



Socket piece for hunting harpoon

On display

Title/Description: Socket piece for hunting harpoon

Object Type: Implement

Materials: Walrus ivory

Measurements: h. 197 x w. 38 x d. 27 mm

Accession Number: 1113

Historic Period: transition between Old Bering Sea and Punuk (800-1000 AD)

Production Place: Alaska, Bering Sea, North America, The Americas

Credit Line: Purchased with support from the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Charitable Trust, 1995

The sophisticated Old Bering Sea (OBS) harpoon consists of five parts: the counterweight-stabiliser (UAE 1107), the shaft, the socket piece (this object and also UAE 1123 and UAE1160), the foreshaft, and the harpoon head (UAE 467 and UAE1151). [1] The harpoon would have been thrown with an atlatl and the harpoon head would have been attached to an inflated seal bladder. The walrus ivory components of the harpoon were beautifully carved and in particular the counterweight-stabiliser, the socket piece, and the harpoon head were with striking with intricate designs that are telling of a certain period. Contemporary Yupiit have explained that there are different types of socket pieces for summer and winter hunting. This socket piece with a bifurcated bottom is of the “lighter” summer harpoon’ whilst the “winter” harpoon is heavier and has a conical top (UAE 1160). [2]

Almost in the centre of is a striking contrast of white “eye” on the chocolate brown coloured harpoon shaft. The neatly executed spurred lines, like small sharp tooth, accentuate a beautiful design. According to William Fitzhugh and Aron Crowell, this particular walrus ivory harpoon socket appears to a rare example of a transition between Old Bering Sea (500-1200 AD) and Punuk (800-1200 AD). [3] Perhaps it is made somewhere from 800-1000 AD, but further research is still needed to provide a more accurate date. [4] The open socket looks like a jaw of an animal (most frequently a polar bear) that would have swallowed the top of the shaft. [5] Yet, as Fitzhugh and Crowell point out, this particular example lacks the explicit “animal jaws at the socket end” that is common to OBS harpoon socket pieces. [6] Nonetheless, the symmetry between the two sides is marvellous and we can be amazed with the engravings and the grooves where the socket was attached to the foreshaft. We can also marvel thinking about the hunter who would have thrown the harpoon over a thousand years ago.

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] Sergei A. Arutunov, ‘The Eskimo Harpoon’, In *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of the Bering Strait*, ed. by William W. Fitzhugh, Julie Hollowell, and Aron L. Crowell (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp. 52-57 (p.53, fig. 1).

[2] Sergei A. Arutunov, ‘The Eskimo Harpoon’, In *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of the Bering Strait*, ed. by William W. Fitzhugh, Julie Hollowell, and Aron L. Crowell (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp. 52-57 (p.54).

[3] William W. Fitzhugh and Aron L. Crowell, 'Ancestors and Ivories: Ancient Art of Bering Strait', In *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of the Bering Strait*, ed. by William W. Fitzhugh, Julie Hollowell, and Aron L. Crowell (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp.18-41 (p.37, fig. 14)

[4] See for dating, Owen K. Mason, 'Focusing on the Coast', 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. 187-196

[5] Sergei A. Arutunov, 'The Eskimo Harpoon', In *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of the Bering Strait*, ed. by William W. Fitzhugh, Julie Hollowell, and Aron L. Crowell (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp. 52-57 (p.54).

[6] William W. Fitzhugh and Aron L. Crowell, 'Ancestors and Ivories: Ancient Art of Bering Strait', In *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of the Bering Strait*, ed. by William W. Fitzhugh, Julie Hollowell, and Aron L. Crowell (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp.18-41 (p.37, fig. 14)

Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Anthony Plowright on the advice of Robert Sainsbury in 1995 out of funds provided by the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Charitable Trust.
