

Whale Alley

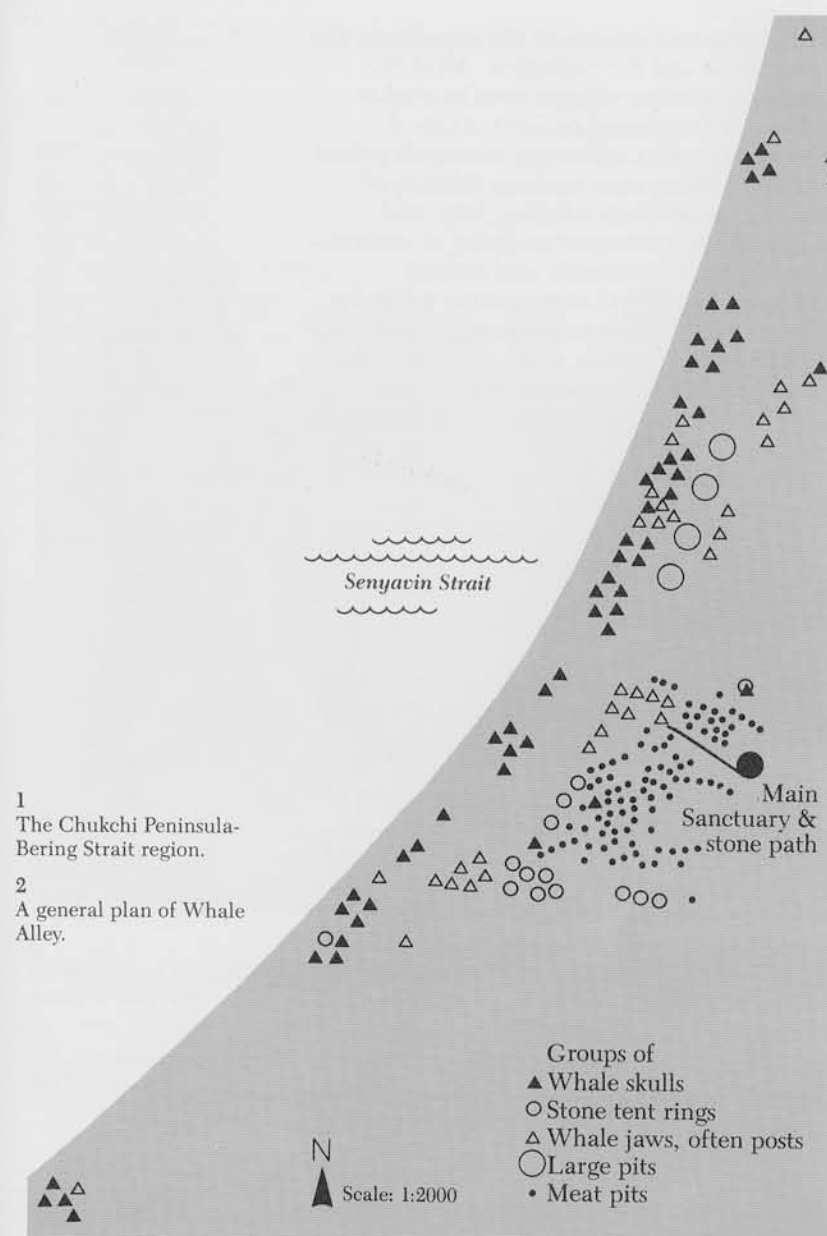
A Site on the Chukchi Peninsula, Siberia

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In August of 1976, a small group of anthropologists led by M. A. Chlenov discovered on the now uninhabited island of Ittygran in Senyavin Strait (Fig. 1) an amazing site that suggested the existence of an early Eskimo ritual complex. The site, eventually named 'Whale Alley,' was the focus of expeditions in 1977, 1979, and 1981. The results of this work were published in a special monograph (Arutyunov, Krupnik and Chlenov 1982) and in a series of smaller publications.

Whale Alley is a monumental construction, even when compared with the remains of the largest early Eskimo settlements on the

Chukchi Peninsula, such as Uelen, Ekven, Sireniki, and Kivak. Whale Alley (Fig. 2) consists of two practically parallel rows of skulls of the Arctic bowhead whale (*Balaena mysticetus*). The skulls are set in the ground in groups of two or four, as are vertical posts made out of bowhead whale jaws (Fig. 3). The skulls and jaws follow a gravel spit along the shore for a distance of 550 meters. An approach road runs for approximately 50 meters from the geometric center of the alley to the talus (rock debris) on the hillside. The road ends in a ring of large boulders which have been called the 'Main Sanctuary.' Approx-



1
The Chukchi Peninsula-
Bering Strait region.
2
A general plan of Whale
Alley.

3
Whale Alley. Drawing by
S. A. Bogoslovskiy.



imately 120 funnel-shaped stone-lined pits, each 1 to 2 meters deep, are built into the talus slope. Layers of frozen meat and blubber are preserved in the bottoms of some of the pits. Other smaller structures of an indubitably cultic character have been incorporated into the complex. Monumental ritual centers of this type are not known anywhere else on the Asiatic side of Bering Strait, and as far as we can judge by the literature, they have not been described in any other part of the Eskimo realm.

In order to understand the function of Whale Alley as well as identify the group that built it, we organized a detailed excavation of the site, studied historical documents describing the area, and collected oral histories relating to the site. In our searches we examined the cultural heritage of the aboriginal groups—the Chukchi and Eskimo—and surveyed the region from Kurupka River to Cape Dezhnev. Remains of ancient settlements were described, and oral traditions associated with them were collected, as were local place names.

Upon completing our monograph on Whale Alley, we came to the conclusion that its builders could not be the direct ancestors of any of the present-day groups of Eskimos of the southeast Chukchi Peninsula, or of the nomadic Chukchi reindeer herders. Nor was the site built by a non-aboriginal group. In our sessions with informants, we noted repeated references to the *masigmat*, a group of people whom present-day Eskimos and Chukchis consider to be quite mysterious. The alleged homeland of the *masigmat* is on the shores of Mechigmen Bay, an area which has not been investigated by ethnographers or archaeologists until very recently.

Several aspects of Whale Alley puzzled us. We had not found any remains of large coastal

villages on the shores of the islands in Senyavin Strait or on the neighboring mainland. Therefore, the nature of the habitation sites occupied by the builders of Whale Alley remained unknown. The most common structural element at Whale Alley appears to be groups of whale skulls set into the ground. Yet, nowhere on the islands or in the Eskimo settlements to the south are such groupings of skulls found.

According to genealogical traditions recorded by us, the present-day Eskimos retain the memory of the *masigmit* who lived in the area of Mechigmen Bay, and who merged with the Eskimo communities of the northern and northeastern sides of the peninsula; among these communities were the erstwhile 19th and early 20th century inhabitants of the islands in Senyavin Strait. In addition, some of our informants talked with conviction about skulls being set in the ground in the area of Mechigmen Bay to the present day.

Questions about Whale Alley and information about Mechigmen Bay prompted us to pay special attention to the uninvestigated area around Mechigmen Bay during the 1981 field season. We hoped to find sites there that would resemble Whale Alley. We were particularly interested in the area of the old Chukchi village, Mechigmen, located on a gravel spit which juts from the southeast into the entrance to Mechigmen Inlet. However, we did not want to limit ourselves to the study of Mechigmen alone, but thought it appropriate to survey the entire coastline between Senyavin Strait in the south and the entrance to Lavrentiya (St. Lawrence) Bay in the north.

The 1981 Expedition

In the middle of July 1981, two sections of the expedition started out at the same time. The ethnographic section, consisting of the authors and the artist S. A. Bogoslovskiy, used a whaleboat manned by six natives from Novoye Chaplino village. The biological section, under the leadership of L. S. Bogoslovskaya, used a skin boat manned by three Eskimo hunters from Sireniki village. The two sections, after separate journeys, met on the islands in Senyavin Strait and, after two weeks of work in the Whale Alley area, proceeded together to the north (Fig. 4).

The use of hunting boats manned by Eskimo crews turned out to be of immeasurable advantage to us (Fig. 5). We could approach the coast and land at any point. Traveling together with hunters also resolved the problem of food. Through constant personal contact and joint work with members of our crews, we learned local place names and hunting terms. Our Eskimo crews also provided us with ecological interpretations of the ancient sites.

Of no lesser advantage were the unified

efforts of the two sections of the expedition, the ethnographic and the biological. All of the ancient sea hunting villages were located at places with heightened concentrations of resources: at points where sea mammals passed close to the shore, near seashore colonies of birds, and at productive fishing lakes and lagoons. With concurrent mapping of contemporary biological resources and ancient hunting sites we could often, on the basis of a preliminary landscape evaluation, predict the existence at one point or another of remains of ancient settlements. In an overwhelming number of cases these predictions turned out to be correct.

Nykhsirak

The first discovery closely tied with Whale Alley occurred on the second day after the expedition left Senyavin Strait. Near a rocky cape, today known as Khalyustkin Cape, forming the southern limits of Mechigmen Bay, we found the remains of a large ancient settlement. In Chukchi the place is called Nykhchigen. However, its Eskimo name has also been preserved—*nykh,sirak* (Seal Cape). The Chukchi name appears to be an adaptation of the Eskimo term. The remains of ancient dwellings ran parallel to the old beach lines of the spit for a length of almost 400 meters. The spit was separated from the sea by a large lagoon, Gytlyangen. Today the dwellings look like rounded depressions with fragments of whale bones jutting out here and there. Such remains of dwellings have been encountered often along the Chukchi Peninsula between Uelen and Cape Dezhnev.

A number of structures at Nykhsirak turned out to be of great interest. Here we found two skulls of bowhead whales set in the ground as in Whale Alley. This was the first indication that our supposition about possible ties between the builders of Whale Alley and the ancient population of Mechigmen Bay was correct. Another striking detail at Nykhsirak was the quantity of skulls of calves of the gray whale (*Eshrichtius robustus*). The skulls were not only found helter-skelter over the gravel spit, but were also included in the rough, circular foundations of some of the semisubterranean dwellings, and in the walls of shallow meat storage pits (Fig. 6). Altogether we counted 122 such skulls and some of the foundations of the dwellings included up to 20 calf skulls.

Mechigmen

Having spent three days at Nykhsirak we continued further north, investigating or noting small old camps on the way. On the 8th of August, 1981, we reached a wide gravel spit which juts into the entrance to Mechigmen



4 Participants of the 1981 expedition in Lorino.

5 The skin boat used during the 1981 season.





6 Igor Krupnik standing in a ring of gray whale calf skulls at Mechigmen.

Inlet. Moving along it to the northeast, we arrived at the old village of Mechigmen, abandoned by the coastal Chukchis in the 1950s. The Chukchi name for the village, as in the case of Nykhsirak, is a phonetic adaptation of the Eskimo name *masig, mi*, which can be approximated to mean "in Masik."

Even while at sea, a marvelous sight opened before us. Above the flat surface of the low-lying, marshy spit, approximately 3 kilometers from its northeastern point, a prominent hillock came into view. The surface around it was dotted with oddly bent fragments of whale jaws set in the ground (Fig. 7), heaps of whale skulls scattered about (Fig. 8), and remains of semisubterranean dwellings. Our eyes caught the regular groupings of large bowhead whale skulls set in the ground. The prominences of the skulls, resembling the claws of crabs, were clearly visible above the greenish-brown vegetation of the tundra.

7 The remains of semisubterranean houses and groups of whale jaw posts at the Mechigmen site.



8 At Mechigmen, bowhead whale skulls were set in the ground. Bowhead whale jaw posts appear in the background.

A survey revealed that the ancient settlement of Masik stretched for more than 1000 meters from southwest to northeast along the direction of the spit, and in plan formed two large ovals fringing the shores of now dry interior lakes. The northern and southern ends of the village were marked by large single posts of bowhead whale jaws. The center of the village was on the hillock. There we found the remains of seven large semisubterranean buildings of distinctive construction. The average diameter of a preserved house pit was about 8 meters. The Chukchis of the nearby present-day village of Lopino called the buildings *klegan*, or 'men's houses.' Some of these structures were no doubt functional analogues of the well-known American Eskimo communal houses or men's houses known as *karigis* (see discussion in Sledge Island article in this issue).

Among the buildings on the hillock we found many interesting features: groups of bowhead whale jaw posts, a single prominent whale jaw secured at the base with an assemblage of 20 calf skulls and deer antlers, and a buried skull of a polar bear weighed down with boulders and surrounded with the small skulls of the gray whale. The hillock itself was divided approximately in the middle by a line of gray whale jaws laid directly on the ground and running for a distance of 10 meters.

Of no less interest were the structures close

to the sea. On the banks of the gravel spit we found a number of meat caches in the form of small pits or funnels, the walls lined with gray whale calf skulls. We also located six oval semisubterranean houses, 8 x 5 meters, with side walls, foundations, and roofs built with bowhead whale and gray whale bones (Fig. 9). Details of construction were almost fully preserved in some of these houses. One of them was virtually undamaged. In our ten years of work on the Chukchi Peninsula, this was the first house with a fully preserved roof of bowhead and gray whale bones that we had encountered. The roof was covered with sod and had a centrally located entrance. As we lowered ourselves into the interior, we noted constructional details that agreed perfectly with the descriptions and illustrations provided by 18th century travelers (Fig. 10). We also observed that each house once had a group of vertical whale jaw posts erected nearby. In Masik we counted approximately 30 such groups, or their remains.

The large number of gray whale bones found at Masik is unusual. We never came across such quantities of gray whale remains anywhere on the Chukchi Peninsula coast. On the surface and in visible house foundations we identified about 1500 skulls of gray whales, the remains of approximately 30 bowhead whales, and the bones of a few smaller baleen whales.

Bones of other sea mammals were relatively rare at the site.

In all, we mapped more than 100 different structures at the site of Masik. Though the first visit to the site enabled us to form only general ideas about it, we realized that in Masik we had found what we sought: a large ancient settlement once inhabited by whale hunters who had a rich ritual tradition which included the custom of setting into the ground pairs and fours of bowhead whale skulls. Today, though, only four such complete groups have been preserved in Masik, and they are not arranged in rows. In two groups, the skulls are set in the ground in a distinctive way: one with the nasal bones up, the other down, a construction that has not been explained.

Other Sites

Another pair of erected skulls was encountered approximately 6 to 8 kilometers to the north of Masik, in a small relatively late settlement known as Raupelyan, located on the northern spit which separates the sea from Mechigmen Inlet. Among the remains of late dwellings and whale jaw posts (under one of which were scattered 40 polar bear skulls) we counted 80 gray whale calf skulls. According to the local inhabitants a large collection of such skulls was to be found at the ancient settlements of Lyugren (presently Lorino) and Ilyan, both now thoroughly disturbed. Finally, about 15 kilometers to the north of Lorino, in the ruins of the ancient settlement of Kukun, 130 gray whale skulls were found, and also the remains of about 10 bowhead whales. The bones lay either on the surface or in the relatively late semisubterranean houses.

Kukun was the northernmost ancient site on the shores of Mechigmen Bay proper. Farther to the north the rocky promontory of Cape Kriguygun begins. Until the middle of the 20th century, the Chukchi villages of Akanni and Yandogay were located on its southern and northern shores respectively. In their appearance they differ noticeably from the settlements of Mechigmen Bay and remind us more of the ancient settlements in the southeast of the Chukchi Peninsula. In Akanni and Yandogay there were no bowhead whale skulls set in the ground, nor had skulls of the small gray whale been used architecturally. Certainly there were plenty of remains of ancient semisubterranean houses, meat storage pits, burial grounds, and bowhead whale jaw posts.

Our journey in the hunting boats ended in Lavrentiya (St. Lawrence) Bay, in the town of the same name, the administrative center of the easternmost region in the U.S.S.R. However, in the next month the small group of ethnographers completed the season with a

journey farther to the north, to the massive promontory of Cape Dezhnev. Here they investigated the remains of two settlements: Naukan (Eskimo, *Nuvukak*) and Nunak.

Cape Dezhnev Survey

The massif of Cape Dezhnev is quite different from the other parts of the Asiatic coast of Bering Strait. It is an extensive, practically inaccessible mountainous monolith, descending steeply into the sea. Here there are no gravel spits, lagoons, or convenient flatlands on which to build villages. Both of the settlements surveyed were located on steep inclines. Nunak is particularly amazing. At its foot is a strip of beach where it is possible to land. In order to reach the early houses, 10 to 20 meters above sea level, one has to crawl on all fours over a narrow mountain path. In Nunak, of most interest are the relatively late dwellings which rather resemble stone bulwarks up to 8 meters in diameter, with boulder walls up to 1 meter thick and stone entry corridors 3 meters long. Analogous but much later, modernized dwellings of this type are described for Naukan (Fig. 11) and the Diomed Islands. There is another remarkable thing about Nunak—a large basin, lined with stone, located on a steep slope above the village. Alas, it was seen by us only from the sea. According to Eskimo folklore and local traditions, existing to this day, the basin held the well-known mythological whale which was born of a woman. Possibly in reality the basin was an artificial reservoir for the accumulation of snow melt and rain water, or perhaps it was a defensive fortification.

The Masik Tradition

In little over three months the expedition had covered over 300 kilometers along the eastern coast of the Chukchi Peninsula, surveying more than 20 ancient settlements. More important, what is now apparent is the exceptional variety of archaeological sites on the coast between Sireniki and Cape Dezhnev. Against this background, the real accomplishment of the 1981 season was the isolation of a distinct cultural tradition in the Mechigmen Bay region. We named it the Masik Tradition after the principal settlement in the area.

In most areas of the northern Bering Sea, the principal target of the aboriginal whale hunt was the bowhead whale (Bogoslovskaya, Votrogov and Krupnik 1982), while walrus, beluga, seal, and deer provided a critical life-support base. Until the identification of the Masik tradition, however, there has not been a gray whale hunting culture known north of the Aleutian Islands.

The specialization of the ancient hunters of Mechigmen Bay has its natural ecological



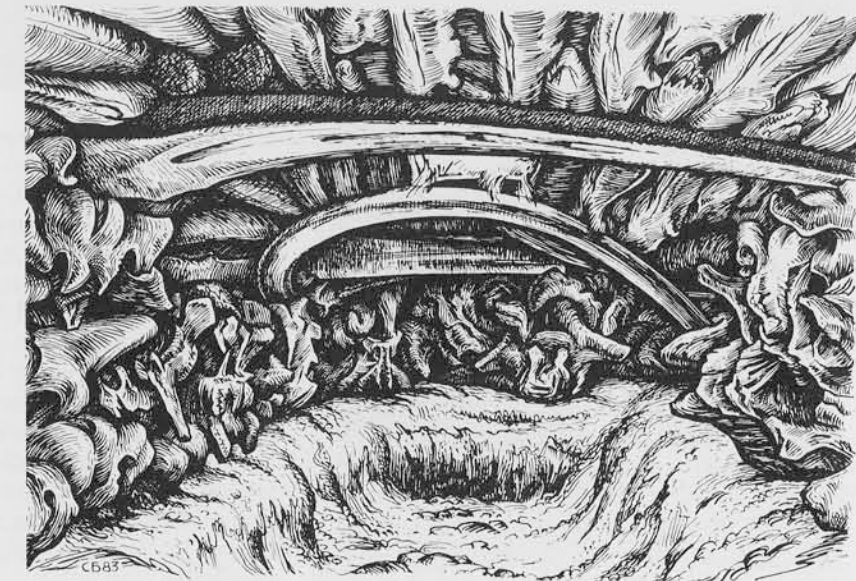
9 The builders of houses at Mechigmen used whale ribs as roofing supports.

10 The interior view of a semisubterranean house in Mechigmen. Drawing by S. A. Bogoslovskiy.

explanation. An enormous number of gray whale calves and young individuals concentrate along this part of the coast during the summer months. The animals come close to shore in some places, one of them being Masik. Here, the biologists accompanying us studied the behavior and feeding of these mammals over several days. As far as we could judge

from the reports of the local native elders, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries the local Chukchis hunted gray whale calves with harpoons and iron spears along this very shore.

In addition to an economy focused on gray whale procurement, other characteristics of the Masik Tradition differentiate it from other ancient cultural complexes of the Chukchi



Peninsula. These characteristics include the presence, in Masik Tradition sites, of groups of bowhead whale skulls set into the ground, the special construction of oval semisubterranean houses without corridor entryways, the distinctive form of meat storage pits which are oval

± 30 (LE-1598), and A.D. 1628 ± 40 (LE-1597). In outward appearance and condition the whale bones in the ruins of dwellings suggest that the sites in the Mechigmen Bay region are also fairly late.

The Russian sea expedition of I. Billings

11
The more recent dwellings at Naukan consist of stone walls with whale bone roof supports.



depressions or circular caches made out of gray whale skulls, an exceptional abundance of various ritual constructions, and an oral tradition which relates the existence of communal men's houses — although memories of these last are also known for other parts of the Chukchi Peninsula, including Uelen and Naukan.

To what degree is the Masik Tradition associated with Whale Alley? A more complete answer to this question will be possible after further investigations, and particularly after the collection of radiocarbon dates from the various sites surveyed. Earlier, Whale Alley had been provisionally dated to the 14th and 15th centuries. However, a sample of whale bone yielded two radiocarbon dates: A.D. 1628

visited the village of Mechigmen in 1791 and noted that the oval semisubterranean houses on the spit were inhabited, suggesting that the Masik Tradition still survived then. Later travelers, such as the Englishman W. H. Hooper, and the Russians N. L. Gondatti and V. G. Borgoraz, visited Mechigmen during the 19th century and never mentioned seeing ritual sites, indicating that by then the Masik Tradition had disappeared. However, a colleague of ours, Professor I. S. Vdovin, visited the small camp at Mechigmen in 1930, when it was inhabited by several Chukchi families, and reported that around a whale jaw post on the hillock lay wooden sculptured representations of whales.

On the basis of the above we can conclude that the Masik Tradition outlived the builders of Whale Alley. In the late 1700s, the obviously Eskimo village of Mechigmen was assimilated by the Chukchi, who pushed a segment of the Eskimo population out. Some of the displaced Eskimos went south to the islands in Senyavin Strait and to Cape Chaplino; others joined the Naukan Eskimos. However, the majority of the Mechigmen Eskimos stayed and became the ancestors of the present-day Mechigmen coastal Chukchis.

At the present time it is difficult to answer a number of questions concerning the geographic distribution of the Masik Tradition and the nature of ties between Whale Alley and other Masik Tradition sites. In a preliminary way we suggest that the Masik Tradition is bordered in the north by the massif of Cape Kriguygun and in the south by the islands in Senyavin Strait. We also suggest that when seen against the background of the rich ritual life of the bearers of the Masik Tradition, Whale Alley ceases to be an exceptional manifestation among the ancient sites of the Chukchi Peninsula.

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