



Engraving tool

Not on display

Title/Description: Engraving tool

Object Type: Implement

Materials: Antler, Jade

Technique: Carving, Drilling

Measurements: h. 110 x diam 8 mm

Accession Number: 1153b

Historic Period: Ipiutak (200-800 AD) (?)

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

Cultural Group: Ipiutak

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

Whilst this belonging might not look extraordinary or aesthetically sophisticated, this antler (?) tool with jade (?) blade would have been very important to produce other belongings. The exact purpose of this tool remains unclear but perhaps it was an Ipiutak (200-800 AD) engraving tool.

Jade has been rare but extremely valuable mineral for its hard properties and high quality. [1] There are only a few places (Kobuk River for one) in northwest Alaska where nephrite jade can be found, but there existed a far-reaching trade various Inuit across the Arctic like their Arctic ancestors had done before about the Bering Strait. Alongside flint and slate, jade was used as the first blades for knives, adzes and hammers were made of jade, and sometimes the ulu blade [2] Nephrite jade was further used in “hide scrapers, labrets, whetstones, percussors, projectile points, pendants, drill bits, lancets, and chisels”. [3]

The bottom of the drill or shaft shows extensive wear and might have been more conical. Ipiutak engravings tools, frequently beautifully carved unlike this one, were conical butted and likely hand-powered rather than using a bow drill. [4] The wear, though, is slightly too low for indicating either excessively repeated movement by hand or drill. The jade drill blade, too, is rather unusual as iron points or ground squirrel incisors were more commonly used. [5] The Birnirk culture, like Inuit, used a deer (or caribou) astragalus as a mouth piece to guide and place pressure on the drill. [6]

We can still marvel, though, how this tool was made and which lengths the owner would have gone to obtain or collect jade and antler through trade or personal sourcing.

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] Jeffrey T. Rasic, *Archaeological Evidence for Transport, Trade, and Exchange in the North American Arctic*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Prehistoric Arctic*, ed. by Max Friesen and Owen K. Mason, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 131-152, (p. 133, 135-137).

[2] John Driggs in Ernest S. Burch, *Social Life in Northwest Alaska: The Structure of Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations*, (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2006) p.201

[3] Jeffrey T. Rasic, *Archaeological Evidence for Transport, Trade, and Exchange in the North American Arctic*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Prehistoric Arctic*, ed. by Max Friesen and Owen K. Mason, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 131-152, (p. 135); see also John Murdoch, ‘Ethnological Results of the Point Barrow Expedition’. In *Ninth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution 1887-'88*, ed. by John W. Powell, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1892), (Pp. 1-441).

[4] 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. 82-83

[5] *Ibid*, p. 82

[6] James Ford, *Eskimo Prehistory in the Vicinity of Point Barrow*, *Anthropological Papers of The American Museum of Natural History*, 47(1), (New York: The American Museum of Natural History, 1959), p. 174.

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.
