



Maskette with whale or hunting charm

On display

Title/Description: Maskette with whale or hunting charm

Object Type: Charm, Head, Mask

Materials: Walrus ivory

Technique: Carving, Drilling

Accession Number: 457

Production Place: Alaska, North America, The Americas, Tikigaq (Point Hope)

Cultural Group: Thule or Inupiat

This Thule or Inupiat maskette or hunting charm (*angoak*) is exceptional and embodies the intricate importance of whales in the Inupiat society. An *agviq* (bowhead whale) is engraved into the human male face with slit eyes, and could allude to the self-identification of Inupiat as “People of the Whale”. [1] Perhaps this object was owned by an *umilik* (whaling captain) and could have been kept in the *qalgi* (men’s house or ceremonial space). The depicted face could have been an important ancestor. [2]

The engraved whale marks a crucial difference between the Iputiak culture and the Thule or Inupiat cultures. Whereas the former focused predominantly on hunting caribou, walrus, and seal, the Thule shifted the attention to hunting bowhead whales. [3] The migration of the Thule ancestors across the Arctic was initiated by “ambitious Thule individuals and their followers” who wanted to “gain wealth and social advancement” as *umilik*. [4] These individuals would leave their western Arctic communities and moved eastward in search for new *agviq* (bowhead whale) hunting grounds.

Renowned Inupiat historian Samaruna and his nephew Asatchaq narrate the importance of the whale for *Tikigaqmiut* (Inupiat from Tikigaq/Point Hope) and how the whale became land. The story is part of a larger story of how Tulinigraq [Raven Man] was made by an *anaa* [Grandmother with spiritual powers] and afterwards married an *uiluaqtaq* (a female virgin with spiritual powers who lives alone).

Samaruna:

Raven was a shaman.

And the *uiluaqtaq* was a shaman.

Asatchaq:

Yes. She was his wife now.

Samaruna:

When they woke in the morning,
Raven went to his qalgi [men's house].
He told the men he was her husband.
Now while he sat in the qalgi,
The men told stories
They talked about an animal,
No one could do anything.
Nobody could catch it.
So when Tulunigraq woke the next day,
He took his harpoon and his qajaq,
And paddled north into the darkness.

Asatchaq:

He travelled by qajaq.

He stopped.

Tulinigraq heard something.

An animal was breathing.

It was rising.

It was breathing.

Raven went closer.

There was something on the surface.

It stretched to the horizon.

Tulunigraq waited.

When its head rose to breath,

Samaruna:

Nauligaa!: he struck it!

He harpooned the animal,

It dived with Raven's drag-float.

When he saw the animal had dived,

He sang to make it rise.

Uivvaluk! Uivvaluk! Uivvalluk!

Round! Round! Round!

Asatchaq:

The whale-float went round.

And the mask on the float

Sang back to Raven.

Samaruna:

The animal surfaced.

The whale came up dry.

It rose in the water.

Asatchaq:

Dry land! Nuna!

It was dry land.

It was Tikigaq.

Samaruna:

Dry land from the whale.

Tulunigraq harpooned it.

When he'd done this,

He went back.

He went back to the uiluaqtaq.

And he told the people

He'd harpooned Tikigaq.

You can still see the place

Where Raven harpooned it.

Asatchaq:

That's why Tikigaaq's the animal.

The land is alive,

It's a whale he harpooned

When Raven Man married the uiluaqtaq. [5]

Raven's harpooning of the whale continues to resonate even today. Nicole Kanayurak, an Inupiaq scholar and wildlife management official from Utqiaġvik (Point Barrow), underscores the importance that aġviq (bowhead whale) play in Inupiat lives as the binding together of kincentric relations. Or in her words, 'Whaling continues to support the foundation of our homes and brings warmth to the community and all our relations' [6]

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] Chie Sakakibara, *People of the Whales: Climate Change and Cultural Resilience Among Iñupiat of Arctic Alaska*. *Geographical Review*, 107(2017), Pp. 159-184

[2] Rainey, Froelich G. 1947. *The Whale Hunters of Tigara*. *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of National History*, 41(2). New York: The American Museum of National History.

[3] 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.

[4] David Morrison, 'The Earliest Thule Migration'. *Canadian Journal of Archaeology*, 22(1999), Pp. 139-156, (p. 151).

[5] Told by Samaruna and Asatchaq to Tom Lowenstein in the 1970s. In Tom Lowenstein, *Ancient Land, sacred whale: The Inuit Hunt and its Ritual*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994).

[6] Henry P. Huntington, Chie Sakakibara, George Noongwook, Nicole Kannik Kanayurak, Valerii Skhauge, Edvard Zdor, Sandra Inutiq, and Bjarne Ababsi Lyberth, 'Whale Hunting in Indigenous Arctic Cultures, in *The Bowhead Whale: Balaena mysticetus: Biology and Human Interactions*, ed. by John C. George and J.G.M. "Hans" Thewissen, (London: Academic Press, 2021)

Provenance

Accessioned into the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia circa 1994.
