



Hunting amulet in the form of a walrus

On display

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

Object Type: Animal, Figure

Materials: Walrus ivory

Technique: Carving, engraving

Measurements: h. 136 x w. 43 x d. 31 mm

Accession Number: 1137

Historic Period: Ipiutak (200-800 AD)

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

Cultural Group: Ipiutak

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

When diggers found this Ipiutak (200- 800 AD) walrus figure it was found together with the seal (UAE 1136). [1] Although a number of animals were important for Ipiutak and other Arctic ancestors, the walrus and its tusk played a significant role as can be seen by the affluence of walrus ivory carvings. [2] With many sites located on the Seward Peninsula, and of which Tikiġaq (Point Hope) is a famous archaeological site, the Ipiutak have been connected most famously with whaling like the contemporary Inupiat. [3] However, as established archaeologist Owen K. Mason points out, caribou, seal, and walrus hunting formed the pillar of the subsistence economy and not whaling. [4]

This walrus carving is similar to the seal (UAE 1136) in displaying the respective characteristics of a swimming posture. Like the seal, the walrus has a skeletal pattern that likely also resembles anatomical and spiritual presence. Esteemed St. Lawrence Island Yupik Elder Roger Silook, the brother of Estelle Oozevaseuk, shares a story about the intimate relations between walrus and Yupiit:

My great-grandmother came from a family where one of their members became a walrus ... My grandfather told me that every time the walrus came south he went out with the walrus and went south. When the walrus came up north, he got up on the island. He did that several months, every year. Until one day the walrus hair started growing on his body [indicates hair along inner forearms]/ And he told his family, 'I'm not coming back next year.' But they still heard him among the walrus, barking, Uugzug, Uugzug, Iikaq, Iikaq. [5]

We could imagine that similar events took place over a thousand years ago when this walrus was carved by Ipiutak people.

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] 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.210, fig. 19);

[2] Erica Hill. 'The Archaeology and Ethnohistory of Walrus Ritual around Bering Strait, *Études Inuit Studies*, 41(2017), pp. 73-99, (p. 73-77).

[3] See for example the seminal book 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); for Inupiat, see Froelich G. Rainey. *The Whale Hunters of Tigara*, (New York: The American Museum of Natural History, 1947)

[4] Owen K. Mason, 'The Contest between the Ipiutak, Old Bering Sea, and Birnirk Polities and the Origin of Whaling during the First Millennium A.D. along Bering Strait', *Journal of Anthropological*

Archaeology, 17(1998), p. 240-325 (p.275).

[5] Roger Silook 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.217).

Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1997 on the advice of Sir Robert Sainsbury out of funds provided by the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Charitable Trust.
