

CHAPTER 7. CERAMICS—ASUT

Weathering of Kodiak’s slate and granite bedrock during the last glacial epoch created distinctive deposits of grey blue clay. This clay is widely available, particularly in areas once covered by glacial lakes. The oldest documented use of clay is for cooking features (Steffian 1992b). During the late phase of the Kachemak tradition, people lined small pits beside household hearths with a thick layer of clay (Figure 7.1). These may have been cooking vessels, stationary, water-tight containers for cooking soups and stews heated with hot rocks. Clay-lined troughs leading into these pits may have captured the oil exuded by chunks of blubber set by the fire to melt. Some of these clay features are filled with small stake holes. The clay used in household features does not appear to have been altered beyond shaping.

Figure 7.1. Clay features surrounding a hearth in a Late Kachemak house at the Uyak site.



Alutiiq ancestors also lined underground pits with thick layers of clay (Figure 7.2). These large depressions, dug into the soil beneath household floors, acted like root cellars. Here, foods could be stored or fermented in the cool ground. People sealed some of the pits with a clay cap. Others had a stone or wooden lid. These pits are typical of the Koniag tradition (Saltonstall 1998). At the Uyak site clay pits also held human burials (Heizer 1956:16).

Figure 7.2. Clay-lined pits in profile at the Malina Creek site, Afognak Island.



In the Koniag tradition, people began to form portable clay objects (Table 7.1). They used clay to manufacture several styles of fired ceramic pots (Clark 1966, 1974, Heizer 1949) and they made unfired gaming balls. There are no historic descriptions of clay working, but studies of pots and pot fragments from archaeological sites suggest that people mixed clay with sand, beach gravel, and/or plant fiber and formed it into large, thick-walled, conical pots with a flat base (de Laguna 1939). These vessels were hardened by firing, and then used for cooking and rendering oil (Admiraal et al. 2020). Some of these ceramic pots were finished with decorated applique rims (Clark 1974).

In the 19th century, Alutiiq people adopted a variety of imported European items made from clay. These included English ceramics and delicate tobacco pipes made of white kaolin clay. These objects are common finds in historic sites.

It is likely that the Alutiiq learned to make ceramics from their Alaska Peninsula, neighbors who produced pots for more than a millennia before the technology was adopted along the Gulf of Alaska coast. Ceramics appear in Kodiak’s archaeological record at about eight hundred years ago. They are most common in settlements of the islands’ southeastern coast. The mouths of these vessels are often coated with a black crust—carbonized food remains.

Table 7.1. Alutiiq terms for ceramics

English	Alutiiq	Comment
Gaming Balls	Mayaciingcuk ^c	
Pottery Vessel	Qikumek canamasqat ^c	
Worked Clay	Qikuk ^{m*}	“clay”, material collected for manufacture

m = term in modern usage, h = historic term, c = term created by Elder Alutiiq speakers

* = suggested term needing additional review



Alutiiq Technological Inventory

Artifact Class Summary Sheet

English Names **Alutiiq Names**

Industry Pecked Cobble **Activity** Gaming **Function**

Common Materials

LxWxD (cm)

Tradition Ocean Bay Kachemak Koniag Alutiiq

Miniature Yes No/Unknown **Example Sites Found**

Description

Gaming balls are spherical pieces of stone or clay thought to have been used in a tossing game—like yaamaq or kakangaq. They tend to occur in archaeological sites in clusters. Most are unmodified spheres of greywacke and granite—water worn stones likely collected from the beach. However, a small number of these pieces are molded clay. The clay examples are also spherical and appear unfired. They are lumps of clay made into balls and dried. Craftspeople probably added water to the clay to make it maleable. There is no evidence of temper.

References

Last Update

Updated By

GAMING BALLS

Gaming Balls from Karluk One.



Alutiiq Technological Inventory

Artifact Class Summary Sheet

English Names	Pot	Alutiiq Names	Qikumek canamasqatc
Industry	Ceramic	Activity	Cooking/Storage
		Function	Cooking, Rendering Oil
Common Materials	Clay with gravel, sand, or fiber temper		
LxWxD (cm)			
Tradition	<input type="checkbox"/> Ocean Bay	<input type="checkbox"/> Kachemak	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Koniag <input type="checkbox"/> Alutiiq
Miniature	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Yes	Example Sites Found	Kumluk, Malriik, Rolling Bay
	<input type="radio"/> No/Unknown		
Description	<p>Alutiiq craftspeople fashioned pots from glacial clays mixed with sand and/or gravel. A few early pots also show the use of grass as a tempering agent. Most were quite large, up to a foot in diameter and big enough to hold several gallons of liquid. However, people also fashioned tiny toy pots. There were two shapes of pots, (1) tall conical pots with a flat base, and a (2) globular style with a more rounded base.</p> <p>To start a pot, a craftsperson formed the base with a round disc of clay. To this they added strips of tempered clay, winding them around the base. Crafts people likely used small paddles to blend the strips of clay as they formed the walls of the pot. Many pot were cone-shaped at the base and then straightened at a distinct shoulder to form a cylinder at the top. Sometimes a decorative collar was added to the opening of the pot, and its surface smoothed with a wash of clay and burnished. Craftsmen probably hardened their pots by placing them in fires.</p> <p>Many pots have black crusty material on the inner rim, charred food remains. This material is very valuable for analysis as it can reveal what was cooked in the vessel.</p> <p>Alutiiq pottery is fragile. It breaks easily and typically appears in assemblages as fragments. These fragments are rough edged and often charred from exposure to fire. In the interior of the fragment you can see the temper - typically pea gravel - embedded in the clay. Sherds are often gently curved, reflecting the shape of the pot. It is often possible to note the type of fragment present (body, rim, base). Decoration (incised design) is rare, but sometime present on pot rims.</p>		
References	Admiraal, M., et al., 2020 Heizer 1949 Clark 1966a de Laguna 1939		
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POTTERY



Pot sherds from the Malriik site, Kiliuda Bay

POTTERY



Globe-shaped pot from Karluk One, Karluk

POTTERY



Conical Pot from the Laughlin Collection (AM50)

POTTERY



Conical pot base from KOD-114, Sitkalidak Island (AM1012)

POTTERY



AM711:612



AM711:614



AM711:615



AM711:619



AM711:702



AM711:635



AM711:639



AM711:849

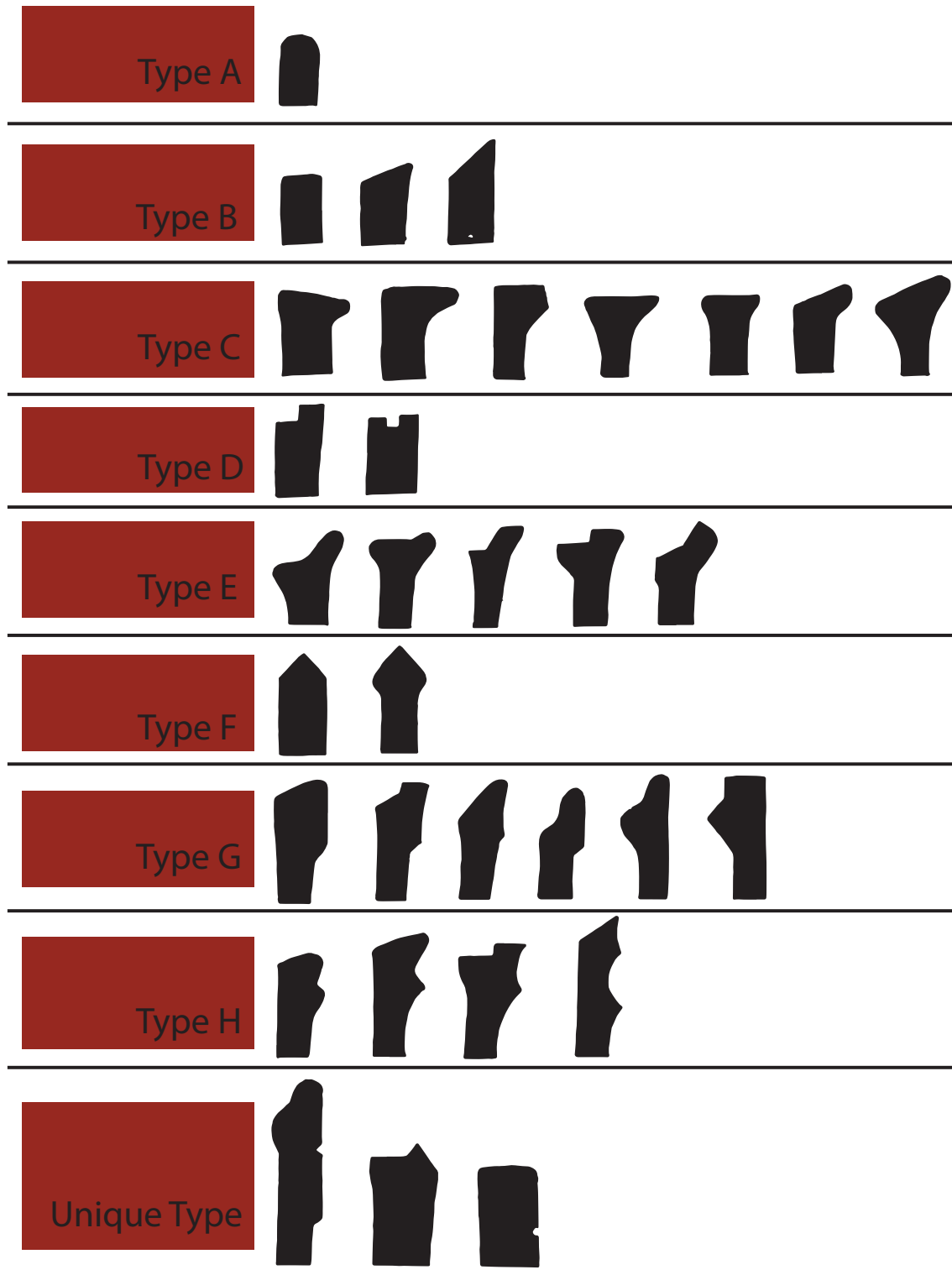


AM711:700

Catalog #	Rim Style
AM711:612	plain
AM711:614	flared
AM711:615	ridged
AM711:619	flared
AM711:702	collared
AM711:635	collared
AM711:639	plain
AM711:849	pointed collar
AM711:700	collared

Pottery rim sherd profiles from the Kumluk site, Old Harbor

POTTERY



Pottery vessel rim styles from the Kiavak and Rolling Bay sites, adapted from Clark 1974.



Alutiiq Technological Inventory

Artifact Class Summary Sheet

English Names	Worked Clay	Alutiiq Names	Qikuk—Clay
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Industry	Ceramic	Activity	Cooking/Storage	Function	Cooking, Rendering Oil
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Common Materials	Clay with gravel, sand, or fiber temper
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LxWxD (cm)	
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Tradition	<input type="checkbox"/> Ocean Bay	<input type="checkbox"/> Kachemak	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Koniag	<input type="checkbox"/> Alutiiq
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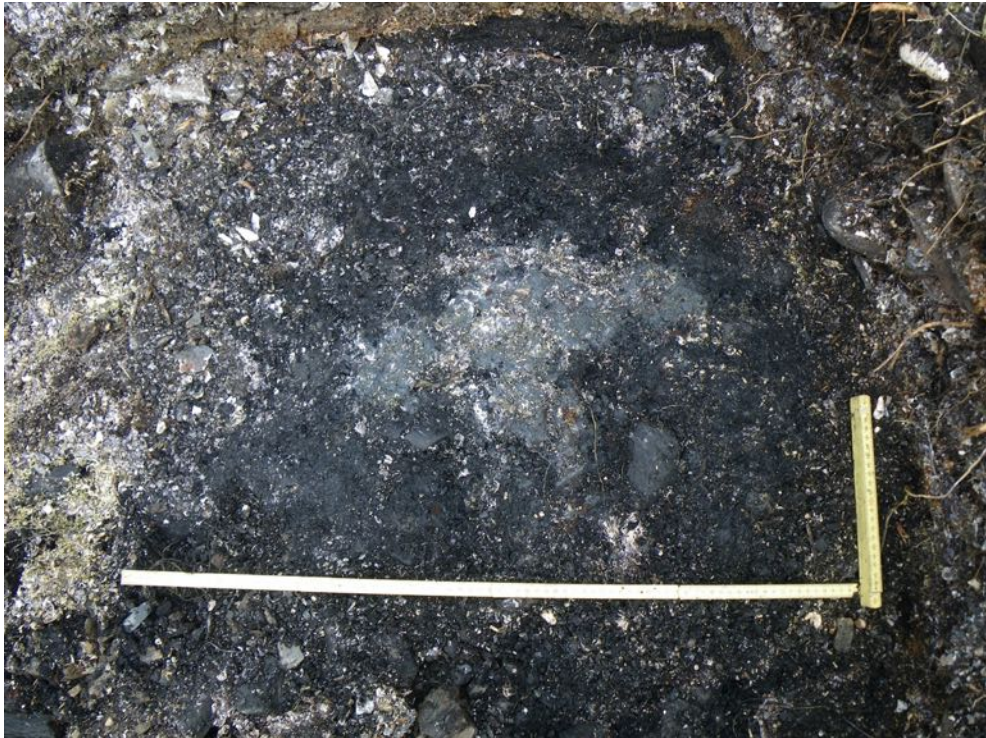
Miniature	<input type="radio"/> Yes	Example Sites Found	Malriik
	<input checked="" type="radio"/> No/Unknown		

Description	<p>At the Malriik site in Kiliuda Bay archaeologists found clay in the shell midden. Lumps of unfired clay with gravel and charcoal may represent debris from pot manufacture. The site produced a variety of sherds from finished pots. Alternatively this might be the remains of a hearth (cleaned out of a house?). Whatever its function, this material represents worked clay.</p>
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References	Steffian, Amy F. and Patrick G. Saltonstall 2018
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WORKED CLAY



Deposit of Worked Clay from the Malriik Site



Worked Clay Sample from the Malriik Site