



Part of stool for seal hunting (?) or heard board of umiaq frame (?)

Not on display

Title/Description: Part of stool for seal hunting (?) or heard board of umiaq frame (?)

Object Type: Fragment

Materials: Driftwood

Technique: Carving, Drilling

Measurements: h. 406 x w. 180 x d. 20 mm

Accession Number: 740

Historic Period: Before 1979

Production Place: Alaska, North America, The Americas

Cultural Group: Iñupiat or Inuit

Credit Line: Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1980

When thinking about the Arctic, a vast treeless region for the greater part, wood might not be the first thing that comes mind. Yet, driftwood is an extremely important material for Inuit. They would obtain the wood from forested up-river inland areas or via sea currents. It is not uncommon to find Siberian trees reaching Alaskan shores or to find Alaskan mainland trees reaching the islands. [1]

This weathered and cracked triangular carved driftwood, with one corner and part of the side broken off, has a number of drilled holes. The larger of the three corner holes still has thread and wood inside that would have belonged to whatever was attached to this object.

Whilst this object is very rare, there are some indications that this carefully carved driftwood might have been used as a stool for seal hunting on ice [2] or a head board of an umiaq. [3] Inupiaq made stools for when they were watching a seal breathing hole for sometimes hours. The hunter would sit or stand on the stool and ward off the cold underground of the ice. Stools for seal hunting were made from dry driftwood which is particularly lightweight. This particular carved driftwood, however, differs from the conventional design of sealing stools as the corners do not have holes where carved driftwood legs can be fitted. [4] Carved driftwood has also been incorporated into umiaq frames. A suspension of the Inupiat umiaq's bow was particularly well-decorated with a whale figure carved into the design as hunting charm and guardian of the whaling crew. [5] Both the head board and the bow suspension, however, do not have three holes in the corner nor at the centre as this piece does.

Whatever the purpose, we can ascertain that it was part of a larger object that was attached to the carving with wooden (?) pegs and skin rope. We can also contemplate about the importance of driftwood in Inuit lives with this piece being highly valued. More research could provide answers of the age of the wood as well as confirm what wood it is. This also might provide more clues about where this object was made and for what purpose.

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] Claire Alix has written extensively on driftwood, she mentions that the "Yukon River drainage ... is the largest wood-producing basin (c.f. Giddings 1941)", Claire Alix, Using wood on King Island, Alaska, *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 36(2012), pp. 89-112 (p.94).

[2] Murdoch, John. 1892. *Ethnological Results of the Point Barrow Expedition*. In *Ninth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution 1887-'88*. Powell, John W. (Ed.). Pp. 1-441 Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office. P. 255

[3] There has been a somewhat similar carved triangular piece of driftwood found in Mound H(ouse) from the Birnirk site. In Evguenia V. Anitchenko. *Open Passage: Ethno-Archaeology of Skin Boats and Indigenous Maritime Mobility of North-American Arctic*. PhD thesis. Southampton: University of Southampton, 2016. P. 431, fig. 79.

[4] John Murdoch, 'Ethnological Results of the Point Barrow Expedition'. In Ninth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution 1887-'88, ed. by John W. Powell, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1892), (Pp. 1-441) p. 255-6.

[5] Jean-Loup Rousselot, William W. Fitzhugh and Aron L. Crowell, in Maritime Economies of the North Pacific Rim. In Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska, ed. by William W. Fitzhugh and Aron L. Crowell, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988). (Pp. 151-171), p. 168, fig. 215

Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Arbutus Limited on the advice of Robert Sainsbury in 1980 out of income from the Sainsbury Purchasing Fund.
