

Ancient fort opens new chapter in First Nations' history

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University of Calgary archaeologists join the Blackfoot in studying unusual woodland-style settlement on Canadian plains

A fortified village that pre-dates European arrival in Western Canada and is the only one of its kind discovered on the Canadian plains is yielding intriguing evidence of an unknown First Nations group settling on the prairies and is rekindling new ties between the Siksika Nation (Blackfoot) and aboriginal groups in the United States.

This spring, students from the U of C's Department of Archaeology are spending several weeks working on a dig near Cluny, about 120 kilometres east of Calgary, as part of a project that is expected to continue for several years unearthing one of Alberta's most significant archaeological sites. Known as the Cluny Fortified Village, the site on the Siksika First Nation reservation next to the Bow River is more than 250 years old and is an enigma to archaeologists who say it may have been home to a small band of normally-sedentary people from North Dakota.

"Tipi camps whose remains are the rings of tipi-anchoring stones left behind after the camps were abandoned were the usual dwelling sites in Alberta for thousands of years," said Dale Walde, director of the U of C's field school who is overseeing the excavation. "This site has no tipi rings, instead it looks more like villages 1,500 kilometres away on the Missouri River in southern North Dakota."

Similar to the fortified villages of agrarian First Nations groups in

central and eastern North America, the Cluny Fortified Village includes evidence of a living area surrounded by a trench and wooden palisade along with pits often seen in communities where farming was a way of life. This year's archaeology field school uncovered bone and stone tools, arrowheads, pottery and glass trading beads that also point towards the inhabitants being descended from the Middle Missouri region people.

"The pottery from Cluny is quite unlike other prehistoric pottery found in Alberta, but it may be distantly related to ceramics from the Eastern Woodlands and the Middle Missouri region," Walde said. "The big mystery of Cluny is: Why is this village site so different from everywhere else?"

The site's existence has long been known to elders of the Siksika Nation but prior to this year, the only archaeological excavation took place in 1960 by a team led by Dick Forbis, a Glenbow Museum archaeologist who later helped establish the U of C's Department of Archaeology. Walde's field school was invited by the Siksika Nation to work on the site as part of the tribe's new Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park, which opened last year.

According to Blackfoot oral histories, the village belonged to a peaceful group that broke from a tribe in the United States and settled on Blackfoot territory for six years, moving to a new settlement each year. Combined with archaeological evidence, scholars believe the group may have descended ultimately from the Hidatsa culture.

"We're still unraveling the story and this site is like a gold mine," said Jack Royal, president of the Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park. "This is a very unique and valuable project because everything is uncovered, documented and prepared by the university and then it comes to our interpretive centre to be stored and used to teach the public about our history and culture."

Royal said reviving archaeology at the site is a priority for the Siksika Nation because it can help strengthen ties the nation has already forged with groups in the United States.

"Several years ago we visited the Mandan tribe in North Dakota and had a pipe ceremony in one of their traditional earthlodges and we knew there was a connection and relationship between us before European contact," Royal said. "It was a very emotional ceremony because it was like meeting relatives you've never met before but knew were out there, and this is helping to re-establish that relationship."

The project is also providing a valuable opportunity for U of C students to be involved in making discoveries important to Canadian archaeology and is especially rewarding for some students who are learning about their heritage by being involved in the dig.

"As an archaeology student of Metis heritage, I feel privileged to be part of the team that is researching this fascinating site," said student Leanne Gladstone, who took part in the initial excavation work last year and is the field school's teaching assistant this spring. "Not only has this been a journey of learning, but it has also been an opportunity to gain a deeper spiritual connection and understanding of my First Nation roots."

Source: University of Calgary

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