



Harpoon socket for winter harpoon

On display

Title/Description: Harpoon socket for winter harpoon

Object Type: Implement

Materials: Walrus ivory

Technique: Carving, Drilling, engraving

Measurements: h. 220 x w. 37 x d. 27 mm

Accession Number: 1160

Historic Period: Old Bering Sea (700 - 900 AD)

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

Cultural Group: Old Bering Sea

Credit Line: Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1999

Rather than understanding the Old Bering Sea harpoon as an uniform, one-size-fits-all, technology, Yupiit Elders have explained the difference between “winter” and “summer” harpoon. There are also differences in sizes of harpoon heads related to hunting specific animals. This walrus ivory Old Bering Sea harpoon socket piece, as part of the Old Bering Sea harpoon, is what contemporary Yupiit Elders have described as part of the “winter” harpoon. [1] The “winter” harpoon was heavier and this closed harpoon socket would have allowed the shaft to be attached with a skin rope through the hole. Although different in style from the open-socket harpoon socket housed at SVCA (UAE 1113), this example also belongs to the mid Old Bering Sea era somewhere between 700 and 900 AD. [2] Elegant curves and circles are brought together in geometric designs through double lines with spurs. A somewhat similar harpoon socket has been housed in the Bellier Collection. [3]

There is still little known about the origins of toggling harpoons, but they certainly existed prior to the Old Bering Sea culture. Neither do we know much about the exact origin story of the OBS harpoon other than that the Old Bering Sea culture had already figured out how to assemble this advantaged technology. [4] Contemporary Yupiit, however, do teach us more about the relationship between hunting equipment, well-being, and spirituality. Beautiful hunting equipment appeases the animals who subsequently give themselves to the hunter. [5] Aesthetically pleasing objects, like intricate harpoon socket, thus ensured (more) successful hunting and subsequently provided food and materials. With the care and devotion that OBS carvers made such beautiful objects, like this harpoon socket piece, we can assume that there existed a similar relationship.

The beauty and spiritual radiance continue to resonate even today. Julie Hollowell, in her work with St Lawrence Yupiit diggers, came across a photo of this harpoon socket in the office of the Savoonga Native Cooperation on Sivuqaq (St. Lawrence Island). When asked, the President commented to her: “I had the chance to hold that beautiful carving, and I may never see it again”. [6] His comment also alludes to the wider discussions of subsistence digging in Sivuqaq and what it entails for belongings to move away from Indigenous communities.

Peter Loovers, February 2022

[1] Sergei A. Arutunov, ‘The Eskimo Harpoon’, 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. 52-57 (p.54).

[2] See for OBS dating, Mason, Owen K. ‘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 (p. 192)

[3] Allen Wardwell, *Ancient Eskimo Ivories of the Bering Strait*, (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1986), p.85

[4] William W. Fitzhugh, ‘Eagles, Beasts, and Gods: Art of the Old Bering Sea Hunting Complex’, 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, 2009a), pp.162-189 (p. 162).

[5] Ibid, p.163

[6] Julie Hollowell, 'Ancient Ivories in a Global World' in Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of Bering Strait, ed. by William Fitzhugh, Aron L. Cromwell, and Julie Hollowell, Strait (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2009), pp. 252-289, (p.277).

Provenance

According to the vendor Miriam Shiell, the object was excavated at the village site of Kukulik, St. Lawrence Island, Alaska.

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Miriam Shiell Fine Art, Toronto, in 1999 out of funds provided by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury.
