



**Harpoon socket part for hunting harpoon**

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## **On display**

**Title/Description:** Harpoon socket part for hunting harpoon

**Object Type:** Implement

**Materials:** Walrus ivory

**Technique:** Carving, Drilling, engraving

**Measurements:** h. 206 mm

**Accession Number:** 1123

**Historic Period:** Early Old Bering Sea-Okvik (AD 500-750)

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

**Cultural Group:** Old Bering Sea (Okvik)

**Credit Line:** Purchased with support from the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Charitable Trust, 1996

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This unique Okvik/early Old Bering Sea harpoon socket, from 500-750 AD, would have been part of the complex Old Bering Sea harpoon. [1] Two holes almost in the centre stand out as if forming a pair of eyes beholding the beholder. The foreshaft would have fitted in the hole in the top and the shaft would have been attached to the bottom and with rope that would have fitted into the two “eyes” as the guided carving for a line suggests.

The harpoon socket has distinctive Okvik-early OBS features with the freestyle engravings, the circle-dot motif with three “lashes” dispersing outwards, and spurred lines. [2] These earlier OBS harpoon sockets do not have the same geometrical symmetry as the later versions, but are equally impressive. The hole at the upper part of the harpoon socket would have been plugged with fossil ivory, wood, or baleen. [3] Around the hole are two double lined circles with rougher insertions at each of the wind directions.

These double holes are particularly unusual for harpoon sockets with the one hole being common. With some imagination, the line holes look like eyes with the circle-dot motif to illustrate a nose and the oval shaped figure could be a mouth. But this is just second-guessing, there little is still known about these designs and the spiritual meaning if at all. We can assume, however, that harpoon sockets and other parts of the harpoon were almost certainly imbued with spiritual significance and presence.

There remains many other mystery clouded over the Okvik/early Old Bering Sea. [4] Okvik is now widely regarded as part of the early Old Bering Sea. For one, the dating of ancestral Arctic materials is difficult and surrounded with controversy. Especially the sites on Sivuqaq (St. Lawrence Island) have been undated or poorly dated. [5] A further difficulty arises with the uncontrolled digging and accelerated site destruction that took place on the American side of the Bering Strait, including on Sivuqaq and the Penuk Islands. [6] Excavations in Chukotka, including the Okvik (in Yuit it means

“the place where walrus haul out”) [7] site, however, have provided a more systematic digging and documentation, and have offered new insights into the Old Bering Sea life. [8]

Graves show that the Old Bering Sea society was hierarchical with *aṅatquq* (spiritual experts) and sea-mammal hunting experts (“whaling captains”) taking a leading role. [9] The excavations also reflect differences amongst Old Bering Sea villages in terms of prosperity due to the presence or absence of large walrus haul-out (and therefore the valued walrus ivory tusks), driftwood for construction, or rocks for hunting or cutting tools. [10] These inequalities “led to both cooperation and competition, trade and warfare”. [11]

We can contemplate whether the required walrus ivory was from a successful personal hunt or had been traded with another commodity such as wood or rocks. We can speculate who owned this beautifully carved walrus ivory harpoon socket? Whatever might be the case, the intricacy of the design suggests a prominent sea-mammal hunter or/and *aṅatquq* who would have used this harpoon socket as intricate part of the OBS harpoon to hunt walrus and/or whale.

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] See for OBS dating, Owen K. Mason, ‘Focusing on the Coast’, 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, 2020). Pp. 187-196 (p. 192).

[2] William W. Fitzhugh, ‘Notes on Art Styles, Cultures, and Chronology’, 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. 88-93, (p.90).

[3] William W. Fitzhugh, ‘Eagles, Beasts, and Gods: Art of the Old Bering Sea Hunting Complex’, 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, 2009a), pp.162-189 (p. 173); see also Feng Qu, *The Legacy of Shamans? Structural and Cognitive Perspectives of Prehistoric Symbolism in the Bering Strait Region*, PhD Thesis, (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Fairbanks, 2013), p. 298.

[4] T. Max Friesen and Owen K. Mason, ‘Introduction: Archaeology of the North American Arctic’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Prehistoric Arctic*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 1-24 (p. 14)

[5] Owen K. Mason and Jeffrey T. Rasic, *Walrusing, Whaling and the Origins of the Old Bering Sea Culture*, *World Archaeology*, 51 (2019), pp. 454-483, (p. 459).

[6] *Ibid*, p. 455; see also for a more contextual discussion, Julie Hollowell, ‘Digging for Ivory on Bering Strait: A Long History of Licit Excavation’, in *Challenging the Dichotomy: The Licit and Illicit in Archaeological and Heritage Discourses*, ed. by Les Field, Cristóbal Gnecco and Joe Watkins (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016), pp 129-153

[7] Julie Hollowell, ‘A History of “Ancient Eskimo Ivories” as Art’, in *Aspects of Okvik: Four Essays on Things of Bering Strait*, ed. by Don E. Durmond, (Eugene: University of Oregon, 2008), pp. 222-259, (p.232)

[8] Don E. Durmond, ‘The Story of “Okvik”’, in *Aspects of Okvik: Four Essays on Things of Bering*

Strait, ed. by Don E. Durmond, (Eugene: University of Oregon, 2008), pp.261-309

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; 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)

[9] Owen K. Mason, 'Focusing on the Coast', 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, 2020). Pp. 187-196 (p. 193).

[10] Ibid, p. 194

[11] Ibid, p. 194.

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## Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Miriam Shiell in 1996 on the advice of Robert Sainsbury out of funds provided by the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Charitable Trust.

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