

Cuumillapet –

ANCESTORS: CULTURES THROUGH TIME



A multitude of archaeological sites preserve the history of Kodiak’s Alutiiq/Sugpiaq people. Dense populations left large accumulations of cultural debris that has resisted decay in the region’s cool, wet environment. In addition to the stone tools commonly found in Alaskan archaeological sites, many of Kodiak’s ancestral settlements contain shell, bone, antler, and ivory objects. A few hold spectacular assemblages of wood and fiber artifacts. This rich record documents at least 7,800 years of continuous human occupation and chronicles the adaptation of Native people to the region’s productive marine environments. Archaeologists divide Kodiak history into five cultural traditions, each reflecting a distinct way of life.



Tatiana Charliaga at the Amak site with a slate lance. Photo by Patrick Saltonstall.

EARLY ANCESTRAL HUNTERS – CUUMILLAT PISURTET (7,800-4,000 YEARS AGO, OCEAN BAY TRADITION) – The first occupants of the Kodiak Archipelago arrived at least 7,800 years ago, settling an environment warmer and drier than today. Archaeologists believe these people came from southwestern Alaska and were well adapted to life along the coast. Like their descendants, they used barbed harpoons, chipped stone points, and ground slate lances to hunt sea mammals, delicate bone hooks to jig for cod, and large bone picks to dig for clams. Some early residents probably lived in skin-covered tents, although oval, single-roomed houses with piled sod walls were in use by about 7,000 years ago.

EARLY ANCESTRAL FISHERMEN – CUUMILLAT IQALLUGSURTET (4,000-900 YEARS AGO, KACHEMAK TRADITION) – About 4,000 years ago, Kodiak people began to focus more intensely on fishing, harvesting quantities of both cod and salmon. They developed nets to harvest salmon, and slate ulus and smokehouses to process larger catches for storage. Over time, villages grew, suggesting that the island’s population was also expanding and filling up the landscape. By the end of this tradition, people were trading for large quantities of raw materials from the Alaskan mainland. Antler, ivory, coal, and exotic stones were manufactured into tools and jewelry. Labrets—decorative plugs inserted in the face—became popular at this time, perhaps to signal the social ties of the person wearing the labret in a landscape where there was increasing competition for resources. The first signs of warfare appear at the end of this period.

CHIEFS, TRADERS, AND WARRIORS – ANGAYUQAT, AKICARTET, ANGUYAT CALI (900-250 YEARS AGO, KONIAG TRADITION) – About 900 years ago, Kodiak’s climate began to change dramatically. Temperatures cooled, the weather worsened, and sea mammals became more difficult to catch. Alutiiq people responded by relocating their villages to the banks of productive salmon streams and hunting more whales. Fishing grew even more important as people harvested even greater quantities of salmon to feed their families and trade with neighbors. Related families began living together in large, multiple-roomed sod houses, pooling resources and labor. Chiefs emerged, perhaps to organize labor. They led war and trading parties, and hosted elaborate winter ceremonies to display their wealth and power, honor ancestors, and ensure future prosperity.

RUSSIAN – KASAAKAT (1763-1867)
By the 1780s, Russian fur traders had worked their way into the central Gulf of Alaska and colonized the Alutiiq Nation. Alutiiq people were quickly forced to adopt new social and economic practices and many people died from starvation and infectious diseases. During the Russian period, Native people were forced to work in camps dedicated to sea otter hunting, salmon fishing, and whaling. Russian clergy introduced the Russian Orthodox faith, a religion that remains strong in many communities.

AMERICAN – MERIKAANSAT (1867-PRESENT)
With the sale of Alaska to the United States in 1867, life on Kodiak changed again. The American period saw the development of the modern fishing industry, where many Alutiiq people worked for wages in canneries. Alutiiq people moved gradually from a subsistence lifestyle into the Western market economy. At the turn of the 20th century, wood-framed houses began to replace sod structures. Educators suppressed Alutiiq speech, punishing children for using the language and halting its transmission. Efforts to reawaken cultural traditions began in the 1980s.

5800 BC to 2000 BC

2000 BC to AD 1100

AD 1100 to AD 1763

AD 1763 to AD 1867

AD 1867 to Now