

Guest Editorial

The papers in this issue of *Arctic* represent major contributions to a relatively recent development in the study of northern peoples, namely the extensive use of ethnographic and ethnohistoric information to augment excavations at late prehistoric and historic Athapaskan and Eskimo archaeological sites. Since this is a research strategy with which I have been associated for many years, it is encouraging to observe the results of a more sophisticated and systematic approach to this multidisciplinary methodology as it is being utilized in the western boreal forest region. Although my perspective on these developments relates primarily to boreal forest sites in the Yupik- and Athapaskan-speaking regions of western Alaska, I can appreciate the significance of such a research strategy wherever it is applied to northern peoples.

During the 1950s and 1960s, most archaeologists working in Alaska were preoccupied almost exclusively with a search for the earliest cultures in their area. This was understandable when it is remembered that the Western Arctic was the region most likely to reveal information concerning man's entry into the New World. With a fascinating problem such as this confronting them, it is little wonder that archaeologists of that era avoided sites belonging to the late prehistoric and historic periods. Ethnographers of the time, with certain notable exceptions, focused on modern Eskimo communities, possibly in the belief that the reconstruction of traditional ethnography was no longer profitable or even possible. Studies of modern communities were undertaken and often described as accounts of culture change, but they were, in fact, synchronic studies of the contemporary situation and were essentially ahistorical.

During this period, the Yupik- and Athapaskan-speaking peoples of western Alaska, when compared to the Inupiat to the north, were never the focus of much ethnographic or archaeological research. Archaeologists did not expect to find evidence of the earliest occupations along the south Bering Sea coast and certainly not along the wooded rivers of the interior. When researchers did begin to move inland in this area, there were new problems to solve and new research techniques to be utilized. Early sites were difficult, if not impossible, to locate along the changing river banks, and the focus was thus on more recent evidences of human occupation. At the same time, it was recognized that significant historical data were available to supplement interior archaeology and that ethnographic information could and should be obtained from Native informants before it was too late.

A research methodology approximating that which was to be used in southwest Alaska in the 1960s was undertaken in the boreal forests of west-central Alaska in the summer of 1935 when Frederica de Laguna carried out an archaeological reconnaissance of the Tanana and Yukon valleys. Her field party, which included geologists, investigated a large number of sites throughout this vast area, testing many of them. In her report (1947), she attempts to locate and identify

all the villages visited by early Russian and American explorers on the Yukon and its tributaries, one of the earliest efforts to integrate Alaskan historical and archaeological data. Cornelius Osgood, who studied the Ingalik Indians in 1934 and 1937, was another early investigator who called attention to the importance of historical literature on western Alaska. It was his vivid descriptions of the earliest Russian explorations on the lower Yukon and its tributaries that first stimulated my interest in Ingalik ethnohistory.

An investigative strategy that combines the methodologies of history, ethnography, and archaeology presents problems that the prehistoric archaeologist, with his or her specialized training, may not have faced previously. The lack of both language facility and experience in the critical evaluation of published and archival source materials has characterized northern research in the past, but the papers in this issue indicate that researchers are becoming more sophisticated and systematic in the use of the information available to them. At the same time, northern libraries and archives are building their own collections and their holdings are becoming better known. Historians interested in the North are producing more studies relevant to the interests of ethnographers and archaeologists, and documents in foreign languages are increasingly being translated, annotated, and published.

Most important of all, perhaps, is the renewed interest in traditional ethnography and the knowledge that, in fact, it is not too late to collect information about historic archaeological sites from elderly informants. Interest in exploring the possibilities of oral history is being encouraged by Native peoples intent on documenting their relationship to the land. Involvement of Native peoples in the research and the subsequent feedback of information to the peoples on whose land sites are being excavated can create goodwill and increase the rewards to be expected from ethnographic inquiry.

One of the discussants for the papers in this issue emphasizes the importance of ethnogeographic data to the boreal forest archaeologist. Presumably, much of this data is best collected in the field, but I would suggest that basic historical research relevant to settlement patterns and historic sites might best be carried out prior to field work so that the investigator is prepared in advance to ask relevant and knowledgeable questions of his or her informants.

It is clear that boreal forest archaeologists working in areas occupied by Eskimos and Athapaskans have made much progress in determining and using new data sources. Ethnohistory, in the broadest sense of the term, bridges the gap between contemporary field observations and archaeology, thus making possible systematic studies of long-term social change.

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