

# INTRODUCTORY NOTES ON “VANKAREM ANTIQUITIES” BY NIKOLAI N. DIKOV: PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF THE 1957 AND 1963 ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT CAPE VANKAREM, CHUKOTKA

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## INTRODUCTION

Archaeological observations at Cape Vankarem on the southwestern Chukchi Sea coast (Fig. 1) are among the earliest in the western Arctic (see Dikov 1977 [2003:3ff] for a historical review). The following preliminary field report on the Cape Vankarem research was published by Nikolai N. Dikov in 1968 and remained largely inaccessible to non-Russian-speaking scholars until its translation by Richard Bland in 2008. Most of the field report was incorporated verbatim into Dikov's 1977 (2003:188ff) synthesis, which was also translated by Bland and published by the National Park Service. The original report included twenty figures illustrating artifacts and maps that were not included in the 1977 [2003] report, but most are reproduced here. In addition, the 1968 report contained a more detailed description of the burials than the 1977 [2003] version. The present work therefore represents a fuller account of the original research, which has had limited exposure and analysis since its discovery over fifty years ago. Also included here is a discussion of the geomorphic context of the site and the contribution of Edward W. Nelson, who visited Cape Vankarem in 1881. Aside from a few allusions to the classic literature (i.e., Collins 1937; Ford 1959; Okladnikov and Beregovaia 1971 [2008]), the report is presented with the brevity and immediacy that characterized Dikov's original. It has, however, been edited for a twenty-first-century English-speaking audience.

## GEOMORPHOLOGIC SETTING OF CAPE VANKAREM

The one-km-long, narrow granitic knob of Cape Vankarem (67°50'55" N, 175°48'24" W) forms a unique landmark on the southwest coast (Fig. 1) of the Chukchi Sea (Arctic Pilot 1917:337). The northwest-southeast trending massif, only 24 meters above sea level, lies off shore at a tidal inlet to an extensive estuary that extends inland to the Vankarem River (Fig. 2a). At one time an offshore island—possibly during at least one of its occupations—the linear Vankarem massif now forms a tombolo, as littoral currents have led to its attachment to a nearby sand and gravel barrier island. The barrier island is capped by at least two depositional sets of beach ridges, an older set separated by wide swales filled by

ponds, succeeded by a more recent set of ridges with narrow swales (Zenkovich 1967:474–475). A narrow channel covered with pebbles extends between the granite bluff and the barrier island (Nelson 1899:266). This pebbly area lies about 0.75 meters above the extreme high water observed in the 1880s and represents the highest storm surge elevation to hit the coast. The barriers are composed of gravel or pebbles, the result of storm deposition that led to beach progradation that eventually limited access for former residents, a circumstance that led Edward W. Nelson (1899) to invent, or presage, the relative dating and survey technique of beach ridge archaeology (Mason 1993).



*Figure 1: The location of Cape Vankarem. Map by Dale Slaughter, Boreal Imagery.*

Cape Vankarem and its vicinity attract thousands of walrus as a haul-out—recently to their detriment (Joling 2007)—a circumstance that may account for its prehistoric importance (Collins 1940:549; Hill 2011). The archaeological value of Cape Vankarem was first recognized by Nelson (1899:265ff), who visited the site in August 1881. Nelson (1899:265) mapped several abandoned settlements (Fig. 2b) that reflected an orientation toward former and less accessible shorelines, a circumstance that he attributed in a general sense to “the rate of rise of the land” (1899:266), presumably due to tectonic or glacio-isostatic uplift. An increase in storm intensity seems a more likely explanation, in the absence of field evidence of tectonic uplift.

### SITE DESCRIPTION<sup>1</sup>

Dikov and his crew identified four sets of house depressions and two graves at Cape Vankarem. The house depressions correspond to three of the sites observed by Nelson

(1899:265ff) in the late nineteenth century. Dikov divided the houses at the four Vankarem loci into two types. Type I houses were large, about 30 meters in diameter; Type II houses were smaller, less than 20 meters in diameter.

Locus 1 lies on the northern spit just northwest of Vankarem village and had seven small Type II house pits in 1963, although ten were noted (Fig. 2b) by Nelson (1899:265).

Locus 2 consists of nine small Type II house depressions arranged along the western margin of the Vankarem massif, only half of which were apparent to Nelson (1899:265). Dikov’s crew did not conduct any excavations in this location.

Locus 3, located on the south margin of the bluff, above the in-filled channel, contains four Type II house mounds, none of which were observed by Nelson. Only three structures are shown in Figure 2c.

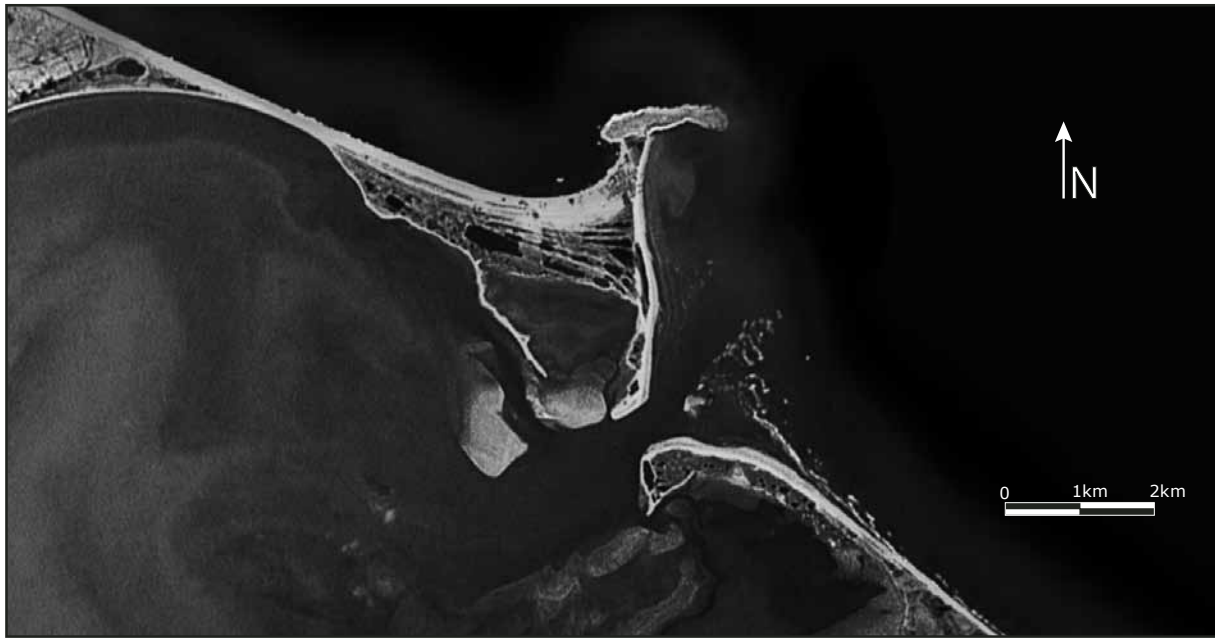
Locus 4 includes two Type I house depressions along the cliffs of the northeast margin of the knoll. Three house mounds were apparent to Nelson (1899:265; Fig. 2b), who inferred that erosion had destroyed other, possibly earlier, houses. The house mounds had a central cavity and a:

trench-like depression leading out...toward the sea show[ing] the position of the entrance passage. Numerous ribs and jawbones of whales lie scattered about...show[ing] the material used in framing them (Nelson 1899:265).

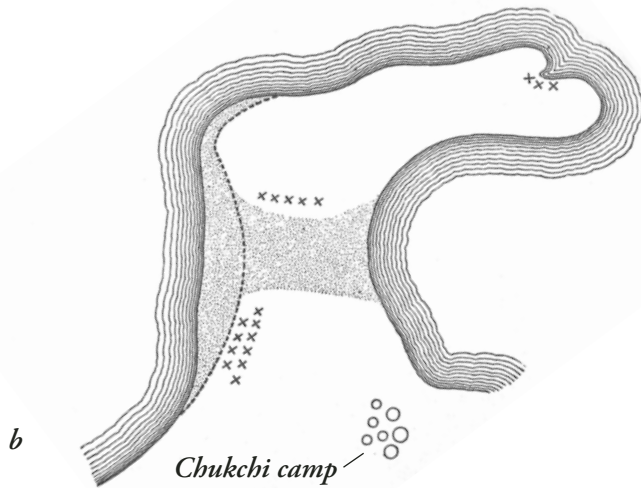
Dikov encountered two graves at the highest point on the Cape Vankarem massif, southwest of Locus 4 (Fig. 2c).

Another locus described as a “present Chukchi camp, consisting of skin lodges” was noted and mapped by Nelson (1899:265) on the eastern barrier island (Fig. 2b); the site was not observed by Dikov in the 1950s. The nineteenth-century residents did not, apparently, employ “recent” whale bone in construction, but “gathered” quite a number of “vertebrae and other bones from the ruins of the Eskimo houses,” a process observed by Nelson (1899:266).

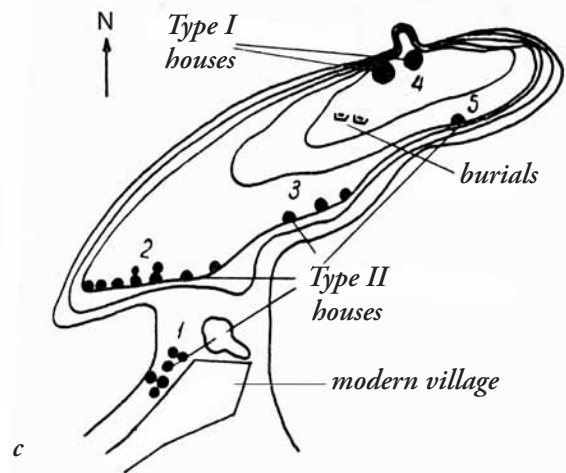
1 This section paraphrases Dikov (1968:60) and incorporates observations on the site made by Edward W. Nelson in 1881.



a



b



c

Figure 2: (a) Aerial view of the Cape Vankarem massif. Courtesy Google Earth; (b) sketch map of the Cape Vankarem sites in 1881 (Nelson 1899:265); (c) sketch map of Cape Vankarem loci, after Dikov 1968.

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