



Drum Handle

On display

Title/Description: Drum Handle

Object Type: Implement

Materials: Walrus ivory

Measurements: h. 140 mm

Accession Number: 1106

Historic Period: Early centuries AD

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

Credit Line: Purchased with support from the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Charitable Trust, 1994

This remarkable highly decorative walrus ivory drum handle, with an intricate design of lines, “teethed” lines and compassed circles, might be early Punuk somewhere between 800 and 1000 AD. Indicative is the sporadic use of the Y-figure which starts appearing in the Punuk culture. [1] This drum handle’s is said to have been found at the Old Village near Kialegak - Kiyalighaq or Kialighaq [2] - on the south-eastern point of Sivugaq (St Lawrence Island) relatively near to the Punuk Islands. The Old Village has been an important archaeological site of Old Bering Sea and Punuk artefacts.

There is a long history of drumming in the Arctic. Drums, for example, were being used by the Old Bering Sea (500-1200 AD) and Birnirk (800-1300 AD) cultures but apparently absent in the Ipiutak (200-800 AD). [3] But drums gained prominence in the Punuk culture and was well established in the Thule culture. [4]

Drums, in archaeological and ethnographic records, have been intimately connected with shamanism. [5] As the drums, and in many cases also drum handles, were made of wood, the survival of drums is relatively scarce. If we build on extensive ethnographic records about contemporary Bering Strait, we could assume that this drum handle was owned by an *an̄atquq* (spiritual leaders). Like the drum themselves, any detailed discussions about Punuk *an̄atquq* (spiritual leaders) and drumming is sporadic. On more recent Inupiat belongings, like the one on an arrow straightener, there are engravings of *an̄atquq* transforming into a non-human being. [6] With colonialization, in the shape of Christianity, drumming became associated with the devil.

An almost identical object to this example is housed in the National Museum of Scotland: [NMS] A.1993/127 [7]

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] Allen Wardwell, *Ancient Eskimo Ivories of the Bering Strait*, (New York : Published by Hudson Hills Press in association with the American Federation of Arts, 1986), p. 96.

[2] Crowell, Aron L. and Estelle Oozevaseuk. 2006. *The St. Lawrence Island Famine and Epidemic*,

1879-80: A Yupik Narrative in Cultural and Historical Context. *Arctic Anthropology*, 43(1): pp. 1-19. p. 6, 8.

[3] Helge Larsen, 'The Position of Ipiutak in Eskimo Culture', *American Antiquity*, 20(1954), pp. 74-79, (p. 75); see also for OBS, Owen K. Mason, *The Old Bering Sea Florescence about Bering Strait*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Prehistoric Arctic*, ed. by Max Friesen and Owen K. Mason, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 417-442, (p. 432); also Henry B. Collins, Jnr, *Archaeology of St. Lawrence Island, Alaska*. Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, 96(1). (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1937). P. 239; for Birnirk, see James Ford, *Eskimo Prehistory in the Vicinity of Point Barrow*, *Anthropological Papers of The American Museum of Natural History*, 47(1), (New York: The American Museum of Natural History, 1959)

[4] For Punuk, see Owen K. Mason, *Thule Origins in the Old Bering Sea Culture: The Interrelationship of Punuk and Birnirk Cultures*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Prehistoric Arctic*, ed. by Max Friesen and Owen K. Mason, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 489-512 (p. 493); for Thule, see Peter Whitridge, 'Classic Thule' [Classic Precontact Inuit], in *The Oxford Handbook of Prehistoric Arctic*, ed. by Max Friesen and Owen K. Mason, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 827-850

[5] Feng Qu, p.77.

[6] See Amber Lincoln and Jan Peter Laurens Looovers, *Relations with Animals in the Circumpolar North*, in *Arctic: culture and climate*, ed. by Amber Lincoln, Jago Cooper, and Jan Peter Laurens Looovers (London: Thames & Hudson in collaboration with The British Museum, 2020), pp. 44-77, (p. 64).

[7] <https://www.nms.ac.uk/explore-our-collections/collection-search-results/drum-handle/237891>

Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Anthony Plowright on the advice of Robert Sainsbury in 1994 out of funds provided by the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Charitable Trust.
