

Chinookan Women, Wapato, & Trade

“The Chinook of the Lower Columbia River intensified production of wapato by placing villages near wapato fields, owning the fields, developing a specialized canoe that women used to harvest wapato in wetlands, and controlling the swans, ducks, muskrats, and beavers that ate wapato (Darby 2005).

Chinookan women gathered great amounts of wapato for food and trade, bringing them “great wealth”. It has been suggested that almost every woman in a village might own a canoe, therefore individual women in Chinookan society had access to resources that allowed them to gain personal wealth and status.

A Most Valuable Root

So important was this resource that Meriwether Lewis observed that wapato was the “principal article of traffic” between people at the mouth of the Columbia River and the heart of the Valley. He further noted “The natives of the sea coast and lower part of this river will dispose of their most valuable articles to obtain this root” (Lewis in Darby 2005).



Photo: Nathan Sandel courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Chinookan Women’s Shovel Nosed Canoe



Sketch detail from Meriwether Clark’s journals, American Philosophical Library.

How much wapato could *you* gather?

Cathlapotle Village Site archaeologist, Melissa Darby, found that an inexperienced wapato gatherer could yield about 350 tubers per hour (~30 tubers per square yard). That is almost 6 pounds of wapato in an hour!

Imagine you are a woman working in well managed wetlands, benefiting from the generational knowledge and experiences of the women who tended the land before you.

How productive could you be?