



Toggle head for hunting harpoon

On display

Title/Description: Toggle head for hunting harpoon

Object Type: Implement

Materials: Ivory (?)

Technique: Carving, Drilling, engraving

Measurements: h. 140 mm

Accession Number: 1151

Historic Period: Old Bering Sea-Okvik (AD 400 - 800)

Production Place: Alaska, North America, Seward Peninsula, The Americas

Cultural Group: Old Bering Sea (Okvik)

Credit Line: Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1997

This highly stylised toggle harpoon head made from walrus ivory has been discoloured. The black and light to dark chocolate colours accentuate that this harpoon head was found in an ancestral Bering Strait burial site. Without provenance, there remains some discrepancy of the date of when this harpoon head was made and whom. An almost identical harpoon head, collected by whaler and trader Captain Edward Perry Herendeen on the Diomed Islands in 1881, is considered to be a transition object from Old Bering Sea II to Old Bering Sea III. [1] Renowned archaeologist Henry B Collins points out that later Old Bering Sea objects had bolder and flowing lines rather than the earlier curved lines. The lines, too, were lightly incised whilst the circles became larger as to form animal eyes. [2]

Captain Edward Perry Herendeen was part of the First International Polar Year Expedition to Utqiagvik (Barrow) from 1881 to 1883. The expedition, sponsored by the US Signal Corps and the Smithsonian Institution, would form key in ethnographic and archaeological work in the region. [3] Although in this particular case most of the collected objects like the harpoon head would have been donated to the Smithsonian Institution, American whalers, traders, US Signal Corps officers and especially Coast Guard officials have been notorious to keep archaeological finds. [4] This has made comparative analysis of Bering Sea archaeological material from the Alaskan side, such as those housed at SVCA, extremely challenging at times.

However, due to an abundance of Bering Sea toggle harpoon heads in archaeological records and museum collections with distinct stylistic varieties of Bering Sea harpoon head designs, has made the identification more robust. Especially for the extensive material from Sivuqaq. [5] Changes in the design of the harpoon heads needs to be placed in broader macro evolutionary processes with innovations in whaling and walrus hunting. [6] This harpoon head, following Henry B. Collins and acknowledging St Lawrence Yupik scholar Paul Silook's contributions, could be placed in a later stage of the Old Bering Sea - Okvik culture and perhaps was made somewhere between AD 400-800. [7]

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] Henry B. Collins, 'Eskimo Art', in *The Far North: 2000 Years of American Eskimo and Indian Art*, ed. by Henry B. Collins, Frederica de Laguna, Edmund Carpenter and Peter Stone (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1973), pp. 1-132, (p. 13, fig 11).

[2] Henry B. Collins, 'Eskimo Art', in *The Far North: 2000 Years of American Eskimo and Indian Art*, ed. by Henry B. Collins, Frederica de Laguna, Edmund Carpenter and Peter Stone (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1973), pp. 1-132, (p. 13, fig 11).

[3] Ernest S. Burch Jr. 'Smithsonian Contributions to Alaskan Ethnography: The First IPY Expedition to Barrow, 1881- 1883', in *Smithsonian at the Poles: Contributions to International Polar Year Science*, ed. by Igor Krupnik, Michael A. Lang, and Scott E. Miller, (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2009), pp. 89-98 (p.89).

[4] Hollowell, Julie. 'Ancient Ivories in a Global World', 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. 252-289, (p.261).

[5] Mason, Owen K. ‘“The Multiplication of Forms”: Bering Strait Harpoon Heads as a Demic and Macroevolutionary Proxy’, in *Macroevolution in Human Prehistory: Evolutionary Theory and Processual Archaeology*, ed. by Anne Marie Pentiss, Ian Kuijt, and James C. Chatters (New York: Springer, 2009). Pp.73-107, (p. 84, 100).

[6] Mason, Owen K. ‘“The Multiplication of Forms”: Bering Strait Harpoon Heads as a Demic and Macroevolutionary Proxy’, in *Macroevolution in Human Prehistory: Evolutionary Theory and Processual Archaeology*, ed. by Anne Marie Pentiss, Ian Kuijt, and James C. Chatters (New York: Springer, 2009). Pp.73-107, (p. 101).

[7] Don E. Dumond, ‘Chronology of Bering Strait Cultures’, 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. 70-77, (p.74).

Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Miriam Shiell Fine Art, Toronto, in 1997 out of funds provided by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury.
