



Hunting amulet in the form of a seal

On display

Title/Description: Hunting amulet in the form of a seal

Object Type: Animal, Figure

Materials: Walrus ivory

Technique: Carving, engraving

Measurements: h. 98 mm

Accession Number: 1136

Historic Period: Ipiutak (200-800 AD), Punuk (800-1200 AD) or Thule (1200-1800 AD)

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

Cultural Group: Ipiutak, Punuk, Thule

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

Over 7,500 years ago sea-levels had been rising with the deglaciation of the High Canadian Arctic, but it took another thousand years for the sea-levels to be relatively more stable. [1] Amongst the earlier animals that ventured northwards were ringed seals who followed pack ice. [2]

This beautifully dynamic walrus-ivory carving of a swimming seal with skeletal markings on a plump body was found on Seward Peninsula at a well-known Ipiutak site. [3] As the Director of the Smithsonian's Arctic Studies Centre in Anchorage, Aron Crowell, points out, the skeletal markings are typical of the Ipiutak (200-800 AD) but this particular carving lacks the more diagnostic design and therefore it might be Punuk (800-1200 AD) or even Thule (1200-1800 AD). [4] The skeletal motif, used on various objects, has been widespread across the Arctic with the iconic Dorset walrus ivory carvings of skeletal polar bears perhaps the best known. [5] Ipiutak, Punuk and Thule, likewise, incorporated engraved lines to illustrate a skeleton or lifelines. [6] The skeletal motif sometimes merges together with lifelines or spirit lines. [7] These motifs both illustrate the anatomical awareness as well as emphasise a spiritual presence of Arctic ancestors. [8] Ribs, spine, and joints, too, were places where spirits resided and the skeletal patterns might allude to this. [9]

The seal with the striking accuracy of the anatomical proportions of the eloquent head with eyes, nose, mouth, the ribs, and the back feet is extraordinary. We remain questioning whether this was a hunting amulet or owned by an *anatuq* (spiritual leader) to facilitate diving into the watery underworld. Esteemed St. Lawrence Island Yupik elder Estelle Oozevaseuk shares a related story about Agnana who visited the seals:

“She found out about the people – the first people that she had seen were small with little arms and legs and very big eyes. They welcomed her, and they fed her what they had eaten, tom cods and other small fishes. They were seals”. [10]

Peter Looovers, February 2022

[1] Amber Lincoln, ‘The First Arctic Culture in North America’, in *Arctic: Culture and Climate*, ed. by Amber Lincoln, Jago Cooper, and Jan Peter Laurens Looovers, (London: Thames & Hudson in collaboration with The British Museum, 2020), pp. 199-206, (p.199); see also Matthew J., Saulnier-Talbot Émilie, Potter Ben A., Belmecheri Soumaya, Bigelow Nancy, Choy Kyungcheol, Cwynar Les C., Davies Kimberley, Graham Russell W., Kurek Joshua, Langdon Peter, Medeiros Andrew, Rawcliffe Ruth, Wang Yue and Williams John W. A New Terrestrial Palaeoenvironmental Record from the Bering Land Bridge and Context for Human Dispersal, *Royal Society Open Science*, 5(2018), pp. 1-11

[2] Owen K. Mason ‘Focusing on the Coast’, in *Arctic: Culture and Climate*, ed. by Amber Lincoln, Jago Cooper, and Jan Peter Laurens Looovers, (London: Thames & Hudson in collaboration with The British Museum, 2020), Pp. 187-196. (p. 187).

[3] Aron L. Crowell, ‘Sea Mammals in Art, Ceremony, and Belief: Knowledge Shared by Yupik and

Iñupiaq Elders, in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of the Bering Strait*, ed. by William W. Fitzhugh, Julie Hollowell, and Aron L. Crowell (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp.206-225 (p. 223, fig. 23).

[4] *Ibid*, p.115.

[5] Amber Lincoln, *The First Arctic Culture in North America*, in *Arctic: Culture and Climate*, ed. by Amber Lincoln, Jago Cooper, and Jan Peter Laurens Looovers, (London: Thames & Hudson in collaboration with The British Museum, 2020), pp. 199-206, (p.204).

[6] Valérie Chaussonnet, 'Crossroad Times', in *Crossroads Alaska: Native Cultures of Alaska and Siberia*, ed. by Valérie Chaussonnet, (Washington, D.C.: Arctic Studies Center, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, 1995), pp. 48-97 (p. 72).

[7] William W. Fitzhugh, 'Images from the Past: Thoughts on Bering Sea Eskimo Art and Culture', *Expedition*, 26(1984), pp. 24-39; William W. Fitzhugh, *Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo*, Washington, D.C.: Published for the National Museum of Natural History by the Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982), p.200

[8] William W. Fitzhugh, *Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo*, Washington, D.C.: Published for the National Museum of Natural History by the Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982), p.200, 201, fig. 249

[9] Aron L. Crowell, 'Sea Mammals in Art, Ceremony, and Belief: Knowledge Shared by Yupik and Iñupiaq Elders, in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of the Bering Strait*, ed. by William W. Fitzhugh, Julie Hollowell, and Aron L. Crowell (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp.206-225 (p.220); see also. Ann Fienup Riordan, 'Eye of the Dance: Spiritual Life of the Bering Sea Eskimo', in *Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska*, ed. by William W. Fitzhugh and Aron Crowell, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), pp. 256-270 (p.261)

[10] Estelle Oozevaseuk in Aron L. Crowell, 'Sea Mammals in Art, Ceremony, and Belief: Knowledge Shared by Yupik and Iñupiaq Elders, in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of the Bering Strait*, ed. by William W. Fitzhugh, Julie Hollowell, and Aron L. Crowell (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp.206-225 (p.219).

Provenance

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