THE HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY OF GENDER, FOOD AND LABOR IN OLD HARBOR, ALASKA [1]

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This dissertation project addresses the transformation of Sugpiaq society and identity through the Russian occupation, specifically focusing on gendered patterns of food procurement, preparation and storage in addition to other production tasks in and around Sugpiaq households within the Old Harbor region. The Sugpiat are the indigenous people of the Gulf of Alaska region, including the Kodiak Archipelago, the Alaska Peninsula and Prince William Sound. In framing this project around the period of Russian colonization in Alaska (1784-1867 CE), I consider both social (e.g. resettlement, labor demands) and environmental (e.g. local resource drawdown, epidemic disease) hazards brought on by Russian colonization, which created a multifaceted disaster for the Sugpiaq people – whose vulnerability to these hazards was mediated by factors such as gender, class and marriage status. To address these vulnerabilities and elucidate various Sugpiaq strategies for survival, I combine historical and ethnohistorical documentary research with archaeological analysis. The archaeological research centers on foodways (how people used the environment for subsistence, their menu, food preparation, cooking, eating practices) and the presence and use of both local and imported wares, tools and materials related to other production tasks, such as hide processing, sewing, and Russian-mandated hunts for fur-bearing animals. Taken together, these archaeological materials will provide a picture of daily lives and activities in the Old Harbor region during Russian occupation, which, when put in diachronic comparison, will allow me to trace Sugpiaq identity and the structures of social experience (gender, demographic situation, village and household social organization, religion, etc.) throughout the Russian period.

The Pre-dissertation Pilot Award is supporting the pilot phase of this research, which involves the systematic survey of 11 historic-age archaeological sites in the vicinity of the modern village of Old Harbor, which is the village closest to where the Russians first settled in 1784. The aim of the pilot survey is to evaluate the suitability of these sites for inclusion in my dissertation. My goal at each site is to locate residential spaces and middens, which together yield information about foodways, daily activities, spatial organization and disposal patterns. Particular attention will be paid to the integrity of the archaeological deposits and the types of materials present – which will indicate whether the sites contain enough information for meaningful analysis. A key aspect of the project is building a collaborative relationship with the Sugpiaq community of Old Harbor and the research described here is being developed in full consultation with Old Harbor community leaders and the Old Harbor Native Corporation.