

ENCOUNTERS of ALUTIIQ and RUSSIANS on KODIAK ISLAND, 1741

Georg Wilhelm Steller (physician and natural historian on the Bering expedition), *Second Kamchatka Expedition undertaken upon His Imperial Majesty's Command, or Description of the Voyage of the late Captain-Commander Bering for the exploration of the lands northeast of Kamchatka . . .*, 1743. EXCERPTS.



[Bird Island, of the Shumagin Islands. September 4, 1741.]

We had just dropped anchor when, from the cliff lying south of us, we heard a loud noise, which at first we took for the roaring of a sea lion. (We did not expect any trace of human beings on this miserable island twenty miles away from the mainland.) But soon we saw two small boats being paddled from the shore to our ship. We all awaited them with the greatest eagerness and utter amazement to mark most carefully the boats' mountings, shape, and design.

When they were still half a verst away, the two men in the boats, while paddling steadily, began to deliver a long, uninterrupted oration to us in a high-pitched voice, not a word of which any of our interpreters could understand. We took it for either a prayer or a conjuration, the incantation of shamans or a ceremony welcoming us as friends, since both customs are in use on Kamchatka and in the Kurile Islands, as may be seen in more detail in my *Historical Description of the Kuriles*. As they paddled closer and closer, shouting continually, they began to speak to us with pauses between statements. But since no one could understand their language, we beckoned them with our hands to come closer without fear. But they pointed their hands toward the shore to signify that we should come to them there. They also pointed to their mouths and scooped up seawater to signify that we could have food and water with them. But we beckoned to



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Archaeological excavation of an Alutiiq sod house village dating to A.D. 1500 on Afognak Island

them rather to come to us. When we called *nitschi* back to them, which in Baron Lahontan's description of America [1703] means "water," they repeated it many times and pointed again to the shore to indicate undoubtedly that water was available there. . . .

Thereupon, after a short discussion, the boat was lowered in which I, along with Lieutenant Waxell, the Koriak interpreter, and nine sailors and soldiers, decided to go ashore. We supplied ourselves with plenty of firearms and sabers, however, and covered them all with sailcloth to cause no suspicion. We also took along biscuits, brandy, and other trifles to be able to give them gifts. Considering all these preparations, it was the greatest misfortune that we could not get ashore because the beach was very rocky, the water increasingly turbulent, and the wind and the waves so heavy that only with the greatest difficulty could we keep the boat from being dashed to pieces. From the place where their boats and our presents lay without great regard strewn here and there on the beach, all the people on our approach, men as well as women (who because of the sameness of their dress could hardly be distinguished from one another), came full of amazement and friendliness toward us, not failing to beckon us constantly ashore.

But when we saw that it was hopeless for us all to get ashore, we had our interpreter and two others undress and wade through the water to them to inspect a thing or two. They received the interpreter and the others in quite a friendly manner and led them by the arm very respectfully, as if they were very important people, to the place where they had been sitting, presented them with a piece of whale blubber, and talked some with them, although neither group understood the other. In the process they often pointed over the hill, perhaps to

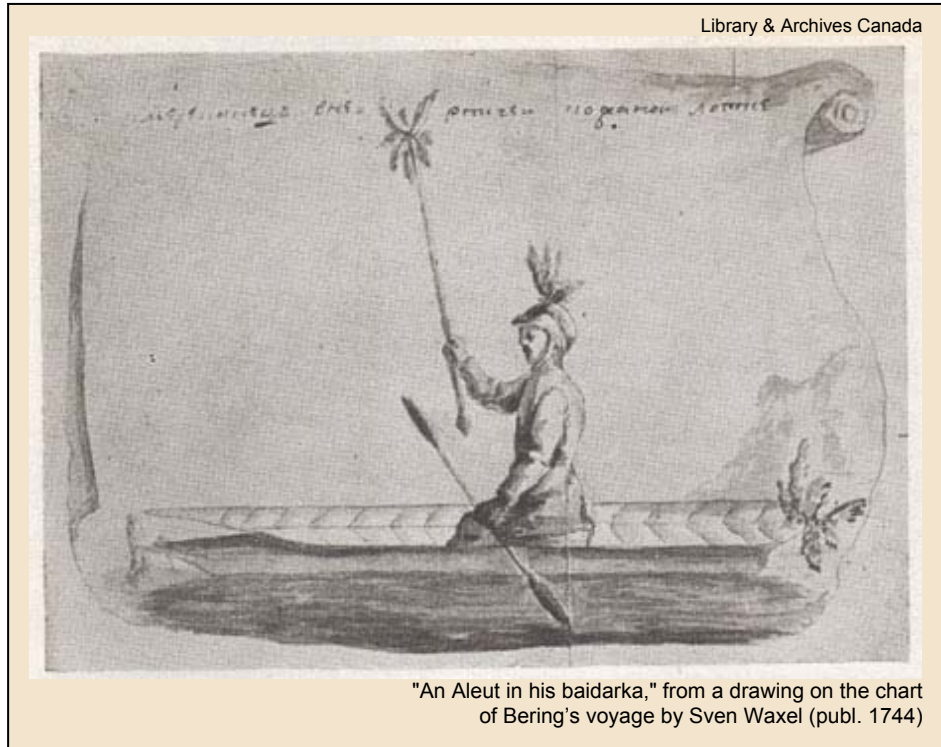
indicate that they had come here only for our sake but that they had their homes on the other side of the hill; later, on sailing out to sea to the east around the island, we saw some huts in the distance.

But half of them remained standing by us, looked at us fixedly, and with frequent gestures invited us to join them. But when we gave them to understand by all sorts of signs how impossible it was for us to join them on land, one of them got into his boat, which he had lifted with one hand and carried to the water under his arm, and came paddling to us. We welcomed him with a cup of brandy, which, imitating

our example, he smartly drank up. But immediately he spat it out again, acting strangely about it, and did not seem at all amused by this supposed trick.

Although had I advised against this as well as against tobacco and pipes, they supposed nevertheless that the Americans had the stomachs of our seamen and tried to make up for one annoyance with a new one. They presented him with a lighted pipe of tobacco, which he, to be sure, accepted, but, displeased, he paddled away. The smartest European would do the same if he were treated to the fly agaric [a toxic mushroom], rotten fish soup, and willow bark that the Kamchadals fancy so delicious.

But when the water rose up more and more along with the wind, we called our people to the boat. These poor people, however, wanted their company a while longer and did not at all want to let them go to the boat. They especially showed a very great liking for our



Koriak interpreter, whose speech and looks fully resembled theirs. At first they presented them with more whale blubber and iron-colored paint, but since they would not let themselves be moved by gifts, they tried to hold on to them by force, gripping them by the arms and forcefully keeping them away from the boat. The other party, however, took hold of the line to our boat, perhaps not out of malicious intent but pure naivete because they were unable to perceive our danger; they wanted to haul the boat with its occupants on shore, where it would have been wrecked on the rocks, and thus they brought us into the same confusion and danger. But because there was now no time to be lost in trying to keep them from their purpose with sweet talk and since they were not about to let the line out of their hands by any gentle means, we immediately fired three loaded muskets over their heads at the cliff.

When they heard it, they all looked so stunned that, as if struck by thunder, they all fell to the ground and let go of everything in their hands.

Right away our men ran through the water and luckily made it into the boat.

As funny as it was to behold their dismay, it was yet more curious that they all stood up again and scolded us that we had repaid their good-will so poorly, and with their hands they bade us be gone speedily since they wanted us no more. Some of them, in standing up, grabbed stones and held them in their hands. But we had to cut the anchor line quickly from the boat (it was caught on a rock) and returned rather displeased to the packet boat because we could not observe what we wished, but had, on the contrary, encountered what we had not expected.

We had, however, no sooner arrived on the ship than a violent storm rose from the south, and we thanked God both that we were on the ship and that it was so well sheltered from the storm. Shortly

thereafter it also began to rain, and it lasted all through the night. Our Americans, on the other hand, lit a fire on shore and made us think this night about what had happened. . . .

On September 5, it rained very hard in the morning. Several times in the afternoon, it seemed to clear up, but always clouded over again. We could not remain anchored in this place any longer because the wind had now veered southwesterly. Accordingly, we weighed anchor about two o'clock in the afternoon and saw just then two Americans paddling in their boats toward shore, and we moved to such a place that once again we had shelter from the island toward the west. Around five o'clock, we reached a desirable place and dropped anchor again.

About half an hour later, we saw again nine Americans in their boats paddling in a line toward the ship with the same shouting and ceremonies as the first time. Yet only two approached our ship; again they gave us gifts with sticks of falcon feathers with iron-colored face paint.

On their heads, these people had hats made of tree bark, stained red and green, which resembled in shape the eyeshades people customarily put on the head: the crown was uncovered and the hats seemed to be invented only to shade the eyes from the sun. Between this hat and the forehead, some had stuck colorful falcon feathers, others, reed grass, in the same way as the Americans on the eastern side of Brazil have feather bundles. And here again I found a clear indication that the Americans originated in Asia since the Kamchadals and Koriaks are

accustomed to wear the same kinds of hats, of which I acquired several for the Kunstkammer [Russian museum of natural history and ethnography in St. Petersburg].

When these Americans understood from our many signals that we wanted one of their hats, they gave us two of them. On one was affixed a small carved image or sitting idol of bone which had a feather sticking in its behind, which doubtless was to represent the tail. In exchange we presented them with a rusty iron kettle, five sewing needles, and a thread.

After they had considered the exchange and consulted each other, they headed for shore without further ceremony, lighted a big fire, and shouted loudly for a time. Then, because it soon became dark, we did see them any more.

