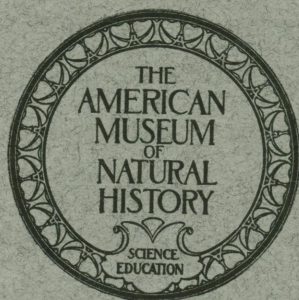


ANTHROPOLOGICAL PAPERS
OF
THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

VOLUME XXXI, PART III

AN ALEUTIAN BURIAL

BY EDWARD MOFFAT WEYER, JR.



BY ORDER OF THE TRUSTEES
OF
THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
NEW YORK CITY
1929

PUBLICATIONS IN ANTHROPOLOGY

In 1906 the present series of Anthropological Papers was authorized by the Trustees of the Museum to record the results of research conducted by the Department of Anthropology. The series comprises octavo volumes of about 350 pages each, issued in parts at irregular intervals. Previous to 1906 articles devoted to anthropological subjects appeared as occasional papers in the Bulletin and also in the Memoir series of the Museum. Of the Anthropological Papers 27 volumes have been completed and 4 volumes have been issued in part. A complete list of these publications with prices will be furnished when requested. All communications should be addressed to the Librarian of the Museum.

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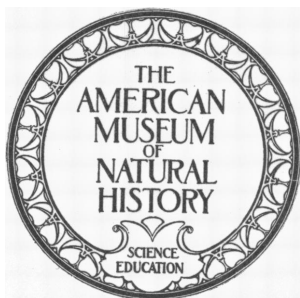
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INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 1928 the schooner *Morrissey* was fitted out by Mr. Charles H. Stoll of New York for an expedition to Alaskan waters, in coöperation with the Museum. Mr. Harold McCracken was the leader of the expedition and Mr. H. E. Anthony, the director of its scientific work. The Department of Anthropology was invited to name a representative on its scientific staff to make archaeological and such other anthropological observations as opportunity permitted. Accordingly, Mr. Edward M. Weyer, Jr., was engaged by the Department to render this service. Mr. Weyer examined a number of archaeological sites at Port Möller, Alaska, and collected specimens and ethnological data at Diomedé Island and a number of points on the mainland of Alaska. Physical measurements were made of a hundred Eskimo of whom photographs and other data were obtained. Further, an interesting Aleutian burial was discovered in Unalaska. Perhaps fuller notes were taken of this burial than of any previous discovery of this kind; but, in any event, it was felt that the find was of sufficient importance to warrant publication in detail. Mr. Weyer therefore prepared the accompanying descriptive account of the burial.

The contents of the grave were brought to the Museum where they have been studied in detail by Margery L. Loeb, the results of which study will follow in a second paper in this series, and will contain a description of the artifacts accompanying this burial, the wrapping and preparation of the bodies, and especially the clothing and textiles found with them. Finally, Mr. Weyer will prepare a third paper giving the results of his archaeological studies at Port Möller. The *Morrissey* moved rapidly from place to place, making the intensive study of any one site impossible. The stay at Port Möller, however, was long enough to make trial excavations in refuse heaps and to reveal the archaeological characteristics of the site. So, on the whole, the anthropological results of the Stoll-McCracken Expedition are a worth while contribution.

THE EDITOR.

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AN ALEUTIAN BURIAL

An Aleutian grave which casts interesting light on the former burial practices in the Aleutian Islands was discovered by the Stoll-McCracken Arctic Expedition of 1928 of the American Museum of Natural History. This grave may be characterized as a driftwood sarcophagus containing four "mummies," buried on the flat top of a precipitous islet near Unalaska Island, about four hundred miles west of the Alaska Peninsula. Early visitors to these islands reported remarkably preserved human mummies. In 1874 Captain Hennig, of the Alaska Commercial Company, secured a number of bodies from a cave on one of the Islands of the Four Mountains. These mummies, forwarded to institutions in the United States, were described by W. H. Dall in an article "On the Remains of Later Pre-Historic Man obtained from Caves in the Catherina Archipelago, Alaska Territory."¹ Basing his estimate chiefly on native legends Dall dates the earliest remains in the cave from 1756, which is just before the arrival of the first white people in the region.

The discovery of this burial cave was illuminating. Unfortunately, however, there was no information as to the character of the primitive mortuary grotto and the arrangement of the bodies and grave deposits within. Scientific data regarding Aleutian cave graves remained incomplete, and information concerning a second type of Aleutian grave, viz., the wooden sarcophagus, was very deficient. Therefore, the Stoll-McCracken Arctic Expedition, hoping to contribute comprehensive information on former Aleutian funeral practices, made the securing of a typical grave one of its aims. The result of this effort was the discovery of a buried sarcophagus containing four "mummies" with their grave deposits, untouched since they were interred. The following pages describe the finding of this grave, the mode of the interment, and the nature of the "mummies" and artifacts, which were returned to the Museum. Exploring among these islands is uncommonly ill-conditioned. Stormy weather prevails, which, combined with strong currents that course between the islands, makes navigation very difficult. Furthermore, anchorages are scarce. Besides these serious drawbacks to travel, the extreme dampness of the climate makes any sort of scientific reconnaissance irksome.

The searcher for graves has few clues to follow. Burials are not necessarily in direct association with the ancient villages, which are fairly easy to locate. Probable village sites may be anticipated by the study of a map showing the configuration of the coast, the topography, the

¹*Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge*, 1878.

sources of fresh water, and other environmental conditions that influence the selection of a location for settlement. On the ground, a buried village is generally detectable by the shallow pits marking the caved-in, semi-underground dwellings.

A burying ground, on the other hand, is likely to be passed over unnoticed. Further, places quite unsuitable for human habitation were often selected for graves; for example, small, uninhabited islands. A good generalization is that sites where the dead would be safe and secure were preferred. Hence, often the most inaccessible locations were chosen. This was certainly true of the buried sarcophagus discovered by

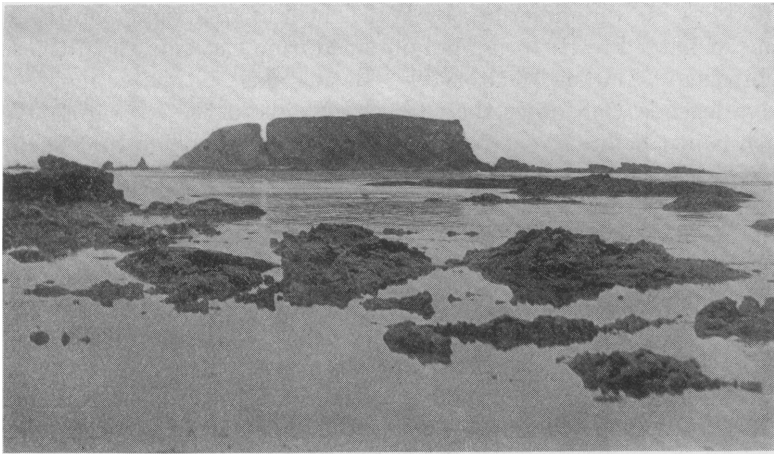


Fig. 1. "Fortress Rock" as seen from the Eastern Side. On its summit the burial was discovered.

the Stoll-McCracken Expedition. Well-nigh insurmountable cliffs rising 125 feet from the sea defended the summit of the islet.

In our searchings, the most valuable suggestions came from local traditions and the actual observations of natives and foreign travelers. We had been told of this strange rock. Generally it was described as two islands, an error understandable from the extraordinary cleft that almost divides the rock into two parts, as shown in Fig. 1. Tradition has it that long ago people lived on the summit of the "larger island," in refuge from besiegers, probably from Kodiak Island in the Gulf of Alaska. "Scale the 'small island' first," we were always told. This was said to be quite feasible but the larger block of rock supposedly was inacces-

sible. According to the legend, the ancient refugees who made the island their fortress spanned the breach between the two summits by a draw-bridge.

Late in June, 1928, we anchored in Kashaga Bay, on the north coast of Unalaska Island. Somewhere along this shore to the westward we should find the "double islet." So we immediately struck out in a small boat. Rounding the first promontory our view was widened to include a long extent of coast line. Distant about six miles and offshore about one mile, stood a great abrupt rock, which was cleft near its landward end by a deep precipitous gorge. Unmistakably here was the object of our quest. This sharp slit stood in perfect profile. As we drew nearer, the sea shallowed to form a typical high latitude strand flat. Long-continued marine erosion, aided by the disintegrating action of frost, had reduced the coastal strip to a shallow platform. Here and there the sea surface was broken by low, jagged skerries of dark rock. These, however, were insignificant in contrast with the stump-like island itself, which rose to a level of about 125 feet. "Fortress Rock" we called it, by reason of its rock ramparts and the moat-like cleft guarding the flat crest of the larger mass from the accessible smaller summit.

Our small boat wended among the jagged skerries near the island to the irregular rocky beach, and we stepped out. Climbing the smaller section of the island was quite simple. Part way up this smaller block, at the extreme south end of the island, we found a wide niche in the rock sheltered by an overhanging cliff. This niche had been used extensively as a burial place, as indicated by a number of grave deposits. The material was in disorder and partially decayed and of the bodies only the scattered bones remained. We collected twenty-three skulls and a quantity of grave materials. On the summit of the smaller section of the island were many other shallow graves yielding skeletons and less plentiful grave deposits.

The table-like top of the main mass of the island stood at exactly the same level as the smaller summit, separated from it about twenty-five feet by the deep gorge. A circuit of the beach disclosed cliffs at all points. Midway along the eastern side, however, where the talus slope flanked the rock wall highest, a narrow chimney in the cliff opened a single route to the top. Here we cut footholds in the steep rock and attached a safety rope. There were no evidences that this route had been used before, but the rapid weathering in this region would soon efface marks left by climbers.

The summit is a plateau about 450 feet long and 150 feet broad. People had once dwelt on it (as, indeed, the legend suggested), for there were a few house-pits. We did not have opportunity to excavate these. Living in isolation upon this islet tableland would be impossible for long, for no water is available, perhaps even anywhere on the island, and food would be restricted to birds, which, to be sure, are uncommonly plentiful. The sod upon the summit was thoroughly riddled with burrowed-out birds' nests.

In some places, digging to a depth of a foot or two produced various artifacts, principally stone implements. No metal was found anywhere on the island. The driftwood crypt containing the mummies was buried at the edge of the large, flat summit, near the dividing cleft. It was hidden by one and a half feet of earth, except on one side near the cliff where the ground had slumped slightly. The side timbers thus exposed were discovered by Junius Bird, Second Engineer of the *Morrisey* and scientific assistant. The structure suggested a buried dwelling of some kind rather than a grave.

It is difficult to say how much of the foot and a half of earth on top of the sarcophagus had been replaced by the grave-diggers and how much of it may have been deposited by the wind. The accumulation of wind-blown material would be very slow, due to the elevation of the summit and its position in the sea. There are no exposed mud flats in the vicinity and the rocky coast of Unalaska Island is about one mile away. The soil cover on top of Fortress Rock was no where deep, and was especially shallow near the edges.

We removed the earth covering the sarcophagus and exposed its topmost lid, 8 feet by 10 feet in size and formed of planks laid lengthwise (see diagram in Fig. 2b). A stone lamp (60.1-5667) 4 inches long lay on these planks directly in the center. Near it were two irregular obsidian flakes (I-41). Also here were found a piece of bone, probably a wedge (60.1-5668), 7 inches long, flat on one side, convex on the other, and a fragment of wood.

The cracks between the planks that served as a lid were well caulked with neatly tied straw bundles and pieces of fur. As we removed these top planks, one by one, the elaborateness of the burial became obvious. Beneath it were spread protective layers as shown in the diagram in Fig. 2b. The uppermost was a fine-textured grass matting, which stuck to the lid from long contact with it. Under this were spread animal skins, probably of seal. Deeper were two layers of grass fabric of a different texture, between which lay a bulkier packing of straw bundles (60.1-5724) tied together to form a sort of loose matting (Fig. 3).

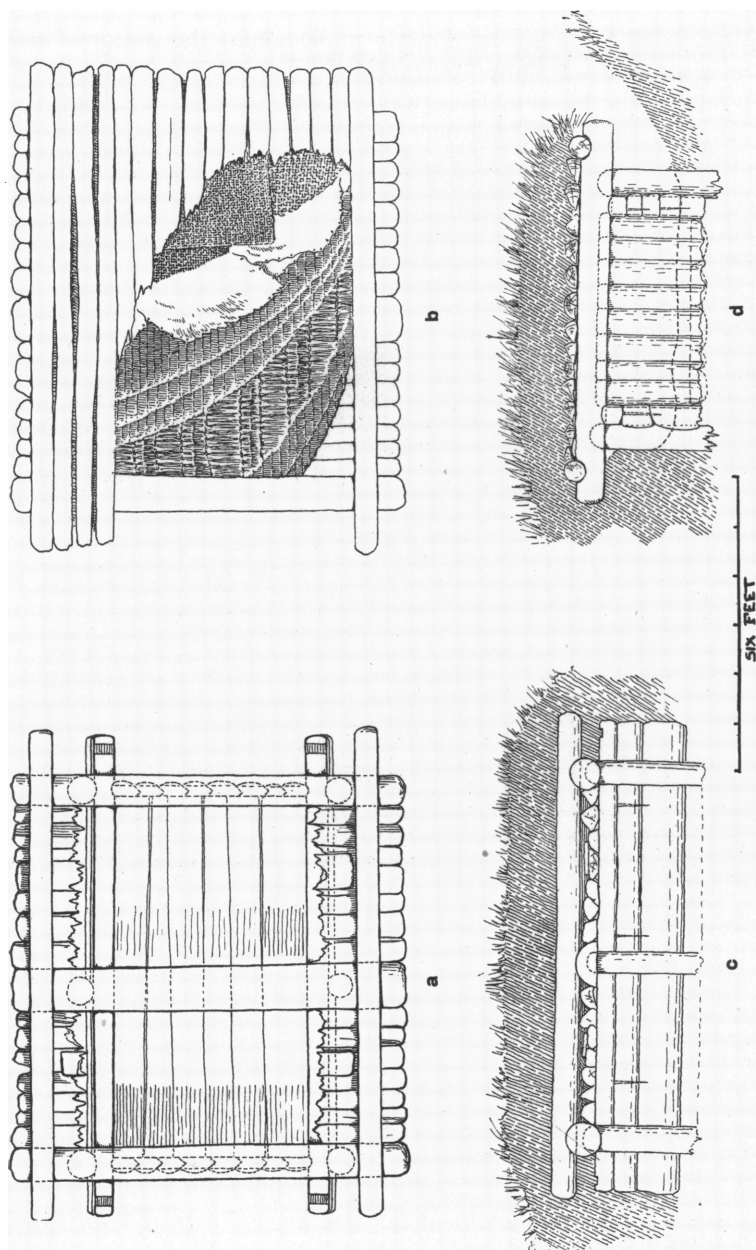


Fig. 2. Diagrams showing Construction of Driftwood Sarcophagus.

a, Top view, showing interior; *b*, Top view, showing position of the two lids and layers of matting and skin between; *c*, Side view of sarcophagus, intact; *d*, End view of sarcophagus, intact.

Resting on all these layers, directly under about the center of the lid, was a second stone lamp (60.1-5669), about 8 inches in length. And deep among the loose matting was a double paddle (60.1-5670b), together with two shafts of wood (60.1-5671ab) of about the same length.

All of these layers of matting and skin rested on a second inner lid composed of split logs laid crosswise. The center log, considerably larger than the rest, superficially divided the sarcophagus into halves. Inside, the sarcophagus measured 4 feet by 7 feet by $1\frac{1}{2}$ feet. The dia-

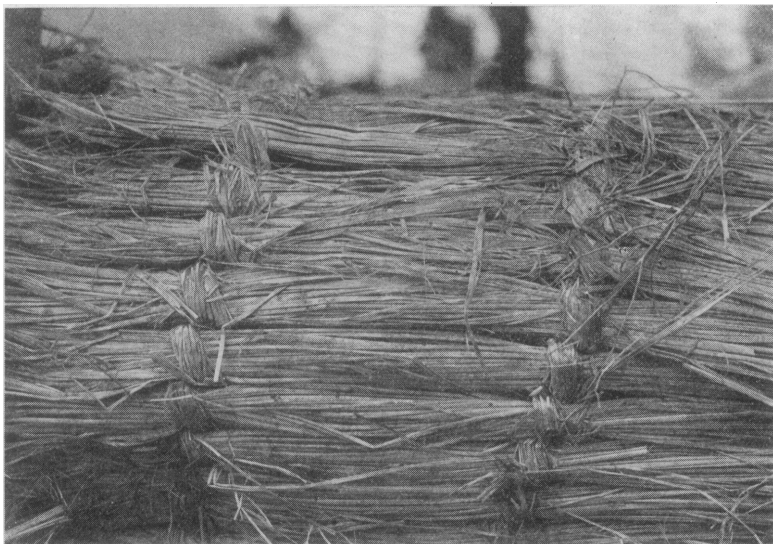


Fig. 3. Straw Matting laid between the Two Lids of the Sarcophagus.

grams in Fig. 2 illustrate its construction. The parts were expertly mortised together and bone nails added rigidity.

Four bodies were inside, lying in the positions indicated in the diagram in Fig. 4. All were doubled up with their knees close to their shoulders. One half of the space was given to Body No. 1 which was buried more elaborately than the others. Body No. 3 was the bottom-most. No. 4, the smallest body, partly covered the feet of No. 2, these two being separated by two layers of fur (sea otter?) with the fur sides together. Bodies Nos. 1 and 2 lay with their heads to the southeast; but the *feet* of No 3 were southeasternmost.

With the exception of Body No. 3, each lay in an oval hoop to which was attached loosely an animal skin, like a loose drum head. This frame was composed of two or more pieces of wood curved and lashed into shape by rope of woven sinew. The hoop of No. 2 had loosened and spread.

Under each of bodies Nos. 1, 2, and 3 was a shallow wooden bowl, approximately where the hips rested.

Judging by the differences in their preparation for burial, No. 1 (a man) was the most important person of the four. Half of the space was apportioned to this one body. The hoop around it was wrapped in pup seal fur. Inside the hoop the body lay on several thicknesses of straw

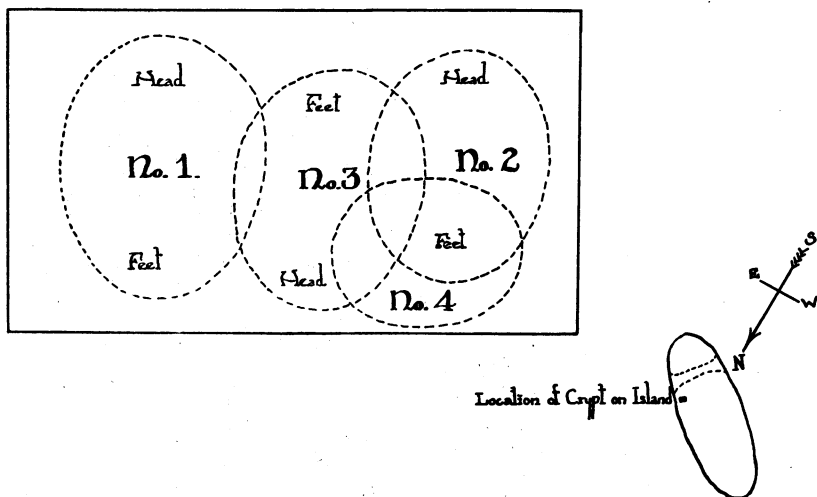


Fig. 4. Positions of the Four Mummy Bundles in Sarcophagus. Top view. Insert indicates location of grave on the summit of "Fortress Rock."

cloth which were folded over the top of the body. Among these wrappings was a gut parka and over the legs a birdskin garment (60.1-5702).

Beneath these coverings lay the body bundle itself, in a nest of small straw sheaves, each about a foot long. These were packed on and around the body, parallel to it. At either side of the head was a roll of birdskin. Beneath the body was a broad thin board which had rotted somewhat (60.1-5686ab).

Fig. 5 shows a number of spear shafts with their long heads of bone (60.1-5672a-q, 5673-5678) as they were found, lying across the hoop of the deceased hunter to serve his needs in his after life. Near this was a

shield-like object of wood (I-38). Near the center of the hoop lay four thin pieces of wood (60.1-5679abc, e, f). Two halves of a harpoon foreshaft (60.1-5681ab) were under the first layer of grass fabric covering this body. On its left shoulder was a limestone labret (60.1-5700). Along the left side of the body lay a notched piece of wood about 3 feet long (60.1-5683). Beneath the feet was a shallow wooden bowl, oval, and about one foot long. Under the left heel were fragments of a wooden



Fig. 5. Spear Shafts with Long Bone Heads over Body No. 1

helmet (60.1-5682). A flint piece (60.1-5699) lay on the floor near the head.

Body No. 2, a woman, had been prepared for burial in the same general fashion as No. 1, but more simply. A grass matting of moderate coarseness was spread over the mummy bundle and its hoop frame. The body itself lay on a sheet of finely woven grass cloth which was folded over the body from all sides. Next to the body this fabric had decomposed badly. In texture it was identical with the corresponding wrappings of Body No. 1, which, however, were much more numerous.



Fig. 6. The Head of Body No. 2. Strung through the septum of the nose on a strand of sinew are six beads, four of which are of Korean amber.

In both, these grass cloths were only wrappings and not clothing, properly speaking.

This body was clothed in garments woven of grass essentially like the apparel of No. 1. Parts of them had rotted away. The body had shriveled considerably, but in many places the skin was quite firm. The head, however, was remarkably well preserved. Fig. 6 was taken after the head arrived in New York. Strung through the septum of the nose on a strand of sinew were six beads, four of which were Korean amber as determined by Doctor Herbert P. Whitlock of the Museum staff.

Under the hips of this body was the customary shallow wooden bowl, broken.

Near the head was the head of an infant about eight months old contained in a gut sack similar to the large one worn by the head of this mummy. Near the baby's head was another sack (60.1-5715) containing very small bones which doubtless belonged with it. Near the feet of No. 2 was a bag (60.1-5696a-g) containing the following articles:—

1. A decoration for a garment with fringe (60.1-5696c).
2. A strip of skin about three feet long and 5 inches wide, rolled up (60.1-5696d).
3. A block of wood three or four inches long with three drilled sockets in it, possibly the hearth of a firedrill (60.1-5696b).
4. A skin bag containing red powder (60.1-5696e).
5. An ornament (60.1-5696f).
6. Two sealskin thongs $\frac{3}{8}$ inch wide, each with a slip noose (60.1-5696g).

A roll of thong (60.1-5692) was found near the head of this mummy (No. 2). A sort of breastplate of wood (60.1-5707ab) was found between Bodies Nos. 2 and 3, as also were two pieces of worked wood (60.1-5708-5709).

Bundle No. 4, containing the body of a child was found overlying the feet of No. 2. Fig. 7 shows it as it appeared after the removal of a sealskin blanket. It was taken to the Museum undisturbed, where it was found to contain the body of a three or four year old child, remarkably small for its age. Nine wooden shafts, (60.1-5689a-i), perforated at one end and a small wooden spoon (60.1-5690) were found under the bundle.

Body No. 3, a man, was prepared for burial with less care than any of the others. Perhaps because of this, perhaps because it was most subject to dampness, being bottommost, it had disintegrated. Practically all that remained was the skeleton. In the abdominal cavity there was a small quantity of grass. The head wore no sack-like waterproof

hood, but the eye sockets still contained moss which had been packed into them. Teeth worn to the gums indicated that the person had reached at least middle age. The skull was crushed and was perforated by a hole more than an inch in diameter. This mutilation could not have occurred naturally in the grave and was doubtless the cause of death. Under the body was the characteristic wooden bowl, in this case about six inches in diameter. Also under the body was a piece of wood. Associated with the body were found a stone pestle (60.1-5697) and a wooden piece (60.1-5679d) identical with those found with Body No. 1. A float



Fig. 7. Burial Bundle containing the Body No. 4, a Child.

stopper (60.1-5680) probably belonging to one of the darts, was found under the spear shafts near the center of the sarcophagus, and probably belonged with this body, though possibly with No. 1.

Excluding Body No. 4, which was brought to the Museum intact, we may say that the care exercised in the preparation for burial of Nos. 1, 2, and 3 was decreasingly less in the order named. No. 1, obviously, had been the most important person in the interment. Half of the space was allotted to this body, as was also the greatest share of the grave deposits. No effort had been spared by the primitive mourners in fitting this person for his future life. Probably he had been a brave or distin-

guished man, for it is known that such persons, after death, were treated with great consideration. Skilful whale hunters received special attention. Petrof,¹ referring to the statement of Lieutenant Davidof concerning the customs of Kadiak Island, says that before a hunting expedition the whalers would carry the dead bodies of their distinguished predecessors into a stream and drink the water thus tainted. Dall² and Petrof³ both refer to the practice on Kadiak Island of cutting to pieces the body of a notable whaler so that each man might have a part as a fetish. There is no probability, however, that either of these practices could have been carried out in the case of the chief body in the burial described here.

The other three persons may have been grave escorts, killed at the time of the burial to serve the needs of the chief person in the realm of the spirits. Sarytschew, in his early account⁴ says, regarding the Aleutian Islands:—

That the custom formerly prevailed at the decease of a Toja (skilled whale hunter), or any other man of consequence, of burying one of his servants with him.

Sauer, commenting on the customs of Kadiak Island in his account of Captain Billings' expedition in the latter part of the eighteenth century⁵ says that the most confidential of a chief's laborers are sacrificed and buried with him. This practice is a possible explanation of the bodies associated with that of the chief person in the burial described in this paper. Almost certainly No. 3 had been killed by violence; but it can never be ascertained whether this person was a funeral sacrifice to No. 1, or whether he was killed by accident or in battle. What can be fairly certainly stated is, that all the bodies were buried at the same time, for the two wooden lids of the sarcophagus, laid as they were in two directions, could not have been easily removed. Both or none of the covers would have to be taken off, and the probability is that, once closed, the grave was left untouched.

As against the grave escort idea, we may cite the wide range in age and sex observed in these burials. The literature dealing with such mortuary practices does not reveal procedures that require the younger generation to be sacrificed as grave escorts. Further, since mummification was practised by the Aleut, it was not necessary to inter bodies immediately after death, for they could be kept in convenient places and

¹Petrof, I., "Census Report of Alaska" (*Tenth United States Census*, 1880), 234.

²Dall, W. H., "On the Remains of Later Pre-Historic Man obtained from the Caves of the Catherine Archipelago, Alaska Territory" (*Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge*, Washington, 1878), 267.

³Petrof, *ibid.*, 234.

⁴Sarytschew, G., *Account of a Voyage of Discovery to the Northeast of Siberia, the Frozen Sea, and the Northeast Sea*, London, 1806, vol. 2, 77.

⁵Sauer, M., *An Account of a Geographical and Astronomical Expedition to the Northern Part of Russia, performed by Captain Joseph Billings in the Years 1785-1794*, London, 1802, 77.

finally be interred in a single grave. This alternative would account for the apparent simultaneous burial of the mummies found by us. However this may be, certain phases of the practices and beliefs of the Aleut concerning the dead are noteworthy in that they distinguish this people from the neighboring tribes, indeed, from most other primitive peoples. Instead of fearing the dead, as is usual, they seem to have had an affectionate regard for them. Several practices manifest this attitude. For instance, a mother would keep her dead child in the hut for weeks or even until another one came into the world to take its place, always treating the baby mummy with the greatest tenderness. Sauer,¹ Sarytschew² Dall,³ and Jochelson⁴ all mention this custom. Illustrative of the same attitude of friendliness towards the dead is the practice of burying them actually inside of their winter dwellings, which they would continue to occupy.⁵ The Eskimo, on the contrary, are more likely to remove a dying person from the dwelling, that the corpse will not contaminate it. Or, if a death occurs in the house, they take various ingenious precautions to prevent the return of the spirit, a common method being to remove the body through the window, to bewilder the spirit.

One typical feature of Aleut burials, however, the doubled-up position of the body, may be interpreted as evidence of a fear of the dead. The fact that the body is commonly lashed in this position and that the bones are sometimes broken⁶ further suggests that the aim is to restrain the ghost from returning to haunt the living. Jochelson points out, in addition to this interpretation, that the doubled-up position corresponds to the usual sitting posture of the Aleut and that this consequently is a natural position for burial. It should be mentioned that a few instances of bodies buried in the extended position are known, for example, those discovered by Pinart in La Caverne d'Aknañh, Unga Island.⁷

No material evidence of white civilization was found in the grave, or, indeed, on the entire island. All implements were of bone, stone, or wood, the latter material having been fashioned probably with stone tools and in some instances sanded until very thin. The timbers of the crypt must all have been drifted by ocean currents at least seven hundred miles, the distance from the nearest forested country. Rope, cord, and thread were made of sinew. This suggests considerable antiquity.

¹Sauer, *ibid.*, 161.

²Sarytschew, *ibid.*, vol. 2, 77.

³Dall, *ibid.*, 6-7.

⁴Jochelson, Waldemar, "Archæological Investigations in the Aleutian Islands" (*Publication 357, Carnegie Institution of Washington*, Washington, 1925).

⁵Dall, *ibid.*, 6-7.

⁶Dall, *ibid.*, 6.

⁷Pinart, A., *La Caverne d'Aknañh, Ile d'Ounga, Archipel Shumagin, Alaska, Paris, 1875.*

On the other hand, climatic conditions here are extremely unfavorable for the preservation of organic remains. Precipitation is quite heavy in this part of the world and the earth is damp most of the time. The mean temperature, even in the middle of winter is but slightly below freezing. The many protective coverings of wood, skin, and matting could not exclude all moisture. Hence, most of the contents of the grave were damp and parts were sodden. The driest articles were those protected by waterproof gut membrane, such as the head of No. 2. Perhaps this owed its remarkable preservation to this added protection, but even so it is difficult to understand why it had not deteriorated more. In general, then, there seems no way by which the age of this burial can be determined.

The removal of the material from the table-like summit of the island presented a problem. The route we followed in ascending was too steep to allow carrying the bodies down safely; yet, this was the only place where the cliffs could be scaled. The problem was solved by the vertical cleft in the island. This cleft, which in itself increased the inaccessibility of the main summit, offered an ideal shaft down which the contents of the crypt could be lowered. The material was suspended on an improvised litter and two men on each brink payed out the ropes. Quite possibly the primitives who prepared the grave followed the reverse of this method in hoisting the mummy bundles to their final resting place on the summit. The very long strands of seaweed which are quite abundant on the beach would have served admirably as ropes.

The contents of the grave were all lowered safely and boxed on the beach. A few weeks later we took advantage of the first sunny day to open the packing cases and dry the material on the decks of the *Morrissey*. Only slight deterioration occurred during the several months that elapsed before the bodies arrived at the Museum.

