

THE LATE PREHISTORIC/EARLY HISTORIC ESKIMO OF INTERIOR NORTHERN ALASKA: AN ETHNOARCHEOLOGICAL APPROACH? ¹

by

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Despite considerable research by both ethnographers and archeologists, I feel we still do not fully understand the nature of the late prehistoric/early historic Eskimo occupation of interior northern Alaska. An examination of the data now available discloses a number of discrepancies in previously formulated reconstructions of Eskimo culture in the broad area stretching from the Noatak River Valley in the south to the edge of the Arctic Coastal Plain in the north and the Utukok River in the west to the Itkillik River-Galbraith Lake area in the east. My intention in this paper is to briefly outline some of the current problems in this area based on evidence secured during a still on-going archeological project dealing with the late prehistoric/early historic Eskimo population. It should be kept in mind that I am an archeologist looking at interior northern Alaska from the vantage point of the Noatak Valley-Etiviluk River headwaters area where most of my fieldwork has taken place.

As Solecki (1951) has noted, three physiographic provinces are represented in Northern Alaska. The southernmost consists of the Brooks Range, drained in the southeast by southern flowing tributaries of the Koyukuk River and in the southwest by the Noatak River, timbered along its lower reaches, which flows westward and then south to debouch at Hotham Inlet. North of the divide the many tributaries of the Colville River, including the Etiviluk, Nigu, Killik, Chandler, Anaktuvuk and Itkillik, flow northward to join

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the east-flowing Colville which then turns north to the sea. The gently rolling foothills which surround the Colville and its tributaries form the Arctic Foothills Province. Finally, the northernmost province, the Arctic Coastal Plain, is flat, relatively featureless and covered with myriad lakes and meandering streams. Thus, the late prehistoric/early historic inhabitants of this area became adjusted to varying physiographic conditions, ranging from the forested southern flanks of the Brooks Range to high mountain valleys to the rolling foothills of the Colville drainage to the Arctic coast.

Ethnographers working in northern Alaska have consistently made a distinction between the coastal population, called the Tareumiut, or people of the sea, and the inland Nunamiut, people of the land. As Spencer (1959) has pointed out, these represent two ecological adjustments, the life of the Nunamiut centering around the caribou and the Tareumiut having a primary orientation toward sea mammal hunting. However, despite ecological differences and, consequently, differences in the material culture utilized to exploit the local environment, there was a high degree of cultural uniformity between the two groups. In terms of non-material aspects of their culture, the Tareumiut and Nunamiut were quite similar and a network of trading ties bound the two ecological systems together.

There is some disagreement among ethnographers as to the specific Eskimo groups that should be subsumed under the rubric "Nunamiut." Spencer (1959:19ff.) apparently includes all the people inhabiting the area delineated above, from the Itkillik River to the Utukok and also the Ikpikpuk and Meade River peoples and the groups that inhabited the Lower Noatak River and the drainages of the Kobuk and Selawik Rivers. However, Gubser (1965:341) notes that the Noatak Eskimos looked west for their kin and traded primarily at Hotham Inlet rather than at the Colville mouth to which the Nunamiut proper traveled each summer. The Kobuk and Selawik peoples differed considerably from the Eskimos farther north, in that the former inhabited a forested riverine environment and depended to a great extent on salmon and other fish for sustenance. According to Gubser (1965:337ff.) there were four main groups of true Nunamiut: 1) the Kangianigmiut who lived along the upper Colville above the mouth of the Killik and along its tributaries and at times moved into the Noatak drainage; 2) the Killikmiut

who lived along the Killik and Chandler Rivers and the drainages between; 3) the Kaymalikmiut who lived in the Anaktuvuk, upper John, upper North Fork and upper Wild Rivers area and 4) the Itkillikmiut who lived on the Itkillik River, in Ulu Pass and on the upper Dietrich River. Gubser (1965:340) continues: "When population was low, each group might be represented by only one band. One region may even have been vacant for awhile. When population was high, such a people as the Kangianigmiut might be represented by four or five bands, each of which could have become a stable band, identifying itself as a particular group of people if population remained high and if the natural resources (especially the caribou) had been adequate. But such a high concentration of bands of normal size (50-150 people) could not exist in such a small area for a very long period without experiencing hunger or starvation . . . any *other* major grouping could be represented by only one or two bands (in which case everyone had all the meat, fat and skins he needed) or, for a short time, by four or five bands (in which case the decimation of caribou resulted ultimately in a reduction of human population.)"

Both Gubser and Spencer move beyond discussions of Nunamiut population dispersal to reconstruct Nunamiut culture before substantial Western contact. For my purposes I would like to focus on three traits which, because they lie in the realm of material culture, should be reasonably easy to accurately reconstruct and describe. These are house type, pottery and the presence in village sites of specialized structures serving as men's houses or *karigi*.

According to Spencer (1959:44-9), the most common Nunamiut house was a portable tent-like structure made from caribou hides stretched over a willow frame and held down by rocks placed along the oval or round base. Sod houses were also utilized, particularly at the more permanent winter villages located in the Selawik, Kobuk and Noatak drainages. Sod houses were erected on a willow branch frame supported by central posts and might have a passageway leading into a single room. Occasionally two houses were set up side by side and joined by a central passageway. A sod house might be semi-subterranean to the extent that the turf was removed before setting the central posts in place. Gubser (1965) corroborates Spencer's house description. Ingstad (1954:158-9), who spent a year at Anaktuvuk Pass, notes further that three

forms of sod houses were possible: a long house with an entrance on the long side, a long house with an entrance on the short side and a more rectangular type about half as large as these.

There is considerable confusion concerning the art of pottery-making among the Nunamiut. Both Gubser (1965:233) and Ingstad (1954:157) credit the bands in the Anaktuvuk Pass area with pottery-making, though Ingstad notes that the more westerly Nunamiut, living close to the clay source in the Noatak valley, manufactured more often than the Anaktuvuk Pass people. According to Gubser, the main Nunamiut clay source was somewhere on the Colville. Parenthetically, the Noatak people claim their pottery came from the Buckland area to the southeast. Spencer (1959:470ff.) denies that the Nunamiut ever made pottery, because he believes their nomadic lifeway prevented them from doing so. However, clay pots were a ceremonial necessity for the primary caribou slaughter in the spring, hence the Nunamiut were forced to secure them from the Pt. Barrow Tareumiut, who made many from a local clay for trading purposes.

Turning finally to the *karigi*, or men's house, we find that, according to Gubser (1965:168), the Nunamiut merely utilized an enlarged willow frame-caribou skin tent for this purpose. Spencer (1959:49) adds that willow beams, sod blocks, ice blocks and caribou skins all could be used in *karigi* construction, but he provides no further specifics on the Nunamiut *karigi*.

So much for the ethnographic reconstruction. As can be seen, there is general agreement on aspects of house and *karigi* construction, though some researchers provide more detail than others. There is little agreement about Nunamiut pottery-making. Now, keeping the ethnographic "facts" firmly in mind, I would like to explore the archeology of the same area. Excavations in late prehistoric/early historic Nunamiut sites have been carried out in the east primarily by Campbell (1962a) and in the west by myself, though others, including Solecki (1950), Irving (1953, 1962), Alexander (1968) and Amsden (Campbell, personal communication) have located and tested Nunamiut sites. The locations of the major known Nunamiut archaeological sites are shown in Fig. 1. I have not included isolated house structures or villages reported by early explorers and not relocated since.

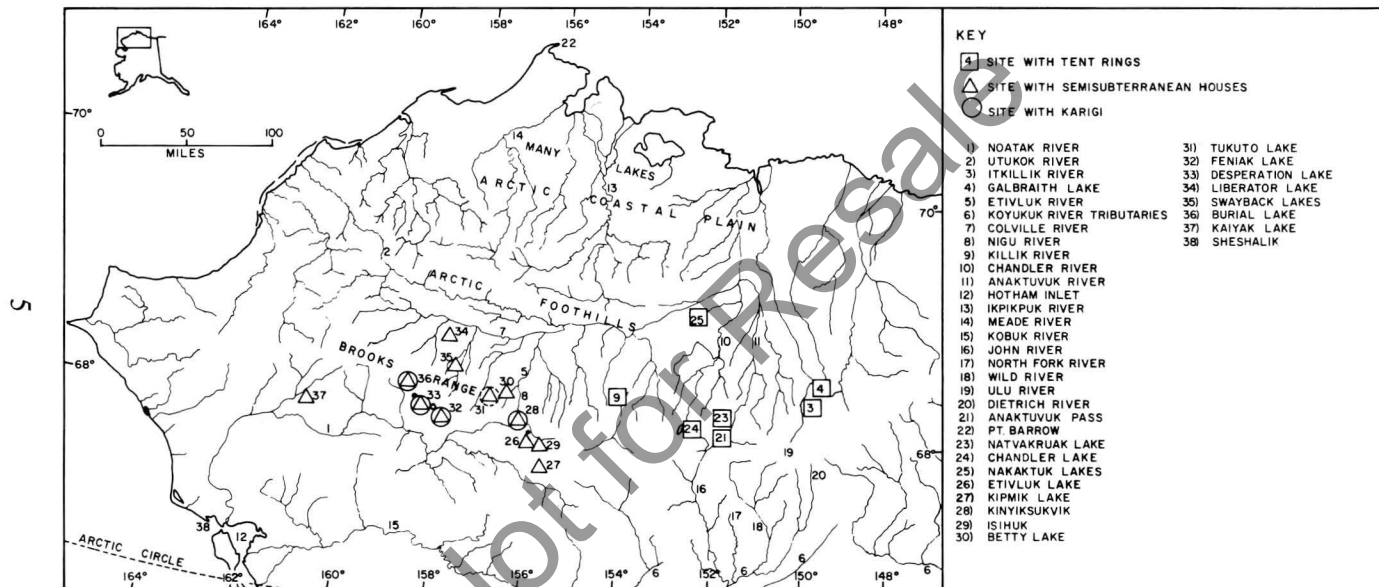


Figure 1.

If we examine these sites in terms of the types of houses present, we find a distinct east-west dichotomy. From the Killik valley east, the only type of house structure reported in the archeological literature is the tent ring, or what remains of a ground level willow frame-caribou skin tent. Clusters of tent rings are found primarily along the shores of large lakes in locations ideal for intercepting caribou. West of the Killik valley, to my knowledge, only two tent rings have been located, both being square in outline and recent in age. The hallmark of the western sites is the relatively deep semi-subterranean house. A wide variety of types are found, often within the same site. For example, at Tukuto Lake, I found at least three: 1) very deep semi-subterranean, spruce-framed structures, oval in outline with a wide bench at the rear and a long-centrally placed entrance passage; 2) “half” houses, shallower than the first with no apparent bench and a short entrance passage at one side; and 3) a shallow oval floor with no evidence of a bench or entrance passage and the remains of willow wall supports. At Etivluk Lake, Irving (1962:77-8) found large, deep rectangular houses with paired lateral benches and a long entrance which ended in a storm shed; shallower small oval or sub-rectangular houses with single raised benches at the rear and no entrance passage and a third type which appears to intergrade between the two.

It also might be noted that, in contrast to the situation in the east, the western sites are fairly complex with many semi-permanent houses, other structures, such as caches, and deep middens, indicating relatively large populations.

Pottery shows an interesting distribution in these sites. Sherds are almost lacking in the east; Campbell (personal communication) found only one or two and Amsden (Campbell, personal communication) apparently recovered several more during the past field season. Pottery is extremely common in the western sites, having been found in most if not all the late-prehistoric/early historic sites tested by Irving and myself. At Tukuto Lake pottery sherds constituted approximately fifty percent of more than 4000 catalogue entries.

The distribution of known *kariyit* (the plural of *karigi*) does not show the same east-west pattern. So far as I know, no remains of the Nunamiut *karigi* described by Gubser – that is, an enlarged tent ring – have been found. Irving (1962:81) first reported probable *kariyit* differing from the ethnographically

described type when he found a large oval *karigi* at Desperation Lake with walls made of boulders up to five feet in diameter and having a bench of smaller stones around the interior. Some of the wall stones had petroglyphs. Another smaller *karigi* of the same general type, was found at Kinyiksukvik in the Nigu Valley (Irving 1962:79-80). In 1967, I found similar *kariyit* at Burial Lake, also with petroglyphs and Feniak Lake, both in the Noatak Valley. A large circular depression lined by at least two boulders, found at Tukuto Lake and to be excavated in the summer of 1970, may also fall in this category.

How do we explain the difference between the archeological record and the ethnographic reconstruction of the Nunamiut? One obvious answer lies in the informants utilized by the Nunamiut ethnographers. Virtually all have been drawn from the population resident in Anaktuvuk Pass. The Nunamiut informant *par excellence* has been Simon Paneak, with reason, for his knowledge and understanding of the past are considerable. However, Paneak was born on the Itkillik River and spent most of his life either on the coast or in the Killik-Chandler-Anaktuvuk valleys. Quite probably an ethnographic reconstruction based on data from Paneak and other Anaktuvuk informants is valid for three eastern bands of Nunamiut but I seriously doubt that we should extend the reconstruction to the Kangianigmiut, the westernmost band of Nunamiut (Oswalt (1967:234) also makes a similar observation) Unfortunately, informants who took part in a relatively aboriginal lifeway probably are no longer available for consultation.

If we can legitimately speak of the Western Nunamiut as opposed to the Eastern Nunamiut, then, what causal factors are involved in the difference? Briefly, I will mention four possibilities:

(1) There is no archeological evidence that the Eastern Nunamiut inhabited their territory prior to white contact (early 1800's); all known archeological sites contain historic material. The same may be true for the western Nunamiut; until dendochronological samples from the bottom of the deep midden at Tukuto Lake are dated, we can not be sure. However, late prehistoric populations occupied the Noatak Valley by A.D. 1400 (Hall, n.d.) and thus were in a position to expand northward. This, of course, poses the problem of the origin of the Western and Eastern Nunamiut. Campbell (1962a:52;

1962b) feels the Anatuvtuk Pass Nunamiut represent an offshoot of the Pt. Barrow-Arctic Coast Tareumiut. This may be the case, or the eastern Nunamiut may have moved inland from the Arctic Coast further east; only further studies will tell. I believe that the Western Nunamiut may be an extension of the Kobuk-Noatak peoples. Early sites along the Kobuk date from A.D. 1200 (Giddings 1952) and along the Noatak (Hall, n.d.) from A.D. 1400, providing a neat progression.

(2) The cultural affinities of the Western Nunamiut appear, on the basis of archeological evidence, to be to the south. Use of pottery and semi-subterranean houses are the norm along the Kobuk and Noatak. We do not know much about the seasonal round of the Kangianigmiut; quite possibly some families of this group descended the Colville River to the Arctic Coast in the spring, as did the Eastern Nunamiut. However, the Noatak peoples, the Utukok peoples and, I believe, some of the Kangianigmiut moved south and west for the summer.

(3) Though I cannot provide quantitative evidence, the subsistence potential of the area occupied by the Western Nunamiut seems greater than in the East. More caribou were available more often. The fish resources of the Western area are superior, particularly in the Noatak basin where salmon are available. The village permanence suggested by many semi-subterranean houses and the presence of *kariyit* may be explained thus; with the exception of Kinyiksukvik and perhaps Tukuto Lake, the sites with *kariyit* are confined to the Noatak valley. However, historically the diet of the upper Noatak peoples was based on caribou and included little fish (cf. Foote 1961).

Finally, point (4), it is tempting to note that the greatest concentration of late prehistoric/early historic Nunamiut, in the upper Noatak valley and across the divide in the Etivluk-Nigu headwaters, lies directly athwart one of the main arctic trade routes. As Stefansson (1914; cf. Oswalt 1967:132-3) and others have noted, Eskimos from Siberia and as far south as Cape Prince of Wales traded each summer at Sheshalik on Hotham Inlet, with the resident coastal population and the people who lived along the Kobuk and Noatak. Exotic goods were then traded up the Noatak, across the divide and down the Colville to another trading center at the Colville delta. From there some trade items went west to Pt. Barrow but most ended up in the Canadian Arctic. While I am not one of those who sees the

entire sweep of late culture history in North America being effected by a traded broom, the strategic position of the Western Nunamiut in a well-documented trading system may be of importance.

In conclusion then, on the basis of the archeological evidence, it seems reasonable to distinguish at least two groups of Nunamiut, the Western and the Eastern Nunamiut. The former are characterized by a large population, extensive use of pottery, relatively permanent winter villages with semi-subterranean houses of several types and large, well constructed *kariyit*. The Eastern Nunamiut utilized ground level willow frame-caribou skin tents for housing, a larger version of the same as a *karigi* and, apparently, did not use much pottery. This dichotomy is not clearly reflected in the reconstructions of the Nunamiut culture offered by ethnographers, probably because the informants now available, many years after the fact, represent the eastern bands. Explanations for the distinctiveness of the Western Nunamiut include a different history, both in terms of origin and length of residence in the interior, better subsistence possibilities and the propinquity of the Western group to an important trading route.

Having offered these tentative formulations I find that I am not yet satisfied that our picture of the late prehistoric/early historic inhabitants of interior Northern Alaska is any clearer. For example, perhaps the upper Noatak sites, which have been only tested, represent a way of life as different from that represented by the upper Colville basin sites as the latter differs from that of the Eastern Nunamiut. Only more work combined with an awareness of diversity within an overall cultural system that, despite my statements here, has considerable continuity between the involved groups, will provide firmer answers.

A final point worthy of note is that the dichotomy between the archeological evidence and the ethnographic reconstruction briefly summarized in this paper suggests that Arctic prehistorians must exercise greater caution in the use of ethnographic data. Many of the reconstructions of archeologically known Arctic cultures have been given the firmness of reality by adducing ethnographic parallels for archeological inventories (cf. Larsen and Rainey 1948; Giddings 1952; and my own work, Hall 1966). The dangers of this procedure, particularly when the available ethnographic

reconstructons are just that, reconstructions, should be, but apparently have not been, obvious.

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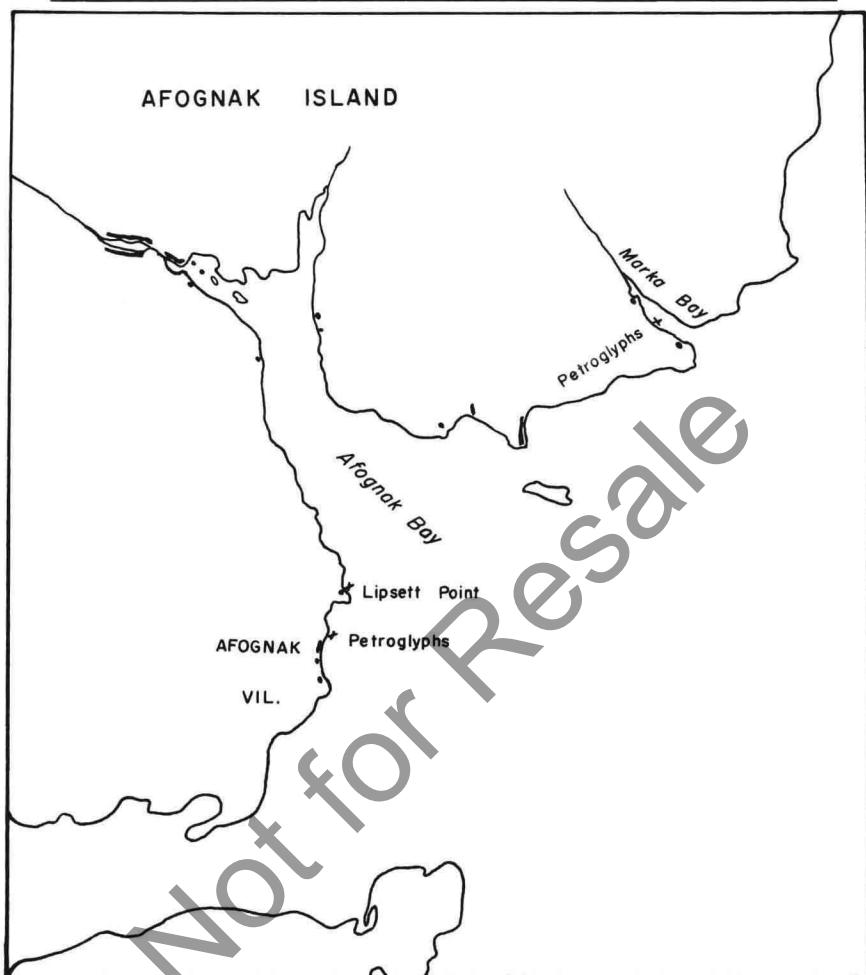


Fig. 1. Map of Afognak Bay showing petroglyph sites and occupation sites. These sites are catalogued elsewhere (Clark n.d.). The scale is approximately 2 miles to the inch.