



Maskette or hunting snow goggles

On display

Title/Description: Maskette or hunting snow goggles

Born: 0200 - 0900

Measurements: h. 140 mm

Accession Number: 1097

Historic Period: Ipiutak (AD 400-600)

Credit Line: Purchased with support from the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Charitable Trust, 1993

This eloquent walrus ivory maskette, or snow goggles, would have been worn an Ipiutak person somewhere between 200 and 900 AD). [1] Ongoing research provide more insights in the mysterious appearance of the Ipiutak peoples in the Seward Peninsula, Alaska. Most recent research has put the earliest Ipiutak dates somewhere between 110 BC - AD 103 and AD 1285-1421. [2] Yet, archaeologist Owen K. Mason who has written extensively on the Ipiutak, claims that the Iputiak culture originated around 200-400 AD and flourished 600-900 AD with a sudden decline 900 AD. [3] Both agree nonetheless that the Ipiutak's ultimate florescence was at 700 AD, and the Ipiutak culture overlapped with other Bering Sea cultures. [4]

The Ipiutak became synonymous with the emergence of a whaling culture in Alaska and gained international attention after the astonishing excavations by Danish archaeologist Helge Larsen and American anthropologist Froelich Rainey. [5] In the dawn of United States' participation in World War II, in the consecutive summers between 1939 and 1941, the two collaborated in an international and multi-disciplinary project led by the American Museum of National History. The archaeologists received the support from the village council to pay local Inupiat for each grave they found. [6] The exquisite ivory carvings and other materials captured the imagination of a nation about to go to war. Time magazine, in 1941, wrote in their Science section that the "mysterious" Ipiutak culture lived in numerous houses which could be best described as an "Arctic Metropolis". [7] With six hundred houses mapped it certainly was a large community. [8]

Snow goggles, or maskettes, were not widely used but Larsen and Rainey found some examples in graves which might give some clue of the spiritual significance of these objects. Larsen and Rainey further argue that the goggles might have been introduced by other peoples [9] such as the Old Bering Sea - Okvik from Chukotka. [10] Curator at the American Museum of National History, William W. Fitzhugh writes with reservation about these snow goggles that "they may been used as hunting goggles together with bent-wood visors. Use of hunting masks would have given the hunter spiritual vision to see prey or to conceal the hunter's identity from animal spirits". He goes on to say,

however, that there is not any evidence which would suggest that snow goggles held spiritual significance. Rather it is more likely that they were used by hunters for practical purposes. [11]

Something which we do now know is that the Ipiutak were not an emerging whaling culture, but instead relied on hunting walrus, seal and caribou with some whaling. [12] This snow goggles, then, might have been used by a hunter when hunting seal and walrus.

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] I am following Owen K. Mason's revised dates for the historical periods of the Bering Strait.

[2] Thomas J. Brown, Shelby L. Anderson, Justin Junge & Jonathan Duelks. 2021. Bayesian assessment of northern Alaskan chronological issues: Implications for future research. *The Journal of Island and Coastal Archaeology*. Pp. 1-25

[3] 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, 195

[4] Thomas J. Brown, Shelby L. Anderson, Justin Junge & Jonathan Duelks. 2021. Bayesian assessment of northern Alaskan chronological issues: Implications for future research. *The Journal of Island and Coastal Archaeology*. Pp. 1-25; 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.

[5] Larsen, Helge and Froelich Rainey. 1947. Ipiutak and the Arctic Whale Hunting Culture. *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, Volume 42. New York: Published by the order of the Trustees of the American Museum of Natural History; but see a dismissive note on the whaling culture, Helge Lar The Ipiutak culture: Its origin and relationships. (New York: Proceedings of the 29th International Congress of Americanists, 1952), pp. 22-34

[6] Hollowell, Julie. 'Ancient Ivories in a Global World. In *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of Bering Strait* by William Fitzhugh, Aron L. Cromwell, and Julie Hollowell, Strait (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp. 252-289 (p. 263).

[7] Time magazine. 1941, Science: Arctic Metropolis. *Time*, XXXVII(11), <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,765299,00.html> [accessed 05 December 2021)

[8] Phyllis Morrow and Toby Alice Volkman, 'The Loon with the Ivory Eyes: A Study in Symbolic Archaeology', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 88 (1975), pp. 153-150 (p. 144).

[9] Larsen, Helge and Froelich Rainey. 1947. Ipiutak and the Arctic Whale Hunting Culture. Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, Volume 42. New York: Published by the order of the Trustees of the American Museum of Natural History. P. 113

[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. P. 195

[11] Fitzhugh, William W. 2009. Eagles, Beasts, and Gods: Art of the Old Bering Sea Hunting Complex. In Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of the Bering Strait. William W. Fitzhugh, Julie Hollowell, and Aron L. Crowell. P.162-189. 167

[12] Owen K. Mason, The Contest between the Ipiutak, Old Bering Sea, and Birnirk Polities and the Origin of Whaling during the First Millennium A.D. along Bering Strait, Journal of Anthropological Archaeology 17(1998), Pp. 240-325, p. 291; Owen K. Mason. 'Earliest Known People in the North American Arctic, in Arctic: Culture and Climate, ed. by Amber Lincoln, Jago Cooper, and Jan Peter Laurens Loovers, (London: Thames & Hudson in collaboration with The British Museum, 2020a) Pp.178-186, p.186.

Provenance

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