

## COPPER NECK-RINGS OF SOUTHERN ALASKA

By GEORGE T. EMMONS

In the narratives of the early European explorers who visited the Northwest coast of America in the latter half of the eighteenth century, frequent mention is made of objects, implements, and ornaments of copper found in possession of the natives. These were unquestionably of virgin metal and of home manufacture, for while odd pieces might have been carried across the continent during the course of centuries of trade and migration, the very abundance and the typical forms would argue to the contrary. The great copper fields of Alaska and the Northwest Territory, extending from Copper river through the White river district to the vicinity of White Pass were well known to the local inhabitants and furnished one of the principal sources of revenue in their trade with the coast Tlingit, long before the Pacific ocean was exploited by Europeans.

The Chilcat, who occupy the head of Lynn Canal, controlled this trade, upon which their wealth and power greatly depended. They traveled inland in large bands two or three times a year, when they met the interior people by appointment, and traded with them on their own terms, for the Athapascan hunter, mild in character, living in patriarchal simplicity and following his food supply throughout the greater portion of the year, was dominated and held in practical vassalage by the more virile and savage Tlingit, and even as late as 1890 he was allowed to visit the coast only under escort, without the privilege of trading with outsiders. The arrogance of the Chilcat is best illustrated in their destruction of the Hudson's Bay Company's post at Fort Selkirk in 1852. They looked upon this interior trade as their exclusive right, and when the rich fur fields of the lower Yukon valley attracted the Company's attention and a factory was there established, a war-party under the leadership of Chartrich, the hereditary chief of the Connahtabee

clan, marched inland four hundred miles, captured and burned the post, and, setting the factors free, admonished them against any further encroachments upon their preserves. This is one of the few instances on record when this all-powerful Company acknowledged and accepted defeat at the hands of a rival.

The Chilcat traded also with the Yakutat people of Bering bay for the copper that they in turn procured from the interior tribes of Copper river. In winter they traveled overland to the coast, but in spring and summer they made the passage of Lynn canal, Cross sound, and thence coastwise in their canoes, a distance of some 250 miles. Ismailof, the Russian pilot, mentions meeting at Yakutat in 1788 a considerable body of Chilcat under their chief Ilchak on their annual trading expedition.

Unquestionably the Huna and Sitka tribes shared in the barter with the Yakutat, but the Chilkat were the progressive traders of the north, and it is still traditional with the Tsimshian and Haida that their earlier supply of this metal came to them from this people. The Athapascans inhabiting the copper region were a utilitarian, in-artistic people whose whole life was a struggle with nature and the elements for their food supply, and they seem to have used metal for daggers, spear-blades, and arrowpoints only. Few or no ornamental pieces have ever been found among them. In mining operations hereabouts, spear-blades of copper have been exhumed fifteen to twenty-five feet below the surface of the ground, attesting to the antiquity of the manufacture and use of this metal. As late as 1885 bullets and slugs were hammered out for use in the smooth-bore muskets against big game. The native source of supply was found either in the form of placer nuggets or in outcropping veins of pure metal, for neither the manner nor the means of reducing the ore when found in combination with other substances was known.

The coast people utilized copper not only for weapons and hunting implements, but fashioned it into ornaments for the ears and nose, bracelets, anklets, neck-rings, masks, rattles, the overlaying or ornamentation of dancing implements, and that peculiar shield-like object known as *tinneh* which had an intrinsic value according to its size, and a still greater personal value dependent upon its ownership and its use on occasions of ceremony, when it might be

cut in pieces, given away, or placed on the memorial column. The early traders, finding copper in such demand, immediately included it in their exchanges for furs, and even worked it into shape after native designs.

Another source of supply was from stranded vessels that were copper sheathed and bolted, and so in time it became so common that the northern trade was abandoned as unprofitable. The superiority of iron was recognized as soon as it was acquired, when copper

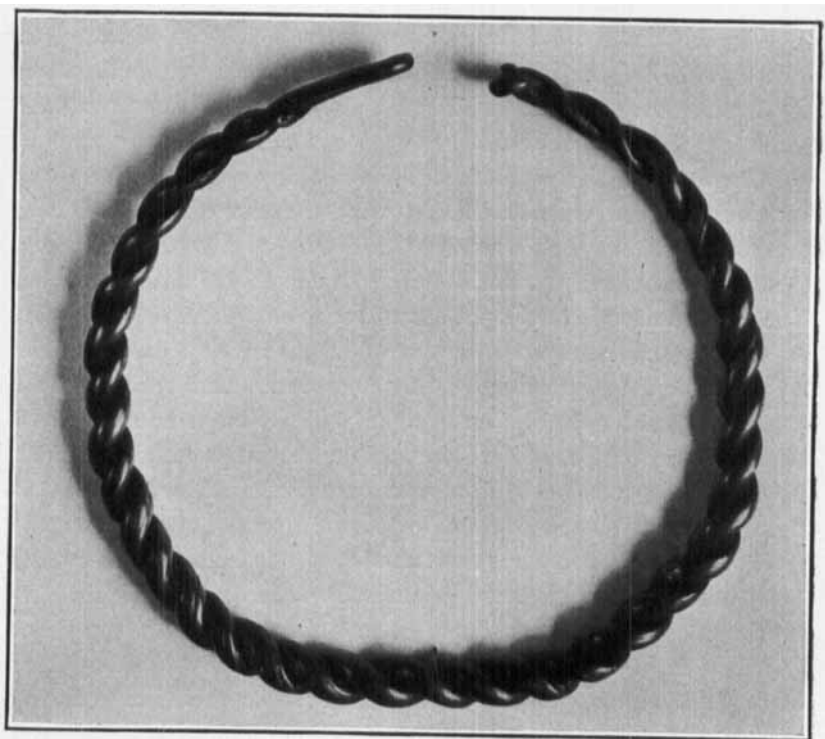


FIG 142. — Copper Neck-ring of a Nishka Chief, Nass Harbor, British Columbia.

fell into disuse except for personal ornaments and the decoration of dance paraphernalia, and with the later introduction of silver, and then of gold, the demand for copper practically ceased.

The neck-ring here illustrated (fig. 142) was obtained from a Nishka chief living at Kincolith, Nass Harbor, British Columbia.

He valued it highly, and said that it had been in his family through four or five generations when they lived on the Nass, for Kincolith is a mission village of recent years, where the people have been gathered from the older river settlements.

The use of the neck-ring was for occasions of ceremony, when it was worn around the neck both as an ornament and as an indication of rank and wealth ; and after death, as a mark of respect, such pieces, as well as the copper shield or the Chilkat blanket, might be displayed on the mortuary column or the grave-house.

Neck-rings are among the rarest of copper objects known to the Northwest coast, and while the Tlingit of southeastern Alaska controlled the trade in this metal, and unquestionably had this ornament, yet I never saw one in their possession, although in the forgotten rubbish of an old communal house at Wrangell I found one of iron, similar in all respects, which was used in like manner, and when a defect occurred in one of the twisted strands, copper had been used to repair it.

Dr C. F. Newcombe, of Victoria, British Columbia, whose years of intimate acquaintance with the Haida give him a very accurate knowledge of their possessions, past and present, tells me that he has seen four of these copper ornaments on the Queen Charlotte islands — one at Klue, one at Dadens, North island, and two at Masset — and knows of one other, collected at Masset for the late Dr George M. Dawson, which was taken from an old family grave by Henry Edenshaw, now an old man, in whose father's life it was said to have been in the family for three or four generations.

So far as I know, all of these ornaments are the same in form and character, consisting of two twisted strands to represent the typical rope of the Northwest coast ; for whether it be the head-dress, neck or shoulder girdle of shredded cedar-bark, the halibut line of spruce-root, the warp or woof of the blanket of bark or goat-wool, the fish-net of nettle or sinew, or cordage for any purpose, two strands alone were employed, which marked it in contradistinction to the three- or four-strand rope of our manufacture.

The antiquity of the use of the copper neck-ring is told in the legend of The Salmon Doctor, which goes back to primitive days, before the curse of civilization had blighted this coast. It is known

equally to the Haida and the Tlingit, and like many other of their old stories is localized at different points. As given to me by an old Sitkan it occurred at the summer fishing camp of his ancestors at Naqwasina bay on Baranof island, some fourteen miles to the northward of Sitka ; and near the entrance, in a cave-like overhang of the rocky shore, was pointed out the last resting place of the hero of the tale.

To give the story without going too deeply into detail, as I wish simply to illustrate the early use of the copper neck-ring —

A family of the Sitka tribe had removed to their summer camp near the mouth of the main stream to catch and cure their winter food supply of salmon. The son of the chief — a very little boy — came to the mother for something to eat and was given a piece of dried salmon that was slightly moldy ; this he threw away in anger and heartily abused the whole salmon family. In these early days of life human beings and animals, including fish and birds, were much nearer to each other, both physically and spiritually. In the beginning they were all one people, but when light was suddenly given to the world, great consternation prevailed, and while some retained their human form others fled to the woods and assumed the forms of animals, and in like manner the air and the sea were peopled. As the old legends abound in transformations and in mixed unions, it can be seen how the Tlingit should look upon the different species as separate families possessing human attributes. Thus the salmon were considered as a great people who lived far out in the sea and every summer visited the rivers and the shore, and while they were legitimately taken in great numbers and constituted the principal food supply of the people, yet they were always spoken to or of with great respect, and their capture and treatment were according to conventional rules that were strictly observed. The silver salmon swimming in the stream heard with shame the abuse heaped upon them ; and as the little boy, attracted by some gulls, walked into the water, they dragged him under, when he was transformed into a salmon and taken to their ocean home. The following spring, when the salmon made their reappearance, one more lively and beautiful than the others was noticed to remain about where the little boy was lost, until he attracted the attention of the father, who, after re-

### *Postscript*

The copper neck-ring, described in the accompanying paper, having been submitted to Mr Wirt Tassin, chemist of the United States National Museum, for examination, Mr Tassin kindly reports as follows :

A qualitative test of the metal shows the presence of silver.

Examination of an etched surface shows that the strands are each made up of two other strands made up apparently of hammered sheets.

These observations give rise to the following conclusions: The copper is perhaps "native," since silver is a constant constituent of the copper of the Copper River and Lake Superior regions. The sheets composing the individual strands taper from the centers to the ends and vary greatly in thickness at different points, a condition which would arise when hammering a nugget into a sheet with the idea of getting as great a length as possible with a minimum width.

My idea of the method of manufacture is somewhat as follows: The native nugget was heated to a full red and quenched to make it soft and then hammered from the ends to the middle. It was then re-heated and worked in the same manner, except that the work was applied along the edge. These two processes were repeated alternately till the desired flat was obtained.

Two of these flats were placed side by side, one end fastened, and both were then twisted together, but not "*laid up*." When a certain amount of work had been done the twist was heated, cooled, and rounded up by hammering, thus forming a strand. Two such strands were thus twisted to form the necklace. Two flats make a strand and two strands make the necklace.

WIRT TASSIN.

peated efforts, finally speared him and gave him to the mother to prepare for curing. Upon attempting to cut off the head, the knife encountered a copper neck-ring which the mother at once recognized as that worn by her lost son, whose disappearance was explained in the transformed fish, which was carefully wrapped in a cedar-bark mat and placed in a burial chest on the roof of the house. Soon after this the camp was much disturbed by the faint droning of a shaman's chant, as if far in the distance. Each succeeding night the sound became more audible, and finally was traced to the burial box containing the salmon body, when there came forth a shaman, in full regalia, whose great power and long life with his people is still traditional.

Since writing the above my attention has been called to the illustrations of silver and gold neck-rings on pages 84-87, 106-108, of Anderson's *Scotland in Pagan Times*. The form and character of these ornaments, and of one in particular, is almost identical with the Nishka copper neck-ring here described. That one has any connection with the other, however, is a mere matter of conjecture, and the opinion of one person is as worthy of consideration as that of another. I would only call attention to the fact that the twisted fiber, hide, or metal of the Northwest Coast people is in all instances of two strands, as is shown in the illustration, while the prehistoric Scotch specimens are of a varying number of strands.

PRINCETON,  
NEW JERSEY.