



Ivory Plug

Unknown Artist, Old Bering Sea II

ca. 100-300 A.D.

D: 1.625"; L: 3.25"; W: 2.75"

T0588

<http://collections.fenimoreartmuseum.org/node/5171>

By Alexandra Beuscher (Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University)

This ancient plug, carved from walrus ivory, is a product of the Old Bering Sea (OBS) culture situated 400 BC - 1300 AD on St. Lawrence Island, the Siberian Coast, and the Diomed Islands.¹ Once considered “objects of unknown use,” comparisons with historical material, along with knowledge shared by Yup’ik elders, provide valuable insights into these ancient and otherwise unknowable objects. Alaskan Yup’ik culture of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta is perhaps the “most direct historical legacy of [OBS] culture”.²

The plug was probably used in sea mammal hunting, as historical Yup’ik employed similar items to make airtight floats (*qerruinat*) from sealskins by plugging wound holes or anatomical orifices

in the skins, and inflating them. The floats were were then fastened to harpoon (*asaaqut*) lines.³ Once the harpoon head was deployed and embedded in the body of the prey, the float acted as a drag, slowing down the animal as it tried to escape, and keeping it afloat and visible after death.⁴ Though historical examples of plugs from the YK delta tend to be flat and round rather than conical, there are other ancient examples of conical ivory plugs, and some 19th century wooden examples from the Bering Sea region north of the Delta (Figures 2-4).

This ancient plug was carved to resemble a bird's head with a triangular beak. OBS patterns often include triangular designs and ovoid forms that are reminiscent of bird's wings and feathers.⁵ In historical Yup'ik culture, birds were believed to be transformations of the hunter, and appear on many hunting implements.⁶ Seabird were effective spirit allies because they had exceptional vision, and could transcend the worlds of the sky, the land, and the sea below.⁷ OBS harpoon heads are often carved to resemble birds (Figure 5).⁸ The carving style on the plug is similar to the style seen on harpoon equipment, suggesting that this plug was part of the group of tools associated with harpoon hunting and bird imagery. A diving seabird would be an especially appropriate animal to evoke in a drag float, as they dive beneath the water, but must always resurface.

Decoration of hunting equipment was important to the success of the hunt, as the Yup'ik believed animals preferred being killed by beautiful weapons.⁹ The dotted lines on this OBS plug may represent spiritually significant rhythmic patterns from songs or dances.¹⁰ Or they might depict the stitched seams in animal skin clothing that protected bodies from the cold air and water, and kept skin boats and floats airtight.¹¹ The concentric circle motif known as *ellam iinga* in Yup'ik, prevalent on both OBS and Yup'ik material, has been interpreted by scholars and Yup'ik elders to mean "eye of awareness" and is connected with spiritual sight and passage of animals and spirits between worlds.¹²¹³ This plug has two large *ellam iinga* that seem to represent eyes, and another set of five smaller *ellam iinga* placed strategically around the figure. Five is a sacred number in Yup'ik cosmology, representing the degrees of separation between worlds.¹⁴ *Ellam iinga* often adorn OBS hunting weapons, and perhaps were meant as "all-seeing eyes that guide the harpoon to its prey."¹⁵ The plug also has cavities at the "eyes," "nostrils," and at its base that may have been inlaid with spiritually potent material.¹⁶

Figures



Figure 1. Plug, Unknown artist, Old Bering Sea II, St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, Fenimore Museum, T0588.



Figure 2. Fluted Plug, Unknown artist, Punuk, Provenance Unknown, Princeton University Art Museum, 1998-494. Published in Crowell and Fitzhugh, *Gifts From the Ancestors* (2009).

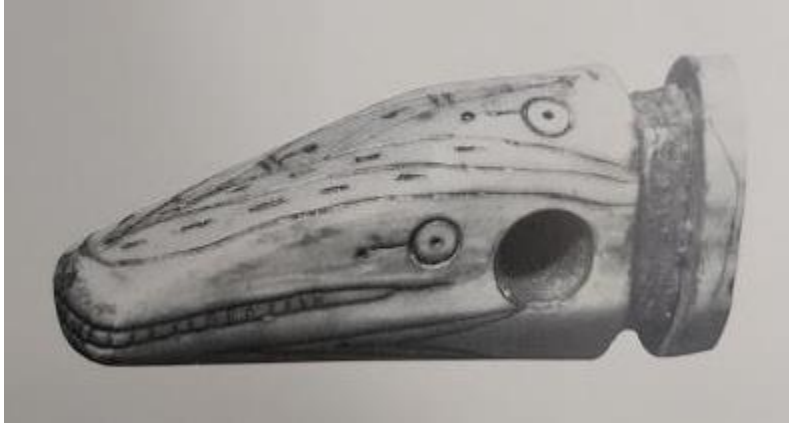


Figure 3. Plug representing a duck and a toothed beast, Unknown artist, Punuk, Provenance unknown, Published in Wardwell (1986) p. 110.



Figure 4a and 4b. Wooden Plugs, Unknown artist(s), 19th century, Port Clarence, AK, AMNH 60 / 1549 A-H and 60 / 1550 A-F.



Figure 5. Harpoon Head, Unknown artist, OBS II, St. Lawrence Island, Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, A347940.

¹Robert Ackerman, "Prehistory of the Asian Eskimo zone," in Damas, D. *Handbook of North American Indians, vol. 5, the Arctic* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1984), 106; Aron Crowell and William Fitzhugh, "Ancestors and Ivories," in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of Bering Strait* (Princeton University Art Museum, 2009) 31.

² Crowell and Fitzhugh, "Ancestors and Ivories" 24.

³I will include the Yup'ik words for the tools here, though these objects probably had different names in the OBS period. All Yup'ik terms are taken from the glossary in Ann Fienup-Riordan's *Yuungnaqpiallerput/ the Way We Genuinely Live*.

⁴ Sergei A. Arutiunov, "The Eskimo Harpoon," in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of Bering Strait* (Princeton University Art Museum, 2009) 52.

⁵ Crowell and Fitzhugh, "Ancestors and Ivories," p 31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁷ Ann Fienup-Riordan, *Boundaries and Passages: Rule and Ritual in Yup'ik Eskimo Oral Tradition* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1995) 129-130.

⁸ “Harpoon Head” Alaska Native Collections, Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center, accessed October 05, 2017, <http://alaska.si.edu/record.asp?id=492>.

⁹ Crowell and Fitzhugh, *Crossroads of Continents*, 123.

¹⁰ Sergei A. Arutiunov, “The Enigma of Ancient Bering Strait Art,” in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of Bering Strait* (Princeton University Art Museum, 2009) 133.

¹¹ Mikhail M. Bronshtein, “Early Eskimo Art from Ekven and Bering Strait,” in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of Bering Strait* (Princeton University Art Museum, 2009) 155.

¹² William Fitzhugh, “Eagles, Beasts, and Gods” in *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of Bering Strait* (Princeton University Art Museum, 2009) 170

¹³ Fienup-Riordan, *The Way We Genuinely Live*, 79, and “Earrings with Necklace: Design,” Alaska Native Collections, Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center, accessed December 15, 2015, <http://alaska.si.edu/record.asp?id=348>.

¹⁴ Fienup-Riordan, “The Mask: Eye of the Dance” p 53.

¹⁵ Fitzhugh, “Eagles, Beasts, and Gods” 170.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

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