

Siberian Goats and North American Deer: A Contextual Approach to the Translation of Russian Common Names for Alaskan Mammals

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ABSTRACT. The word *iaman* was used by 19th-century Russian speakers in Sitka, Alaska, to refer to locally procured artiodactyls. The term originally meant "domesticated goat" in eastern Siberia and has usually been translated as "wild sheep" or "wild goat" in the American context. Physical evidence in the form of deer bones recovered during archeological excavations dating to the Russian period in Sitka suggested a reexamination of the context in which the word *iaman* was used by the Russians. Russian, English, Latin and German historical and scientific literature describing the animal were examined for the context in which the word was used. These contexts and 19th-century Russian dictionary definitions equating wild goats with small deer substantiate the hypothesis that the word *iaman* referred to the Sitka black-tailed deer by Russian speakers living in Sitka.

Key words: Alaskan mammals, Alaskan archeology, historical archeology, ethnohistory, Russian translation, southeast Alaska, faunal analysis, Russian America

RÉSUMÉ. Le mot *iaman* était utilisé au XIX^e siècle, par les locuteurs russes de Sitka en Alaska, pour se référer aux artiodactyles qui constituaient une source d'approvisionnement locale. Ce terme signifiait à l'origine « chèvre domestique » dans la Sibérie de l'est et a généralement été traduit comme « mouton sauvage » ou « chèvre sauvage » dans le contexte américain. Des preuves physiques sous la forme d'os de cerfs trouvés au cours de fouilles archéologiques datant de la période russe à Sitka, indiquaient que le contexte dans lequel le mot *iaman* était utilisé par les Russes devait être réexaminé. On a étudié la littérature historique et scientifique russe, anglaise, latine et allemande où se trouvaient des descriptions de l'animal, pour y chercher le contexte dans lequel le mot était utilisé. Ces contextes et les définitions du dictionnaire russe du XIX^e siècle qui se réfèrent aux chèvres sauvages comme à un petit cerf, appuient l'hypothèse que le mot *iaman* utilisé par les locuteurs russes qui vivaient à Sitka, se réfère au cerf à queue noire de Sitka.

Mots clés: mammifères alaskiens, archéologie alaskienne, archéologie historique, ethnohistoire, traduction russe, Alaska du sud-est, analyse faunique, Amérique russe

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INTRODUCTION

In translating historical documents pertaining to the Russian colonies in North America in the 18th and 19th centuries, particularly in the fields of history, anthropology and zoology, the interpretation of words for plants and animals is often a problem in the absence of scientific names (Pierce and Donnelly, 1978:viii). The translator frequently has to rely upon his or her expertise in the subject matter and on the context of the word in order to determine its common English equivalent.

The Russian word *iaman* (pronounced ya-MAN) is a case in point. This term was used by Russian speakers in Sitka, Alaska, to refer to the locally procured artiodactyl (a hoofed mammal with an even number of functional toes). *Iaman* means "domestic goat" in Siberia and has most often been translated as "wild sheep" or "wild goat" in the context of southeastern Alaska. However, no goat or sheep bones have been uncovered during recent archeological investigations of the Russian period in Sitka; instead, a considerable amount of faunal material from the small indigenous deer (Sitka black-tailed deer) was retrieved (Blee *et al.*, 1986).

Four artiodactyls are native to coastal southeast Alaska: the moose (*Alces alces*), the mountain goat (*Oreamnos americanus*), the Dall sheep (*Ovis dalli*) and the Sitka black-tailed deer (*Odocoileus hemionus sitkensis*). Baranof Island, on which Sitka is located, is somewhat south of the natural range of the Dall sheep, and there are none found on the island today. Mountain goats were introduced for big game hunting in 1923, apparently for the first time, as none was observed by Americans on the island before that time (Reardon, 1981). Today, the deer is the only small artiodactyl

on Baranof Island that is native to the area. During the course of the archeological investigations, local fish and wildlife officials insisted that no wild goats or wild sheep were native to Baranof Island, despite the repeated reference to the *iaman* in the pre-1867 Russian-language documents.

An attempt was made to clarify the apparently contradictory evidence offered by the Russian-language documents, the archeological evidence and the consensus of local biologists. In the spirit of multidisciplinary studies, a variety of sources of data was consulted to test a hypothesis that the Russian word *iaman* could be used to refer to the Sitka black-tailed deer as well as the wild goat. When it is considered how heavily the Russians relied upon the provisioning of the *iaman* by local Tlingits, its importance in trade relationships between the native and Euroamerican groups should not be underestimated. It would be erroneous to conclude, for example, that the Tlingits were importing wild sheep or wild goats from the mainland when an abundant source of mammal protein, in the form of the Sitka deer, was available on Baranof Island itself.

ARCHEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

During exploratory tests for archeological deposits under a building slated for restoration at Sitka National Historical Park, Sitka, Alaska, a trash pit associated with a Russian-era hospital was discovered. The results of these excavations are discussed in detail in Blee *et al.* (1986). Over 11 000 artifacts and almost 12 kg of animal bone, as well as decomposed organics, macrofloral remains, shell, charcoal and a limited amount of sand, made up the deposit. Dating

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of the artifacts and a functional analysis of the cultural material indicated that the trash was deposited by the occupants of a Russian-period hospital during an approximate 6-month period from mid-winter to mid-summer in 1860.

The food bone in the trash pit formed four distinct clusters: two deposits of deer (*Odocoileus* sp.)¹ bones from at least 18 different individuals; one of wild birds, including mergansers (*Lophodytes* sp.), Canadian geese (*Branta canadensis*) and other waterfowl (families Aythyinae and Anatinae); and one of domestic cow (*Bos* sp.) bones. These clusters of bone may represent four separate, special meals prepared for several people at once, such as would occur in a hospital kitchen (Chomko, 1986). Over three-quarters of the meals represented in the trash pit were from locally procured sources.

THE PROBLEM OF THE IAMAN

The *iaman* is frequently mentioned in Russian-language documents, including Khlebnikov (1985:143-147, 214), Golovin (1862:12, 44, 74), Tikhmenev (1863:322) and Fedorova (1971:213). In English translations, the word has variously been interpreted to mean "wild sheep" (Gibson, 1978:374; Golovin, 1979:36, 38, 102), "mountain sheep" (Gibson, 1978; Tikhmenev, 1978:359), "wild goat" (Fedorova, 1973:235, 236; Tikhmenev, 1978:369, 374), "mountain goat" (Tikhmenev, 1978:422), "wild chamois" (Golovin, 1979:12, 38), "mountain ram" (Khlebnikov, 1976:22, 37, 99, 124) and "game" (Golovin, 1979:38). A related word, *iamanina*, has also been translated as "mutton" (Khlebnikov, 1976:70), "wild mutton" (Golovin, 1979:66; Gibson, 1976:13, 215), "wild sheep meat" (Golovin, 1979:38) or "goat meat" (Tikhmenev, 1978:369).

In certain contexts, these interpretations are indisputable: for example, the *iaman* are described as having long white hair that is woven into robes by the Tlingits in the Chilkat area (Khlebnikov, 1985:275). However, for the Sitka area this attribution deserves some reconsideration. Historical documents written in English do not mention either wild sheep or goats being procured in the Sitka area; instead, the writers often commented on the abundance of deer or venison. Notable examples are Edward Belcher and Francis G. Simkinson, who described the southeastern Alaska coast in 1837 (Pierce and Winslow, 1979:105; Belcher, 1843:86); Sir George Simpson (1847:227), recounting an 1841 trip to the Russian capital; Richard Collinson (1889:88), writing of Sitka in 1850; Frederick Whymper (1868:78), Emil Teichmann (1963:175, 207, 214) and Marietta Davis (Haycox, 1986:75, 76), who visited Sitka in the 1860s; Sophia Cracoft (1981:24, 42), Dr. John Brooke (1875:482) and Emily Fitzgerald (Laufe, 1962:61), who observed the community in the 1870s; and

Aural Krause (1956:125), an anthropologist who travelled through Sitka in 1881.

It is notable that only one Russian living in the Sitka area used a word that could be translated as "deer" when describing the local fauna (Blaschke, 1842:55); he wrote in Latin, not Russian. The only artiodactyl that he mentioned being in the Sitka area was *Cervus leucurus*, the scientific name assigned to the small deer in the Pacific Northwest by Richardson (1829:260). This animal was called a roe deer or chevreuril by the British.

Golovin, a Russian official writing in 1861, made an allusion to the range of the *iaman*: "But *iamanina* is eaten only on Sitka; it is not available in other parts of the colony" (Golovin, 1979:36). Of all the Russian colonies in 1861, Sitka alone lay within the natural range of the small deer. According to biologists, if any southeast Alaskan game animal could be found *only* on Sitka in 1861, it must have been the Sitka black-tailed deer.

Russian Language Descriptions

Davydov, a Russian exploring Russian America in 1802 and 1807, described four artiodactyls in southeast Alaska: a *los* (translated "elk," but obviously a moose), two types of *dikii baran* (wild sheep) and one type of *dikii koza* (literally "wild goat") (Davydov, 1812:171-172, 1977:213). One of the "wild sheep" had "very smooth wool from which the Koliuzhes [Tlingits] make their woolen clothes. The rams of this species have white horns. . ." (Davydov, 1977:213). This is a description that best fits the Dall sheep. The other was reported as having "thick white wool and horns like our goats" (Davydov, 1977:213), an obvious reference to the mountain goat.

What was the "wild goat" (*dikii kozel*), if two of the "wild sheep" were what English speakers call the mountain goat and mountain sheep? Davydov describes the animal as being found on the mainland coast and offshore islands of America but does not mention it in Alaska proper. He writes further that "practically no use is made of their skins, but their flesh is very tasty" (Davydov, 1977:213). The "wild goat" habitat as described by Davydov coincides with the range of the Sitka black-tailed deer, an animal with hair that is not conducive to being woven.

Of the Russian sources considered, only Khlebnikov provided a quantitative description of the *iaman*. He noted that "a ram weighs about two *pud* when it is fat" (1976:99). Two *pud* is a little over 32 kg. The Sitka deer live weight varies between 45 and 80 kg (Alaska Department of Fish and Game, 1973:10); they dress-out to about 35 kg. Both of the other artiodactyls native to southeast Alaska weigh more than the Sitka deer. The Dall sheep (*Ovis dalli*) weighs between 50 and 90 kg (Alaska Department of Fish and Game, 1973:11), and the mountain goat (*Oreamnos americanus*) weighs between 60 and 140 kg (Alaska Department of Fish and Game, 1973:14).

The common Russian word for deer, *olen*, is used interchangeably to mean the caribou (*Rangifer tarantus*), weighing as much as 318 kg (Walker, 1968:1402) and the red deer (*Cervus elaphus*), varying from 100 to 250 kg (Walker, 1968:1389). The European roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), almost identical in size and general appearance to the Sitka deer, is called a *kozulia*, not an *olen*. Since the roe deer is

¹The use of "sp." after the genus name in the scientific nomenclature indicates that the faunal analyst could not identify the species from the specimens represented in the archeological assemblage. In many cases, there are insufficient differences of morphological characteristics among the various species in the named genus to distinguish them on the basis of skeletal evidence alone. In archeological investigations such as these, local context is usually used to suggest the probable species. In this case, *Odocoileus hemionus sitkensis* (Sitka black-tailed deer) is most likely the species represented in the trash pit. It is quite clear that the specimens were of the genus *Odocoileus*, and not *Ovis* or *Oreamnos*.

not native to Siberia, and since *olen* are much larger animals, the Siberian-born Russians in Alaska apparently gave it the name of what appeared to be its closest Siberian counterpart: the *iaman*, originally defined as a domesticated goat. In this regard, it is instructive that *dikii kozel* literally means "wild goat," but that the two words together can also be used interchangeably with the Russian words for small deer.

Dictionary Evidence

Russian dictionary definitions help to confirm the hypothesis that *iaman* referred to deer as well as wild sheep and goats. Most modern Russian dictionaries do not contain the word *iaman*, suggesting that it is a regional (i.e., Siberian and American) term and is no longer used in contemporary language. However, a dictionary originally compiled in the 19th century contained both *iaman* and *iamanina* (Dal, 1909:1574). *Iaman* is there defined as a domestic *kozol*, a word usually translated as "goat." *Iamanina* is defined as the meat or hide of a *kozla* or *koza*. It could also be used to refer to a fur coat of no value taken from a *guran*. Four Russian nouns were therefore used to define *iaman*: *kozol*, *kozla*, *koza* and *guran*.

This same dictionary also contains a detailed definition of *kozol*, which is described as a domestic ruminant (i.e., a goat); it is also noted, however, that the term is erroneously used to refer to a small form of deer (Dal, 1909:329). The words *koza* and *kozla* are defined as undersized forms of the deer family, i.e., *kozulia*. The dictionary specifically lists the *Cervus capreolus*, an early scientific name for the roe deer, as an animal that could be called a *koza*. Dal (1909:329) further states that "sheep and animals with deer-like horns are called *dikii kozi* [literally, wild goats]. The common goat of Siberia is *iamanikha*." *Kozulia* is defined as a wild goat, sheep, form of small deer, *Cervus capreolus* (roe deer) and *pygargus* (a variety of roe deer [Brown *et al.*, 1961:94]) in the eastern provinces of the Crimea, the Caucasus and Siberia (Dal, 1909:332). Finally, *guran* is defined as a Mongolian and Siberian word meaning a wild goat, male *kozulia*, *Cervus pygargus* and "possibly a wild sheep?" (Dal, 1909:1011; the question mark is in original).

With this contemporary dictionary evidence, there can be little question that in the Russian language the words for wild goat, and especially those used to define *iaman* and *iamanina*, can be used interchangeably to refer to small deer as well as to sheep and goats.

Goats and Deer in Other Languages

That the roe deer and a wild goat should be considered similar is not unique to the Russian language. Sir George Simpson (1847:227), head of the Hudson's Bay Company, wrote of Sitka in 1841: "The surrounding country abounds in the chevreuil. . . ." The chevreuil is another name for the roe deer (Walker, 1968:1404). Its scientific name, *Capreolus capreolus*, is Latin meaning "diminutive goat" (Gotch, 1979:210). Even zoological classifiers recognize the physical resemblance between the roe deer and a goat.

Finally, a sort of Rosetta stone for the problem of the *iaman* can be found in the writings of Ferdinand Wrangell, chief manager of the Russian American Company from 1830 to 1835, who wrote the following in German:

The mountain ram (*gornyi baran*), as it is called here [in Russia's American colonies], has straight ram's horns and long white wool, with magnificent beautiful wool beneath. It lives in the mountains along the seacoast and is also found on the Kolosh coast and in the mountains bordering Chugach Bay. Another kind, called the *iaman* here, lives in the same coastal mountains, but farther west than Chugach Bay, and on both sides of Cook's Inlet. [Wrangell and Baer, 1980:83-84; revised translation by R.A. Pierce.]

The scholar Karl-Earnst Baer, never in Russian America, but who studied the report from there closely, concluded in an editorial note to the above passage that Wrangell's "mountain ram" was

according to the description: *Capra Americana* Richardson, *Antelope lanigera* Smith. Admiral Wrangell, to whom I showed the description in Richardson's *Fauna Boreali-Americana* [1829:258-273] immediately said it was correct. He had seen horns similar to the *Ovis montana* Desm. in Richardson's sketch, but did not know its name. Therefore, it probably does not live near our colony. The animal called *iaman* there is said to look like a deer. [Wrangell and Baer, 1980:83; revised translation by R.A. Pierce.]

CONCLUSIONS

A variety of different sources confirm the hypothesis that the word *iaman* could be used to mean the Sitka black-tailed deer as well as a wild goat or wild sheep: 1) the appearance of deer bones in the Russian-period trash pit, exclusive of sheep and goat bones; 2) the lack of a Russian reference to an animal that English speakers found to be ubiquitous; 3) the "two *pud*" weight criterion given by Klebnikov; 4) Russian dictionary definitions equating wild goats and small deer; and 5) Wrangell and Baer's (1980) statement that the *iaman* was a deer. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that, when mention is made of the historic food sources in Sitka, the word *iaman* in the Russian-American literature should be interpreted to include the Sitka black-tailed deer.

That the Siberian-born Russian speakers in the American colonies should choose to use their word for domesticated goat when referring to a similar-sized wild artiodactyl should not be surprising. It was not unusual for Old World emigrants to name unfamiliar North American fauna for similar animals in their homeland. English-language examples abound: the American wapiti was called an "elk," yet no true elk are native to North America. The animal that Americans have named a "moose" is referred to as an "elk" in Europe. The American bison was likewise called a "buffalo" and the pronghorn an "antelope" in the popular literature; neither terminology is correct taxonomically. Notably, the American mountain goat is not a goat at all, but is rather a type of antelope.

All of the Russian-language uses of the word *iaman* in documents describing the Sitka area referred to a wild animal that was procured by the native Tlingit Indians in the forests immediately surrounding Sitka. Unless the Tlingits, under pressure from the Russians, had systematically exterminated the wild goat or wild sheep from Baranof Island before American possession in 1867, the only artiodactyl native to the island was the Sitka black-tailed deer.

In this particular case, it is apparent that no single source of information could place the word *iaman* in its appropriate

context. To the historian relying on 19th-century dictionary definitions, the word meant "domesticated goat." Since the 19th-century Russian writers clearly stated that the animals were hunted by the Tlingits and then sold in the local market, it was no great leap of faith to take to suppose they referred to a wild goat instead of a domesticated one. Only the apparently contradictory physical evidence offered by the deer bones in the archeological deposits from an undeniably Russian context suggested that the word might have a broader meaning. Examination of the words used to define words, in this case the Russian words used to define *iaman*, verified that wild goats and deer were sometimes lumped under the same sort of terminology.

In summary, it is believed that a broader contextual approach needs to be taken when translating the common names of animals from one language to another. This study reinforces the need for a multidisciplinary approach toward deciphering the identity of animals described in literature dating to past centuries and written in languages other than English. The combination of evidence from the context in which the animal is mentioned, physical evidence from the archeological record, the specialized knowledge of local biologists and a careful examination of past dictionary definitions yielded a better understanding of what animals were being procured by the Sitka Tlingits and eaten by the Russians in the first half of the 19th century. While elucidating the interrelationships among the Tlingits, Russians and the local environment, this clarification might also be of use to biologists studying the fluctuations in the size of deer populations (e.g., Hanley, 1984; Hanley and Rose, 1987). The Russians kept detailed records of both the local climatic conditions and the number of *iaman* that were procured for their consumption each year (Gibson, 1978:373). The extension of these records to the beginning of the 19th century should be of interest to wildlife and forest managers in southeast Alaska, as well as to the students of Russian-American history or Tlingit economic functions.

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