

Archaeology and the
Capitalist World System
A Study from Russian America

CONTRIBUTIONS TO GLOBAL HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

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Russian America

Aron L. Crowell

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Archaeology and the Capitalist World System

A Study from Russian America

Aron L. Crowell

*Arctic Studies Center / Smithsonian Institution
Anchorage, Alaska*

With an Appendix by
Donald W. Clark

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Preface



History has many voices. In the words of Russian fur merchant Grigorii Shelikhov, who led the conquest of Kodiak Island, Alaska, in 1784 and sought to subjugate its indigenous Qikertarmiut population, “the arrival of the Russians in their land had brought them innumerable advantages, security, and prosperity” (Shelikhov 1981:121). Arseni Aminak, a Qikertarmiut elder in 1851, held a different view. He recalled a Russian ship that visited the island several years before Shelikhov as a “strange monster, never seen before, which we feared and whose stench made us sick.” In 1784, the dead of his people lay on the beach at a place called A’wauq—meaning “to become numb”—where hundreds had been killed by Skelikhov’s cannon and muskets (Holmberg 1985:57–59). The Russian hunters who built the Shelikhov–Golikov Company’s first outpost on Kodiak Island, at a small cove they called Gavan Trekh Svetitelei (as commonly translated, “Three Saints Harbor”), recalled their own miseries and despair: “We ... spent the winter in ceaseless labors and ... suffered great shortages and real famine.... Many contracted fever, scurvy, and other ills, and died” (Pierce 1976:75).

Eyewitness statements about what happened on Kodiak Island during the Russian conquest and early years of colonial rule are important, but rare. They represent the experiences and views of a few individuals who lived through a time of turbulent change and traumatic contact between disparate cultures. All the more significance, therefore, attaches to the archaeological record of this period, comprised of Qikertarmiut village sites and the remains of Russian forts and fur trade posts along the wilderness shores of the Kodiak archipelago.

This study is a historical and archaeological examination of Shelikhov’s founding settlement at Three Saints Harbor, occupied by Russian fur company personnel as well as Qikertarmiut captives and indigenous Siberian and Alaska Native laborers. Based on two seasons of fieldwork and excavations, it combines physical evidence and historical materials to build a new interpretation of economy, social interaction, and daily life in early “Russian America.” It considers Three Saints Harbor within nested scales of analysis—as a landmark of Alaskan history, as a window on Russian colonialism in its formative period, and as a microcosm of global

processes that yoked the New World and its peoples to the vast engine of Eurocentered capitalism.

As a theoretical contribution, the work at Three Saints Harbor is an attempt to translate the world system perspective articulated by sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein into an archaeological model for Russian America, informed by Eric Wolf's analysis of capitalism's impact on the world's "people without history" and by anthropological perspectives on ethnicity and boundary maintenance on colonial frontiers. The inequalities and dynamic tension of multiethnic colonial societies are considered to be fundamental aspects of historical and archaeological interpretation. Findings at Three Saints Harbor and other sites highlight archaeology's unique potential to cast light on the lives of those in the lower echelons of such societies, whose individual stories and viewpoints have seldom survived in oral or written form. It was, in fact, among this nonelite stratum of colonial society where cross-cultural contact and social interchange between colonizing and indigenous populations may have been most extensive (Lightfoot and Martinez 1995).

The book consists of six chapters and an appendix. Chapter 1 considers the seventeenth- through nineteenth-century Russian and European fur trades in North America within the context of world system expansion, comparing economic and social interactions with northern indigenous groups and considering the implications for archaeological interpretation of this period. A world system model for Russian American archaeology is proposed, derived from the logistics of colonial supply, the social and demographic profile of the colonial population, and the tributary mode of production that Russian fur traders imposed on Alaska Native groups. Chapter 2 assembles Russian, Spanish, and American historical material into a detailed account of the founding, development, and abandonment of the Three Saints Harbor colony against the backdrop of Shelikhov's ambitions to economic empire. The third section of the book, composed of Chapters 3, 4, and 5, is an archaeological analysis of material culture and social interaction at Three Saints Harbor, based on site survey and excavations at selected dwellings. Chapter 6 summarizes results of the project, reviews work at other Russian American sites from the perspective of the world system model, and suggests directions for future research. An appendix by Donald W. Clark details results of excavations conducted at Three Saints Harbor for the University of Wisconsin in 1962.

Acknowledgments



This work had its origin as my doctoral dissertation at the University of California, Berkeley (Crowell 1994a). It has benefited from the scholarship and contributions of many, to whom my appreciation is indeed heartfelt. At the same time, of course, all responsibility for the result is mine alone. Donald W. Clark carried out the first research at Three Saints Harbor, encouraged me to undertake new studies there in 1900–1991, and provided access to notes, data, and unpublished writings. Kent Lightfoot served as principal thesis advisor and gave critical advice on the research design and manuscript. Others at Berkeley who commented on various drafts were James Deetz, Nelson Graburn, and Dell Upton. An important debt is owed to postdissertation reviewers Lydia Black, Allen McCartney, Richard Pierce, and others who offered ideas and insights: Oleg Bychkov, Glenn Farris, William Fitzhugh, Louise Jackson, William S. Laughlin, Charles Orser, Lester Ross, Valery Shubin, Olga Shubina, Douglas Veltre, and William Workman.

The 1990 field season at Three Saints Harbor was organized under my direction in cooperation with the University of California, Berkeley, the Kodiak Area Native Association (KANA), and the Sakhalin Regional Museum in Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. Principal funding for the project was provided by the National Science Foundation, supplemented by Berkeley field school student fees and a grant from KANA. My sincere appreciation to Gordon Pullar, then director of the Kodiak Cultural Center and Museum Project, and to KANA Cultural and Heritage Program Coordinator Richard A. Knecht, for enthusiastically supporting the work and enabling the participation of Kodiak Island students. Hospitality to project participants was provided in Kodiak by Fred Clark and Cindy Amdur, and in Old Harbor by the Haakanson and Christiansen families. The cooperation of the Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is also gratefully acknowledged.

We were fortunate to have four distinguished participants from Russia, whose travel to Alaska was sponsored by the Kodiak Area Native Association. Our guests and field consultants were archaeologists Valery O. Shubin, Olga A. Shubina, and Sergei V. Tkachenko of the Sakhalin Regional Museum, accompanied by interpreter Yuri N. Michailov.

Richard Knecht helped lead the field program, assisted by Fred Clark

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Magnetometer surveys were conducted by Lewis E. Somers (Geoscan, Inc.), and an underwater survey of the harbor was undertaken by volunteer SCUBA divers Pete Cummiskey and Braxton Dew. Other special guests who shared their company and diverse talents with us were Louise Jackson, Father Sergius Gerkin, Sven Haakanson, Sr. of Old Harbor, Jim Simons, and Dan Murley, Lyn Kolani, and Doreen Ferguson of Fort Ross Historic Park in California.

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This book is for Dee and David, beyond time or words.

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