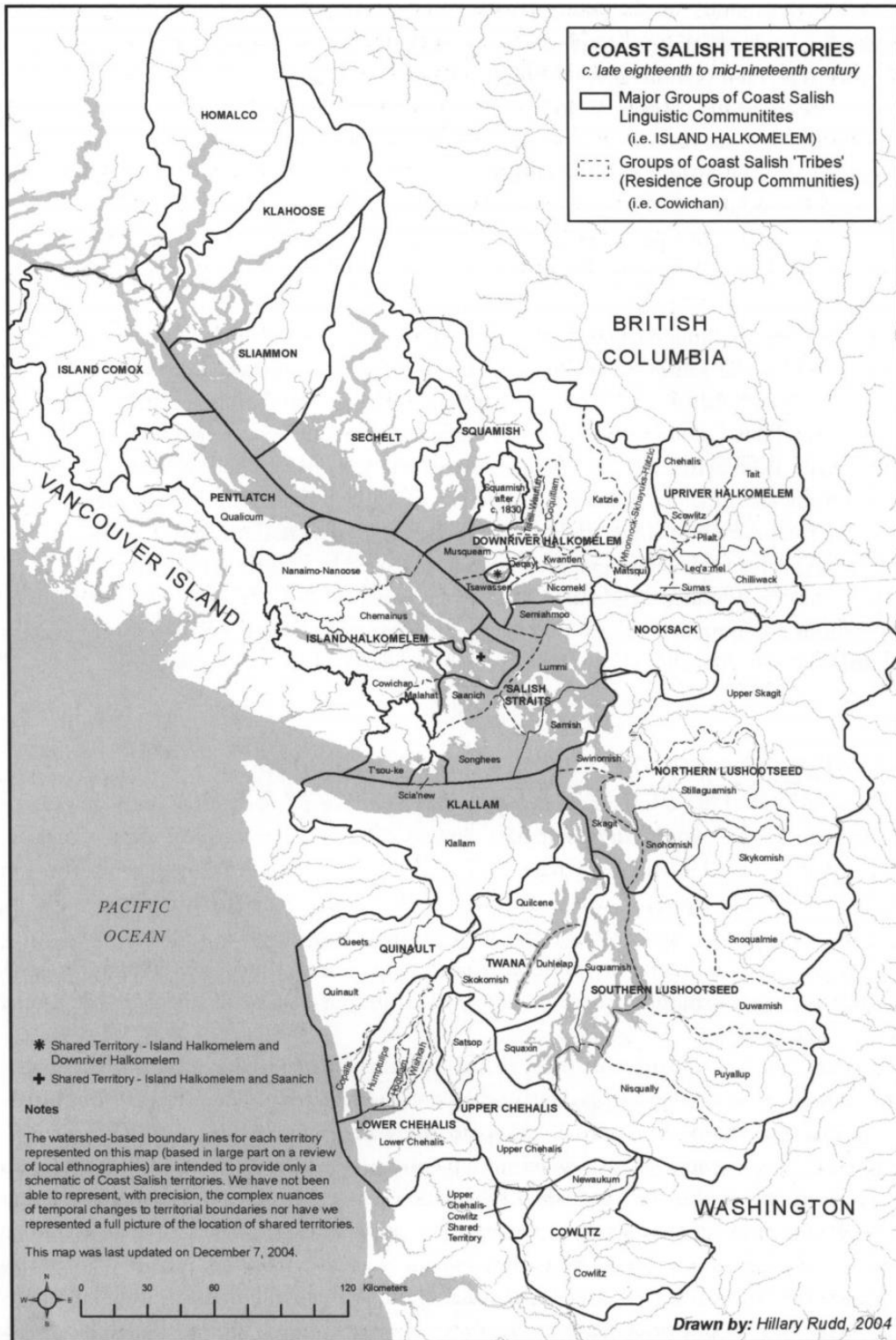


Figure 1: Map showing Coast Salish territories before the mid 1800s

7 Possible implication

If the coin found in the Gorge of Victoria got there by being skipped like a stone and if the coins given out at Blubber Bay on Texada Island were skipped like stones, then it might be worthwhile for someone with a metal detector to search the tidal flats at Blubber Bay. If more coins were to be found, that find would contribute to the discussion of whether Francis Drake's search for the Strait of Anián led him to enter the Strait of Juan de Fuca and explore the Strait of Georgia.

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