

# INTRODUCTION TO “NOTES ON THE KOLOCHES” BY ALPHONSE LOUIS PINART

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## ABSTRACT

Alphonse Louis Pinart was born in Marquise, Pas-de-Calais, France, in 1852, the son of the director of an ironworks. He attended school in Lille and Paris. Having a penchant for languages, he studied Sanskrit and attended lectures on Chinese. In 1867, when he was 15 years old, he visited the Paris International Exposition, there meeting the Abbé Brasseur de Bourbourg, a scholar of Mexican studies. Pinart became captivated by the study of Native cultures, particularly Native American cultures, and in 1869 was on his way to California. On 27 April 1871, he set out on his first trip to Alaska to spend a year in the Aleutian Islands and on Kodiak Island (cf. Laronde 2009). During this time he began collecting material for his subsequent articles (Parmenter 1966; Wagner 1962).

These few facts are most of what is known about Pinart's early years. When he died in 1911 the journal *Anthropologie* published a death notice in which the author of the notice gave only 14 of the dozens of journal articles left behind by Pinart (Verneau 1910). And, as Ross Parmenter states, none of the journals is mentioned by name, number, volume, or date (Parmenter 1966:1).

In the Native village of Illiuliuk (now the community of Unalaska) Pinart engaged a small crew of Aleuts and set out on 4 September 1871 from Unalaska Island in a kayak. On 10 November of the same year he arrived in St. Paul (now the city of Kodiak) on Kodiak Island. From Kodiak he traveled to San Francisco, returning to Sitka the following year to carry out his second and final trip to Alaska. Returning to France in late 1872, he was given a hero's welcome and awarded a gold medal by the French Geographical Society (Grant 1946:277). Following his sojourn in Alaska, Pinart turned his attention to collecting linguistic data on the Natives of Central America.

Pinart was not only a collector of linguistic material; he also amassed rare books and manuscripts. In 1873 he purchased part of Abbé Brasseur's library, acquiring the rest of it the following year after the abbé's death. Pinart's researches, which took him to Germany and Russia, attracted the attention of Hubert Howe Bancroft, who contacted Pinart with a request for books and manuscripts (Bancroft 1890:621). Pinart willingly granted Bancroft's request and, as a result, much of Pinart's work is now housed in the Bancroft Library in Berkeley, California.

In 1880 Pinart married Zelia Nuttall (1857–1933),<sup>1</sup> daughter of a wealthy San Francisco doctor (Zelia was to become an outstanding researcher in her own right).<sup>2</sup> Their marriage turned out to be an unhappy one. In 1884 they were granted a “deed of separation” and in 1887 a divorce. Their marital problems might have been due to finances. Parmenter (1966:1) states that though Pinart was “wealthy in his twenties, by 1883 he had run through all his inherited wealth as well as the money of Zelia Nuttall.” Their

1 Alfred M. Tozzer (1933) identifies Ms. Nuttall as “Zelia Maria Magdalena Nuttall.” However, Henry R. Wagner (1962:6) gives her name as “Zelia Parrot Nuttall,” her middle name being that of her grandfather, John Parrot, consul in Mazatlán, Mexico.

2 During her researches Zelia Nuttall discovered such unexpected treasures as a Mexican codex. In 1902 the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology published a facsimile of it in her name—the *Codex Nuttall* (Wagner 1962:4).

marriage produced one child, Nadine, who later became Mrs. Arthur C. Laughton (Tozzer 1933:475).

In 1911 Pinart died at the age of 59 in Passy, France. Through his work in Alaska he represented France in an international rush to salvage the disappearing cultures of Native peoples.

Alaska was perhaps the last great discovery by Europeans of land available for them to claim. Though Mikhail Gvozdev (1990) apparently landed on Alaska's shore in 1732, Vitus Bering (Steller 1988), whose ill-fated voyage of 1741 brought back knowledge of the wealth of furs to the Siberian *promysblenniki* and started the "fur rush" to Alaska, is considered the "discoverer" of Alaska (cf. Solovjova and Vovnianko 2002). Except along the shores where fur-bearing animals might be found, the exploration of Alaska proceeded rather slowly. A number of tentative trips up the Copper River between 1796 (cf. Grinëv 1997) and 1848 produced relatively little information (cf. Grinëv 1993), and it wasn't until one hundred years after Bering's voyage that Lavrentii Zagoskin (1967) traveled up the lower part of the Yukon River.

The late nineteenth century brought a growing awareness of the rapid disappearance of frontiers to conquer in the New World. Institutions in several countries began sending out people in an almost frantic effort to explore the last bits of unknown land. They were trying to collect both material and nonmaterial items of fading cultures in an attempt to salvage as much as possible before every trace had disappeared (cf. Cole 1985, 1991; Rohner 1966, 1969). With the sale of Alaska to the United States, Americans came to explore the land and collect Native legends and material goods. The explorers included, among others, Frederick Schwatka (1983) and Henry Allen (1985). Others were more interested in the people, such as Edward W. Nelson (1983) and William H. Dall (1870). Nelson, stationed at St. Michael between 1877 and 1881, collected an enormous amount of material for the Smithsonian Institution. Dall explored many parts of Alaska, collecting scientific information on both the people and the land.

Collectors came from other nations as well, primarily Germany. Aurel Krause lived among the Tlingit Indians and produced one of the basic ethnographic works on the Tlingit (Krause 1956). Another collector from Germany, though Norwegian, was Johan Adrian Jacobsen. Jacobsen was hired by the Berlin Museum of Ethnology to travel about Alaska and make ethnographic collections (Jacobsen 1977). And while Franz Boas did much collect-

ing in Canada he also studied the Tlingit and Haida in Alaska (Rohner 1969).

The Russians, of course, had Ivan Veniaminov (1984), who wrote an ethnography on the Tlingit, and later Waldemar Jochelson, who, as part of the Jesup Expedition, studied the Aleuts (Jochelson 1933).

In this large group of researchers France had a single representative, Alphonse Louis Pinart. Ross Parmenter calls Pinart an "explorer, linguist and ethnologist" (Parmenter 1966). He spent his modest fortune and that of his wife in his quest to collect Native culture, particularly linguistic data, before it vanished. Besides cultural material, Pinart collected geographic, geological, and paleontological information.

Pinart left behind about sixty-five published items and hundreds of pages of unpublished materials. His unpublished materials remain in the form of handwritten notes in various languages—he seemed equally at ease writing in English, Russian, or French, as well as German and Spanish. Twelve of his publications pertain to Alaska. One is a catalog of items collected in Alaska for a display in the Paris Museum of Natural History ("Catalogue des Collections Rapportées de l'Amérique Russe"). Another is his "Voyages à la côte Nord-Ouest de l'Amérique exécutés durant les années 1870–72 par Alph.-L. Pinart," which is a collection of articles by others analyzing fossils, rocks, and other materials collected by Pinart. Of the twelve articles Pinart published on Alaska, all but one—"Notes on the Kolocheš"—are largely devoted to the inhabitants of the Aleutian Islands.

Pinart did much in a short period of time, resulting in some geographical inconsistencies, particularly in the "Voyage along the Coast of Northwest America from Unalaska to Kodiak." In Pinart's defense, he was trying to acquire as much information as possible. He must have felt pressured by the fact that, while the Germans and Americans had many people in the field, he was the sole representative for France.

He apparently felt compelled sometimes to publish in great haste. For example, Pinart rushed to get the "The Cavern of Aknañh, Unga Island" published, believing that a certain American (presumably William H. Dall) was about to upstage him by claiming the discovery for himself. Despite his hasty work, we must give Pinart credit for recording and publishing this article at a time when many explorers desecrated burials without recording any information about them.

Pinart liked to present himself as a great explorer. No doubt this helped him raise funds for further travels. He did dedicate himself to acquiring scientific data, albeit primarily in the form of word lists. Nevertheless, his frequent references to himself as “a young traveler who, for the love of science, has, at his risk and peril, explored during nearly two years the rarely visited and almost unknown coasts of the northwestern region of North America” (“Notes on the Koloches”) might make the reader smile. In fact, the Russians had been in the region for over 100 years before Pinart arrived and were in Shelikof Strait when John Meares “discovered” it for the English in 1786 (Meares 1967:x–xi). And of course, Native peoples have lived on these coasts for 7,000 years or more.

Pinart was a man of his times who readily interchanged the words “savages” and “natives.” We have not tried to soften any of his prose. Despite his sometimes inappropriate language, he was trying to save as much of the disappearing Native heritage as he could.

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