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THE GEOGRAPHY
OF THE TSIMSHIAN INDIANS.

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Archives
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THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE TSIMSHIAN INDIANS.

BY G. A. DORSEY.

(Reproduced from The American Antiquarian, October, 1897.)

The Tsimshian Indians form one of the most important stocks of the Northwest. They live in villages on the Nass and Skeena rivers and adjacent islands, and have as neighbors on the north the Tlingits, on the east the Dénés, and on the south the Bella Coolas and Kwakiutls. Their origin and early movements are still a matter of speculation. Their language separates them from the neighboring stocks, but in religion, folk-lore, and culture they have much in common with the Tlingits, Haidas of the Queen Charlotte Islands, and the Kwakiutls. Their physical relationship with these stocks has not been determined, although some anthropometric data has been collected by Dr. Franz Boaz and by myself.

Owing to three chief reasons the life of the Tsimshians, as well as that of other Northwest Indians, has within the last fifty years undergone marked change. These reasons are: (1) The founding and rise of the city of Victoria, on Vancouver Island; (2) the establishment of Hudson's Bay Company's Posts and missionary stations, and (3) the establishment of numerous salmon canneries on the inlets and rivers.

The changes brought about by these causes may also be considered under three heads. First may be mentioned the change of physical status due to mixture with the whites and with other Indians; secondly, the change in culture due to white contact and especially due to the influence of missionaries, and, finally, the change in habitation due to the establishment of Hudson's Bay Company's posts, missionary stations and canneries. It is only with the last change, that of habitation, that we are here concerned.

While on the coast of British Columbia this summer, in the interests of the Field Columbian Museum, I gathered such information as I could relative to this point, and, while fully realizing the imperfection of the data collected, it seems to me to be of sufficient importance to be recorded. My information was obtained from various missionaries and traders, and from the reports of the department of Indian affairs. I am especially indebted, and take this opportunity of expressing my obligation, to the Rev. Mr. Tomlinson of Meamskinisht, a missionary who began his career of usefulness with Duncan at Metlakahla and who is acquainted with the Tsimshian dialects, and has resided in many of the Tsimshian villages on both the Nass and Skeena rivers.

Boaz* has divided the Tsimshian stock into dialects, those speaking the Nasqá and those speaking the Tsimshian proper. Of those speaking Nasqá he enumerates two tribes; of the Tsimshians proper he enumerates six tribes. He does not specify, however, whether this enumeration refers to former times or today; at any rate I am unable to reconcile his list of tribes to present conditions. It is to be noted furthermore that the tribes speaking Nasqá are not confined to the territory of the Nass river, but are also found on the Skeena river. As to the distinguishing characteristics of the two dialects I had no time for investigation. But from various sources I learned that those tribes which spoke the Tsimshian dialect proper could not understand the Nasqá dialect, whereas the Nasqá tribes could understand those who spoke Tsimshian proper. It appears yet further that there are two closely related groups of the Nasqá dialect, the Nasqá and the Kitksa'n, the former group being confined to the Nass river, the latter to the Skeena river.

Instead of taking up the tribes or villages according to a linguistic basis I have preferred rather to follow the natural divisions and to take up first the Skeena river villages, and then the Nass river villages and finally the coast and island villages. It will be seen from a reference to the map that the villages are numbered from 1 to 18 and from A to H. The numbers refer to ancient or modern villages, which were founded without reference to white influence. The letters refer to villages founded within recent years through recent white influence. The capital letters N, K and T on the map are for the purpose of distinguishing the Nasqá and Kiksán tribes from those speaking Tsimshian proper. These numbers and letters are retained in the text. In the spelling of the proper names I have followed as a rule that given by the missionaries of the various towns or by the traders; in some cases I have inserted in brackets the spelling given by Boaz (B) or that given in the report of the Indian Commission (R).

One of the origin myths of the Tsimshians reports that after the flood their ancestors drifted about for a long time in a canoe and finally landed at Dum-lak-am (what will be a good place). Here they rested and this was their earthly primeval home. From here they began to extend outward in various directions and so was built up the Tsimshian people. Dum-lak-am, so far as can be determined, was the region about the modern town of Hazelton, one hundred and sixty miles up the Skeena river, and at this point we may properly begin our review of the Tsimshian villages.

* Franz Boaz: Fifth Report on the Northwestern Tribes of the Dominion of Canada, B. A. A. S. 189. Page 8.

SKEENA RIVER VILLAGES.

1. N. K. Kit-an-maiksh [Git-an-max R.] place for putting out net. Until 1879 this village was located on a flat just above the junction of the Skeena and Bulkley rivers. Shortly before that time the inhabitants had begun to build a little further up on a low bluff overlooking the Skeena where the present town of Hazelton now stands. The old village was destroyed by fire about 1876. The population of Hazelton, or "The Forks," as the town is commonly called, in 1881 numbered about 200; at present it numbers about 250. Many families have removed thither from Kishpiyeoux and from villages down the river. The town recently has become of considerable importance, as it is at the head of steamboat navigation on the Skeena. It contains a very important Hudson's Bay Post and is the distributing point for miners' supplies for the interior, especially for the Omenica country, which has for some time been the scene of much mining activity.

2. N. K. Kish-pi yeoux [Kits-pioux, Kits-piouse, R.] place of ancestor Pi-yeoux. This village, at the junction of the Kishpiyeoux and Skeena rivers, was in 1873 the most populous on the upper Skeena. At that time it numbered about 400 people; now it contains 225. Between 1881 and 1895 the population decreased about thirty-three per cent., much of this being due to successive epidemics of measles.

3. N. K. Kish-ga-gass [Kits-ge-gaas, Kits-ge-goos, R.] place of ancestor Ga-gass—on the Babine river, nine miles from its mouth. This village twenty years ago had over 300 inhabitants, but many have removed to Hazelton and many perished in the mines of Caribo and Omenica. Kish-ga-gass now numbers about 275, and is probably the most primitive of all Tsimshian villages.

4. N. K. Kaul-daw [Gal-doe, R.] dwellers beyond. This village is doomed to utter extinction; numbering about 150 people in 1875, there are at the present time only about thirty who claim Kaul-daw as their home, and even many of these remain there only one or two months of the year. Many of the former inhabitants have removed to Kish-pi-yeoux. Within five years the village will be completely abandoned.

5. N. K. Kitze-gukla people of Zegukla mountain. This is the first of the Skeena river villages as we go toward the coast from Hazelton. In 1873 its population was about 250, but it is now about eighty. In 1875 many of the houses were burned from a conflagration which started on the opposite side of the river, caused by the carelessness of two miners. Much trouble and ill feeling grew out of this, and the Indians attempted to close the river to navigation. The difficulty was not settled until a man-of-war appeared at the mouth of the Skeena.

6. N. K. Kit-win-gach [Kit-wang-agh, R.]—people of place of plenty rabbits. This village numbered about 250 in 1876, 200 in 1881, and at present about 150. Many deserted their homes during the gold craze on the Stickene river, and suffered as the Indians usually do in contact with the whites under such circumstances. Many men died, and the women and girls were abandoned. Some of these women even took their daughters with them for the purpose of selling them to the whites.

7. N. K. Kit-win-skole [Kit-wan-cool, R.]—people where pass the narrows. This formerly extensive village, which numbered over 350 in 1875, has been nearly abandoned and now contains less than eighty people. Most of them have gone up to live at Hazelton, but many others left for the mines, while others still found ruin and death in Victoria.

8. T. Kit zilas [Gyits-alá ser, B.; Kit-sa-las, R.]—people of the cañon. Of this village, which numbered over 300 in 1875, but a single family remains. The head of this family is one of the crew of the S. S. "Caledonia," which runs on the Skeena. He lives in a neat modern cottage. All the other houses are in ruins and overgrown with vegetation.

9. T. Kit-zim-gay-lum [Kit-sum-kalem, R.; Gyitsumrâlon, B.]—people of Zim-gay-lum river. Another almost deserted village; its population of 150 in 1885 has been scattered until at present not more than sixty remain. Many have gone to New Metlakatla, others have settled in Port Essington, while still others have joined the Kitksians.

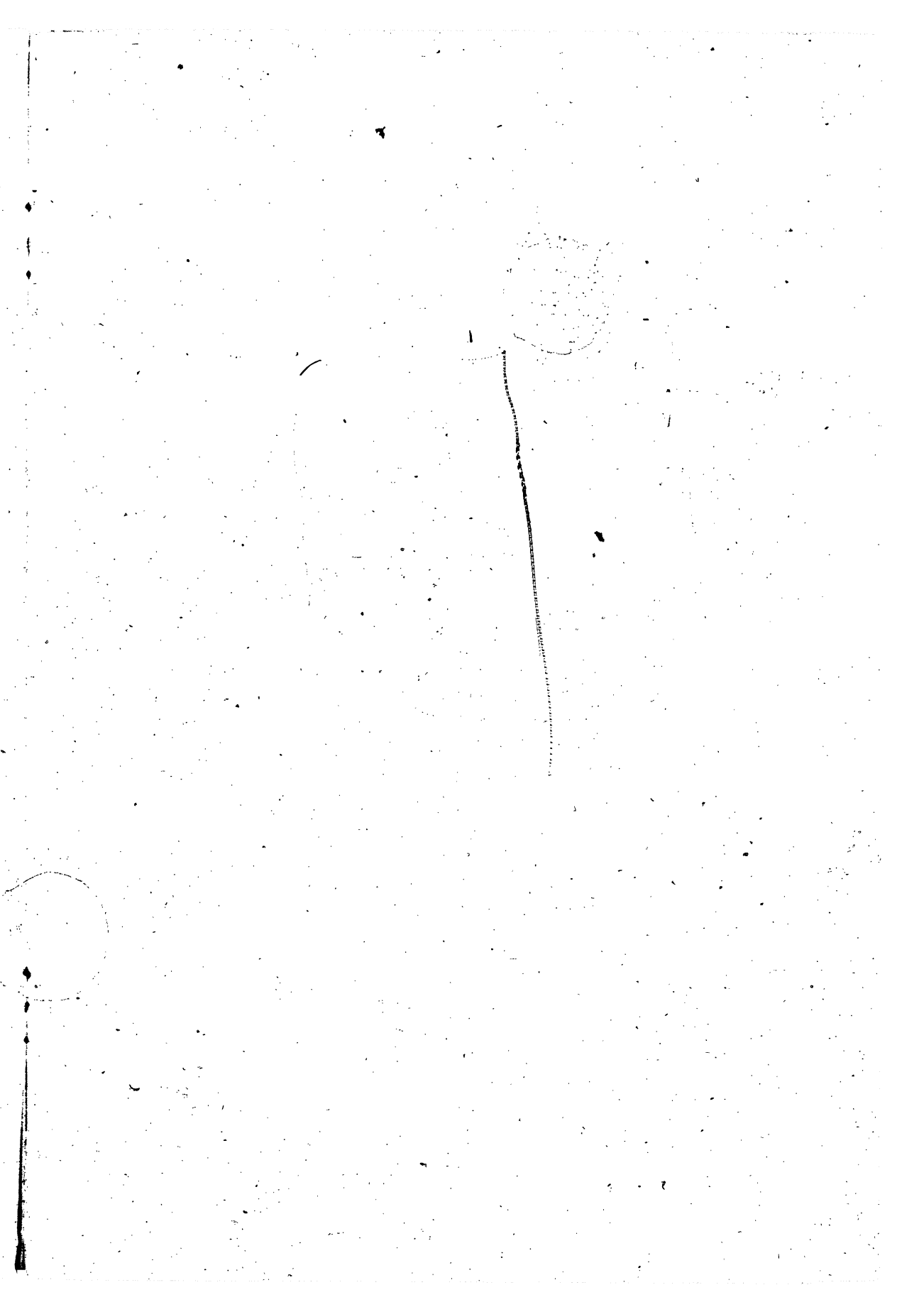
NASS RIVER VILLAGES.

10. N. Kit aix—? In 1870 Kit-aix, near the mouth of the Nass river, was a populous village numbering over 350. At present it numbers about seventy-five. Many have joined the mission villages of Kincolith and a few have taken up their residence in Lak-kul-zap.

11. N. Lak-ungida (Haida name?)—This was one of the most populous villages in 1870 and numbered over 400; now there are not more than fifty remaining. Many died in Victoria, others have gone to the mission village Kincolith and a few went to Lak-kul-šap.

12. N. Kit-lak-aous—people on the sandy point. The remaining inhabitants of this village, which numbered 150 in 1890, deserted the place entirely in 1895. Where they went I was not able to learn.

13. N. Kis-themu-welgit—? This was never a large village and numbered but eighty in 1875, and now numbers about fifty. The chiefs removed to Victoria and a few have settled in the Nass river mission villages.





14. N. Kit-win-shilk [Kit-win-tshilth, R.]—people of the place of the lizards. This village now numbers less than one-half of its 1870 population, which was 200. The deaths have exceeded the births and many of the women, who were noted for their fair complexion, fine form and beauty, were lost in Victoria.

15. N. Kit-lak-damix [Kit-lach-damax, R.]—people on pool or pond. This village numbered 350 in 1872, has at present only about 150 inhabitants. It is hard to account for this decrease for there has been no special epidemic, nor have there been any decided migrations to other villages. On the other hand this village is known to have received acquisitions from Kit-win-skole.

3. COAST OR ISLAND VILLAGES.

16. T. Kit-kahta [Kit-kaa-ta, R. Gytga-ata, B.]—people of the poles. This was formerly a large village, numbering between 300 and 400 in 1870. Many have gone to Alaska, some to join Duncan's colony at New Metlakáhtla, and the population has decreased considerably. It now numbers about eighty.

17. T. Kit-khatla [Kit-katla, R; Gyt-qá'tla, B.]—people of the sea. This village now numbers about 200, and is the most primitive and least often visited of the coast villages.

18. T. Kit-tizoo [Gyid-esdzo, B.]—? This village, at the northwest of Milbank Sound, is the most southerly of all Tsimshian villages. It is now almost deserted, part of its population having gone to Alaska; others have settled at Bella Bella.

MODERN VILLAGES AND MISSIONARY STATIONS.

A. Meamskinisht—foot of porcupine grove. Founded in 1889 by Mr. Tomlinson as a mission village. At the outset it numbered but five people, now its population is about fifty—drawn from the Kitk'sans.

B. New Kitzilas. This is not a mission village, but was settled by the people of Kitzilas in 1893. Its population at present is about forty.

C. Port Essington. This town is second in importance only to Port Simpson. Although it was the seat of a Hudson's Bay Post in 1835, it had its real beginning in 1872, when the gold excitement began in the Omenica country and the whites began to go into the interior by the Skeena river. In 1874 a Church of England mission was started, and then the Indians began to settle there from various places on the Skeena but chiefly from the villages of Kitzilas and Kitze gukla. It now numbers about 200 inhabitants, has two churches, two salvation armies, a cannery and a saw mill. It is also the starting point for the Skeena river steamer, and is destined some day to be a place of considerable importance.

D. Matlakhatla. The story of this mission village is the romance of the Northwest coast, and it has been told over and over again. Its history is a chapter in the life of a man who ranks among the first of America's missionaries and teachers. Duncan went out to Port Simpson in 1857 and removed to Matlakhatla in 1862. With him went a few of the Simpson Tsimshians. Within six months the whole body moved over with their chief, Kit-laan. Of the rise and fall of this new world Utopia we are not here concerned. Duncan left and founded a new and brighter Utopia on one of the islands of southern Alaska, and Matlakhatla today is a ruinous monument to the folly of a Bishop of England. Its population in 1896 was 150.

E. Port Simpson. The early history of Port Simpson or Simpson as it is called on the coast, is the history of a Hudson's Bay Company's Port. This post was first established in 1831 on the Nass river at a point about two miles above the present mission village of Kincolith. It only remained there two years but during that time seven of the traders died or met their death at the hands of the Indians. Then the Post was removed to Port Simpson. At that time there were no Indians nearer than the peninsula of Metlakhatla. In that passage at that time there were nine villages of Tsimshians who still retained their summer homes on the Skeena river. Of these nine villages I learned the names of six. The first was Kishpokalants; its chief was Legaik and he was the head chief of the entire Tsimshian nation. The other five villages were: Kit-lani, Kinagingeeg, Kil-utsai, Kitadah, Kitzeesh. The combined population of the nine villages was about 5,000. They have long since disappeared; many removed to Simpson, but the majority were scattered among other villages, slain in inter-racial wars, lost in the gold fields of the interior, or perished in Victoria. Simpson at present is the metropolis of the coast, dull and stupid in summer but awake and lively enough in winter. It boasts of a hotel, fire department, hospital and two rival churches and salvation armies. Its population is over 700. A half dozen totem poles mark the sites of the old houses of the early days.

F. Kin-colith—place of scalp. This mission village was founded in 1867 by Mr. Tomlinson. Its inhabitants were drawn from the Nass river villages, chiefly from Gwin-wah. It now numbers about 200.

G. Lak-kul-zap [Kach-als-ap, R.] Founded in 1872 by Mr. Green, from Tsimshians drawn from the villages of Kit-aix and Kitkahta; now numbers about eighty.

H. Aiyaush—eternal bloom. Founded in 1871 by Mr. Tomlinson. Its inhabitants were drawn chiefly from Kit-lak-damix. It now numbers 100.

Of the ancient villages the following have Church of England missions: Kit-an-maiksh, Kish-ge-gass, Kit-wan-gach, and Kit-khatla. The following have Methodist missions: Kish-pi-yeoux, and Kitze-gukla. Of the mission villages the following are Methodists: New Kitzelas and Lak-kul-zap, Metlakhatla, Kin-col-ith, and Aiyaush are Episcopalian; while Port Essington and Port Simpson have both Episcopal and Methodist missions. The mission of Meamskinisht, in charge of Mr. Tomlinson, is on an independent basis.

Although the Tsimshians today are but a remnant of the stock as it existed in 1850, they now seem to be holding their own in point of population, while some of the other coast stocks are diminishing very rapidly, the Haidas especially. Their estimated population in 1888 was 5,000, but this estimate is probably in excess by one or two thousand, as the report of the Canadian Indian commissioner for 1895 gives for twenty villages not quite 3,200 population. Today they are nearly all Christianized; live in frame cottages, wear European clothing and during the summer months work in the salmon canneries. But while the Tsimshians may outlive the Haidas as a separate stock, their ultimate absorption and final extinction are but matters of time. The new villages and especially the canneries are bringing the different stocks of the coast into more and more intimate relations and this results in a disappearance of the pure types. The introduction of another ethnic element, the Chinese, on the coast may further complicate matters for while as yet there is no commingling of the Indian with the Chinese, it will probably come sooner or later as it has on the west coast of South America. The fate of the Tsimshian, as with his brother elsewhere on this continent, is to disappear—to disappear as Tsimshian, as Indian.