

It is difficult to establish the exact time of the Tlingit arrival in Alaska, but in any case, it took place not too long ago (about four or five hundred years). However, we have no evidence for tracing their way of life back to more than a century, i.e., prior to the time when the first Russian promyshlenniki came to Alaska...

The first Russian encounter with the Tlingit dates back to the end of the 1790s. The Russians found them already acquainted with the Europeans. The first Europeans who visited them for trading purposes were probably the Spanish. At least such a legend exists among the Indians. Later on, following the Spanish, the Indian

waters were frequented by the British and the Americans from Boston, which explains why the Tlingit still refer to the latter as "Bostonians." This acquaintance with the whites, however, began only some ten or fifteen years prior to the Russian arrival.

The first time the Russians came face to face with the "Kaliuzh" was in June of 1792, when Baranov was staying with a hunting party in Nuchek Bay. The Kaluizh themselves arrived there together with the Ugalentsy (Eyak) from Yakutat Bay to take their revenge on the Chugach (Eskimos) for an offense of the previous year. Having suddenly stumbled on the Russian camp, they decided to challenge them. During the night they attacked

Russians meet the Tlingits

Baranov's camp but were defeated.

In 1796, Captain Shil'ts (Shields) cruised Chilkat Bay (Lynn Canal) and Sitka Bay (Sitka Sound), and in 1799-1800, Baranov himself built the first Russian fortified settlement among the Tlingit Indians.

Although at that time the Indian settlements were more populous, the In-

dians were more inclined toward a nomadic way of life. They dwelled in large earthcovered barabaras, which one entered through a small semicircular opening, instead of a door, covered with a piece of hide during cold weather. A fire was lit in the middle of such a barabara, with the smoke escaping through this opening. Animal skins were used for clothing as well as bedding.

Theirs was an austere way of life. The greater part of the year was spent in military expeditions against the neighboring Aleuts and in internecine feuds. Warfare was considered the most honorable activity. Being fearless, they, like the ancient kings, often undertook seafaring expeditions in their iaks (yaakw) (Huge canoes hollowed out of a single tree trunk), covering great distances. Under favorable weather conditions they covered between 150 to 200 miles, or about 200 verstas in twentyfour hours. Their canoes could accommodate more than forty well-armed warriors.

Prior to acquaintance with European firearms, their major weaponry consisted, as among other savages, of the bow and arrow. Arrowheads were made of stone and bone; later on — after the Tlingit had become familiar with copper and other metals — they began making metal ones. According to their legend, they saw copper for the first time when a Spanish vessel was wrecked near their shores. The nails from the ship were used by the Indians to make the first metal objects. Later on, iron was used for the same purpose.

Besides the bow and arrow, every Tlingit carried a big dagger, originally made of bone or stone and later on of metal. This dagger was always worn around the neck. The armor included a tight suit made of thick leather and a short cuirass skillfully woven out of tree roots (wooden rods or staves). A small round shield was made out of the same material and fish (whale) sinews. Several cuirasses were sometimes worn one on top of the other. Over the cuirass a thick cloak was sometimes worn as well.

Instead of a helmet and visor a warrior wore a wooden headdress with a mask that had holes for the eyes and mouth only. This mask would represent a certain animal, bird or fantastic monster. Here is how Baranov describes the Tlingit armor and their military tactics, in one of the letters dealing with his first encounter with them in Nuchek Bay (Boswell Bay) in 1792.

"In the dark of the night, before dawn, we were surrounded by a multitude of armed warriors and a slaughter of natives (Aleuts present in Baranov's camp) began everywhere...Two of our men, who suddenly awoke, were killed. Although fewer people were on guard, darkness allowed the Indians to crawl

up so close that we noticed them when they were already within ten paces, striking at our tents with their weapons.

"We were firing our rifles for a long time but without success, since they were wearing three or four layers of Kuaks (suits of armor made of wooden staves and plaited with sinew) and on top of that were covered with very thick moose cloaks. On their heads they wore thick shishaks (helmets) depicting various monsters, which none of our bullets or grape shot could penetrate. And indeed in that darkness they seemed to us more terrifying than the most awful devils of hell..."

Love of warfare was highly developed among the Tlingit. Endless wars were waged not only against various neighboring Aleut and Eskimo tribes but among themselves as well. The main cause of such bellicosity was the fact that the law of the blood feud — "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" — reigned supreme and was strictly observed. An offense was always punished by another offense, a wound by a wound, a death by a death...

When not engaged in warfare, most of their time was spent hunting land and sea animals. This activity demanded the same abilities as warfare: endurance, personal courage, cunning, and skills in catching animals and, at the same time, overcoming all the difficulties and obstacles caused by the local terrain and severe climate.

Until the Tlingit became acquainted with the Europeans and learned the value of furs of such animals as beaver, otter, fur seal, marten, etc., they hunted only those animals which provided them with food, clothing, and other materials useful in the household. Because of that, among the land animals, they hunted moose (tsisk), bear, local deer (kavokan) and

certain types of mountain goat, and, among sea animals, seal (nerpa) and whale, since they provided enormous amounts of grease — a necessary nutrition in cold climates. Cereals were unknown. This type of food was substituted, to some extent, by various berries, including shiksha

(crowberry), moroshki (salmon-berries), etc.

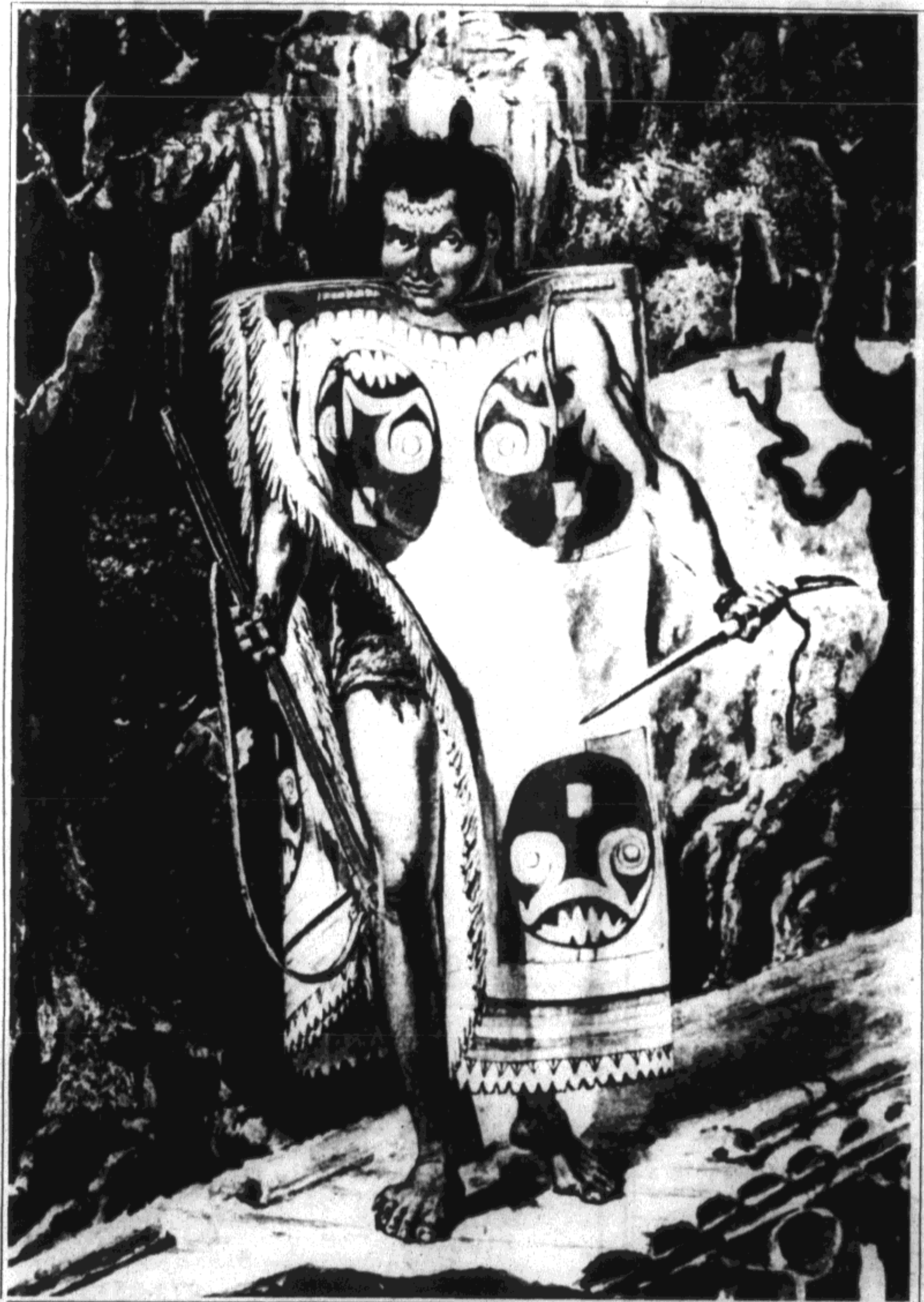
All foods are prepared in grease. Even today the greatest delicacies are fermented fish and deers heads... Their daily ration, however, consists of dried fish, or iukola, with its own peculiar smell, which serves the same purpose as bread among the Europeans. It is usually eaten dipped in fish oil or seal grease.

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Because two kinds of animals were hunted, an Indian beginning in early childhood, learned to climb mountain cliffs and canyons covered with virgin forest, with barely visible paths made by animals. From early years, he had to learn to endure cold, dampness, and various changes of weather. For this purpose, on cold winter days, fathers brought their small children to the

Spartans.

The Alaskan sea is stormy and menacing almost all year round. Often there are violent storms with terrifying winds. Huge foaming waves rush to the shore and crash with thundering noise against the rocks. This can terrify any mortal. One should pity the unfortunate person who dares resist its power and fight it...



"Tlingit Chief in Ceremonial Dress Holding Musket and Knife," painted by Russian artist Tikhonov, (Shur Collection, UAF Alaska and Polar Regions Department).



"Tlingit Chief with Sitting Woman" was painted by the Russian artist Tikhonov. Sitka is shown in the background. From the Shur Collection at the Alaska and Polar Regions Department, University of Alaska-Fairbanks

