



Ulu handle for a slate/flint blade

On display

Title/Description: Ulu handle for a slate/flint blade

Object Type: Implement

Materials: Walrus ivory

Technique: Carving, Drilling, engraving

Measurements: h. 57 x w. 102 x d. 32 mm

Accession Number: 1190

Historic Period: Ipiutak (200 - 800 AD) or Old Bering Sea (500 - 750 AD)

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

Cultural Group: Ipiutak or Old Bering Sea

Credit Line: Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1999

Together with needles and needle cases, ulus (Inuit women's iconic knife) are paramount for Inuit women in the Arctic. Like needles, ulus have had a long history and already existed when the Ipiutak and Old Bering Sea emerged about the Bering Strait. This is walrus ivory ulu handle for a flint blade was allegedly used by an Ipiutak woman somewhere between 200 and 800 AD or by an Old Bering Sea woman between 500 and 750 AD. [1]

There remain ongoing discussions amongst archaeologists whether Ipiutak women used ulus or not. William W. Fitzhugh, for one, has written that the Ipiutak did not have ulus. [2] Helge Larsen and Froelich Rainey, however, excavated a number of flint blades that they designated as ulus. [3] Owen K. Mason, too, refers to an iron (!) ulu found at Point Spencer. [4] Feng Qu, however, sides with William W. Fitzhugh and similarly argues that there is not any evidence that Ipiutak used ulus. [5] Ethnographic records show that Inupiat ancestors had ulu handles of similar style but made from whale bone. [6]

While the Okvik, or early Old Bering Sea (OBS I), have many stylistic similarities with Ipiutak in terms of straight and barbed lines, spurred lines, double lines, and holes that would have been plugged with jet in the Ipiutak case, the Ipiutak differed in their incorporation of zoomorphic figures. [7] Okvik-Old Bering Sea certainly used ulus and there have been numerous examples excavated. OBS ulu handles frequently had animal designs in the shapes of bear or seal. [8]

This ulu handle with a slate/flint blade would have been used to cut up the walrus that provided not only the meat and hides, but also the tusks that were used to carve beautiful belongings such as this incredible example.

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] For dating, see 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.

[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.91).

[3] 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. 101-102

[4] Owen K. Mason, 'From the Norton to the Ipiutak Cult, in *The Oxford Handbook of Prehistoric Arctic*, ed. by Max Friesen and Owen K. Mason, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 443-468, (p. 458)

[5] 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. 4

[6] 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), p.163, fig 125.

[7] 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.91).

[8] 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. 311

Provenance

According to the vendor Miriam Shiell, the object was excavated on Seaward Peninsula, St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, in 1999.

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Miriam Shiell Fine Art, Toronto, in 1999 out of funds provided by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury.
