



Wound plug (with knife) for plugging hole of hunted sea animal

On display

Title/Description: Wound plug (with knife) for plugging hole of hunted sea animal

Object Type: Implement

Materials: Wood

Technique: Carving, engraving

Measurements: h. 225 x w. 50 mm

Accession Number: 1126

Historic Period: Okvik (250 BC-AD 100)

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

Cultural Group: Old Bering Sea-Okvik, Punuk, or Thule

This wooden carving of a wound plug (with knife) is exceptional and unique and brings together Okvik (500-750 AD) facial designs but has been said to have been made by a Punuk (800-1200 AD) or Thule (1200-1800) carver. [1] Whereas the long nose are characteristic for Okvik facial features, the large eyes are rather unusual and differ vastly from the more narrow ones (for example, UAE 1120). There are some similar Okvik examples of carved heads with frowned or tattooed foreheads. [2] The lines, in one example, are alluding to tonsure hair and the location of a hunting visor. [3]

The mouth is slightly open and large eyes are contrasted with a long thin nose. The right side still has the inlet for a large circular eye that is chipped in the bottom. The front head is engraved with lines as to indicate frowns. The ears are demarcated with drilled holes which is plugged on the right side. Again, we can assume that the left side would also have had inlet eyes and plugged ears. The torso is followed with a long snail-like figure starting with a deepened trench. At the bottom are two more holes filled with a stake. The front of the torso, too, has a hole with a wooden stake.

Wound plugs, such as this one, would have been used to plug up the hole in a wounded sea animal (seal or walrus) caused by a harpoon and to prevent precious blood to be draining or to have the animal drown. Inuit have continued using these wound plugs for the same reasons. Wound plugs have been used by Arctic ancestors for over more than a millennium. The Okvik-Old Bering Sea (500 – 750 AD) already used wooden wound plugs and the usage was continued in the Punuk (800 – 1200 AD) and Thule cultures. [4] The styles, however, differ and offer an indication when the wound plug was made. Birnirk (800-1300 AD), for example used wound plugs that looked very similar to nails. [5] Although this wound plug transcends different styles, the elegant facial carving with the additional wooden inlet plugs leads us to suggest that this wound plug was of spiritual significance.

Peter Looovers, February 2022

[1] Robert Ackerman, 'Ivory Carving in the Bering Strait Region', in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of Bering Strait*, ed. by William W. Fitzhugh, Julie Hollowell and Aron L. Cromwell, Strait (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp. 78-85, (p.82, fig. 7).

[2] 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. 42.

[3] Lars Krutak, *Sacrificing the Sacred: Tattooed Prehistoric Ivory Figures of St. Lawrence Island, Alaska*, in *Ancient Ink: The Archaeology of Tattooing*, ed. by Lars Krutak and Aaron Deter-Wolf, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), Pp 262-285 p, 278; see also Wardwell, 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.46.

[4] Henry B. Collins, *Archaeology of St. Lawrence Island, Alaska*. Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, 96(1). (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution., 1937), p. 357.

[5] Owen K. Mason, 'The Punuk/Birnirk Interregnum of the 9th to 11th Centuries', 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. 212-219, (p.214, fig. 4.78).

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.
