



Hunting harpoon counterweight and stabiliser

On display

Title/Description: Hunting harpoon counterweight and stabiliser

Materials: Walrus ivory

Measurements: h. 165 mm

Accession Number: 1107

Historic Period: Old Bering Sea (AD 400 - 600)

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

What could this object be? Is it a ceremonial piece? Is it a sculpture that symbolises a bird or perhaps a whale's tail? George Byron Gordon, who visited several Bering Strait communities for the University of Pennsylvania Museum in 1905, described a similar object as a "winged object" with a ceremonial purpose related to the whale hunt. [1] Relying on a non-Inupiat informant living in Nome at that time, he argued that the "wings" symbolised the whale's tail with the object forming the top of a staff that would have been carried around in a whaling ceremony. [2]

Since Gordon's attention to "winged objects", the view has changed and it is now well established that the object in fact is a harpoon counterweight-stabiliser of the complex and aesthetically mesmerising archaic Bering Sea harpoon. Many of these winged counterweight-stabilisers are extraordinary intricate and underscore the exceptional skills that Bering Strait ancestors illustrated in their carvings. Old Bering Sea (OBS) harpoons in particular were carved with great care, beauty, and spiritual significance. Excavations in Uelen and Ekven, northeastern Chukotka, led by established Russian archaeologists Sergey A. Arutyunov and Dorian A. Sergeev, offered the first temporal classification of the harpoon counterweights in a Group A and Group B. [3]

Russian archaeologist Mikhail M. Bronshtein, the foremost expert on OBS harpoon counterweight-stabilisers, furthered their arguments by initially distinguishing thirteen different types. Whilst too cumbersome to address each of these types here, the earliest OBS counterweights had "straight lines that came together at acute angles and circles with a dot in the centre". [4] These earlier styles were replaced by counterweights with less articulated expressions of masks and bird's wings. [5] Subsequently, improved mask and bird's wing designs were carved. Replacing the earlier straight

lines were slightly carved lines with short incisions and concentric circles. Moving to Group B, the harpoon counterweight-stabilisers became more affiliated with sea mammals and historical/mythological persons. [6] More recently, Bronshtein simplified the categorisation into four classes. Keeping the same distinction of Groups A and B for the first two groups, he has added a third group with 'mask-like polar bear heads and anthropomorphic forms in realistic forms' and a fourth group that is an extreme stylistic version of the third group. [7]

Following Bronshtein, this particular walrus ivory harpoon counterweight-stabiliser would belong to the transition from Old Bering Sea I to Old Bering Sea II. [8] Or, in other words, the carver could have made it somewhere between AD 400 - 600 but further research could provide a more accurate date. The carved out corners of the "wings" exemplify sea mammal (seal) heads. [9] Whaling played a less dominant role in early OBS era (aka OBS I), but gained prominence during the florescence of OBS (aka OBS II) and especially in the later part of OBS (aka OBSIII). [10]

This particular style and design, albeit variations that illustrate the individual carver's stylistic and spiritual expressions, has been very common and there are a number of rather similar carved counterweight-stabilisers excavated at different locations in northeastern Chukotka and on Sivuqaq (St. Lawrence Island). [11] This commonality of counter-weight design across the Bering Sea is not surprising as we know from archaeological records and oral histories that the Bering Sea was a lively place with a lot of movement between the islands, Chukotka and Alaska during the height of the OBS culture. [12] This particular example was found on Sivuqaq at the Old Village near Kiyalighaq or Kialighaq, a well-known OBS settlement. [13]

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] Lucy Fowler Williams, *Guide to the North American ethnographic collections at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2003), pp. 8-17

[2] George Byron Gordon 'The Double Axe and Some Other Symbols', *The (University of Pennsylvania) Museum Journal*, 7 (1914), pp. 46-68 (p. 62-68)

[3] Mikhail M. Bronshtein, *Structural and Artistic Features of "Winged Objects"*, in *Archaeology in the Bering Strait Region*, ed. by Don E. Dumond and Richard L. Bland, (Portland: University of Oregon Museum of National History, 2002), pp. 127-38

[4] Mikhail M. Bronshtein, *Structural and Artistic Features of "Winged Objects"*, in *Archaeology in the Bering Strait Region*, ed. by Don E. Dumond and Richard L. Bland, (Portland: University of Oregon Museum of National History, 2002), pp. 127-38 (p.130)

[5] *Ibid*, p. 130

[6] *Ibid*, p. 130

[7] Mikhail M. Bronhstein, *Early Eskimo Art from Ekven and Bering Strait*, in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of Bering Strait*, ed. by William Fitzhugh, Aron L. Cromwell, and Julie Hollowell, Strait (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp. 138-161, (p.141).

[8] Mikhail M. Bronhstein, *Burial of an Old Bering Sea Hunter*, in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient*

Ivories of Bering Strait, ed. by William Fitzhugh, Aron L. Cromwell, and Julie Hollowell, Strait (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp. 98-109, (p.102-03).

[9] Mikhail M. Bronhstein, Early Eskimo Art from Ekven and Bering Strait, in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of Bering Strait*, ed. by William Fitzhugh, Aron L. Cromwell, and Julie Hollowell, Strait (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp. 138-161, (p.141).

[10] Mikhail M. Bronshtein, Kirill A. Dneprovsky, and Arkady B. Savinetsky, 'Ancient Eskimo Cultures of Chukotka', in *The Oxford Handbook of Prehistoric Alaska*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 469-488 (p. 477)

[11] Mikhail M. Bronhstein, Early Eskimo Art from Ekven and Bering Strait, in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of Bering Strait*, ed. by William Fitzhugh, Aron L. Cromwell, and Julie Hollowell, Strait (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp. 138-161, (p.141).

[12] Mikhail M. Bronhstein, Early Eskimo Art from Ekven and Bering Strait, in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of Bering Strait*, ed. by William Fitzhugh, Aron L. Cromwell, and Julie Hollowell, Strait (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp. 138-161, (p.141).

[13] 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.

Provenance

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