



Hunting or ceremonial amulet

On display

Title/Description: Hunting or ceremonial amulet

Object Type: Animal, Figure

Materials: Ivory (?)

Technique: Carving, engraving

Measurements: h. 80 mm

Accession Number: 1152

Historic Period: Ipiutak (200-800 AD)

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

Cultural Group: Ipiutak

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

Acquired in 1997 by Lord and Lady Sainsbury, this Ipiutak (200-800 AD) object might have come from the same site on Seward Peninsula as the swimming seal (UAE1136) and walrus (UAE1137). The carving, however, differs in being a recognisable rendering of a particular animal. Perhaps this darkened walrus-ivory carving is a sea-creature (or is a wood frog tadpole?) with the spine and ribs engraved. The circle-dots are set outwards to accentuate the eyes, the mouth is drilled with the front still closed, and the back has a smooth, rounding shape with discoloration which might indicate that it would have fitted into something else.

The presence of sea creatures, or sea monsters, is widely spread across the Arctic and the seas housed multiple beings including animals such as seals and walruses as well as other beings. Edward William Nelson in his classic book 'The Eskimo about Bering Strait' refers to various "mythic animals" that inhabit the sea. [1] The sea, like the land and sky, were and continue to be full of malevolent and benevolent beings. [2] While we do not have any Ipiutak narratives about sea creatures, we do know that Ipiutak *an̄atquq* (spiritual leaders) used to fight other *an̄atquq*.

Ipiutak, however, also incorporated frogs in their designs. The wood frog is able to survive across the Arctic due to its extraordinary capacity to completely freeze and hibernate during winter and thaw in spring. [3] Ipiutak carvers frequently incorporated frog-like (or tadpole-like) figures into their design. [4] The transformative abilities of frogs from embryo to tadpole to adult frog, and the capacity to freeze solid and thaw, might have been exemplary for Ipiutak of the force of frogs. Frogs, thus, appear to have been an important spiritual medium. Perhaps this carving needs to be understood in this sense. The two vertical lines left from the bulging eyes might reflect external gills of recently hatched frog embryos. The open mouth of the carving might reflect the widening of the young tadpoles' mouth. [5]

Whatever this unique object might have entailed, we can assume that it was somehow related to forceful entities.

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] Edward William Nelson, *The Eskimo about Bering Strait*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1900), p. 441-448

[2] Erica Hill,

[3] Kevin Broderson, *Frogs and Toads*, (Wildlife Notebook Series, Alaskan Department of Fish and Game, 2008), https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/static/education/wns/frogs_and_toads.pdf [accessed 15 December 2021]

[4] 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)

[5] Craig Holdrege, 'Do Frogs Come from Tadpoles?: Understanding Development as Creative Activity', *In Context*, 33(2018),

<https://www.natureinstitute.org/article/craig-holdrege/do-frogs-come-from-tadpoles> [accessed 15 December 2021]

Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Miriam Shiell Fine Art, Toronto, in 1997 out of funds provided by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury.
