

REVIEW

2000 YEARS ON THE KING SALMON RIVER: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPORT FOR UGA-052

By Brian W. Hoffman, 2009. Occasional Papers in Alaskan Field Archeology, no. 2. Bureau of Indian Affairs, Alaska Region, Branch of Regional Archeology, Anchorage. Paperback, 133 pages, figures, photographs, tables, two appendices. NTIS order no. PB2009-111442.

Reviewed by Don E. Dumond

Department of Anthropology, 1218 University of Oregon, Eugene OR 97403-1218; ddumond@uoregon.edu

The King Salmon River involved here (there are others of this name) heads at Mother Goose Lake on the central Alaska Peninsula and flows 60 km or so in traversing the 30 airline km to Ugashik Bay on the Bering Sea, where it empties alongside the Dog Salmon and Ugashik rivers that drain lands farther to the northeast. On the right bank of the King Salmon at roughly its midpoint, the site UGA-052 lies on a Native allotment that has been awaiting ownership transfer. As the author notes, the cultural geographic context is enough to make the position interesting—between the northern Alaska Peninsula (sociolinguistic Yupik), the Kodiak Island group (Koniag), and the Aleut zone to the southwest (Unangan).

From 2003 to 2008, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) located and mapped at least sixty-six major depressions on the site. Excavations reported by Hoffman include not only those by the BIA archaeologists between 2002 and 2004, but also results of a field school of Hamline University that he himself conducted in 2003. With full-color illustrations throughout, the publication is visually striking.

UGA-052 is divided spatially and culturally between two zones, the higher “inland” zone a few hundred meters from the river and the lower “river” zone on the King Salmon banks. The former, trenched and pitted by BIA archaeologists, included at least sixty surface features, depressions largely round or nearly so in discernible outline, and between 16 and 44 m in max-

imum visible dimension. The river area, on the other hand, included three depression complexes apparently representing multiroom houses, plus two (recent) square depressions and a round one, and was taken on by the Hamline field school.

The work of the two parties demonstrated an overall age and cultural separation: seven age determinations in the inland area ranged from 1530 ± 40 to 1720 ± 40 ^{14}C years (calibrated and estimated to date between AD 230 and 620), with artifacts indicating aspects of the Norton cultural horizon; from the river zone six determinations in evidently prehistoric multiroom houses range from 150 ± 40 to 530 ± 60 ^{14}C years (calibrated and estimated to date from AD 1300 to sometime before contact), with artifacts suggesting a recent Thule- or Koniag-affiliated occupation (the Thule-Koniag distinction in this period being uncertain). In addition, an apparent Norton-affiliated occupation outside one of the multiroom houses provided a ^{14}C age of 1280 ± 50 years, and a sample from the presumed floor of a multiroom house was aged at 1020 ± 70 ^{14}C years, suggesting a Norton contamination (whereas another from a hearth in the same room was among those in the Thule/Koniag range). Putting these together, the Norton-related occupation is presumed to date from about AD 250 to 850, heavier and earlier in the inland zone, slightly later and much less evident at the river bank, with Thule/Koniag occupation beginning around AD 1400 and lasting for several centuries but ending before the Russian period.

The mid-period of abandonment, from AD 850 to perhaps AD 1300, is marked by relatively massive tephra deposits indicative of heavy volcanic activity.

For both inland and river zones, careful tabulations are presented of stone artifacts and waste material. For the river zone, to which organic preservation was entirely limited, are also tabulated a few hard organic artifacts as well as faunal and floral remains, and observable wooden structural remains are mapped and discussed. The artifactual material from the two zones, plus the carbon dates, provide a general confirmation of findings reported by Winfield Henn (1978) from his work in the Ugashik River drainage, of a massive Norton-period occupation succeeded in late times by an occupation reminiscent of the so-called Thule period of the northern peninsula. The tabulations for UGA-052 are followed by discussions of activities apparently engaged in at the site and the possible functions as a settlement in the two periods. Finally, the presence of the unmistakable volcanic episode between the two occupations leads author Hoffman to suggest that the multiroom house occupants were colonists newly moving into an abandoned area, making use of some special artifact forms as they accommodated to a region with resources partly unfamiliar to them. Much of this discussion is stimulating, although for various reasons is not convincing in all respects.

A major weakness in the data is the modest size of the sample. This is, of course, a direct result of limited time spent on the site. In inland-zone excavations, BIA crews of five persons spent a total of twenty-two days in the two years of 2003 and 2004, testing thirteen depressions in total, of which the nine covered in this report (all of those receiving more than a 50 x 50-cm test pit) had a total of 32 m² exposed, yielding 127 stone implements and a somewhat greater number of potsherds. In 2003, the Hamline field-school crew of six spent thirty-six days (including days off?), clearing a total area of 38 m², from which they recovered only sixty-three nondebitage objects, largely of stone but including some matting and a few organic artifacts. One is thus inclined to skepticism in terms of some blanket conclusions. There are two of these in particular.

The first is that the absence of apparent remains of the transverse slate knife (*ulu*) in the two multiroom houses chiefly tested at the riverside can be taken to suggest that three bipolar chert or chalcedony cores found in the floor of one of the houses represent a previously unsuspected Thule-period technique for deriving flake implements

with which to butcher fish. At the edge of the same house, of course, were reportedly undisturbed Norton deposits productive of chipped stone. And yet this suggestion in regard to the possibility that hard quartzite was used for some cutting tasks during the Thule-related period of polished slate is worth further consideration, given that chips of similar material have been reported consistently in excavations of houses of the period on the northern Alaska Peninsula (although almost all of these are in areas with juxtaposed or stratified Norton-period remains). But in terms of the overall limited number of slate implements recovered from the river-zone houses at UGA-052, the absence of even the fairly common transverse knives seems understandable as sample limitation (for instance, only seven examples of identifiable projectile insert blades, usually so plentiful, are reported). That this sample absence of knife fragments, together with the just-possibly intrusive bipolar cores, is sufficient support for the colonial nature of the Thule-period occupation, in which people were unfamiliar with local resources and were trying something new, seems to stretch a doubtful point.

The second is that the Norton houses of the inland zone (none of which received more than a single trench) were predominantly round, without any indication of a side entry. This may, the author suggests, be a possible indication of Aleut-zone influence, an area where Unangan people were partial to more nearly round houses entered through the roof. In my own experience in the region, the surface indication of any semisubterranean house more than a few centuries old is bound to be round, and traces of shallow, sloping side entries to Norton houses are invisible. This is doubly the case where volcanic ash deposits of some depth postdate the occupation. One must therefore hope strongly that in future excavations of houses like those of the inland area of UGA-052, major efforts will be made to more carefully clear the houses themselves as features worthy of interest—and worth more than a trench.

Somewhat the same unhappiness can be extended to the excavations within the apparent confines of the multiroom structures. The expanded excavation areas in those depression complexes are mapped as much more than mere trenches, but the extensive artifact and waste-material distribution maps seem to say that the excavators never ventured outside their squares. No presumed articulations between rooms were fully explored; where tunnel connections between rooms were encountered, it was only the portions of them lying within the excavation square that were revealed, and where room edges are

located it is again only those within an excavation square. The square grid, of course, is an imposition on a site that permits easy and effective measurement of the locations of objects found in an unsquare natural world. But that the square itself should have such a strong hold on the archaeological conscience that the specific feature—the house, in this case—is not followed in its own right is lamentable. The house form, after all, is a primary artifact indicative of much that is social and worth exploration in all its dimensions. Thus, in the UGA-052 excavations we do not really know the complete form of any house of any age.

As a last and final note (and I hope a constructive one, having been there myself), a flaw in this otherwise handsome contribution to a BIA publication series lies in some minor and mechanical editorial matters. In the present text, for example, “lead” appears more than once as the past tense of the verb “to lead,” rather than the more appropriate “led”; “laying” shows up where “lying” is indicated; and “bulk” is used rather than “balk” or “baulk” (at the edge of squares). These are only a few examples of the kinds of minor boggles that all of us are susceptible to, and which can be righted by a carefully chosen copy editor.

REFERENCE

- Henn, Winfield
1978 Archaeology on the Alaska Peninsula: The Uga-shik Drainage, 1973–1975. *University of Oregon Anthropological Papers* no. 14. Eugene.

