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ABORIGINAL BURIAL PRACTICES IN  
THE PLATEAU REGION OF NORTH AMERICA

Roderick Sprague, Ph. D.  
University of Arizona, 1967

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ABORIGINAL BURIAL PRACTICES IN  
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The historic Indian burial ground associated with Palus Village at the confluence of the Palouse and Snake rivers in eastern Washington was excavated in 1964 under the field direction of the author. Palus Village was frequently mentioned in accounts of the early fur-trade period and later was an important Snake River crossing on the Mullan Military Road.

The name of the Palouse River and the Palus band of Sahaptian-speaking Indians has a long history of variable spellings and much conjecture as to its meaning. Palus in the Nez Perce language means, approximately, "something sticking down in the water." The Indian group first spelled by Lewis and Clark as pel-late-pal-ler was not the Palus band as has been suggested by many authorities, but rather refers to one of two possible villages on the Snake River above the mouth of the Clearwater River.

The position of the Palus in relation to the surrounding Sahaptian speakers is still unclear and may never be settled. The meager ethnographic data on the Palus have been assembled along with notes on several important personalities among the Palus.

A critique of current burial nomenclature and classificatory schemes suggests the need for a new approach, which is presented. The ten suggested criteria of analysis include: (1) form of disposal, which is divided into simple disposal and compound disposal, involving a reduction process (i.e., cremation) and a secondary disposal; (2) location of the disposal area; (3) preparation of the body; (4) disposal vehicle (coffin, urn, etc.); (5) demography (age, sex, pathology, etc.); (6) individuality (single, double, multiple, mass); (7) articulation; (8) position (degree of flexure, arms, head); (9) deposition (back, face, side, seated); (10) orientation; and (11) grave goods (frequency, types, placement). This scheme is then applied to the Palus Burial Site which is characterized by primary inhumations near the village site in single wooden coffins, extended on the back, oriented from east to northeast, and with abundant grave goods.

All available data on burial patterns in the ethnographic Plateau region are reviewed from the archaeological, ethno-historical, and ethnographic literature. Several former hypotheses on the movement of Plateau burial patterns are rejected or altered while others are strengthened. The supposed obvious relationship between Klamath and Central California cremation is questioned. Until further evidence is presented, the suggested antiquity of 1000-1500 B.C. for lower Columbia Valley cremation must be considered only speculative. The late, upriver diffusion of the Wishram burial shed is accepted. The crude burial shed of the Nez Perce can be explained as an attenuated form of the classic burial shed as well as by the hypothesis suggesting the breakdown of a former trait. The suggestion that cedar cists and cremation diffused from the north into the middle Columbia region is rejected as not proved. The chronological precedence of cedar slabs over stick cists has been found lacking and even reversed in the Lower Snake region.

The Lower Snake River burial chronology previously suggested is generally upheld. This pattern consisted of late prehistoric burials flexed on the side and oriented in the westerly half of the compass; a brief period of extreme trait variability including the use of cairns, burning over the grave, or cedar cists, accompanying a flexed body; and a final period of inhumations extended on the back in rough cedar boxes and oriented east.

Kroeber's hypothesis that the disposal of the dead is more in a class with fashion is supported by the data presented. The rapid and widespread change of the protohistoric, however, suggests culture change greater than that explained by Kroeber's thesis, a suggestion born out by other lines of evidence.

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