

## Ivory socket piece with a combination of engraving styles, 50.5 cm



Bruce White photos

This socket piece has a diamond-shaped cross-section (1.3 x 2 cm) with a 2-3 mm flat edge between the recessed area and the butt end. The socket end is 2 x 2 cm, and the socket is 1 cm in diameter and 0.5 cm deep.

The curvature occurred after the object was carved from a tusk that was not sufficiently aged. There was obviously no curvature initially but this developed as the ivory dried, making its further use for hunting purposes impossible.

Unusually long and rather thin (“flattened”) socket pieces such as this are very rare. The initial intention of the carver was often not to make a socket piece but rather a long spear end used to finish off a harpooned whale, or a long, strong foreshaft that was attached directly to the wooden harpoon shaft without use of an intermediary socket piece. In either case the spear end or foreshaft had a good probability of breaking, but the prospect of capturing a large right whale would make such a risk worth taking. If the object broke while it was being made and the carver saw that it could no longer be the 60-70 cm length required for the intended spear end or foreshaft, he could use it instead to make a long socket piece such as this. The two undecorated concave areas on opposite edges (centered 13.5 cm from the socket end) suggest that this object may have been intended originally as a spear end rather than a foreshaft, since spears of this type usually carried flint side-blades in recesses such as these (Sergei Arutiunov, personal communication).

However, it is also possible that this object was originally carved as a socket piece. Note the close similarity with the 21 cm Punuk socket piece for a child’s “training harpoon” shown below, and that also has a “flattened” diamond-shaped cross-section and recessed areas centered 4.5 cm from the socket end (in both cases these recesses account for 21-27% of the total length).



The unusual diamond-shaped cross section is also seen in a Birnik bag handle.



The decoration on the 50 cm socket piece has been commented upon as follows by Mikhail Bronshtein: “From my point of view its decoration consists of the ornamental motifs which are typical for different cultural traditions - from Okvik and OBS I [fine double lines with “teeth” on inside] to Birnik [single lines with large angled extensions on outside]. Many patterns could be defined as OBS II [concentric ovals with “tooth” decoration on outside] and Ipiutak [dot and circle motifs with 2, 4 and 6/8 outside spokes]. I risk assuming that the socket piece was made rather early when various ornamental traditions would not take their final shapes. From the other side, this ornamental style could be a local version typical for an isolated group of the ancient Eskimos of the Bering Strait region.” (Mikhail Bronshtein, personal communication; additional description in brackets by RM).