



Toggle in the form of a caribou head

Not on display

Title/Description: Toggle in the form of a caribou head

Object Type: Toggle

Materials: Walrus ivory

Technique: Carving

Measurements: h. 68 mm

Accession Number: 1109

Historic Period: Old Bering Sea (500-1200 AD), Ipiutak (200-800 AD), or 1800s

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

Cultural Group: Old Bering Sea, Ipiutak, St Lawrence Yupiit or Siberian Yuit

Credit Line: Donated by Anthony Plowright, 1994

Without provenance, this attractive toggle in the form of a caribou head has been designated as early centuries AD which would place it in the Old Bering Sea (500-1200 AD) or Ipiutak (200-800 AD) era. A slightly similar Old Bering Sea adze handle has been found on Sivuqaq (St. Lawrence Island). [1] Yet, in similar vein, a slightly similar Ipiutak adze handle has been found at the Ipiutak site near Tikiqaq (Point Hope). [2] The design on the carving, and particularly the line on the back with the > marks is indicative of nineteenth century Southwestern Alaska. [3] Both the horns and the eyes however would have been plugged with organic material but more research needs to be done to establish what the exact material is in this case.

Finding similar caribou-head shaped objects in different locations might be surprising but alludes to the intimate connections that Old Bering Sea and Ipiutak had through political alliance, trade, and occasional violent encounters. [4] A number of inland archaeological sites have illustrated that Ipiutak peoples ventured inland on the Seward Peninsula to hunt caribou and obtain chert. [5] There was an active trade between inland and coastal Ipiutak to trade walrus with caribou. The coastal Ipiutak, in turn, would trade caribou skins for walrus meat and ivory with Old Bering Sea peoples living on Sivuqaq and Punuk Islands. [6] The caribou skins would have been important for the OBS peoples for clothing, [7] although we might make a measured assumption that OBS peoples also used seal skins for winter clothing and waterproof parkas.

Like its seal toggle counterpart, the toggle might also have been imbued with spiritual significance to ensure caribou hunting luck. Caribou hunting certainly has had a long history in the Arctic with recent excavations on Zhokov Island, off the coast in northeastern Siberia, showing that Arctic ancestors hunted caribou at least 9,000 years ago. [8]

If, as suggested by the design, this caribou toggle is much more recent than it underscores the intimate connections through trade and kin-relations Sivuqaq and Siberian Yuit. Like the Arctic ancestors of the Old Bering Sea and Ipiutak cultures, there continued an active trade between coastal and inland Arctic Indigenous Peoples to acquire caribou or sea-mammal products.

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] Henry B. Collins, Jnr, *Archaeology of St. Lawrence Island, Alaska*. Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, 96(1). (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1937). p. 468

[2] Helge Larsen and Froelich G. Rainey, 'Ipiutak and the Arctic Whale Hunting Culture', *Anthropological Papers*, 41 (New York: The American Museum of Natural History, 1948), p. 141

[3] Dorothy Jean Ray, *Artists of the Tundra and the Sea*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1980), p. 92

[4] Owen K. Mason, 'The Contest between the Ipiutak, Old Bering Sea, and Birnirk Politics and the Origin of Whaling during the First Millennium A.D. along Bering Strait', *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*, 17(1998), p. 240-325.

[5] *Ibid*, p. 280

[6] Ibid, p. 301

[7] Ibid, p. 301

[8] Vladimir V. Pitulko, 9,000 Years Ago in the Siberian Arctic: Zhokov Island, 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.166-177

Provenance

Gift from Anthony Plowright to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1994.
