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# THE CLUNY FORTIFIED VILLAGE SITE PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY PROGRAM

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## **A Unique Part of our Archaeological Heritage**

The Cluny Fortified Village site has been known to the Siksika since it was first built at about AD 1700. Euro-Canadians first became aware of the site in 1875 and it was visited intermittently until about 1910. Richard Forbis, a co-founder of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Calgary, was the first archaeologist to become aware of and work at the site in 1960.

Aerial Photograph of  
the Cluny Site, Siksika,  
Alberta. Photo  
courtesy Harrison  
Boss

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This site is unique in southern Alberta and, indeed, in the Canadian Plains. Canadian Plains peoples were, during the Late Precontact period, mobile hunter-gatherers whose subsistence depended largely on bison. They did not build permanent habitation structures such as the defensive trenches, pits, and walls, the remains of which we see here on the site today.

Instead, this site looks at first glance a good deal like a fortified village constructed by horticultural peoples and their relatives in Missouri and northern North Dakota (at least 1,500 km away) during Late Precontact times through to the present day. Defensive fortifications in those areas vary considerably in terms of size and complexity. These differences result from many factors, including the number of people in a settlement and the direct circumstances leading to the construction of a fortification. The defensive works surrounding Middle Missouri horticultural villages may often have been built at a relatively leisurely pace, expanding over time as the settlements grew in size. On the other hand, some defensive works were hastily built affairs thrown up in a very short time when danger was apprehended by the occupants of an otherwise mobile village.



Students Excavating at the Cluny Site.

Villages were still being fortified with entrenchments when European explorers first

visited the Missouri in the mid-eighteenth century. Indeed, fortified villages were found throughout the upper Midwest at this time. It is believed that most of the Plains villagers there were Siouan-speakers. The Siouan term for all manner of protective works surrounding lodges and settlements is “čunkašké” (pronounced “choon-**kash**-kay”).

**“Some defensive works were hastily built affairs thrown up in a very short time...”**

**-DR. DALE ALLEN WALDE**

The fortifications we see at Cluny most closely resemble those of the more hastily constructed features. It does seem from the structure of the site that the people who built Cluny were foreign visitors to the Canadian Plains. The trenches, which appear to have been constructed after the pits would have served as defensive positions from which warriors could have fought any attacking force. With their raised exterior wooden or stone walls, the pits would have provided shelter for noncombatants. A discontinuous screen of closely spaced tree trunks would have provided additional protection for the village. The presence of overlapping features and at least two





Preserved Wooden Posts Associated with Encircling Screen

components indicates that the site was occupied for relatively long periods of time (more than one year) and was re-occupied at least once.

For all this discussion of fortifications, though, the material culture we recover from the site includes many of the items we would expect to find in a peaceful village. It is clear that pottery was being made at the site as were beads from mammal bone, river clam shells, and fossils from nearby outcrops. Bone awls indicate that clothing was being made and the recovery of grinding stones and broken bison bones tells us that

meals of meat (bison, dog and other mammals) were being prepared and that pemmican was being made for future use. Most if not all of life at Cluny appears to have been peaceful and the main function of the fortifications may have been simply to indicate a willingness on the part of the inhabitants to defend themselves should that prove necessary.

The pottery we find at the Cluny site is also very different from the pottery we generally associate with southern Alberta. It looks more like ceramics we see from the Eastern Woodlands and Northeastern Plains. The pottery, then, like the site structure itself, suggests that the people who lived at Cluny were not locals but were instead visitors from relatively far away. Recovery of glass beads and metal objects from the

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*-DR. DALE ALLEN WALDE*

upper component at the site suggests that the site was occupied at a time when European trade goods had made their way through to southern Alberta before the arrival of Euro–Canadians around AD 1700.

The Northeastern Plains and Middle Missouri people certainly hunted bison but they also depended to a very great extent on food such as maize, beans, and squash grown in their fields. It may be that part of the reason they came up to Siksika country was to trade some of their garden products for the pemmican produced by the Siksika.

We know from studies of Late Precontact Period Canadian Plains pottery that the maize trade was common throughout the area. That trade, however, seems mostly to have involved Canadian Plains peoples going down to the Middle Missouri villages to exchange pemmican for maize. They also obtained a special kind of rock called Knife River Flint for making many of their stone tools. Later on, beginning at about AD 1700, trade for horses was also conducted. The Cluny site may represent the first discovery of Plains Village people coming up on to the Canadian Plains to pursue those trade opportunities.



Students Excavating at the Cluny Site



**“This site represents a meeting place of different peoples with different lifeways...”**

*-DR. DALE ALLEN WALDE*

The question of who built and lived at the Cluny site is a very challenging one. While some association with Middle Missouri or Northeastern Plains peoples seems clear, differences in village construction and pottery design seem to suggest the association is not a direct one. That is, it seems unlikely that a group of Middle Missouri people came directly from that area to this site. We do know, however, that, early on, several groups of Plains Village people moved away from the Middle Missouri area to become independent groups with their own identities. These groups are known archaeologically as the Scattered Village Complex. It may well be that, sufficiently removed in time and space from their Middle Missouri ancestors to have developed their own village and pottery styles, some of the descendants of these independent Plains Village peoples were the creators of the site.

It is interesting that this site represents a meeting place of different peoples with different lifeways during precontact time. With the completion of the interpretive centre and the invitation from the Siksika Nation for others to come and share the history here, that role as a meeting place is reasserted and represents a continuation of that tradition of people coming together in this place.

## **How You Can Become Involved!**

Participants will excavate alongside members of the Archaeology Field School at the famous Cluny Fortified Village site. First time participants will receive a tour of the Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park Interpretive Centre and an introductory tour of the archaeological site. Volunteers will be supervised by experienced University of Calgary graduate students. Training in archaeological excavation techniques will



**Ceramic Vessel Recovered from the Cluny Site**

be provided on site. All artifacts from the site are the property of the Siksika Nation and, ultimately, will be stored at Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park Interpretive Centre.

The program will operate from 10 July to 14 August, 2014, Monday–Friday. Cost consists of the daily admission fee to Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park (\$12.00 + GST). Participants will meet with volunteer program supervisors at the Blackfoot Crossing Historical Park Interpretive Centre parking lot at 9:00 AM each day—please note that there are no overnight accommodation facilities at the park this year.

Participants under the age of 18 must be accompanied by a responsible adult at all times. All participants will be required to complete a Volunteer Liability Waiver Form and a Photography Waiver Form.

Participants under the age of 18 must also complete an Informed Consent Form.

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