

Archeology Program

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

▶ QUICK MENU

◀ FEATURES

■ SITEMAP ■ HOME

Archeology in the Parks > Research in the Parks >

Supporting Community Archeology: The Golovin Heritage Field School

NPS archeologists care for archeological sites on park lands. Sometimes, however, the NPS supports community-based archeology fieldwork outside of parks. Archeological projects in local communities help people understand the past of their own neighborhoods. By working on a site in their community, people can learn about archeological methods and the types of information that archeological sites can hold that are relevant to their heritage. The involvement also helps people learn about the importance of cultural resources and the need to protect them.

Marsh north of Qitchauvik site.

For the most part, NPS programs support community-based archeology through public outreach programs rather than through financial assistance. The NPS Shared Beringian Heritage Program, however, encourages local and international participation in the preservation and understanding of cultural resources by funding projects and developing partnerships on both sides of the Bering Straits. The program also works to sustain the cultural vitality of Native Peoples in northwest Alaska through promoting Native Alaskan projects. In supporting community archeology projects, the Heritage program fosters a preservation ethic among people in the community.

Between 1998 and 2000, the Shared Beringian Heritage Program funded the Golovin Native Corporation in northwestern Alaska to carry out archeological investigations at sites on corporation lands. The Golovin Native Corporation controls land on the southern part of the Seward Peninsula that borders northeastern Norton Sound. The project gave students opportunities to document their region's history.

The corporation coordinated the Golovin Heritage Field School, composed of high school students from Golovin and from Nove (New) Chaplino, Chukotka (Russian Federation). Students and staff from the Bering Straits Foundation, the University of Alaska, and the private sector excavated at the Qitchauvik site, on the shore of Golovin Lagoon. Here, they uncovered a men's house, or qarigi, that dated to A.D. 550-750. Excavation of the qarigi helped the researchers to better understand the ways that community stability and cohesion were developed and maintained.

At the end of the field seasons, the field school students held an open house to tell people about research findings to date. Several community members brought forward artifacts that had been removed from the Qitchauvik site; one household eventually donated a significant collection of objects, which added a new dimension to the artifact assemblage.

Northeast Norton Sound

The Qitchauvik site is situated near the mouth of a small river that drains into the Golovin Lagoon. The location of the site provided access to important resources for the people in the settlement. The Golovin region is one of the few places on the Seward Peninsula where the tree line descends to sea level and people could easily harvest spruce wood, roots, bark, and needles here for making things and for starting fires. Driftwood from trees growing in interior Alaska that were carried to the ocean by the Yukon River littered the beaches. Driftwood was burned for light and heat, and used as a raw material for housing and household items.

Although the same currents that deposited the driftwood also brought fresh water to northeastern Norton Sound and decreased marine productivity, Golovin Lagoon provided several resources important for sustaining a community. The shallow waters attracted pods of beluga whales that migrated through the sound in the spring and fall. Several species of salmon and trout spawned each year in the river near the site. These concentrations of fish could be speared or netted, and artifacts from the site suggest that the people at the Qitchauvik site did both. Seals were also available.

The river was, at various times, trapped behind beach ridges as storms pushed sand and gravel on shore into large berms and blocked the mouth of the river. The river occasionally changed course as waters backed up behind these temporary dams. The marshes that filled former channels after the river carved out new outlets hosted migratory ducks and geese. The people hunted beaver in the marshes, and caribou on nearby hills.

The people of the Qitchauvik site also would have relied on plant foods, but plant remains are not as easy to detect in the archeological record. If seeds or woody parts are not present, recognition of plant remains often requires sophisticated analysis to identify pollen or plant

cell parts called phytoliths that contain silica. People in northwest Alaska traditionally picked several types of greens and stored them in oil in sealskin containers to eat during winter months. Storage of all kinds of foods, including berries, greens, fish, and mammal flesh was essential for surviving the winter. Drying and freezing were important ways to preserve and store food.

The Qitchauvik site

The Golovin Heritage Field School excavations focused on a qarigi, a large single roomed structure, at the Qitchauvik site. The qarigi is located on the seventh beach ridge from the lagoon. Results of the excavations of the qarigi indicate that it was used between about A.D. 550 and 750.

Beach Ridge #7 is a stable feature that, based on geomorphology, developed over about 400 years between AD 100 and 500. The climate during this time period was characterized by stronger and more frequent storminess. The wave action from these storms deposited materials that make up the beach ridge. After about A.D. 500 the climate became milder, with fewer and weaker storms. The storm surges no longer reached to Beach Ridge #7 and began building a new beach ridge closer to the ocean. The Qitchauvik qarigi was built after A.D. 550 during this period of relatively mild climate. There are no house depressions on Beach Ridge #7, but 14 have been identified on another beach ridge on the landward side. The households living in these houses may have built and used the qarigi.



Golovin Field School students excavate the qarigi.

Judging by the construction of other communal structures, the qarigi was rectangular, at least 30 feet long and at least 18 feet wide, and built of timber. The structure was semi-subterranean and, when complete, would have been covered with soil. The roof was supported by an internal structure composed of upright columns bearing a, presumably, rectangular frame of cross beams. One of the cross beams was at least 9 feet long. Roof planning sloped down from the rectangular support structure to rest on the timbered walls. This roof construction produced an internal space that was highest in the center of the qarigi, then sloped downward to the four walls.

Within this space, the qarigi exhibited a two-level floor, with one level for benches located around the walls, and a step down to the hearth area in the center. The hearth was built directly under the highest area of the roof, in the center of the room. It rested on a raised platform about 6 inches high, and 20 inches square. There is little evidence for cooking or eating around the hearth, which is consistent with ethnographic descriptions of how men's houses functioned. It appears that the primary function of the fire was to provide heat and, maybe, light. Several stone lamp fragments were also found.

Stone tool fragments were the most common artifact found during excavations. Twelve different types of raw materials, including chert, basalt, slate, obsidian, and schist have been identified. The many varieties of raw materials suggest that the people either traveled widely or had extensive social ties or both. Identifying the sources of the different types of stone would help outline the social and/or travel networks of the people at Qitchauvik.

Many small flakes were excavated from the qarigi. Small flakes result from sharpening arrow and spear heads and knives and suggest that re-sharpening was the most common stone tool activity in the qarigi. Slate projectiles and knives were sharpened by grinding. A number of flakes resulting from re-sharpening were also utilized as cutting tools. Small knicks were visible of cutting edges, suggesting that the utilized flakes were used to cut something hard, such as bone, antler, ivory, or wood. More than 150 wooden artifacts were identified.

Spruce, the most common species in the Alaskan boreal forest, was also the most common wood identified at the site. Wooden boat and sled pieces were identified, as were kayak paddles, knife handles, and fire drill hearths. Cottonwood, tamarack, willow, and birch were also identified. Several of the pieces of wood look as though they were trimmed with metal, which was unusual for this time period, but not impossible. Indirect trade networks connected people at the Qitchauvik site with metal-producing communities in Asia.

A small number of bone, antler, and ivory objects were found. These include part of a fishing spear, a possible fishing hook, bird hunting arrowheads, various bone points, and a seal dart point. There was little non-tool bone and ivory debris. This suggests that, unlike wood, bone and ivory carving did not commonly take place inside the Qitchauvik qarigi.

The utilized flakes may have also been used to carve wooden figures and maskettes. Small human effigies, caribou figurines, and maskettes were found in the Qitchauvik qarigi. The

ways that these representations were used, whether for amusement, education, curing, or ritual, is not known. Many of these were looted from the site prior to excavation and are in private collections. Because the items were not found in context, clues about their use that may have come from placement in the qarigi, or association with other artifacts have been destroyed.

Eskimo Men's Houses

According to 18th- and 19th-century European explorers, qarigis were communal men's buildings. Visitors to Eskimo communities usually stayed in the qarigi because they were larger than domestic houses. This use as an inn no doubt accounts for the detailed outsiders' descriptions that have come to us of qarigi. The buildings were usually made of logs banked with earth and had a large hearth in the center of the building.



Excavators found segments of wooden bows.

The qarigi provided shelter for large construction projects associated with repairing and building hunting and transportation equipment, ethnographically identified as men's work. Communal space to carry out cooperative projects allowed young men to learn from older men, men raised in the community to learn from people raised elsewhere and vice versa, and promoted cohesion and integration among the men. Although women and children were not forbidden to enter or use the qarigi, most women's work was carried out in their homes. Cooking was usually done elsewhere and food brought to the qarigi for consumption. In some communities, men actually slept in the qarigi while women and children typically did not. The qarigi also provided shelter for the whole community to come together for discussions and for celebrations.

Who Lived at Qitchauvik?

In the 19th century, northeast Norton Sound was a dynamic social boundary between two Eskimo groups. The Inupiat Eskimos lived in communities from the south shore of the Seward Peninsula north to the Arctic Ocean. Inupiat communities spread along the coast of the Arctic Ocean east into Canada. The Yupik, speaking a different Eskimo language, inhabited communities along the south shore of Norton Sound and the Yukon River delta. Yupik communities are also found on St. Lawrence Island and on the Kamchatka Peninsula. Both Yupik and Inupiat were spoken in communities surrounding Golovnin Bay.

The archeological evidence from excavations suggests that the Qitchauvik site was also multi-cultural. Just as people in the 19th century and today signal group affiliation or origin through language, distinctive dress, and material culture, the people at Qitchauvik communicated group membership through the same avenues.

The Qitchauvik site may have been on the periphery of the Ipiutak sphere of influence. Ipiutak is an archeological culture whose geographical extent, to date, is largely to the north of the Qitchauvik site, and which collapsed by about A.D. 900. Several of the artifacts exhibit decoration that is typical in Ipiutak sites, including a browband that is incised with flowing lines to form fantastic animals. There were a number of artifacts that are not typically Ipiutak, and suggest that Qitchauvik may have been composed of people originally from a number of different communities.

The people of different origins who lived at Qitchauvik may have been slaves, relatives by marriage, or refugees from famine or social strife in other communities. They left their mark in the archeological record through the distinctive ways that they fashioned and decorated tools and items of personal use. Only the shape, decoration, and origin of material items remain for the archeologists to find. Detecting and interpreting these signals is part of the challenge of understanding social relations in this community on the frontier between two cultural regions.

Conclusion

Archeological excavations at the Qitchauvik site have uncovered the remains of a large communal house. Students in the Golovin Heritage Field School also found a large assemblage of wood and stone objects inside the house. Many of the artifacts cannot be easily assigned to a single archeological culture. The variations in decorative lines and figures found on artifacts suggest that Qitchauvik may have been a multi-cultural community. People from settlements with other decorative traditions may have moved to Qitchauvik as spouses or slaves. Trading partners or relatives may have taken refuge with the people of Qitchauvik, fleeing bad environmental conditions or vengeful neighbors.

Qarigi are identified in the archeological record by their large size and by the low incidence, traditionally, of tools related to women's activities such as sewing and cooking. The appearance of the qarigi in northwestern Alaska coincides with increasingly sedentary communities, greater population densities, more elaborate burial customs, and warfare. These trends undoubtedly brought new social challenges with them as well. The qarigi provided communal space for discussion and developing cooperative solutions to social and environmental challenges.

Many, if not all, traditional societies larger than extended families have ways to create social solidarity and integration among people. These mechanisms, called sodalities, are particularly

important for men, who often must cooperate in communal activities such as hunting, fishing, and warfare. Clan affiliation, age-grade groups, and society membership are all ways that non-industrial societies integrate men into social units. At multi-cultural Qitchauvik, activities within the qarigi may have been particularly important for forging social ties between individuals and families. The qarigi may have been "the critical matrix for collective action" (Mason in Mason et al. 2007:151), enabling the people in the community to successfully meet the challenges of living in northwest Alaska.

This report was abstracted by Karen Mudar from NPS Technical Report Number NPS/AR/CRR/2007-67, An Ipiutak Outlier: a 1,500-Year Old Qarigi at Qitchuvik on the Golovnin Lagoon, The Golovin Heritage Field School, 1998-2000, by Owen K. Mason, Matt Ganley, Mary Ann Sweeney, Claire Alix, and Valerie Barber.

DOI	Discover History	Search	Contact	FOIA	Privacy	Disclaimer	USA.gov
---------------------	----------------------------------	------------------------	-------------------------	----------------------	-------------------------	----------------------------	-------------------------

Last updated: 08/11/2020 23:45:15

MJB