



Hunting hat ornament

Not on display

Title/Description: Hunting hat ornament

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Walrus ivory

Technique: Carving, Drilling, engraving

Measurements: h. 25 x w. 11 x d. 40 mm

Accession Number: 1201

Historic Period: late Old Bering Sea (900 - 1200 AD)

Production Place: Alaska, Ivetek, North America, St. Lawrence Island (?), The Americas

Cultural Group: Ipiutak or Old Bering Sea

Credit Line: Donated by Lisa Sainsbury, 2000

This wonderful late Old Bering Sea (900-1200 AD) hat ornament with the distinct features of a walrus head with large tusks was found at Ivetok on Sivuqaq (St. Lawrence Island). [1] Due to the shallow seas and rich feeding grounds around Sivuqaq, and south of the sea ice extent, walrus have congregated in exceptionally large groups up to tens of thousands during winter on different locations on Sivuqaq and Penuk Islands. There have also been episodes throughout time, however, when Sivuqaq peoples faced tremendous hardships with the absence of walrus. [2]

A dreadful famine, between 1878 and 1880, decimated the St. Lawrence Yupiit population when there were no walrus around. Esteemed St Lawrence Island Yupik Elder Estelle Oozevaseuk recounts how the famine was the result of cruel behaviour towards walrus by Kululegmiit hunters (hunters from the northern St. Lawrence Island village of Kukulek). [3] The hunters 'would cut mangtak [skin] from living whales' or walrus. [4] These acts of improper behaviour towards sentient animals subsequently led to famine as the animals did not give themselves anymore to the hunters. St Lawrence Yupik political leader Vera Metcalf addresses the ongoing and current challenges of 'ecological, social, economic and political conditions' that have been detrimental to the St Lawrence Yupiit. [5] These conditions are all affected by the climate change, or crisis, and erratic weather patterns that impact seasonal cycles. [6] The well-being of walrus, and therefore the St. Lawrence Yupiit, is constrained by the 'loss of ice in shallow water' that is crucial for walrus females and their young calves. [7] Walrus might also change their pathways and move to more contaminated areas for feeding and subsequently become sick and inedible. [8]

While walrus tusks certainly have been pivotal for carving various objects such as this fine example of a hat ornament, walrus are equally important to provide food, hides (to make umiaq covers for example), and spiritual well-being for ancestral and contemporary St Lawrence Islanders. The famine of 1878-1880 is a stark and ominous reminder what happens when the walrus stay away. Unfortunately, with climate change, this has become more and more frequent.

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] Carleton Ray, 'Walrus, the Beringian "Tooth-walker"', 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. 46-51, (p.48).

[3] Crowell, Aron L. and Estelle Oozevaseuk. 2006. The St. Lawrence Island Famine and Epidemic, 1879-80: A Yupik Narrative in Cultural and Historical Context. *Arctic Anthropology*, 43(1): pp. 1-19. p 10-12

[4] Crowell, Aron L. and Estelle Oozevaseuk. 2006. The St. Lawrence Island Famine and Epidemic, 1879-80: A Yupik Narrative in Cultural and Historical Context. *Arctic Anthropology*, 43(1): pp. 1-19.

[5] Vera Metcalf and Martin Robards, 'Sustaining a Healthy Human-Walrus Relationship in a Dynamic Environment: Challenges for Comanagement', *Ecological Applications*, 18(2008), pp. S148-156 (p. S149).

[6] See also for the relation between climate change and weather, Amber Lincoln, Jago Cooper, and Jan Peter Laurens Looovers, *Arctic: Culture and Climate*, (London: Thames & Hudson in collaboration with The British Museum, 2020)

[7] Vera Metcalf and Martin Robards, 'Sustaining a Healthy Human-Walrus Relationship in a Dynamic Environment: Challenges for Comanagement', *Ecological Applications*, 18(2008), pp. S148-156 (p. S151)

[8] *Ibid*, p. S153

Provenance

According to the vendor Miriam Shiell, the object was excavated at Ivetek, St Lawrence Island, Alaska.

Purchased by Lisa Sainsbury from Miriam Shiell Fine Art, Toronto, in 2000 and donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia the same year.
