Notes

Sealer's sledge excavated on Livingston Island, South Shetland Islands

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ABSTRACT. Details are provided of a sledge, possibly of late nineteenth/early twentieth century provenance, discovered on Byers Peninsula, Livingston Island, South Shetland Islands, in 2007.

Contents

Introduction

During archaeological fieldwork in January 2007, the authors excavated the components of a remarkably complete sledge, probably dating to the nineteenth century, that appeared to have been cached on the west coast of Byers Peninsula on Livingston Island, in the South Shetland Islands group. The context for the wider study of sealing sites has been published previously (Stehberg 2003; Pearson and Stehberg 2006; Zarankin and Senatore 2005; Zarankin and Senatore 2007).

The site where the sledge was located, adjacent to a gentoo penguin rookery halfway between Point Smellie and Devil's Point, may be one reported by British field workers in the 1950s (see Lewis–Smith and Simpson 1987: 57, site 11). However, the description of that site, as 'the base of a wooden hut built on a sealer's cargo sledge', with 'a large amount of charcoal and charred timber' and the remains of an iron stove and planks coated in blubber, do not match the description of the site as excavated.

The site, named Punta Diablo [Devil's Point] 2 during the survey, had been noted previously by two of the authors (Zarankin and Senatore 2005) (Fig. 1). The remains of the sledge were located against a rock outcrop situated on a steep slope above a beach where elephant seals were active. The excavations suggest that the sledge was intentionally placed where it was found, probably to avoid its destruction by elephant seals wallowing on the lower slopes. No other evidence of human occupation was located on the surface or during excavation, and the steep slope makes it most unlikely that the location was used as a campsite. It appears to have been simply a safe place to leave the sledge for later use.

When surveyed in 2007, parts of two sledge runners were protruding from the ground, which was being eroded by water flowing in runnels from the slopes above. The surface is kept unstable by the seasonal extension of the adjacent penguin rookery over the site. Given the apparent presence of at least parts of a sledge, it was judged to be prudent to excavate and assess the context for the site, and if necessary remove the sledge material before its inevitable disturbance and possible loss due to erosion.

As excavation proceeded more components of the sledge were located at or immediately below the surface, covered by sand and gravel washed down the slope. By the end of the excavation all the components needed to construct the sledge were found, in varying states of preservation, disassembled and distributed down about 6m of the slope.

Fig. 1. Punta Diablo [Devil's Point] 2 site, Byers Peninsula, Livingston Island, showing the sled components being excavated, and their relationship to the beach. (photograph M. Pearson 1997)

Fig. 2. The sledge re–assembled in Punta Arenas. (photograph R. Stehberg 2007)

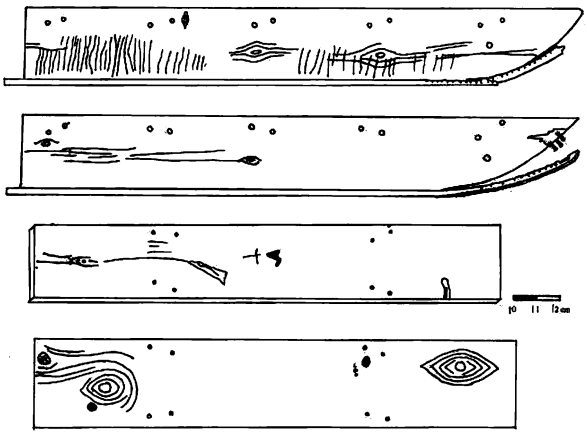

Fig. 3. Drawing of the sledge runners and deck planks. (R. Stehberg 2007)

Details of the sledge

Fig. 2 shows the sledge as re-assembled and Fig. 3 presents details of its construction. The sledge runners are solid timber planks, 2430mm long, 315mm deep and 50mm thick, with one end rounded and the other cut square. A timber plank 100mm wide and 30mm thick is attached to the base of each runner with wedge-shaped cut nails with hand-forged heads, forming a ski-like sole. Each runner has a series of ten drilled holes in five pairs along its upper edge, through which to pass rope or hide thongs to secure the upper framework of cross pieces. A larger hole near the curved front end is interpreted as an attachment for a hauling rope. Five cross pieces lay beside and beneath the other timbers, each being roughly 1090mm long, 30mm wide and 70mm thick. Bevelled cuts about 80mm from each end provided fixing points for binding the cross–pieces to the tops of the runners. The distance between these attachment points is 810mm, indicating the width of the sledge when assembled. Two large planks, one 2030 × 320 × 25mm, the other 2100 × 380 × 25mm are interpreted as being the bed of the sledge that was bound to the tops of the cross-pieces. Four pairs of holes drilled though each plank near the outer edges and 840 mm apart indicate they were tied to the cross–pieces, the measurement suggesting the fixing being to the second and fourth cross–pieces from the front of the sledge. Fragments of rope were found beneath one of the planks, which may have been used to secure the deck to the cross–pieces. Several fragments of a stoneware vessel were also found beneath and beside the planks.

The style of the sledge is that of the Greenland and eastern Canadian Arctic Inuit type, usually called the 'komatic' (from the Inuktitut word *qamutik*, the word for 'sledge' (Brody 2000: 325)). The runners show very little wear, and the sledge may have been a new one found to be too heavy to use in an ice free area and abandoned. This type of sledge was used by both American and British Arctic travellers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Pearson 1995), so stylistically it is not possible to indicate the nationality of the sealers using the sledge in the period of use. The analysis of the timber species is presently under way, and may settle the question of country of origin. At the time of writing the species used has been narrowed down to *quercus* (oak) and *pinus* (pine), indicating northern hemisphere origin, but is not yet sufficiently refined to indicate an American or European species.

Dating of the sledge

Dating is similarly difficult. The wedge–shaped cut nails with forged heads were available for most of the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, covering most phases of sealing in the South Shetlands. They are unlikely, however, to have been used in a sledge built after about World War I. The well–preserved nature of the timbers of the sledge runners might suggest its use in a late nineteenth/early twentieth century context rather than in an 1820s sealing expedition, but this is by no means certain. The heavy construction of the sledge might indicate it was used to transport heavy items such as elephant seal oil barrels. Possible origins include sealers associated with the revival of U.S. sealing in the South Shetlands between 1871 and 1892, when 14 ships visited; and a series of Canadian sealers operating in the area between 1894 and 1908. The scientific expeditions of David Ferguson in 1912–1913 and Olaf Holtendahl in 1927–1929, which might have used such a sledge for transporting geological samples, did not land on the Byers Peninsula (Headland 1989; Holtendahl 1929; Ferguson 1921). Whale factory ships used in the period 1892 to 1932 are not known to have visited President's Harbour/New Plymouth that lies off the site. Combining the physical attributes and the dates of known expeditions to the archipelago, a date for the sledge of between 1871 and 1908 seems likely.

The sledge is in Santiago for conservation assessment and storage. It may become an important artefact in a proposed Antarctic museum being considered by the Instituto Antartico Chileno (INACH) for Punta Arenas.

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An Antarctic tragedy: a polar poem

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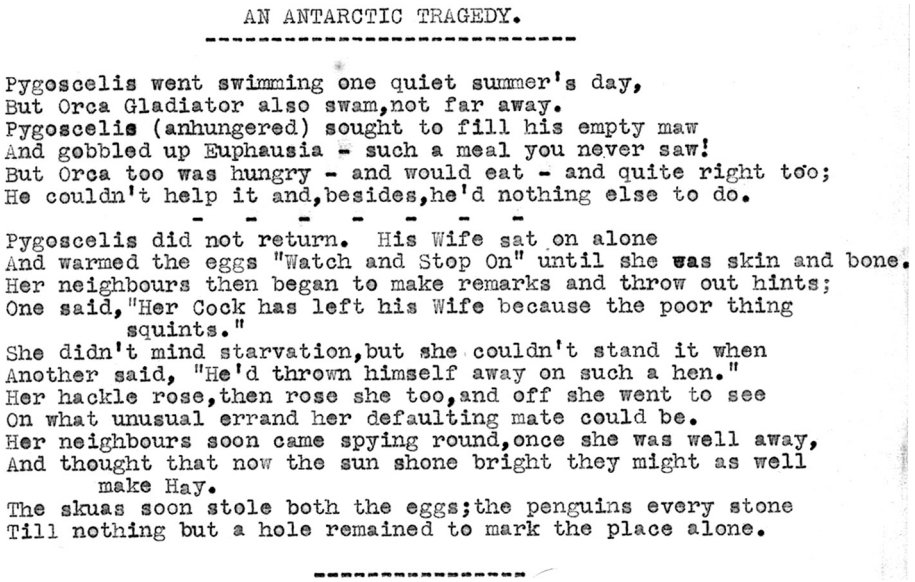
ABSTRACT. A newly discovered Antarctic poem, probably by Raymond Priestley, is presented.

Raymond Priestley (1886–1974) served as geologist on Ernest Shackleton's *Nimrod* expedition (1907–1909) and Robert Falcon Scott's *Terra Nova* expedition (1910–1913); he later visited west Antarctica with Prince Philip on the R.Y. *Britannia* (1957) and returned to the Antarctic for the last time as United Kingdom adviser to the American Deep Freeze IV expedition (1958–1959). After Priestley's death, his estate disposed of his library. In his copy of *The South Polar Times* was laid a loose sheet of paper on which was typewritten a poem in red ink, obviously very old, entitled *An Antarctic tragedy*. Presumably Priestley wrote it, but attribution must remain speculative because he did not sign it or otherwise append a notation. Attribution seems reasonable, if not obvious, however, under the circumstances of its discovery. *An Antarctic tragedy* is a clever, humorous, and poignant poem about an unfortunate Adélie penguin (*Pygoscelis adeliae*) pair during the nesting season. All who have observed Adélie penguins in their colonies will understand this poem perfectly, with true sympathy for these remarkable and lovable creatures. (Fig. 1)



AN ANTARCTIC TRAGEDY.

Pygoscelis went swimming one quiet summer's day,
But Orca Gladiator also swam,not far away.
Pygoscelis (anhungered) sought to fill his empty maw
And gobbled up Euphausia - such a meal you never saw!
But Orca too was hungry - and would eat - and quite right too;
He couldn't help it and,besides,he'd nothing else to do.
- - - - - - -
Pygoscelis did not return. His Wife sat on alone
And warmed the eggs "Watch and Stop On" until she was skin and bone.
Her neighbours then began to make remarks and throw out hints;
One said,"Her Cock has left his Wife because the poor thing squints."
She didn't mind starvation,but she couldn't stand it when
Another said, "He'd thrown himself away on such a hen."
Her hackle rose,then rose she too,and off she went to see
On what unusual errand her defaulting mate could be.
Her neighbours soon came spying round,once she was well away,
And thought that now the sun shone bright they might as well make Hay.
The skuas soon stole both the eggs;the penguins every stone
Till nothing but a hole remained to mark the place alone.

Fig. 1. *An Antarctic tragedy*