



Harpoon head

On display

Title/Description: Harpoon head

Object Type: Implement

Materials: Walrus ivory

Technique: Carving, Drilling

Accession Number: 467

Historic Period: Punuk culture (800-1200 AD)

Production Place: Alaska, North America, St. Lawrence Island (?), The Americas

Cultural Group: Punuk

One of the most compelling technologies in the Arctic has been the Old Bering Sea toggling harpoon. This harpoon head, made from walrus ivory, would have been part of a set of five pieces that constitute the Old Bering Sea harpoon: the harpoon head, the foreshaft, the socket piece, the shaft, and the counterbalance weight. [1] The harpoon would have been thrown with an atlatl (a throwing board). The toggle harpoon head was attached by rope, made from cut sea mammal skin, to a seal bladder that functioned as buoy. The harpoon head would turn diagonal after passing the thick blubber section of the sea mammal and become interlocked inside the animal. [2] This inventive compulsion technology, vital for hunting the abundant whales and walruses, marked the formation of the Old Bering Sea and Punuk maritime cultures with sedentary villages. This particular harpoon head has the distinctive features of the Punuk culture (800-1200 AD) with the four finely incised dots at the end of short carved lines near to the line hole at the centre of the harpoon head.

Due to high volume of harpoon heads found in excavations, and their constant distinctive innovations [3], harpoon heads have been particularly apt to determine cultural eras [4] known together as the Northern Maritime Tradition. [5] Archaeologists Henry B. Collins and Otto Geist were the first to conduct professional archaeological excavations on Sivuqaq (St. Lawrence Island) in the 1920s. Their findings of exquisitely carved ivory objects altered the academic understandings of Arctic ancestors and provided an incentive to revise the Arctic history with the Bering Sea harpoon head forming a crucial chronological and ethnic analytical marker. [6] Collins, who was an assistant curator of the Ethnology Division at the US National Museum (Smithsonian Institution), became instrumental in outlining distinct cultures which he coined Okvik, Old Bering Sea I, II and III. Although not always recognised in the literature, Collins – and other archaeologists for that matter – relied heavily on the help and guidance of St. Lawrence Yupik Pauk Silook. Geist already had coined the Punuk culture in reference to the excavations he made on Punuk Island. Like all cultural eras that constitute the Northern Maritime Tradition, the names have derived from localities and were given by American or Canadian archaeologists. Collins, thus, established the term “Old Bering Sea” in a reference to Canadian anthropologist Diamond Jenness’ archaeological finds on the Little Diomed Island in the Bering Strait. Jenness subsequently termed the objects he excavated as belonging to a previously unknown “Bering Sea culture”. [7] Whereas Collins’ typology of the Bering Sea has remained persistent in provenance by museums, art galleries, and art collectors akin, more recently archaeologists have challenged Collins ideas by pointing out the shortcomings in his initial analysis of harpoon heads that was at the base for establishing a unilineal order of Arctic ancestral cultures. [8] Owen K. Mason, amongst them, has redefined a multilineal chronology of Northern Maritime Traditions with Iputiak (200-800 AD), Old Bering Sea with Okvik, Uelen and Ekven sites (500-1200 AD), Punuk (800-1200 AD), Birnik (800-1300 AD), and Thule (1200-1800 AD). [9] Here you can see a clear co-existence of Ipiutak and Okvik-Old Bering Sea (with Uelen and Ekven) cultures and Old Bering Sea with Punuk and Birnik cultures for several centuries.

Riddles, however, remain unsolved. Still little is understood about the Northern Maritime Traditions’ mysterious appearance somewhere around 200-400 AD (Ipiutak culture) in northwest Alaska or around 500-750 AD (Old Bering Sea culture) along the northern Chukchi Sea and Bering Strait. [10] But the abundance of harpoon points indicate a shift to maritime hunting. There is nothing short of Bering Sea harpoon heads found in museum collections yet each of them is unique. This particular harpoon head, which is not as elaborate as those of the Old Bering Sea culture, appears to have a carved eyelid around the line hole with the head shaped like a bird with its beak slightly opened as to welcome an arrow point. On the top of the harpoon head are further carved lines.

- [1] Mason, Owen K. 2020b. Focusing on the Coast. In *Arctic: culture and climate*. Amber Lincoln, Jago Cooper, and Jan Peter Laurens Loovers (eds.). Pp. 187-196. London: Thames & Hudson in collaboration with The British Museum. p. 190-1
- [2] See for illustration, Spencer, Robert F. 1984. North Alaska Coast Eskimo. In *Arctic*. David Damas (ed.). Handbook of North American Indians, Volume 5. Pp320-337. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution. P. 326
- [3] Collins, Henry Bascom Jnr. 1937. Archaeology of St. Lawrence Island, Alaska. Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, 96(1). Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution. p. 37
- [4] Collins, Henry Bascom Jnr. 1941. Prehistoric Eskimo harpoon heads from Bering Strait. *Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences*, 31(7): 318-324
- [5] Morrison, David. 1991. The Diamond Jenness Collections from Bering Strait. Archaeological Survey of Canada Mercury Series Paper 144. Hull (Quebec): Canadian Museum of Civilization
- [6] Mason, Owen K. 2009. "The Multiplication of Forms": Bering Strait Harpoon Heads as a Demic and Macroevolutionary Procy. In *Macroevolution in Human Prehistory: Evolutionary Theory and Processual Archaeology*. Anne Marie Pentiss, Ian Kuijt, and James C. Chatters (eds.). Pp.73-107. New York: Springer. p. 89
- [7] Morrison, David. 1991. The Diamond Jenness Collections from Bering Strait. Archaeological Survey of Canada Mercury Series Paper 144. Hull (Quebec): Canadian Museum of Civilization
- [8] Lewis, Michael A. 1995. Technological Development and Culture Change on St. Lawrence Island: A Functional Typology of Toggle Harpoon Heads. PhD thesis. University of Alaska Fairbanks.
- [9] Mason, Owen K. 2020a. Earliest Known People in the North American Arctic. In *Arctic: culture and climate*. Amber Lincoln, Jago Cooper, and Jan Peter Laurens Loovers (eds.). Pp.178-186. London: Thames & Hudson in collaboration with The British Museum. p. 185; also Mason, Owen K. 2020b. Focusing on the Coast. In *Arctic: culture and climate*. Amber Lincoln, Jago Cooper, and Jan Peter Laurens Loovers (eds.). Pp. 187-196. London: Thames & Hudson in collaboration with The British Museum.
- [10] Mason, Owen K. 2020b. Focusing on the Coast. In *Arctic: culture and climate*. Amber Lincoln, Jago Cooper, and Jan Peter Laurens Loovers (eds.). Pp. 187-196. London: Thames & Hudson in collaboration with The British Museum. p. 190, 195
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Provenance

Acquired by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1993.

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

