PREHISTORY IN THE UPPER COOK INLET, ALASKA

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INTRODUCTION

The Cook Inlet area has long been the focus of studies by prehistorians interested in exploring the movements of two distinct ethnic groups through time. Archaeological and historic accounts testify that Eskimo peoples have, in the past, occupied the lower portions of Cook Inlet and probably the remainder during some time periods as well. During later historic times, all but the outer reaches of the Inlet became the territory of the Athapaskan Tanaina. Timing and reasons for that shift were the primary aims of past research.

Archaeological research in the Cook Inlet area north of Kenai has been done by de Laguna (1975b), Kent et. al. (1964), Boraas and Workman (pers. comm.), Boraas (pers. comm.), Dumond and Mace (1968), Dixon and Johnson (1973), Reger (1973, 1974) and Reger and Antonson (1976). A number of efforts at summarizing Cook Inlet prehistory have been made, usually from the perspective of the Eskimo area (cf. Clark 1971).

Osgood's ethnographic sketch of Tanaina culture (1966) has been the main source of analagous comparative material for that group. For the Pacific Eskimo, Birket-Smith (1953), Holmberg (1856) and from an archaeological viewpoint, Clark (1968) remain the standard works.

The focus of this paper is a discussion of the results of investigations during the summers of 1975 and 1976 and the ramifications on interpretations of prehistory in the Upper Cook Inlet area. The definition of Upper Inlet for the purpose of this paper will be the reaches of Cook Inlet north of Kenai including Knik and Turnagain Arms.

BELUGA POINT SITE, ANC-054

The Beluga Point Site was found in 1975, briefly tested during the fall of that year, and again during the summer of 1976. The site is located approximately 27 kilometers east of Anchorage on the north shore of Turnagain Arm. Situated on a rocky point, the locality provides a trap for preservation of the aeolian sedimentary record. Prevailing winds blow from the east down Turnagain Arm and deposit wind blown sediments on the leeward side of the rocky point. Depth of sediments at the site ranges from .5 to 2.5 meters above bedrock. Most testing of the site has been carried out in the shallower end. Stratigraphic studies at the site reveal that a major section from the middle of the total stratigraphic record is missing from the shallowest end with portions of the lowermost and the uppermost units present. These can be tentatively correlated the more complete record in the deeper end, however, by examination of

stratigraphic pit midway between the two areas. Impressions gained during the past summer are that the two bottom cultural components are separated from the upper component by a major geologic unconformity.

The lowermost cultural component at the Beluga Point Site, Component I, is found in a reddish layer at a depth of approximately 45 cm. below the surface. It is found associated with what seems to be a volcanic ash within the thicker reddish layer. Component II comes from a gray silt which overlies the reddish layer. Much of the material comes from the upper portions of the silty layer at a depth of 20-25 cm. Some Component II artifacts were found at the interface between the gray silt and an overlying brown soil which probably indicates deposition of the brown soil parent material unconformably on the gray silt. Artifacts from Component III are found lying on the upper surface of the brown soil at an average depth of 10-15 cm. below the present ground surface.

Component I is a very small sample of core and blade material without any artifacts of other tool classes. A large, thick blade, a blade-like flake, an edge fragment of a core, three core platform rejuvenation flakes and five microblades or fragments comprise the diagnostics for this component and almost the entire sample. The core platform rejuvenation flakes display evidence of platform preparation by multiple flake removal from randomly directed blows. One of the specimens does seem to have been removed by a single frontal blow similar to Campus-type core technique. Shape of the cores from which the flakes and blades were removed cannot be clearly discerned although the impression gained is of a large conical core. The one complete blade measures: 3.44 cm. long, 0.97 cm. wide and 0.33 cm. thick. It has retouch along 2/3 of each side. The two other most complete blade fragments measure somewhat slightly less in width and thickness. Raw material utilized for the Component I sample is almost impossible to identify due to a very advanced state of alteration. Several of the blade fragments and flakes were in such poor condition that any but the most careful treatment as they were recovered resulted in the artifacts crumbling into powder. Mottling of the soil matrix around the specimens indicates they were subjected to long periods of saturated conditions.

The Component II collection is the largest component sample from Beluga Point thus far. It consists of a complete stemmed point, two stems from the same type of point, two round-based lanceolate points or knives, two point blade fragments, two biface fragments, a flake burin and two retouched flakes. Raw materials range from coarse grained gray siltstones, through reddish-brown chert, to white chalcedony.

The stemmed point is randomly collaterally flaked and has a blade portion which is very long in comparison to the stem length. The point blade is 5.1 cm. long and the stem is 1.0 cm. long. Width of the stem is 0.84 cm., less than half the total point width. The other two point stems are of similar dimensions. Both stem fragments and the complete point stem have been ground on the lateral edges. Two rounded-base, lanceolate point or knife bases were collaterally flaked and ground on the lateral edges. As neither specimen retains the piercing or cutting portion of the blade, a determination of function is impossible. Both artifacts were probably hafted. The single burin found in Component II is unlike any of the more

formally described burins from Alaska. At least three hinge fracture facets can be seen at the end of one burin facet and a fourth possible burin stroke scar may be present. The second burin facet is the result of a single blow. This blow was struck from the opposite edge from the first after the thin flake had been rotated. Negative bulbs of percussion are missing from both facets as the edges have been broken off. The two bifaces found were a preform fragment and a very large flake struck from one edge of a large fairly well made biface. The blow extended across the specimen and removed a portion of the far edge. The flake seems to have been from a preform near the final stages of manufacture.

Component III, the uppermost cultural level, is the single component which contains slate, worked or otherwise. A ground slate point, 15.2 cm. long, is the most impressive artifact from this small collection. The point has sharply-indented barbs at the base, a square, flat stem and a diamond-shaped cross section. In addition to three minimally retouched flakes, a biface fragment was found which may be the base of a projectile point. The fragment expands rapidly from a sharply rounded-base and a slight shouldering is suggested on one side.

A hearth constructed by building a ring of cobbles and filling it with beach gravel was associated with the Component III artifacts. The beach-gravel filling also contained a few identifiable fragments of burned bone, a few flecks of red ochre and charcoal. Some distance from the hearth, a mandible identified as mountain sheep was in the same stratigraphic level. The component collections from Beluga Point reflect their stratigraphic discreetness in a very low frequency of raw material overlap and seemingly mutually exclusive techniques of manufacture.

Comparative analysis of the Beluga Point Component I material seems to point to Interior affinities. Core and blade materials from Long Lake, approximately 120 kilometers northwest of Beluga Point, have a similar appearance. The small Component I sample prevents anything more than tentative correlations but both sites produced similar platform preparation debris and microblades of similar dimensions. Long Lake microblades average 0.96 cm. in width (Bacon, 1975:9). West (1975b: Fig. 1) has cited a date of 4656 ± 115 BC which he feels dates the Long Lake core and blade material. Tentatively then, I would accept a similar age for the Component I material (i.e. ca. 4500 BC).

Although Component II from Beluga Point yielded a substantial collection (for the area), comparisons are very difficult. There have been no stemmed points similar to those from Component II found anywhere in Southcentral Alaska. A possible exception may be stemmed points from Pedro Bay on Illiamna Lake. Those points are reported by Townsend to be similar to those found in the Takli Alder and Birch phases on the Alaska Peninsula (Townsend, 1970: 5). Photographs are not available for comparison. There may be a low level of similarity with the Takli Alder and Birch points but the best comparison surfaced at the Healy Lake Village Site, Level 2. Cook (pers. comm. 1976) dates Level 2 at the Village Site to a period 2-3000 years ago. It is unfortunate that comparisons have to be made over such a long distance. The burin from Beluga Point is, as mentioned previously, unlike those from any formally described class of burins in Alaska. Based on existence of the burin,

the stemmed point comparison with Healy Lake points, and a complete lack of slate in the Component II sample, the Interior seems to be the best place to look for future comparisons.

Ground slate points like the specimen found in Component III occur in the Kachemak Bay sequence during the Third Period. Hearths ringed with large stones and filled with beach gravel are also typical of hearths in Kachemak Bay particularly during Period III (de Laguna, 1975b: 129). Workman (ms.), after analyzing the available radiocarbon dates for Cook Inlet has assigned Kachemak III to the first millenium of the Christian Era. Such a date would seem to apply equally well to Component III at Beluga Point (a date of 790 ± 120 BP, GX-4409, has been obtained from the Component III hearth).

MOOSE RIVER SITE, KEN-043

The Moose River Site is located at the confluence of the Kenai River and its tributary, Moose River. House pits are situated on a river terrace approximately four meters above the present mean river surface. The terrace trends away from the current river bank, describing the river margin during earlier times. Coarse to medium sands form the deposit and overlie a deposit of boulders in a gray silty matrix. Lower areas of the site form what is apparently a point bar deposit at the confluence. These more recent deposits are also sandy material. Cultural deposits mantle and intergrade with the terrace and lower bank deposits.

Bone (apparently moose), notched stones, ground slate chisels or awls, slate ulu fragments, boulder chip scrapers and chert flakes were found on the bank of Moose River in a small test pit and in disturbed beach deposits. The test pit also uncovered a hearth undistinguished by any stone constructs.

The house pits at the Moose River Site are large rectangular depressions averaging approximately 8 meters by 16 meters in dimensions. One house pit at the periphery of the site is an aberrant form for the site with a square main depression, an entrance tunnel and an enlarged entrance shed depression. This pit seems to be more recent than the other pits at the site. The walls are more distinct and grass grows in the main room while other pits are very indistinct and covered by moss and small spruce.

One of the rectangular house depressions was tested by excavation of a .5 meter by 3 meter trench from the center to the side. A series of floor levels were encountered which began at a depth of 35-45 cm. below the irregular ground surface. A hearth of stone pavement filled with sterile gravel was encountered at the center of the house. Wood ashes were superimposed on the sterile gravel. Outline of the trough-like stone pavement appears to be oblong or rectangular. Of the four floors found, one is associated with the wood ash hearth deposit; one, which is separated in places into two floors, is associated with the stone pavement; and a fourth which stratigraphically underlies the pavement. Excavations were suspended at that point due to time constraints and our feeling that the house would most profitably be excavated an entire level at a time. Depth of the house deposit is therefore known. Artifacts recovered from the house were notched stones, ground slate ulu fragments, boulder chip scrapers and a few chert flakes.

The most interesting occurrence at the Moose River Site aside from the artifact collection, is the configuration of the hearth in the house pit tested. Paving of hearths with fist-sized stream cobbles is not a well known trait from the Cook Inlet area. The paving in conjunction with a trough-like construction is totally unlike any of the hearths attributed to a Tanaina occupation (cf. Kent et. al. 1964: 110; de Laguna 1975b). Only one other site on the Kenai Peninsula has yielded a similar hearth. That site, the Merrill Site or KEN-29, produced a flat-paved hearth located outside of an associated living floor (Reger, 1973: 37). A radiocarbon date of 2245 ± 115 BP (295 BC, S-1041) stratigraphically applies to the hearth and house floor. The site inventory which includes large numbers of notched stones, slate ulus, chipped stone points, and boulder chip scrapers as well as other materials, has been interpreted as being Eskimoid in nature. The Hook Point Site on the Pacific coast of the Alaska Peninsula produced Takli Birch Phase hearths which are paved and in some cases appear to have trough structures associated within the house (G. Clark, pers. comm. 1976). Takli Birch has been assigned a date of 2200-800 BC (G. Clark, pers. comm. 1976; Dumond, 1971: 31). The dating differs considerably from the Merrill Site and I prefer to restrict my correlations to more immediate areas. In addition, the artifact inventory cited for Takli Birch by Dumond (1971: 22) does not include the notched stones so prominent at the sites on the Kenai River. Based on the close correspondence thus far apparent with the Merrill Site, placement of at least the house tested at the Moose River Site in the first half millenium BC would be justified.

The evidence gained from the past summers investigations has added to the picture of prehistoric occupations in the Upper and Middle Cook Inlet areas and allows a number of speculations to be made. A review of the hypotheses suggested by earlier investigators reveals a general agreement that Kachemak III people utilized the entire Cook Inlet area and that an identifiable Athapaskan Tanaina occupation emerged in either Late Prehistoric or Early Historic times (de Laguna 1975b: 148; Dumond and Mace 1968: 19). The earlier time periods in the Upper Inlet area were not addressed in this paper because of a lack of data. Combining the data from the Beluga Point Site, the Moose River Site and the Merrill Site with previously considered data present a more refined but still speculative framework of group movements.

Assuming then, that we can assign an ethnic identity to an archaeological culture, the Beluga Point Components I and II have been assigned to an Athapaskan occupation and Beluga Point Component III and the house tested at the Moose River Site, House 1, to an Eskimo occupation. We are then presented with a picture of Athapaskan use of the Upper Inlet prior to the Kachemak III occupation at Beluga Point and the Cottonwood Creek Site on Knik Arm. Historic references place Athapaskan Tanaina in the Upper Inlet again during the last part of the 18th century. In the Middle Inlet area, from the Kenai area south to the Anchor Point or Ninilchik areas, present evidence indicates an Eskimo occupation through Kachemak II and III times and an Athapaskan Tanaina occupation during late prehistoric and historic times. Kachemak Bay or the Lower Inlet area had an Eskimo occupation until later historic times.

A general view of events in the critical Upper Inlet area shows a florescence of Eskimo culture during the first millenium AD followed by

a resurgence of Athapaskan usage. The Middle Inlet apparently provided the base for the Eskimo surge into the Upper Inlet. A boundary between Eskimos and Indians on Cook Inlet during pre-Kachemak III times would then logically fall somewhere between the Kenai area and the Turnagain Arm-Knik Arm areas.

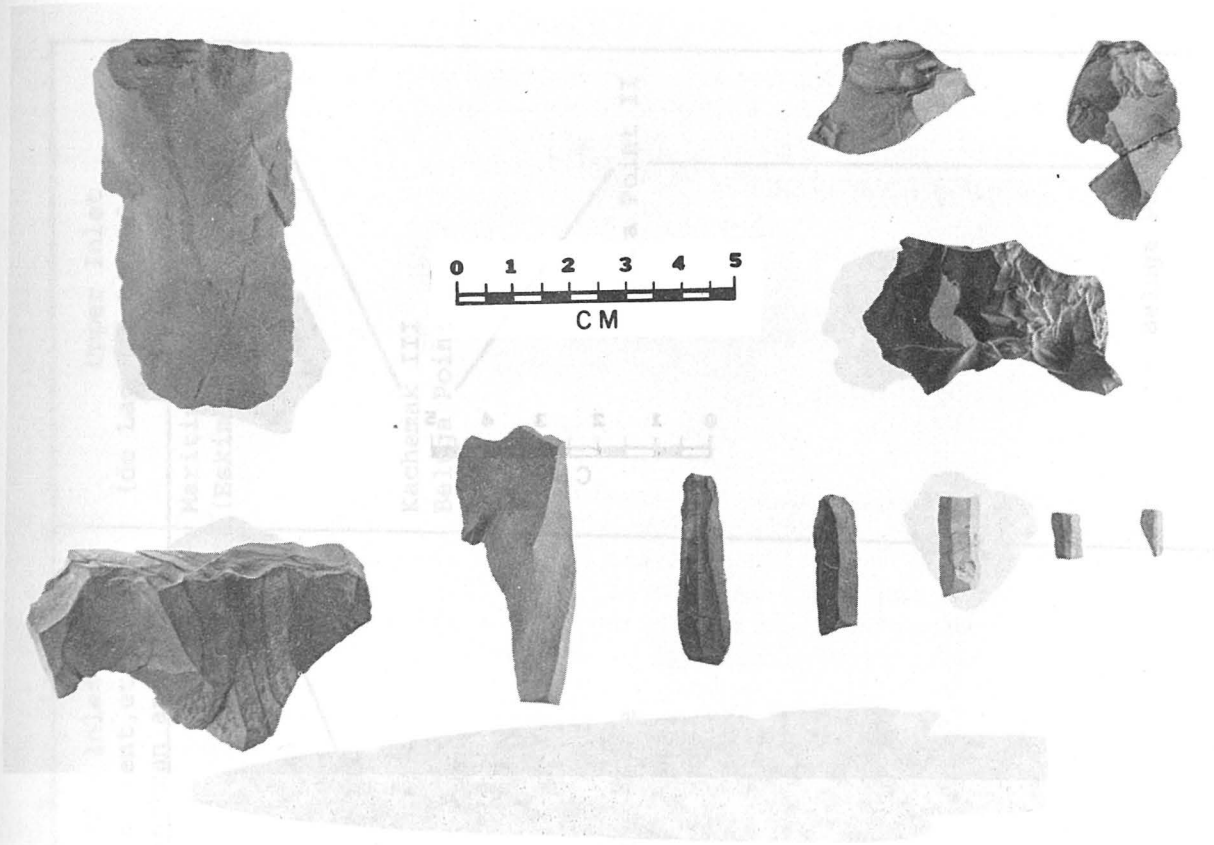


FIGURE 1. Beluga Point Component I

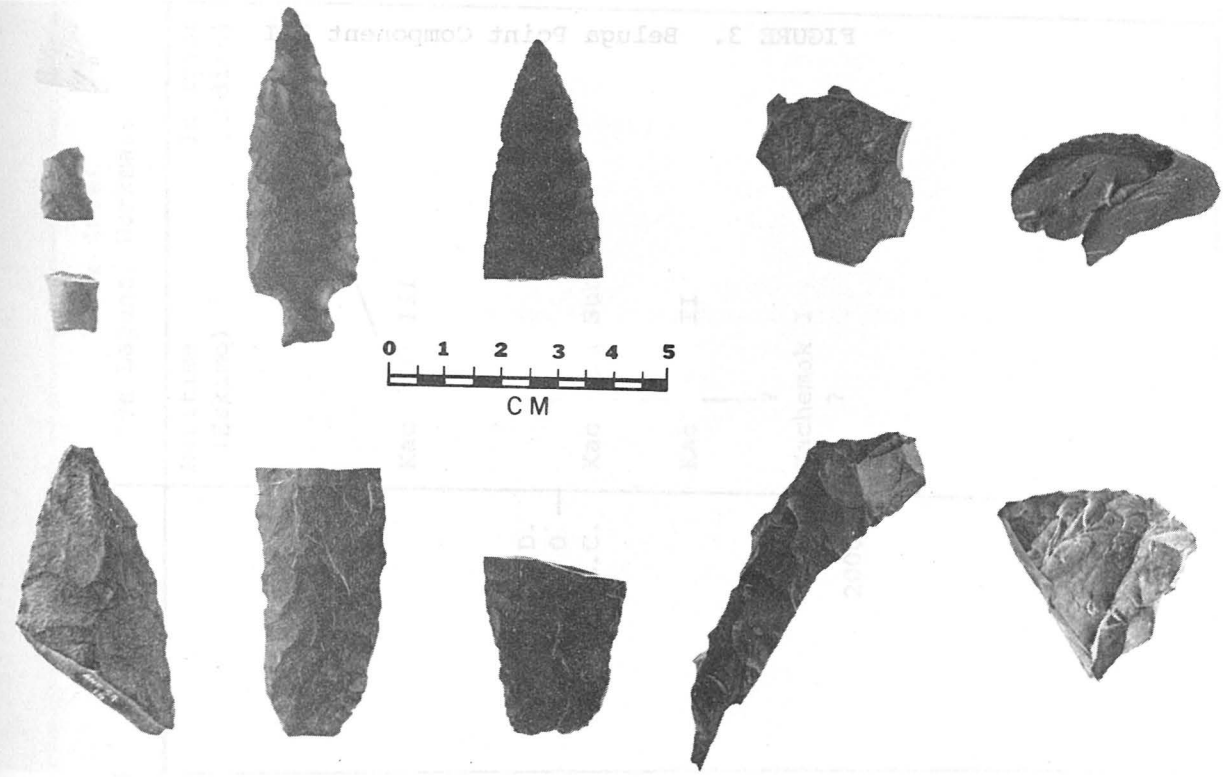


FIGURE 2. Beluga Point Component II

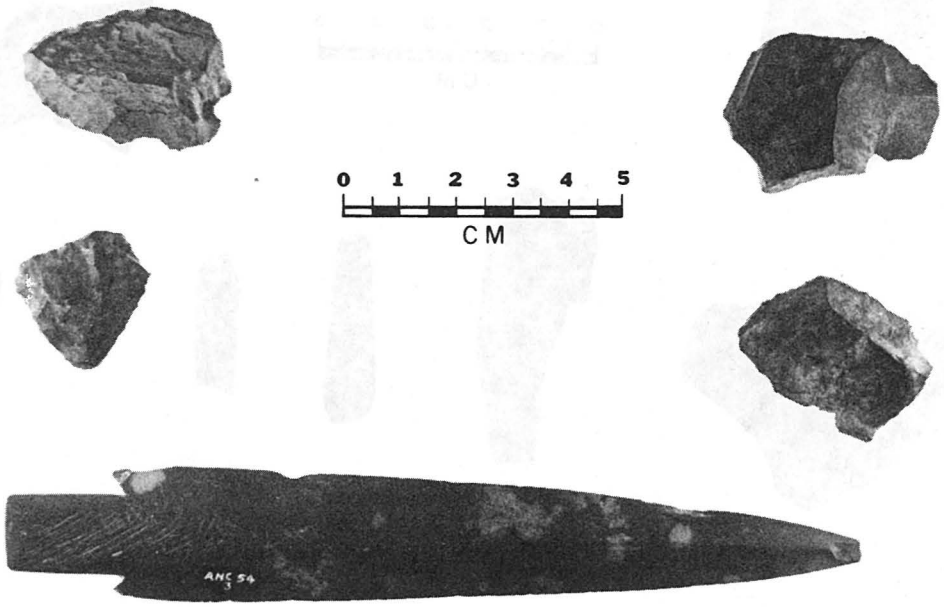
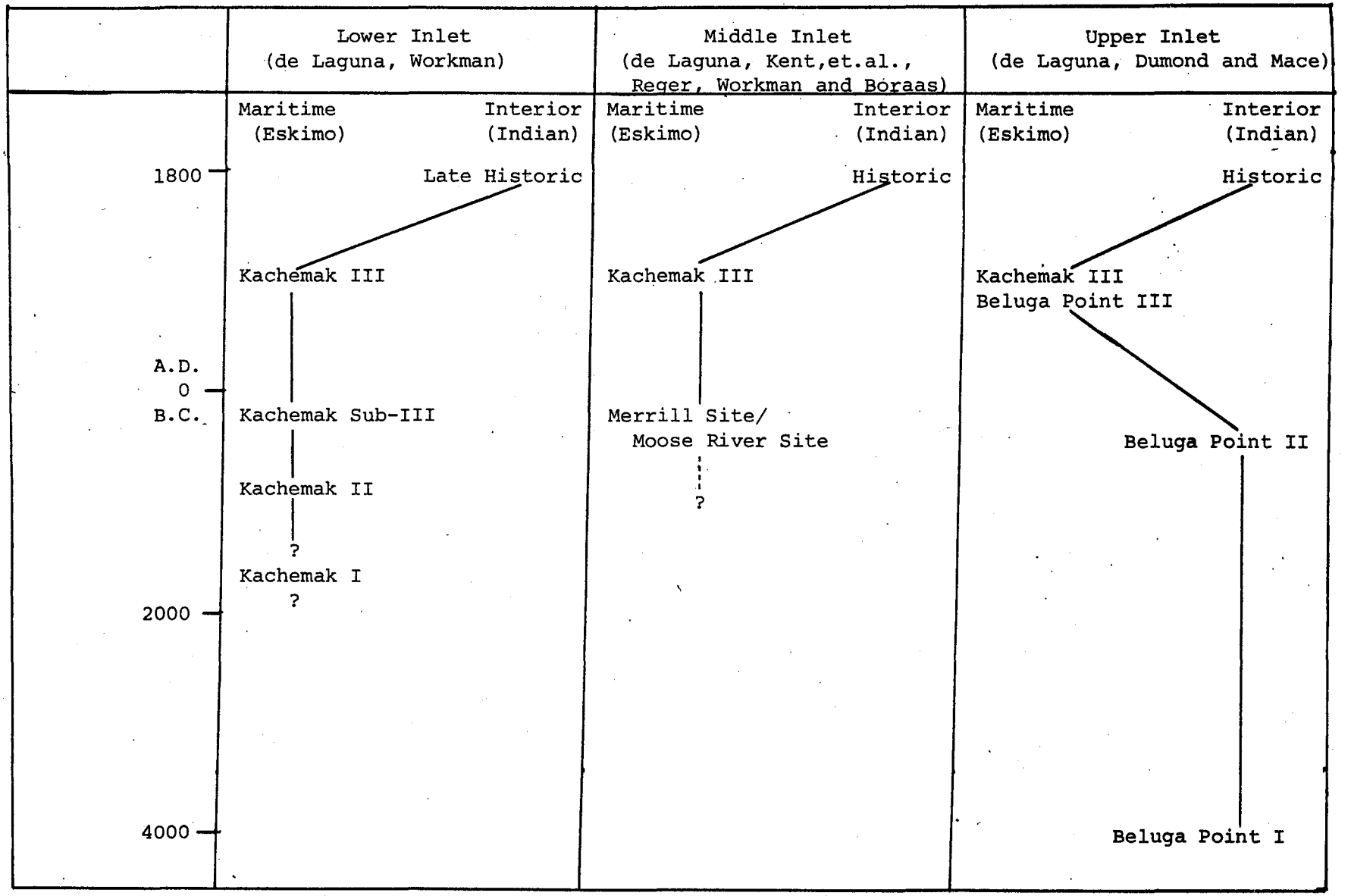


FIGURE 3. Beluga Point Component III

FIGURE 4



Cultural Sequence and Movements in Cook Inlet