



Carved ivory human figurine

On display

Title/Description: Carved ivory human figurine

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Walrus ivory

Technique: Carving

Measurements: h. 210 mm

Accession Number: 1108

Historic Period: Old Bering Sea (AD 400 – 600)

Production Place: Alaska, Cape Kialeagak, North America, Old Village, St. Lawrence Island (?), The Americas

Credit Line: Purchased with support from the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Charitable Trust, 1994

The facial expression of this walrus ivory carving of a limbless androgynous figure is striking and one can only guess the emotions that the carver tried to convey. The figure also illustrates the complexities of pinpointing the cultural era of production without suffice provenance. The walrus ivory carving has an enigmatic design with a thinly X curved singular line across the upper body and a double lined U-shape across the chest. In particular, the curvilinear X without a circular point of connection where the lines meet is rather unique and difficult to decipher. The face and thin curved lines are similar to other figures designated as the Okvik-Old Bearing Sea (500-750 AD) culture on Sivuqaq (St. Lawrence Island). The bottom with the broadening base, however, is striking of the Punuk (800=1200 AD) or Thule (1200-1800 AD) cultures. The lines on the face and body can be understood as tattoos. [1] With measured hesitation, this figure might therefore be attributed to the transition period between the Okvik-Old Bering Sea and the arrival of Punuk cultures on Sivuqaq.

This particular figure was allegedly found or excavated at Cape Kialeagak – Kiyalighaq or Kialighaq [2] - on the south-eastern point of St Lawrence Island near to the Punuk Islands. Whoever found this figure might have had help of a “shorty fellow” as archaeologist Robert Ackerman recounts:

A group of hunters had come to the old site of Kialeagak on the south side of the island. One man while bringing water to the camp saw a little man walking around the ruins of old igloos on top of the midden. He called out, but no answer. Determined to find out who this “shorty fellow” was he went to the spot where he had seen him-nothing. Andy [Ackerman’s Yupik co-worker] then laughed and said the “shorty fellow” was probably telling me where to look. [3]

Archaeologist Henry B. Collins, in 1929, had visited the site whilst excavating on the Punuk Islands. Collins, who was indebted to the collaborative work with esteemed St. Lawrence Island Yupik scholar Paul Silook, wrote that there were two villages: a smaller prehistoric (Old Bearing Sea)

village and a more extensive village that was established around the time that the Old Village had been abandoned during the Punuk period. [4] The newer village was occupied until the late 1870s [5] when a famine and pandemic struck St. Lawrence Island due to improper behaviour by Kululegmii hunters towards walruses (see UAE 1201). [6]

In the St Lawrence Yupik language this type of human figures are called *qawawaaq* (carved ivory human figurine). St Lawrence Island Yupik Elders Estelle Oozavaseuk, who is the daughter of Paul Silook, and Vera Kaneshiro explain that these are dolls for girls with which they played inside the house. The wide, flat base allowed the figure to stand on its own. [7] Whilst the exact purpose of this figure is unknown, one could imagine that Old Bering Sea or Punuk girls were playing with these dolls inside the sod houses of Kiyalighaq perhaps waiting for their fathers to return from hunting walrus.

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] Lars Krutak, *Sacrificing the Sacred: Tattooed Prehistoric Ivory Figures of St. Lawrence Island, Alaska*, in *Ancient Ink: The Archaeology of Tattooing*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), Pp 262-285

[2] 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. 6 , 8

[3] Ackerman, Robert. 1959. Siberians of the New World. *Expedition Magazine*, Penn Museum (Summer) Pp 24-35. P. 35

[4] Collins, Henry Bascom Jnr. 1929. *Prehistoric Art of the Alaskan Eskimo*. Washington: Smithsonian Institute. p.16

[5] Collins, Henry Bascom Jnr. 1929. *Prehistoric Art of the Alaskan Eskimo*. Washington: Smithsonian Institute. p.16

[6] 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

[7] Alaska Native Collections. 2001. From discussion with Jacob Ahwinona, Estelle Oozevaseuk, Marie Saclamana and Branson Tungiyon (Kawerak, Inc.) at the National Museum of Natural History and National Museum of the American Indian, 5/07/2001-5/11/2001. Also participating: Aron Crowell and Bill Fitzhugh (NMNH) and Suzi Jones (AMHA). <https://alaska.si.edu/record.asp?id=326> [accessed on 27 September 2021]

Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Anthony Plowright on the advice of Robert Sainsbury in 1994 out of funds provided by the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Charitable Trust.
