



Sheldon Jackson Museum, III-X-20

Aleut Baidarkas

Located on top of the *Eskimo Containers* exhibit case is the museum's only full-sized Aleut baidarka. Aleut kayaks, said to be the ultimate in sea kayak design, are known by the Russian word "baidarka." Unfortunately, this unfinished baidarka is not the best example of this style of craft. For instance, instead of bearded seal or seal lion skin, heavy walrus hide covers the wooden frame.

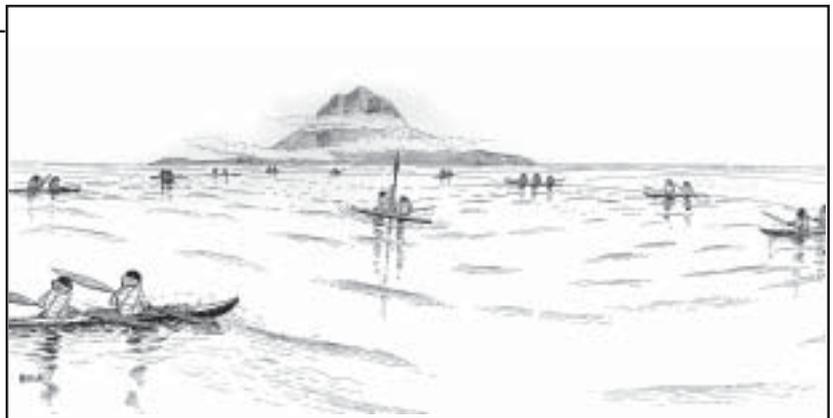
An incident in the late 1890s provides a possible explanation. A group of Eskimos awaiting transportation from Sitka to their homes in the Arctic received instructions from Dr. Jackson to identify and make repairs to the Eskimo artifacts collected over the previous years. It is possible this group of

Eskimos covered a kayak frame Jackson had collected on an early trip to the Aleutians with the walrus hide they had at hand. Over the years shrinking of the tough skin has caused the fragile kayak frame to warp, leaving it with the bowed profile seen today.

Baidarka Use

With open water year round, the island dwelling Aleut depended heavily on the sea for their livelihood. At an early age boys learned the skills needed to safely handle their crafts and hunt. The Aleut's primary game includes seals, sea lions, sea otter and fish, but whales were also hunted at one time.

Both one and two-hole baidarkas served the sea-going Aleut prior to Euro-American contact. According to Orthodox priest Father Veniaminov, the use of two-hole kayaks was limited to hauling freight or for a man to transport a child. One-hole baidarkas were used by able bodied hunters. After Russian fur trappers subjugated these hunters and redirected them into commercial sea otter hunting, the two and even three-hole baidarka began to



The Sea Otter Fishery of Alaska. Drawing by Henry Elliot, *Our Arctic Province*, 1886

replace the one-hole craft. A two-hole craft allowed the bowman to hurl his otter dart while the sternman balanced the craft. It is thought the Russians introduced three-hole kayaks for purposes of transporting traders, explorers, missionaries and goods in the center hole while Aleuts paddled in the bow and stern.

Safety Measures

Hunters often traveled in pairs and joined their boats together for stability in heavy weather. Disabled craft took refuge between two others or could be lashed across them. Gut skin raincoats and spray skirts fitted around the holes helped prevent water from entering the baidarka through the hatch. When water did get in, a large hollow tube-shaped bailer was used to siphon it out. The

hunter sucked water into the tube, placed his finger over the bottom opening, then emptied the contents over the side. Patching materials made of small pieces of wood or rocks were used to plug holes. Blubber could be used for daubing on weak areas.



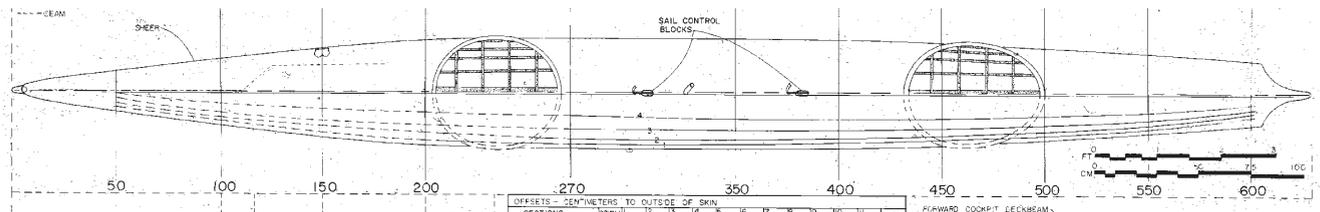
Wooden bailer,
Unalaska, 1978
Photo by David Zimmerly

Baidarka Construction

A variety of driftwood went into baidarka construction and its equipment – black spruce for the frame and paddles, yellow cedar for the ribs and cockpit coamings and red cedar for harpoon shafts and bailers. According to one source, four or five sea lion skins or seal skins were stretched over the frame. Rubbing boiled seal oil into the skins about once a month maintained waterproofing.

One-hole baidarkas are from 13 to 19 feet in length and weigh around 44 pounds. Two-hole

boats average 20 feet (the one exhibited here is 20'7" long and weighs 47.4 pounds). Three-hole baidarkas are 25 feet or more in length and can weigh up to 100 pounds. The maker's physical stature determined the final dimensions of the baidarka. Builders used anthropometric measurements based on arm span, hand span and finger widths. These sleek, fast, craft could travel up to seven miles an hour.



References

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