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Unangan baskets, Atka Island, about 1899. Countless hours of work collecting, drying, selecting and weaving grasses transformed mundane household items into artistic marvels. (E. H. HARRIMAN COLLECTION, ARCHIVES, ALASKA AND POLAR REGIONS DEPARTMENT, UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA-FAIRBANKS)

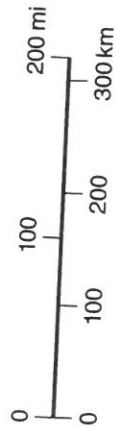
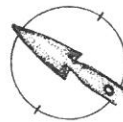
Attu Island

**Western Unangan**

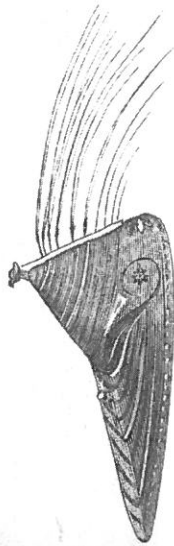
Rat Islands

**Central Unangan**

Andreanof Islands



Unangan artists such as Parascovia Wright practice the delicate art of weaving Attu Island grass baskets. (PHOTO BY KATHY KIEFER)



Aleutian hat.

ALASKA PENINSULA

Cold Bay

Dutch Harbor

Fox Islands

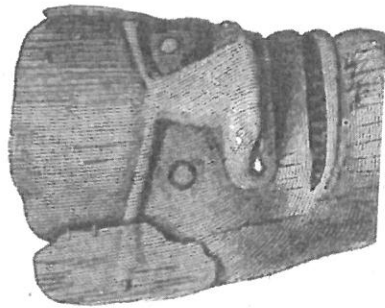
Shumagin Islands

**Eastern Unangan**

Unalaska Island

# Unangan/Aleut

# Unangan/Aleut



Unangan mask

Stretching like a rocky necklace from Asia to North America, the Aleutian Islands and the nearby Alaska Peninsula are the home of the Unangan, “the original people.” The term “Aleut” was introduced by Russians and comes originally from the Koryak or Chukchi languages of Siberia and was adopted by the people to reflect an identity altered by adoption of the Russian Orthodox faith and marriage of Russian men with Unangan women. It appears to have been quickly adopted by the Unangan people themselves (Lantis 1985).

The Unangan are distinctive among the world’s people for their remarkably successful maritime adaptation to this cold archipelago. At the time of European contact, the Unangan population inhabited all of the major Aleutian Islands, the Alaska Peninsula as far east as Port Moller, and the Shumagin Islands to the south of the Alaska Peninsula.

## Archaeology

William Laughlin, an early archaeologist in the Aleutian Islands, considered the Unangan the survivors of the inundation of the Bering land bridge at the end of the Ice Age 10,000 ya (years ago). His work at Anangula, a site on Umnak Island in the central Aleutians, demonstrated that people lived there as early as 8,500 ya. The microblades and tradition artifacts found in interior Alaska are similar to Paleo-Arctic earlier. Post holes indicate that several shelters or simple houses were located at the site; proximity to the ocean indicates that people were dependent on marine resources but no materials that people were confirm this.

Between 6,000 and 4,000 ya, several sites indicate the expansion of populations onto other islands in the central Aleutian Archipelago. Continuous occupation at Chaluka, a site surrounded by the contemporary village of Nikoliski, from 4,000 ya demonstrates the continuity of the Unangan people. Fish hooks, barbed projectile points, harpoon heads,

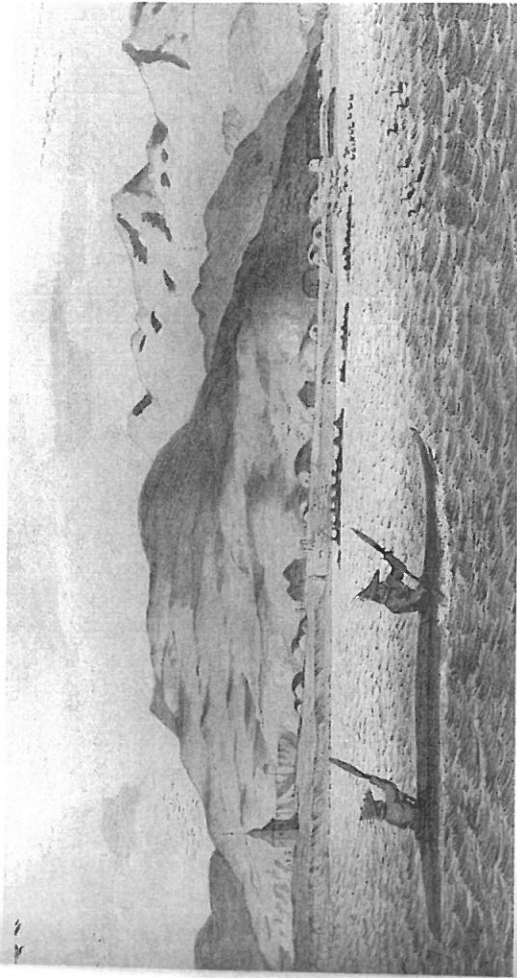
and other objects remain constant in the archaeological record until the time of contact indicating the maritime focus of life.

Around 3,000 ya, Unangan or their ancestors appear to have built several multi-household communities on the rich lagoons at the west end of the Alaska Peninsula. Large houses with whale bone frames have been found as far east as Port Moller during this time period. At the same time, groups were also moving into the Shumagin Islands. Artifacts considered to be used by bearers of the Arctic Small Tool Tradition, already found further up the Alaska Peninsula at Ugashik Narrows and Naknek, have been found near the west end of the Alaska Peninsula. This finding sets up the possibility of close contact between groups, at least for a short period of time.

Unangan expanded to the west somewhat later, arriving at their furthestmost outposts on Attu Island about 1,500 ya.

## Population and Settlement

Although reconstruction of Unangan culture and history is difficult due to the devastating impact of Russian contact in the 18th century, it is believed that the Unangan were divided into nine named subdivisions. The total Unangan population is estimated to have been between 15,000-18,000 people at the time of contact. The nine subdivisions are usually divided into western, central and eastern groups based on

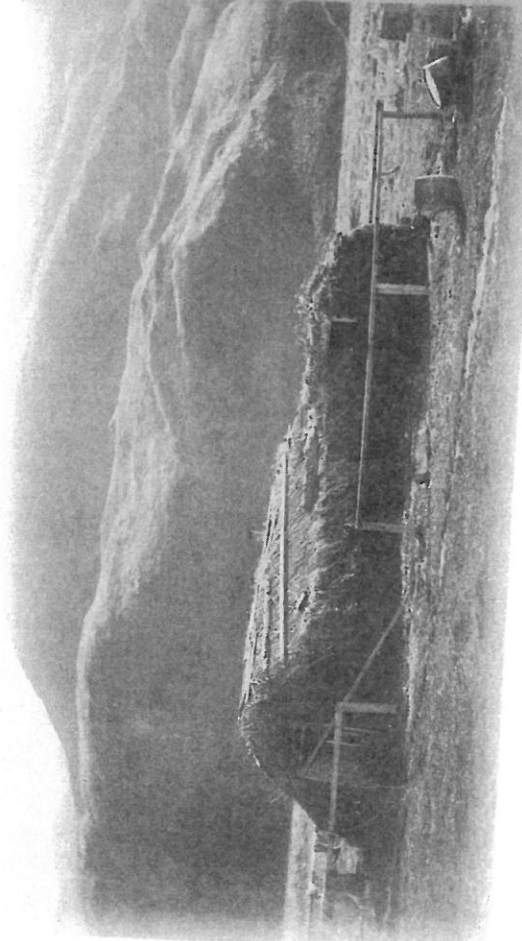


“Oulak, Chief Village on Unalaska” by Louis Choris, ca 1825. The treeless, windswept Aleutian islands were first colonized by the Unangan more than 8,000 years ago. The steep, rocky shores made the occasional flat terrace immediately above a sandy beach, a valuable site. (ANCHORAGE MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND ART)

language. Population concentration was greatest among the eastern groups who had access to salmon and caribou. The Unangan were a relatively long-lived people with a considerable portion of the population more than 60 years of age. Unangan settlements included villages and seasonal camps. Winter villages, which could be used year round, were generally placed in protected locations along a shoreline with a good beach, a nearby freshwater stream, a headland for observation, and close proximity to marine mammals, fish and intertidal resources. On the mainland, settlements tended to be on the southside of the Alaska Peninsula, perhaps to avoid winter ice from the Bering Sea. In the Aleutian Islands, settlements often were located on the north side, probably to avoid the prevailing southwest winds. A typical village consisted of about 200 people living in five-to ten dwellings. Tents or abandoned houses were used at seasonal camps where people gathered food.

#### Houses

The basic house of the Unangan is called a *barabara* (a Siberian term). *Barabaras* were oblong pit dwellings with wooden or whale bone frames and rafters overlain by grass and sod. Often they were nearly indistinguishable from the surrounding terrain. *Barabaras* were normally entered by means of a pole ladder through an entryway in the ceiling. Their typical dimensions were 35- to 40 feet long by 20- to 30 feet



The traditional Unangan house, the *barabara*, was a sod-covered dugout typically entered through a hole in the roof. This *barabara*'s door indicates Russian influence. (HEALY COLLECTION, HENRY E. HUNTINGTON LIBRARY)

wide with the floor being four-to six feet below ground level. The inside consisted of an open space in the middle portion for general living and compartmentalized, three-foot deep trenches along the walls for sleeping. These were separated by grass mats hung from the rafters. Sometimes compartments were dug into the earthwalls for burials.

Tools, baskets and other objects were manufactured in the open area. A trough of urine was kept there. Uric acid was used by most Alaskan Native groups for purposes like washing hair (a freshwater rinse would be used afterward), softening skins or making dyes.

The Unangan heated their houses with oil lamps and occasionally small hearths. They usually cooked outside the home near storage and refuse pits. Apparently there were no large community houses or steambaths in Unangan villages. However, some extremely large houses, evidently occupied by several families, have recently been discovered in the eastern area.

#### Food and diet

The most important animal to the Unangan was the Steller sea lion. This animal provided not only food but also a vast variety of other products including boat covers (hide), line and cord (sinew), oil (blubber), tools (bones), fishhooks (teeth), boot soles (flippers), containers (stomach) and materials for garments (esophagus and intestines). Other important marine mammals were seals, sea otters and whales which together with the sea lion comprised 50 percent of the diet. Bottomfish such as halibut and cod comprised about one-third of the diet.

Unangan whaling was a highly ritualized activity for which men and their wives prepared themselves by abstinence and other behaviors to make themselves worthy. Men hunted whales alone with harpoons from kayaks. The stone harpoon heads were coated with a "magical" poison concocted from the acomite plant. Once wounded, the whale could live several days to a week as the poison slowly worked. During this time the hunter who struck the whale secluded himself in his house and pretended to be ill hoping that the whale likewise would become sick and die. Other hunters would watch the whale to see what happened. If the whale died nearby, it was towed to the beach. Whales wounded but lost were often recovered by other Aleuts when they washed ashore.

Not all Unangan engaged in whaling. In the eastern areas, Unangan hunted caribou and fished for salmon. Unangan fishermen caught halibut and cod with ingenious wooden hooks and line made of braided kelp or sea lion sinew.

Women, children and the elderly concentrated on collecting bird eggs, intertidal organisms (such as chitons, clams, seas urchins and seaweed) and plants, roots and berries which ripened in the late summer and fall.



(above) "Inhabitants of the Aleutian Islands," hand-colored lithograph done about 1825 by Louis Choris (1795-1828). The distinctive Unangan visors were made from wood and had sea lion whiskers for decoration. The visors shielded a hunter's face from sun and rain.

(right) Unangan dancing masks have been found in burials in the Shumagin and Aleutian islands. Note the holes on the edges to attach the mask to the head.

(BOTH FROM ANCHORAGE MUSEUM OF HISTORY AND ART.)

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### Technology and training

Unangan are world famous for their unparalleled skill in handling the *baidarka* (or kayak, Unangan—*chigak*), the distinctive skin boat they mastered. Males trained from an early age in the skills necessary to hunt, handle watercraft and survive in the rough waters around the Aleutian Islands. These craft were outfitted ingeniously with throwing boards and a variety of darts for different species attached to the deck within immediate reach of the hunter. Inside the craft were ballast to keep it upright, a bailer, a float and a sewing kit to fix tears on the fly. Unangan men used centuries of accumulated knowledge of wind, tide and current to successfully travel not only throughout the islands but far beyond up into Bristol Bay and along the Alaska Peninsula to the Kodiak Archipelago. Unangan also used the *baidar*, a large open skin boat, for travel and trade.

The training of an Unangan male from his youth included the systematic stretching of leg and shoulder muscles. This enabled him to endure the long hours of concentration and stillness necessary if the arduous and time-consuming pursuit of seals and sea otter was to be successful. The boy's shoulder muscles had to be strengthened to achieve maximum velocity and accuracy with the throwing board (or *aitlatl*) which was used to cast darts and harpoons at birds and marine mammals.

Despite the cultural emphasis on male hardiness and self-reliance, there was a recognized role in Unangan society for the male transvestite (or *berdache*) who dressed and worked as a woman. They were often considered experts in healing.

Unangan women were trained from early childhood in the important sewing, weaving and food processing skills. In later life this training would insure that their husbands were appropriately outfitted for hunting. Aleut basketry made from the fine grasses of the islands as well as from the spruce roots is some of the finest in the world.

### Clothing and decoration

Unangan women constructed marvelous waterproof *kamleikas* (men's outer garments) by painstakingly stitching together strips of sea lion intestine. Waterproof boots were made from sea otter flippers. Colorful cloaks for ceremonial occasions were crafted from the skins of hundreds of tufted puffins taken with snares. Women commonly wore luxurious capes and garments of sea otter fur.

Distinctive elements of Unangan clothing were the beautiful visors and elongate hats worn by the men. Functional designs worn for daily use kept the incessant rain off the hunter and protected his eyes from the ocean's glare. Elegant ceremonial hats were painted in striped

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curving designs of different colors, often with sea lion whiskers attached for additional decoration.

Supplementary personal adornment existed for both men and women. Simple tattoos, usually from short straight lines, were inscribed on the hands and faces. Nose pins were worn by men and women. *Labrets* (flat circular discs made of wood or ivory) were inserted into slits in the area between the lower lip and the chin. A common style was to wear one below each corner of the mouth. The labret is an extremely old adornment, appearing more than 4,000 years ago in the Unangan cultural record. It is no longer worn. (See page 10.)

#### *Social organization*

*Matrilineal* (traced through the female) descent and inheritance characterized Aleut kinship patterns. Although a house was owned by a woman, usually her brothers and their wives were the primary occupants. A recognized leader of the house, usually the eldest male, made most decisions for the group. Children, particularly males, lived



**Russian Orthodox church, Atka, Alaska. Russian Orthodox clerics tried to stop many abuses against the Unangan. Russian Orthodoxy is still a major religion among the Unangan today.** (PHOTO BY DOUGLAS VÉLTRE)

with their mothers during infancy but moved in mid-childhood to the home of their mother's brother. This practice, termed the *avunculate*, makes the uncle the primary teacher and trainer of his sister's children. The uncle's role was generally a strict one in order to insure the competence of the young man. The boy's father assumed a sympathetic, reassuring and supportive role.

Most marriages were monogamous although *polygyny* (multiple wives) occurred among wealthier, more powerful leaders. Divorce was possible, although rare in Unangan society; when desired, a woman simply returned to her own home or that of her eldest sister.

There is little evidence of more complex social organization among the Unangan beyond the house group. There were no men's houses and probably no clans. Although each house group was apparently independent, a senior or leading house in a community was recognized and its head was considered the village leader. The Russians introduced the term *toyon* for this person. Coordination of movement to camps by several house groups and even the village occurred periodically since villages were composed of closely-related people. The village leader was primarily responsible for decisions concerning war and peace.

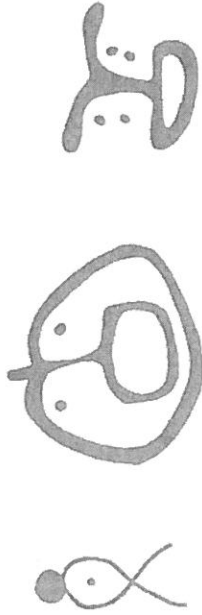
Unangan society was roughly divided into three classes—wealthy people, common people, and slaves (Lantis 1984). The wealthy and common people were usually closely related, thus minimizing conflict. Only whale hunting and possibly leadership were inherited. The number of slaves, primarily women, is thought to have been small.

#### *Warfare*

Although there were no formal village boundaries, Unangan communities claimed certain areas as their resource territories such as rookeries, fishing banks and beaches. These areas would be closely watched. Other Unangan using those areas were considered trespassers if they had not requested access. Normally, however, people would simply go to the nearest village where customs of generosity would ensure that they would be well fed. Poachers could be evicted or attacked.

Warfare was not uncommon among the Unangan. Accounts tell of battles waged over long distances with the Koniag people of Kodiak Island, the Eskimo groups of the Alaska Peninsula and even the Chugach in Prince William Sound. Slat armor constructed of tightly-woven wooden rods have been found; however, Unangan legends state that only the heads of a household wore armor (Laughlin 1980). Hostilities often took the form of raids in which small groups of men, usually less than 10, attacked another village to avenge some insult or theft or to obtain women as slaves. Men who participated did so generally by choice rather than by order.

## Aleutian Island Mummies



The special importance of death and the spirit of the deceased is apparent in the distinctive mummification practices of the Unangan. On Kagamil Island, an amazing 234 excellently-preserved bodies have been discovered in several caves. According to William Laughlin, a widely-recognized expert on Aleuts, mummification was practiced to preserve the spiritual power which resides in each person. These powers could be solicited at a later time by emboldened Unangan hunters who visited the caves and took a bit of flesh from one of the mummies, hoping it would bring assistance in whaling. But this was dangerous and those who sought such power might be subject to insanity, severe sickness, and early death. Even the kin of whalers who sought the power of the mummies could suffer harm from the spirit forces unleashed.

Scientific studies have revealed a detailed Unangan understanding of human anatomy. Mummification is dependent on two factors: deactivating tissue-destroying enzymes in the body and halting invasion of the body by microorganisms that decompose the flesh and soft tissue. Both are best accomplished by warmth and dryness as found in the arid regions of Egypt and Chile. The Unangan controlled these processes by extracting the viscera from the body, inserting dry grass into the cavity and constantly drying the body for up to a month after death. The body was kept in a flexed position bent at the knees. Prior to entombment, the body was wrapped first with multiple layers of seal or sea lion intestine, then with clothing and finally with skins or mats. Often it was placed in a wooden cradle or upon a raised platform in the cave.

The final secret to Unangan mummification was their choice of warm, dry caves for placing the bodies. The Aleutian Islands are noted for their volcanic activity. Subsurface heat escaping through cracks to the surface in the chosen caves insured that the mummies had optimal conditions for preservation. Burial caves with these characteristics have been found in several locations. Although the practice of mummification is ancient and continued even after early contact with Europeans, it has now been abandoned.

## Ceremonies

Good relationships were maintained between communities through winter festivities of dancing and feasting. The village chief from one village would invite another village to visit. The visitors would arrive in their best clothing and were housed and fed generously by their hosts. After changing into ceremonial costume, dancers with tambourine drums from each group took turns trying to outperform each other. Women danced while shaking rattles made of inflated bladders. Wooden masks were used in some dances to invoke the presence of powerful spirits. Distinctive wooden masks with exceptionally large, broad noses and a slightly wolf-like appearance have been found in burials in different parts of Unangan territory. Wrestling and storytelling were also favorite entertainments with exceptional performers given respect and honored status.

Occasions of special significance and ceremony in the Unangan life cycle were marriage, puberty and especially death. Following most deaths, viscera were removed and the body cavity stuffed with grass. Then the person would be propped up in the corner of the house on a mat specially woven for them or placed in wooden cradle-like frame suspended over the normal sleeping place. There the corpse would remain for as long as several months. People felt no horror of the dead but rather a deep sense of loss and wished to prolong the presence of the deceased. Most of the dead were then buried in the house walls or under the floor. Another form of burial, *mummification*, was unique among the Unangan. It was apparently practiced only in the eastern and central areas and is associated with whaling specialists.

## Beliefs

Although little is known of the Unangan belief system, they appear to have conceived of a creator deity related to the sun who was instrumental in hunting success and the reincarnation of souls. Small images of the creator, known as *kaathaagaathagh*, were carved from ivory and hung from the ceiling beams (Laughlin 1980). The creator, however, had little impact on everyday life which was instead influenced by two classes of spirits, good and evil. Animals also had spirits. The most important ones were those of the whale and sea otter. Aleut men wore a variety of amulets and charms that were thought to provide special powers from the animal spirits to enhance success in hunting. The Unangan believed in the reincarnation of souls which migrated between the earth, a world below and a world above.

### *Behavior patterns*

Unangan life was laid out in a clear and dignified manner. Appropriate behaviors were taught and reinforced from early childhood. An Unangan did not speak unless something important needed to be said. Men kept silent lookout vigils for hours on end, then retired without saying a word to anyone. If animosity developed, men duelled verbally. Each man had to listen to his antagonist without showing anger. When near the end of life, some Unangan men went out in their kayaks never to return. Women tirelessly worked on clothing and baskets for hours at a time. All respected the actions of others and were careful not to offend or insult. Positive reinforcement rather than punishment maintained harmony in Unangan communities. In the 18th century, a violent group of men, driven by the ruthless quest for profits at any cost, descended on the Unangan, and their coming eventually resulted in the destruction of this unique system of cultural adaptations.

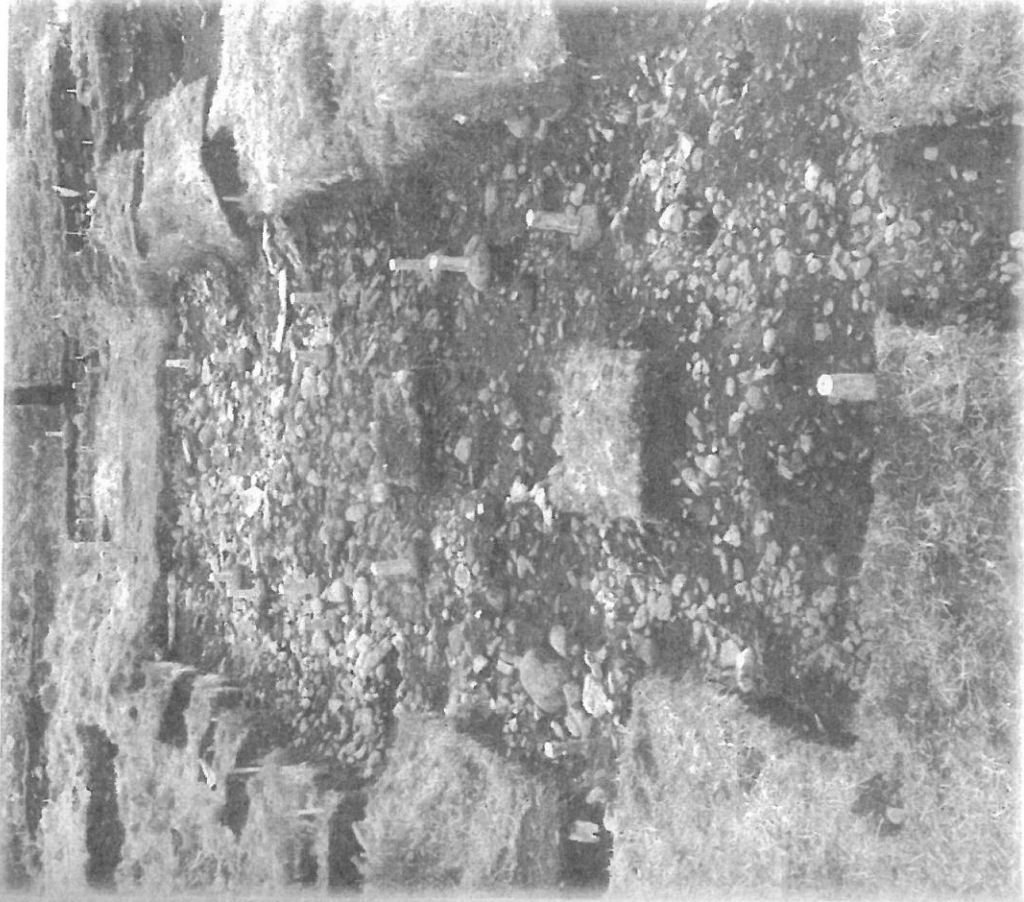
### *Contact and experience with Europeans*

In 1741, the Danish explorer Vitus Bering, in the employ of the Russian government, made the first European landing in Alaska. The discovery of millions of sea otter quickly prompted commercial efforts by independent fur trappers and traders of Cossack descent known as *promyshlenniki*. They sought furs and used a variety of techniques from trade to theft to their ultimate technique, taking wives hostage, in order to coerce Unangan men into hunting for them. The Unangan fought back and were able to inflict several defeats on the invaders. By the late 1780s, however, effective Unangan resistance had been broken and the Russians subjugated them. The tremendous skill of the Unangan men as open-ocean hunters was irreplaceable. They were quickly incorporated as the backbone of the Russian-American Company, a monopoly authorized by the Czar in 1790 to control activities in Alaska. Unangan men were taken from their ancestral homes as far as the Santa Catalina Islands off southern California and forced to hunt sea otters and fur seals for the Russians.

In 1786, the Russians discovered the Pribilof Islands. The two main islands, Saint Paul and Saint George, are the major fur seal breeding grounds in the North Pacific. The Russians forcibly relocated a group of Aleut to harvest the seals; descendants of those first Unangan continue to occupy the Pribilof Islands to this day.

The combination of warfare, disease and starvation wiped out entire villages, reducing the Unangan people to less than 20 percent of the precontact level. In the 19th century, the Russian government tightened control over the commercial activities of the Russian-American Company and sent Russian Orthodox priests to Alaska. Although they

established hospitals, schools, and created an Unangan orthography (writing system), it was far too little too late for the devastated Unangan to recover.



The Unangan of Unalaska built massive semi-subterranean houses just prior to Russian discovery. Some were more than 100 feet long and 50 feet wide, consisting of a central room and six-to ten side rooms. In this photo of an excavated house, white cylinders mark the rocks that were placed under the posts that framed the central room. These large structures imply greater coordination, leadership and class differences, possibly resulting from increased warfare. (PHOTO BY DOUGLAS VÉLTRE.)