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ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS IN  
SOUTHWESTERN ALASKA

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DESPITE considerable activity during the last two decades our knowledge of the archaeology of Alaska is still rather scanty. Very few places have been thoroughly investigated, and almost all work has been confined to two areas, a northern including St. Lawrence Island and a southern including the Aleutian Islands. The intermediate area, from Wales to Port Möller, with a coast line of approximately 2000 miles, is virtually unknown from an archaeological point of view. If archaeological material from this area exists in museum collections, it is unpublished and thus useless to most students.

The need of information about the archaeology of this part of Alaska was felt very badly by the writer during his work on the analysis of the Ipiutak culture.<sup>1</sup> When it became apparent that early Kachemak Bay culture must belong to the same Paleo-Eskimo complex as Ipiutak, it was natural to assume the former existence of the same complex in the intermediate area, an assumption which ethnological evidence seems to bear out.<sup>2</sup> However, ethnological evidence does not carry the same weight as archaeological, and it was in the hope of finding the latter and filling in at least a part of the gap in our knowledge that the writer in the summer of 1948 began investigations in the Bristol Bay-Kuskokwim Bay area. The project, which was supported by the Arctic Institute of North America with funds provided by the Office of Naval Research and by the Danish Expedition Fund, was coordinated with another in Norton Sound headed by Professor J. L. Giddings, Jr. of the University of Alaska.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Erik Holtved of the University of

Copenhagen and Owen E. Rye, a senior at the University of Alaska, were members of the writer's party, the main task of the former being a study of the Eskimo language.

Archaeological work in this part of Alaska is greatly hampered by the lack of local labor, as virtually all able-bodied men are occupied by the salmon fisheries during part of the digging season. For the same reason we had to give up our original plan of reconnoitering the coast by boat and used aeroplanes instead. This method turned out to have many advantages; it is faster, more efficient, and cheaper than reconnaissance carried out by boat and is therefore recommended for future work in Alaska. From an altitude of about 800 ft. the sites are very conspicuous, and, since the relative age of the ruins can be read from the vegetation, which in the late ruins is very luxuriant and dark green and in the old ruins is low and sometimes as heathery as the surrounding terrain, it is easy to pick out the sites that look promising. To the writer it seemed logical to look for sites located like Ipiutak on low sand and gravel spits, a reasoning which eventually gave a positive result. Out of 50 sites observed from the air or reported by local people, seven were investigated although only minor parts of them were excavated. A brief description of the seven sites and the material found in them follows in the order in which they were investigated. As the material has not yet been thoroughly studied this must be considered as a preliminary report of our observations.

*Pávik.* On our way to Dillingham from Anchorage we were grounded for five days because of stormy weather at Naknek on the east side of Bristol Bay. This unintentional stop gave us a chance to do a little digging at Pávik, the former location of the present Naknek village

<sup>1</sup> Larsen and Rainey, 1948.

<sup>2</sup> Larsen and Rainey, 1948, p. 154.

<sup>3</sup> Giddings, 1949.

half a mile further up the Naknek River, which is known from Hrdlička's investigations in 1931.<sup>4</sup> According to the local postmaster, who has lived in Naknek since 1895, Pávik was abandoned 20 years before his arrival; hence the Pakvik mentioned in the 11th census (1890) might be the present Naknek village.<sup>5</sup> The site, situated on a high bluff at the river, consists of several fairly well preserved ruins covered by very high and thick grass. The ruins are square or rectangular, 5 by 5 to 5.5 by 6.5 m. with the longest extension at right angles to the entrance. This is from 2.5 to 3 m. long with an anteroom in front, approximately 2 m. square.

Because of frost in the ruins an area of 16 sq. m. was excavated half way down the steep river bank, where a 1 m. thick layer of refuse had accumulated. Besides fish bones, shells, and bones of seal, beluga, caribou, bear, beaver, and moose the refuse contained a considerable number of artifacts, mostly potsherds but also objects of slate, antler, bone, and ivory. The potsherds are rather thin, 0.5–0.8 cm., harder and less coarse-grained than most Eskimo pottery. The vessels were plain with a flat bottom, almost straight sides, and a thin rim. Notable among the many ground slate objects are triangular arrow points and harpoon blades with a very thin, sharply cut, triangular mid-section (Fig. 55, A, 14, 15). Many cut pieces of slate indicate the use of a stone saw, although none were found. Some of the best preserved antler and ivory objects such as harpoon head and foreshaft, harpoon-arrowhead, nozzles for bladders, dart head, arrowhead, leister prong, bird arrowhead, fishhook, and a human figure are shown in Figure 55, A, 1–11. In addition the finds include fragments of flat sled-shoes of whalebone; antler spoons, one of them with a fantastic human face engraved on the back; and some crudely carved, wooden human heads. The presence of several blue, red, and white glass beads (Fig. 55, A, 12, 13), fishhooks with an iron barb, and some iron tools indicate that the finds must be fairly recent. The same type of harpoon head was used by natives from Naknek fifty years ago, the only difference being that the blade was made of brass; hence, the finds probably date from the nineteenth century.

*Dillingham.* Two sites were found near Dillingham, one on Snag Point at the east end of

the present Dillingham village, the other half a mile north of Snag Point. The latter, which was tested, is situated on an old river bank now separated from the river by a low, quarter-mile wide, grassy plain. This large site, which was covered by tall grass, willows, and some spruce trees, consists of many house pits, some of them very large and deep. Five houses were tested, but as they were excavated in sand, only a paper-thin culture layer with a few potsherds and stone implements was found. The potsherds are extremely thick (2–3 cm.) and coarse grained and must have belonged to very large vessels with flat bottoms. The stone implements include blades for lances, knives and ulos of ground slate, a grinding slab, and two heavy, grooved splitting adzes similar to those found by de Laguna in Cook Inlet and placed by her in Kachemak Bay III (latter half?).<sup>6</sup> The site is undoubtedly pre-white, but judging from the vegetation and state of preservation of the ruins it probably does not date back further than the seventeenth century.

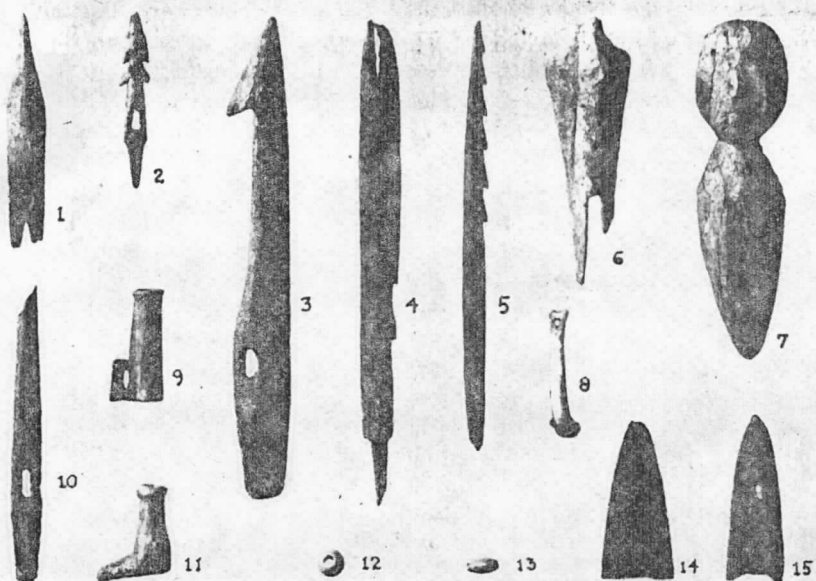
*Platinum South Spit.* Attracted by the topography of the two long and narrow sand spits which separate Goodnews Bay from Kuskokwim Bay, and by the fact that a large site was observed on each of the sand spits, we decided to move from Dillingham to Platinum. Like Point Hope the spits consist of several long, low, parallel ridges of sand and gravel, undoubtedly old beach lines. Of the two sites, each situated near the point of the spit at the entrance to Goodnews Bay, the one on the South Spit is the larger. It consists of a maze of depressions of different sizes, partly covered by tall grass, which makes it impossible to determine the exact number of ruins except by excavating the entire site. We estimated that there were 150 house ruins, which places this site among the largest on record in Alaska.

The houses were built on four of the beach lines, and judging from their state of preservation, they seem to be contemporaneous or at any rate to date from a rather limited period of time. Most of the house pits are square or rectangular and have an entrance passage usually pointing north, sometimes with an anteroom. A few houses seem to consist of two rooms, one behind the other, connected with a passage. Owing to the poor state of preservation and the thinness of the culture layer, little can be said about the construction of the houses. The best preserved

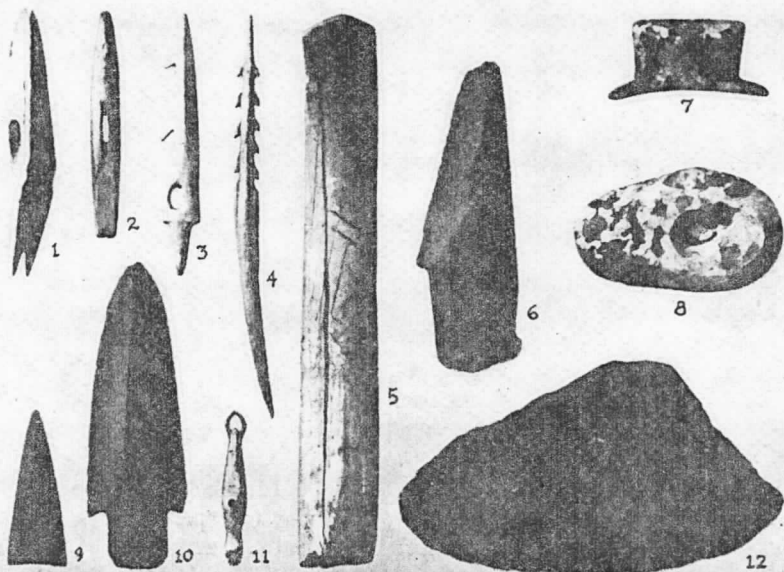
<sup>4</sup> Hrdlička, 1943, pp. 350–1 and 386–8.

<sup>5</sup> Porter, 1893.

<sup>6</sup> De Laguna, 1934, Pl. 18, 1, 2 and p. 172.



A



B

FIG. 55. Artifacts from Pávik (A) and Platinum South Spit (B), southwestern Alaska.