

Prehistoric woman has story for us

Though she lived 1600 years ago, quite a bit is now known about one Eskimo woman resident of St. Lawrence Island, located midway between Siberia and Alaska in the Bering Sea. The entire story is told by the woman's body, found frozen when beach erosion exhumed her.

Prior to reburial in her homeland, a variety of sophisticated analyses of the woman's naturally mummified body have indicated something about how she lived and how she died after her child-bearing years at age 53, or thereabouts. A fractured skull and moss fibers inside her lungs indicated that the woman had died during the cave-in of her sod house. Asphyziation (smothering) directly caused her death, rather than the blow to her head.

Had she lived in modern times, researchers might have attributed the carbon deposits in the woman's lungs to her being a habitual smoker of cigarettes. Instead, the cause is more likely 53 years around open cooking and heating fires.

She had other troubles, too. Her teeth were worn down, and she suffered from coronary artery disease, a condition we tend to associate with living in a

stressful technological society. She once had pneumonia, and she had a sideways curvature to her spine that probably gave her an abnormal walking gait.

On the brighter side of life are elaborate tattoos revealed by infrared photography of the woman's arms. Most of the markings are in the form of alternating bands and rows of dots extending partially around the lower arms. Variety is provided by a row of roundish designs on one arm similar to one on the back of the opposite hand and by a completely different circular design on the other hand. It would be interesting to know what these patterns represent, just as it would be able to know more about the Eskimo way of life 1600 years ago.
