

## REVIEW

### ***THE PEOPLE AT THE END OF THE WORLD: THE WESTERN ALEUTIANS PROJECT AND THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF SHEMA ISLAND***

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#### **Reviewed by Loukas Barton**

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Like many long-term, multiagency resource reconnaissance programs in remote Alaska, the Western Aleutians Archaeological and Paleobiological Project (WAAPP) blossomed from humble origins to a complex web of interests, agendas, research questions and results. This volume is an excellent attempt to articulate the history of this research and, in so doing, helps to define an ambitious agenda for the prehistory of the Western Aleutians by providing solid footing for subsequent analysis, reporting and future investigation.

In 1991 the WAAPP began by using archaeological data from the Aleutian Islands to establish the population history of Bering Sea seabirds. Soon thereafter the study expanded to the evolution of western Aleut culture and to the natural and anthropogenic dimensions of regional environmental change. Over fourteen years, a multi-dimensional international research cooperative representing seventeen institutions refined and expanded its interests in the western Aleutians, collecting archaeological, paleoecological, and contemporary biological and geological data from the Near Islands (Attu and Shemya), Buldir, and Adak. Though expeditions to other islands were planned, weather and logistics conspired against them.

Deductive purists might gripe that this work began with very little direction. Even the post hoc research design (Chapter 1) lacks logical hypotheses and tightly knit test implications. The authors admit it all began “very basically...from a cultural-historical and cultural-ecological framework” (p. 14). And rightly so—prior to the WAAPP project, next to nothing was known of the region’s past. Over time, project members refined a set of

interrelated questions about the colonization, subsistence, settlement, and cultural and environmental changes in the western Aleutians:

- When and from which direction were the western Aleutians initially colonized?
- What are the defining attributes of Near Island Aleut culture and society?
- How and why did the attributes of Near Island Aleut material culture change through time?
- How and why did Near Island Aleut subsistence and settlement change through time?
- How does geographic isolation affect innovation and transmission? And could the Near Islands be the source area of innovations transmitted elsewhere?
- How was social, political, or religious “complexity” expressed in the Near Islands? And to what degree were these expressions introduced from afar?
- Were the Aleuts in contact with the people of Asia?
- How was the evolution of Near Island Aleut culture affected by environmental change? And to what degree did they effect environmental change themselves?
- Finally, how was Near Island Aleut culture affected by the historic introduction of a market economy and its exotic constituents, the fox and the rat?

Few of these questions are addressed directly anywhere in the monograph, which is narrowly devoted to the archaeology of Shemya Island (detailed results from Buldir, Attu, and Rat Islands have been promised for the future). Instead, the authors concede that this publication “is primarily descriptive” (p. 14) rather than “synoptic or theoretical” (p. 209) and that it is “neither a final nor complete

picture” (p. 209) but rather a “first step in addressing and perhaps resolving” (p. 16) some basic archaeological questions. Recurrent disclaimers beg forgiveness for what the monograph does not do and admit to what ought to be done in the future.

Disclaimers aside, the value of this monograph as a professional guide to the western Aleutians cannot be overstated. In this capacity, it succeeds in four general areas: summarizing all that’s known of the region’s prehistory; introducing a chronological account of historical records from the earliest European mariners through U.S. military operations; compiling ethnohistoric accounts of Aleut life, belief and material culture; and providing a detailed primary account of the geology, ecology and biota that set the stage for Shemya Island’s prehistoric record.

First and foremost this is a primary source for the archaeology of Shemya Island. Chapter 10 provides site descriptions, photographs, site maps, excavation profiles, and everything else one might expect from the primary literature. Chapter 11 is a preliminary analysis of the animal remains recovered from Shemya. Chapter 8 discusses prehistoric fishing, harvest pressure, and presumably environmental productivity, while Chapter 9 reports on the evidence for albatross exploitation. Chapter 12 is a descriptive account of the artifacts from Shemya; the descriptions and photos are very useful. Hopefully future studies will provide quantitative, analytical inter- and intra-site comparisons. Chapter 14 (“Eight Unprovenanced Collections”) is an excellent attempt to recover some of the information lost through widespread looting of Shemya’s cultural heritage at the hands of American servicemen and construction workers.

Secondary, in my view, to the archaeological detail, but essential nevertheless, are the data about the ecology and natural history of the region. Directly relevant to the archaeology of provisioning, mobility, and settlement are the chapters on lithic material sources (Chapter 13, appendices H and I); the physical setting (Chapter 5), which includes a discussion of the geology, geography, and climate of the region; the biology and ecology of Shemya Island specifically (Chapter 7 and appendices A–F); and an attempt to establish a local paleoenvironmental sequence for the Holocene (Chapter 6). Maps and species lists found throughout these chapters are priceless.

Two very different kinds of analysis in this monograph are worthy of emulation in future monographs of coastal archaeology in Alaska: (1) marine reservoir correction, and (2) settlement and catchment analysis.

The culture history of coastal Southwest Alaska is anchored to a decades-old chronology built without regard to a) the offsets of old carbon in the marine reservoir, and b) the offsets of old wood floating around the ocean. This is changing as people become more selective about choosing samples for radiocarbon dating. This monograph is an excellent example, but a few things would make it, and future attempts, better. Though the authors do credit Owen (2002) for the methods used to calculate  $\Delta R$  (the local offset from the global marine carbon calibration curve), both the current authors and Owen neglect to tell us how they acquire the model marine  $^{14}\text{C}$  age (“Q” in Stuiver et al. 1986), which is necessary for calculating  $\Delta R$ . This omission is commonplace, and though the requisite curves (Stuiver and Braziunas 1993; Stuiver et al. 1998) are often referenced (e.g., Deo et al. 2004; Owen 2002), there is rarely an explanation for how the numbers were acquired. In some cases, variance in the marine model age can lead to variance in  $\Delta R$  upwards of 100 years or more, violating the standards of good radiocarbon “hygiene” (e.g., Kennett et al. 2008; Spriggs 1989). Aside from this lack of explanation, the authors establish a solid foundation for calibrating the radiocarbon chronology of the western Aleutians.

Another thought-provoking aspect of this monograph is the settlement and catchment analysis. In some ways, this analysis sits uncomfortably in a chapter entitled “Ethnographic Background” (Chapter 3), because it presumes continuity between Attuan speakers of the twentieth century, the Near Island Aleuts encountered during Russian exploration, and those responsible for the late prehistoric patterns recorded by archaeologists, especially since the movements of people through the island chain, and their potential contacts with Asia, are at the core of this project’s research agenda.

More problematic is that the settlement and catchment discussion is scattered across four different chapters. At root, settlement pattern analysis provides insight on “social organization that cannot be learned from ethnographic records or . . . archaeological excavations” (p. 26), while site catchment analysis reveals both “human relationships to the land” and “site function” by evaluating acquisition patterns based on resource distributions and the costs of travelling to them (p. 30). In principle, this is an excellent way to visualize human foraging patterns, even if much of the more recent literature on the energetics, optimality, and logic of central-place foraging (e.g., Bettinger et al. 1997; Hollenbach 2009; Morgan 2007) has been completely ignored. Yet the foundation set in Chapter 3

is insightful, and were it presented as a basis for generating testable hypotheses for this and future research (rather than a first stage of the “Ethnographic Background”) it would have been far more powerful.

Instead we’re asked to follow a rather loose approach to the scientific method for another 200 pages: chapters 7 (and appendices A–F) and 13 provide the spatial distribution, density, and diversity of biological and lithic resources necessary for building testable hypotheses from site catchment models; chapters 10, 11, and 12 provide the archaeological data on site types and locations, along with the fauna and artifacts excavated from them to test the implications of the modeled hypotheses directly for Shemya Island. Together with the Afterword, Chapter 15 provides an assessment of how well the modeled hypotheses explain the data before offering a revised narrative.

Lastly, no one wants to think of the area they work in as “an isolated backwater” (p. 212), nor would anyone like to convey this notion to the inhabitants and descendants of the region. But let’s face it, the Near Islands are a long way from anywhere. The cultural record suggests long periods of isolation, hardship, and perhaps novel approaches to pre-existing ways of doing things. For all of these reasons, the area was likely a hotbed of innovation, with adaptations evolving in ways unique to small, segregated groups of people (Barton et al. 2007; Bettinger et al. 2010). Though cultural traditions may be difficult for small groups to maintain (Henrich 2004), novel variation specific to the western Aleutians may well have diffused eastward throughout the Holocene. I suspect future studies will support this.

This volume is a resource critical to anyone interested in the maritime prehistory of the Pacific Rim, the historical ecology of the Aleutian Islands and Bering Sea regions, and the prehistoric ancestry of the Near Island Aleuts.

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## REVIEW

### ***ARCHAEOLOGY ON THE ALASKA PENINSULA: THE NORTHERN SECTION, FIFTY YEARS ONWARD***

*By Don E. Dumond with contributions by Roger K. Harritt, H. Kory Cooper, Aaron Pedigo, and Santosh Kumar  
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History and Department of Anthropology, 2011.*

*Paper, viii + 214 pp., tables, figures, maps, references. \$18.00 (+ \$7.00 shipping and handling to USA). Order at <http://natural-history.uoregon.edu/research/publications/uoap>*

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Fifty years before the publication of *Archaeology on the Alaska Peninsula* (University of Oregon Paper No. 70), Don E. Dumond began archaeological research in the Katmai National Monument, now Katmai National Park and Preserve. This publication discusses the history of excavations, updates or summarizes work done by various parties after the primary period of the University of Oregon Project that ended about 1966, discusses hypotheses posed around a Pacific coast-Bering Sea drainage differentiation, and further discusses and revises previous interpretations. On the game board, so-to-speak, are archaeological sequences together with their dating and correlation, the data of artifact types and site structures or houses, and apparent cultural relationships between separated areas of the Monument (Naknek drainage/Shelikof Strait) and with adjacent areas, especially Kodiak Island.

Diagrams of sequences, site and feature figures, maps, and date lists are provided profusely. Some recently-recovered artifacts are illustrated; however, readers should appreciate the collections upon which the archaeological sequences are based. For that, they can refer to earlier reports (e.g., G. Clark 1977; Dumond 1971, 1987, 2003 [various figures]).

An important, though brief contribution, is the recognition of Aglurmiut intrusion along the southern Bristol Bay coast, which apparently restricted the Koniag (ancestral Alutiiq) inhabitants to an inland zone of the Bering Sea drainage. Detailed fragmentary information about inland Severnovsk or Nunamiut settlement is presented.

Historic Paugvik (Pavik or Aglurmiut)-late-prehistoric Brooks River (BR) Bluffs phase continuity had been assumed, but that was found not to be the case. Viewed retrospectively, the Aglurmiut presence is seen in the change of round harpoon-dart line holes to a northern style. Recovery of Kodiak style artifacts, including incised figurine pebbles at the Cutbank site, reinforced an earlier conclusion that the Bluffs phase was influenced by the Pacific coast side of the Alaska Peninsula. Ongoing investigation of Brooks River, a tributary of Naknek Lake, found little evidence of historic occupation there, thus this area is proposed as a no-man's land between the Alutiiq and Aglurmiut.

In reviewing the events of the Thule tradition, referred to as the Naknek Period, AD 1000 to AD 1900, disjunctions are found between the three phases: historic Pavik, BR Bluffs, and BR Camp. Proposed migration southward by Camp phase people across the Peninsula, taking an Eskimo language to Kodiak, has been discussed in earlier literature. The initial migration is not a focus of this work. Instead, a possible return migration leading to establishment of the BR Bluffs phase is discussed. Considerable effort is taken here, and in earlier papers by Dumond, to reevaluate house architecture. Numerous small houses, especially those of the Bluffs phase, have been tied together as appended rooms of single Koniag-style (Kodiak Alutiiq) houses. This type of house was described more than 200 years ago, but floor plan illustrations appeared much later (see D. Clark 1956 [Fig.6]; 1974 [Fig. 15]).



Davis in particular found it at the Katmai Savonoski site (W. Davis 1954, reproduced in Oregon Paper No. 70 [Fig. 3.4]). Finally, when Knecht and Jordan published illustrations of houses with multiple appended compartments (Knecht 1995 [Figs. 23-26]; Knecht and Jordan 1985 [Fig. 6]) Dumond reevaluated his characterization of Bluffs phase houses, most of which had been incompletely uncovered in multiple stage excavations. Koniag tradition houses on Kodiak have had variable floor plans (Saltonstall and Steffian 2006); the earliest ones had only two rooms, and the preceding late Kachemak houses usually had one room, sometimes two that showed as separate surface depressions.

Part I of Paper No. 70 also updates the Norton tradition (Brooks River period) excavation record in detail, but no additional Norton phases or major revisions are proposed. The same is the case for the preceding Gomer Period (Arctic Small Tool tradition).

On the Pacific coast (Part II), excavations at Kukak Bay and Takli Island in 1964 and later were done to augment the 1953 and 1955 excavations by Wilbur Davis and Wendell Oswalt at Kukak and nearby Kafia Bay, respectively. This provided the Oregon program with data for comparing Naknek (mainly Brooks River) prehistory with that across the Alaska Peninsula on the Pacific coast. Oswalt (1955) recovered Ocean Bay (Takli Alder) culture material at Kafia, but did not recognize it and realize its great antiquity because he did not separate it from second millennium AD remains.

Later, at Takli Island, the Oregon program recovered the Takli Alder phase which is essentially Kodiak Island's Early Ocean Bay. An outgrowth of Takli Alder, Takli Birch also was excavated. In many aspects, Takli Birch was like the slate-working late Ocean Bay of Kodiak but it retained a flaked stone industry and showed some degree of relationship to Early Kachemak, which it overlapped temporally. After a gap of nearly 1000 years the Takli Cottonwood occupation appeared. Some Cottonwood implements are similar to those of its Kodiak and Cook Inlet Late Kachemak contemporary, a stone lamp with nipples on breasts for instance (D. Clark has seen the specimen; some people would call it "lamp with nobs in the bowl"). But most of the Cottonwood artifacts are similar to those of the Norton Culture Weir phase of the Naknek drainage. At Kukak, teams excavated house pits from which second millennium AD material was recovered. Some of it, the Kukak Mound phase, is closely related to the early half of Kodiak's Koniag phase. Kukak's historic

inhabitants were Koniags (ancestral Alutiiqs), but the last 400 years of prehistory apparently was not found in the Oregon excavations.

Dumond also discusses later work done by others in the area, collectively the "oil spill surveys" and the National Park Service (NPS) excavation at "Mink Island." Reset time spans for the five coastal phases are given from an unpublished manuscript by Crowell and Mann. The Alder phase, based on a single date from "Mink Island" begins at the same time as Early Ocean Bay on Kodiak Island, though, judging from the strength of its microblade industry and presence of prismatic blades, Kodiak may be earlier.

The "Mink Island" site was discovered in 1965 when Mike Nowak and one assistant daringly rowed out there across more than a mile of open water from Takli Island in a tiny rubber dinghy. They would have perished had their craft sunk. The site was being eroded then, and later it attracted looters. While he was in Kodiak about 1998, this reviewer visited the site when excavation was in progress, courtesy of the NPS and project director Jeanne Schaaf. The work and recording was very meticulous, but slow, with an objective of microanalysis. But the reason for the dig was to salvage the site from erosion and potting. It seemed to me that the project had conflicting goals. Dumond devotes three pages of brief Part II to detailed discussion of this. Its main relevance to this publication is that Mink Island shows an occupational gap corresponding to the gaps found elsewhere, as discussed in Part III. Dumond also refers to Fitzhugh finding an Early Kachemak hiatus on Sitkalidak Island, Kodiak Archipelago. I believe, however, that Fitzhugh's gap can be attributed to site loss due to erosion, as is discussed later in this review.

Dumond's third and concluding part, entitled "Towards Resolution," could be read as a stand-alone essay. The matter for resolution is an apparent occupational hiatus in both the Naknek River drainage and on the Pacific coast at Shelikof Strait, plus a lesser gap on the Pacific shores that occurred during the last centuries of prehistory in Koniag tradition (upgraded from phase) times. Volcanic eruptions are explored as a possible cause. The difficulty of correlating ash or tephra layers from site to site, of correlating them from Naknek to the Pacific coast area, the task of determining constraining dates for the ash falls, and linking to the eruptive history of Aniakchak volcano, are all discussed in detail that would not awaken a sleepy reader. Dumond hedges his conclusions. These are that volcanism, three substantial ash falls in particular, is a

possible cause of disjunction or “destabilization of human occupation” resulting in depopulation.

The principal gap of roughly 3000 to 2200 years ago is pervasive within the northern Alaska Peninsula study area, but far to the west and on Kodiak Island (and apparently near Kachemak Bay) occupation continued. There are, in addition to volcanism, correlations with climate change, but Dumond found that human responses, southward migration for instance, sometimes were the opposite of expectations, thus the role of climate change is not resolved.

He also grapples with the possibility of destabilization without an actual break in occupation, that there was cultural change without ethnic continuity; that is, newcomers arrived and replaced their antecedents. Kodiak’s Kachemak tradition, with which Kachemak Bay and Yukon Island, Cook Inlet, can be included, is highlighted for discussion at the end of this volume (exclusive of Appendix). It pleases this reviewer that the area of his archaeological naissance and corporal adolescence is highlighted. The Early Kachemak (EK) is largely coeval with the early hiatus. I have proposed Late Ocean Bay (OB)-EK continuity but am unhappy with the weakness of the evidence, which does not provide a smooth-flowing narrative from one culture to its successor. And Dumond is unconvinced of any case for ethnic continuity. Regional studies are hindered by the loss of most coastal sites on Kodiak and the Alaska Peninsula through marine erosion. Site loss probably has been ongoing for millennia but was accelerated by shoreline subsidence in 1964. The 1964 event and aftermath also stimulated a surge in looting or so-called recreational archaeology that aggressively attacked both eroding and intact sites. Much of EK remains only as artifact-impoorished charcoal-rich layers underlying later village middens, as black streaks at the inner edge of eroded sites, and as beach finds of durable artifacts, such as grooved cobble plummets (stones grooved around one end), found where sites have been totally lost to erosion. Significantly though, as Dumond notes, EK occupation directly overlies Late OB occupation at six or more sites and abuts OB at two additional sites near the town of Kodiak. This information has been recovered primarily through the Community Archaeology Program of the Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository. Did EK people move in, kill the resident men and take over their

homes and wives? That might have happened once, but not six or eight times. There remain many abrupt changes from Late OB to EK. For instance, the sudden appearance of grooved cobble plummets, and EK adze bits differ from late OB antecedents in three major attributes.

But it is not easy to move Early Kachemak in from areas located beyond Kodiak Island and outer Kachemak Bay. There are Paleo-Aleut crossties and Choris culture artifact identities that carry the aura of ancient common origins; but the Arctic Small Tool tradition, which abuts Early Kachemak temporally, is not a likely antecedent. Hidden Falls component II, located near Sitka (S. Davis 1989), is closely related to late Ocean Bay, especially in its sawn and ground slate technology. And its dating is in accord, but the succeeding Hidden Falls occupation lacks essential Early Kachemak attributes. I believe that Early Kachemak developed where it is found.

The author concludes: “This is with the sincere hope that the discussion of these somewhat varied opinions developed over the past fifty years will somehow contribute to endeavors in the same region in the fifty years to come” (p. 176).

This closely written volume is not a recreational read. Attention is given to supplementing, interpreting and, if necessary, reinterpreting previous reports on Katmai Park prehistory. The reader would have to choose between alternative interpretations, but since these usually involve minor issues of arcane information it is best to accept the author’s assessments. Nevertheless, considering the prominent position that the many Katmai Park reports and the publications of Don Dumond occupy on library shelves, *Archaeology on the Alaska Peninsula* is not one to be merely skimmed over. The major point made is that volcanism may have been more important to the upper Alaska Peninsula’s past than previously maintained. This evaluation also would apply to adjacent areas. He poses this as an issue to be addressed by the next fifty years of archaeology.

Dumond has led the way for southwest Alaska to bask in the sunrise of Eskimo prehistory (see preface to Dumond 1987). I would have liked to have seen him push the case even further to explore eastern Aleutian and southwest Alaska Choris Culture relationships before 1000 BC, and to examine possible co-development of late-prehistoric Thule culture throughout the western Eskimo region.

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