



Detachable barbed harpoon head

Not on display

Title/Description: Detachable barbed harpoon head

Object Type: Hunting equipment

Materials: Walrus ivory

Technique: Carving, Drilling

Measurements: l. 120 x w. 30 mm

Accession Number: 456

Production Place: North America, Northwest Coast or Alaska, The Americas

This beautifully carved walrus ivory detachable barbed harpoon head (point or end blade) is somewhat of an enigma. Without provenance, the unilateral barbed point with two hooks could either be from the Northwest Coast or the Arctic. [1] The barbed points was the dominant type used in the regions south of the sea-ice and considered to be the archaic type preceding the toggle

harpoon. [2] Certainly, archaeological records show that Arctic ancestors used unilateral barbed points made from bone or ivory. [3] Most barbed points were used for hunting, but barbed points were also used for warfare. As an example, multi-barbed barbed arrow points, but smaller than this one, were used for warfare by Ipiutak and Old Bering Sea. [4]

According to Sugpiaq (Alutiiq), detachable barbed harpoon heads were used for harpooning seals, sea otter and fish. [5] But Yupiit and Yuit on Sivuqaq (St. Lawrence Island) also used unilateral barbed harpoon heads for bird hunting. [6] Whereas the toggle harpoon are considered female, this non-toggle harpoon is also known as a "male" harpoon that holds an animal by its barbs". [7] The harpoon head would have been attached to a harpoon foreshaft or seal bladder with a harpoon line that run through the hole of the harpoon head. [8]

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] See for example a similar style with slight variations, the Cook Inlet point collected during George Vancouver's voyage at the British Museum (Am,VAN.82) - https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Am-VAN-82; see however also a possible Coast Salish unilateral barbed harpoon head at the National Museum of the American Indian, https://americanindian.si.edu/collections-search/objects/NMAI_75426?destination=edan_searchtab%3Fpage%3D107%26edan_q%3Dharpoon or a Yuit harpoon head from St. Lawrence Island, https://americanindian.si.edu/collections-search/objects/NMAI_143425; another example from Bering Strait can be found at BADA, <https://www.bada.org/object/bering-strait-eskimo-inuit-barbed-whalebone-harpoon-or-spear-head-point>.

[2] See Jean-Loup Rousselot, William W. Fitzhugh, and Aron Crowell. 1988. Maritime Economies of the North Pacific Rim. In *Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska*. William W. Fitzhugh and Aron Crowell (eds.). Pp. 151-172. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press. P.159

[3] Donald W. Clark, 'Prehistory of the Pacific Eskimo Region', in *Handbook of North American Indians: Arctic (Volume 5)* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1984), pp. 136-148 (p. 140); Allen McCartney, 'Prehistory of the Aleutian Region', in *Handbook of North American Indians: Arctic (Volume 5)* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1984), pp. 119-135 (p. 126)

[4] Owen K. Mason, 'Flight from the Bering Strait: Did Siberian Punuk/Thule Military Cadres Conquer North west Alaska', in *The Northern World A.D. 1100 1350: The Dynamics of Climate, Economy and Politics*, ed. by Herbert Maschner, Owen K. Mason and Robert McGhee, (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2009), pp. 76-128.

[5] Frederica de Laguna, 'Chugach prehistory: The Archaeology of Prince Wales Sound, Alaska' (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1956), p. 164.

[6] Edward William Nelson, 'The Eskimo about Bering Strait', (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1900), p.149-50

[7] See Jean-Loup Rousselot, William W. Fitzhugh, and Aron Crowell. 1988. Maritime Economies of the North Pacific Rim. In *Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska*. William W. Fitzhugh and Aron Crowell (eds.). Pp. 151-172. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press. P.160

[8] Frederica de Laguna, 'Chugach prehistory: The Archaeology of Prince Wales Sound, Alaska'

(Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1956), p. 164.

Provenance

Acquired by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1990.

Accessioned into the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia circa 1995.
