ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS OF THE NATIVE ALASKAN VILLAGE SITE, FORT ROSS, CALIFORNIA

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ABSTRACT

Archaeological investigations of the Native Alaskan Village Site (SON-1897/H) have been undertaken in an attempt to understand the spatial organization of a multiethnic settlement composed of native Alaskan and Pomo peoples at Fort Ross, California. A three-phase field strategy was implemented during the summers of 1989 through 1992, encompassing intensive, non-invasive surface investigation, subsurface testing, and broad- scale areal excavation. Preliminary results reveal three separate "bone beds" and at least two architectural features. Future analysis will attempt to refine the spatial association of features and materials to provide insight into the consequences of multiethnic communities as agents of cultural change.

INTRODUCTION

Archaeological investigations of the Native Alaskan Village Site (NAVS) (SON-1897/H) at Fort Ross have been undertaken in an attempt to understand the spatial organization of a multiethnic settlement composed of native Alaskan and Pomo peoples. This field work is part of a broader study of acculturation in the multiethnic colony of Fort Ross, employing a long-term diachronic framework, an emphasis on the study of spatial contexts, and cross-cultural comparisons of native peoples from different homelands.

Founded by the Russian-American Company in 1812 and operated as a trade outpost until 1841, the Fort Ross colony consisted of Europeans, Creoles, native Alaskans, and local Kashaya Pomo, Southern Pomo, and Coast Miwok peoples. Most archaeological research has focused on the stockade complex where the "honorable" Russian administrators and military officers lived. But, the native peoples who labored outside the palisade walls were the economic lifeblood of the Fort Ross Colony, with the Russians depending on them to build, maintain, and support the settlement during the three decades of operation.

We have identified three ethnic neighborhoods outside the stockade compound. The Russian Village, or *sloboda*, consisted of lower-class ethnic Russians, Siberians, and Creoles. The native Californian neighborhood contained a scattering of small, multiple residential compounds in the vicinity of Fort Ross. The Native Alaskan Village was the location of both native Alaskan households of single men and families, and interethnic households composed of Koniag Eskimo men and Kashaya Pomo women. It is identified on the 1817 map of Ross, reproduced in Fedorova (1973), captioned as "14 Aleut Yurts made of planks". Various accounts number dwellings between 14 and 37, with the native

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Alaskan populations ranging from 75 to 116 people.

We suspect that the Village site will provide the greatest evidence of cultural change at Fort Ross. We hypothesize that native Alaskan men and native Californian women perhaps functioned as cultural mediators in the broader Fort Ross community. The Koniag men and Kashaya Pomo women, in their interethnic households with associated kinship networks, would have been the source of greatest innovation and acculturation in the multiethnic community, serving as focal points of exchange between ethnic groups. The cultural exchange of architectural styles, material goods, methods of craft production, subsistence practices, diet, dress, beliefs, and ceremonial practices may have originated in these households. We believe evidence of these cultural practices will be found in a variety of archaeological spatial associations at NAVS: the layout and construction of houses, the location of trash deposits, the types of refuse deposited together in dumps, and the processing techniques and discard patterns of bones.

FIELD INVESTIGATIONS AND RESULTS

Today NAVS is a 200 by 40 m archaeological deposit located directly south of the southern portal of the historic Fort Ross garrison. A three-phase field strategy has been used at NAVS in an attempt to define the overall site structure, the patterning of features and activity areas, and the locations of secondary refuse deposits. Results from each phase provided direction for the refinement of strategies and implementation of subsequent field methodologies.

Phase One was conducted in the summers of 1989 and 1991. Fieldwork centered on intensive surface investigation of the NAVS neighborhood. Nonintrusive methods included contour mapping of the area, surface collection of artifacts, and geophysical survey. All surface features were mapped using a transit and meter tapes, and a 2% sample of the site was surface collected.

Results from the contour mapping in Phase One disclosed 14 shallow surface depressions, ranging in diameter from 3 to 6 m, distributed north to south in a linear fashion across the site. Artifacts resulting from the surface collection included glass beads, ceramics, projectile points, flakes, and worked bone artifacts. A review of the spatial distribution and densities of these surface artifacts reveals a clustering around the surface features. Subsurface magnetic anomalies also tended to follow this linear distribution of features and artifacts.

In the summer of 1991, Phase Two was implemented. Based on the results of Phase One, we wanted to determine if the surface features, artifact clusters, and magnetic anomalies represented former house locations and associated household debris deposits. Selective excavation began, with a 1 by 1 m test unit and three hand-dug trenches, two of which were placed across surface depressions. Sixteen 1 by 1 m units were excavated following natural stratigraphic sequence, divided into 10 cm levels within each natural stratum, to sterile soil, at a maximum of 70 cm. We point provenienced, mapped, and photographed *in situ* all artifacts and faunal remains found in primary contexts. Seventy-five percent of the sediments were dry screened through 1/8" mesh and 25% were wet screened through 1/16" mesh. Each level was mapped and photographed, soil samples were taken from features and as a column from each unit, and unit/trench wall profiles were drawn.

Results from Phase Two excavations revealed a dense concentration of animal bones, marine shells, historic artifacts, fire-cracked rocks, and redwood posts at a depth of 20-30 cm below surface in each of the two trenches that were placed over the surface depressions. The excavated "bone bed" consisted of hundreds of faunal elements, including sea mammal, terrestrial game, domesticated mammal, fish, and marine shell. Artifacts diagnostic of Pomo, native

Alaskan and European cultures were also in evidence, including ceramics, stone and bone tools, beads, and glass. These multicultural remains, along with fire-cracked rocks, were deposited in both trenches in a horizontal layer about 5 to 10 cm in depth.

Phase Three began in the summer of 1992. We undertook a broad scale areal excavation of the two surface features investigated the previous summer. We hoped to define the limits of the "bone beds" and determine if the surface depressions actually represented architectural features. The excavation strategy attempted to maximize the spatial exposure of the "bone beds" *in situ*, yet minimize the destruction of these features, since future interpretive programs could focus on a public display of the cultural horizon. Additional resistivity surveys were conducted, building on the results of the prior years. Working from the hand-dug 1991 trenches, two large excavation blocks were exposed, 23 sq m and 27 sq m respectively. Each 1 by 1 m unit was divided into 50 by 50 cm cells; we excavated the A horizon down to the "bone bed", or until it was evident that the edge of the deposit had been identified. The archaeological surface was then cleaned, photographed and mapped. A preliminary analysis of artifacts and ecofacts was conducted *in situ* and recorded on unit maps. Excavation methodologies used in 1991 were continued in 1992, with the elimination of the 25% wet screen sample.

Initial review of the 1992 excavation results revealed three separate "bone beds" and at least two architectural features. The northern feature appears to be a semi-subterranean structure about 6 m in diameter. The feature has been covered with artificial fill, with the "bone bed" resting on this fill about 20 cm below the present ground surface. The "floor" of the structure is about 70 to 80 cm below ground surface. The southern feature has a sandstone rubble foundation covered with artificial fill about 30 cm below ground surface. Two discrete "bone beds" are located above the fill rubble. Artifactual remains recovered in the excavation blocks are similar to the "bone bed" concentrations from 1991. Diagnostic Pomo artifacts include obsidian and chert points, shell beads, ground stone artifacts, and cooking stones. Among the native Alaskan artifacts are ground slate points, rods and tablets, worked bone dart points and fishhooks, and a possible stone oil lamp. European materials include ceramics, glass, gun flints, glass beads, pipe stems, and a Russian Orthodox metal cross. In addition to animal bones, marine shells, historic artifacts and fire-cracked rock, several pieces of worked whale bone were recovered.

Our current interpretation of the architectural features evident at NAVS is that they were abandoned, filled in, and subsequently used as trash dumps for faunal remains, Kashaya Pomo artifacts, native Alaskan artifacts, and European materials. Although the "bone beds" are unexpected in an open-air coastal California site, the presence of articulated fish vertebrae and whole clam shells indicates that the deposits are in primary context. The various types of bone and shell found on top of the compact fill surfaces are well preserved, large, intact specimens. We believe that once the materials were deposited, they were not trampled by residents nor were they significantly disturbed by subsequent plowing. Although it is possible that post-depositional processes, such as rodent activity, may have produced the deposits, the completeness and integrity of the "bone beds" suggests otherwise.

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

We are now undertaking a comparison of the spatial layout of features, activity areas, and refuse deposits at NAVS with North Pacific Koniag settlements and nearby Ross hinterlands Pomo sites. Additionally, NAVS architectural elements and construction materials will be evaluated in light of information on traditional Pomo/Miwok, Koniag, and Russian structures. Native and European artifacts will be analyzed and compared to artifact assemblages from related sites. Sediments, food remains, and cooking refuse will also be examined.

Initial review of the spatial orientation suggests two preliminary observations about NAVS. First, the settlement layout at NAVS resembles the traditional Koniag villages associated with Russian American Company "artels" (hunting camps). Turn of the century descriptions by Orthodox Churchmen Bolotov and Gideon (Black 1977), as well as recent archaeological investigations by Jordan and Knecht on Kodiak Island, outline the Koniag residential pattern, often a component of the larger artel settlement. The traditional Koniag *barabaras* (or yurts) were often positioned in a linear fashion on a bluff overlooking the water, with midden areas down-slope in front of the structures (Black 1977:82, 90; Knecht and Jordan 1985:21; Jordan and Knecht 1988:231-32, 236-37). Open areas between the structures appear to have been intensively used multipurpose work areas, as evidenced by midden with randomly dispersed artifacts, ash charcoal dumps, food bone dumps, and occasional gravel lenses (Jordan and Knecht 1988:239). The 14 depressions and patterned artifact clusters at NAVS, situated in a line on the terrace above the ocean, seem to reflect a typical Koniag residential layout. The midden below the bluff (Fort Ross Beach Site, SON-1898/H) adds to the continuity of the spatial pattern.

The second observation relates to the Koniag features. While the general size and depth of the NAVS features are as expected for a traditional *barabara*, the large partially excavated pits are uncharacteristically lacking in floor refuse and small side rooms. Jordan and Knecht report *barabara* depths ranging from 75 to 150 cm and measuring 2 to 5.5 m on a side (1985:24, 30). The NAVS feature #8 appears to be of this pattern, at about 6 m across and 70 to 80 cm deep. However, Jordan and Knecht also report typically large central rooms with 10 to 30 cm of floor midden and a dense charcoal hearth area, as well as smaller side rooms that are mostly devoid of refuse and without hearths, but occasionally containing sweat bath rubble (Knecht and Jordan 1985:23-32; Jordan and Knecht 1988:236, 239). The side rooms were usually used as sleeping compartments, sweat bath areas or storage areas (Black 1977:90; Knecht and Jordan 1985:23-32). It is possible that the excavated portion of the features at NAVS represents a side room, and that future excavations will expose the remainder of the traditional structure, specifically the central room with dense floor midden and hearth.

However, it is also possible that the NAVS structure represents a deviation from the traditional multiroom *barabara* floor plan. If the NAVS structures are single-family dwellings, akin to earlier Koniag *barabaras*, the side rooms of later multifamily *barabaras* might not be present (Black 1977:85; Jordan and Knecht 1988:225, 232, 236, 271-2). Perhaps the one large room at NAVS was used by a single family only for sleeping, with other activities conducted outside the structure at communal kitchens, activity areas, storage sheds and sweat baths, as reported by Bolotov and Gideon (Black 1977:82,85,89). Bolotov also describes early single-family artel-associated yurts that did not have hearths, but were heated by rocks warmed at the *povarnia*, the community kitchen (Black 1977:85).

In addition, the impact of the Kashaya Pomo women in these multiethnic households must be considered. Patterns of activity and refuse disposal resulting in an absence of dense floor midden in the NAVS *barabaras* may well be a function of traditional Pomo housekeeping activities. Construction patterns also may have been impacted by the Kashaya; to the extent that the Pomo helped the Koniag build these homes, local architectural practices may have been incorporated.

Other factors to be considered are the impact of the availability of nonnative building materials and long-term exposure of the native Alaskans to Russian construction techniques. Wood post molds, plank flooring, earthen benches, and sod roofing, characteristic of traditional *barabaras*, have as yet to be seen in a NAVS feature. Given that this artel was established outside the Koniag native homeland, perhaps the traditional Koniag *barabara* was altered to make use of local

California building materials not available on Kodiak Island. In addition, Russian influence on construction techniques may have been significant, considering that many of the Koniags at Fort Ross had grown up with the Russians. All of these factors suggest possible great diversity in architectural styles and construction materials, even within this one village site. Future research will attempt to provide answers to these questions.

REMARKS

Information from these ongoing activities will also be used to assist in the development of a public interpretive program and "culture" trail in the Fort Ross State Historic Park, in full collaboration with the California Department of Parks and Recreation. The program will consist of trailside displays and on-site interpretations that will direct the public beyond the Visitor's Center and reconstructed stockade to the greater multiethnic Ross community. A proposal for the interpretative trail extension is currently pending with the State Parks Foundation.

It is our intent that these investigations will shed some light on the acculturation process and native responses to European contact as experienced through native cultural mediators. Hopefully, we will further our understanding of the consequences of multiethnic communities as agents of cultural change.

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