

Ipiutak ivory carving of a loon with its head turned back, 10.3 cm



Bruce White photos

This carving is characteristic of the figures from the original Point Hope Ipiutak site, including the surface weathering typical of objects from the burials (as compared to the houses; Larsen and Rainey, 1948). The deep round eye sockets were most likely originally inlaid with ivory and/or jet. This carving is from one of the Ipiutak sites around the Imuruk Basin, Southeast of Teller. Note that there is a small hole in the midline behind the eyes on the top of the loon head, and that when turned upside down (figure above right) it is clear that another animal (bird?) head is represented, with large deep eye sockets on each side behind which is another small hole, and a depression in the front that is the remnant of a mouth.

The small hole behind the eyes on both sides of this figure most probably represents the pineal gland (also known as the “third eye”). Though in humans and other large mammals it is located in the midline deep in the brain, in birds and reptiles it is centered on top of the brain just beneath the skull (and in the tuatara actually protrudes through a hole in the skull and has the appearance of a crude eye). The pineal is the source of the hormone melatonin that regulates circadian rhythms, and in birds it contains photoreceptor cells that are sensitive to light that passes through the skull. In birds and some other animals the pineal also contains magnetic material, and there is evidence that it is involved in bird navigation. The Eskimos are very familiar with the anatomy of the animals that they consume as food, so it is quite likely that the small holes shown behind the eyes on both sides of this figure represent their observation of the pineal gland.

This unusual piece is particularly interesting in view of the special significance of the loon in Ipiutak culture, as reflected in the many ivory carvings representing loon heads that were found in Point Hope graves (Larsen and Rainey, 1948, Pl. 69, Figs. 2-8; Pl. 70, Figs. 9-11; Pl. 72, Figs. 5-6). Loons were also the most common guardian spirits of shamans among the Yakut and the northern Tungus in Siberia, and wooden figures representing loons surmounted the four posts on the grave of a Tungus shaman who died around 1800 (Jochelson, 1926, p. 228 and Pl. 14; see below). Perhaps most interesting in relation to this carving is the loon skull with artificial eyes found in a Point Hope grave (Larsen and Rainey, 1948, p. 120 and Pl. 49, Fig. 7; see below). Like the artificial eyes found in human skulls at Point Hope, these are made of ivory with inlaid jet pupils, and are cylindrical with a narrow groove encircling the front portion. The possible ethnographic significance of such objects is discussed by Morrow and Volkman (1975).

Literature:

- Jochelson, W. (1926): *The Yukaghir and the Yukaghirized Tungus*, Memoir of the American Museum of Natural History, Vol. 9, Brill, Leiden.
- Larsen, H. and Rainey, F. (1948): *Ipiutak and the Arctic Whale Hunting Culture*, Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, New York.
- Morrow, P. and Volkman, T.A. (1975): The loon with the ivory eyes - A study in symbolic archaeology, *J. Am. Folklore*, 88:143-150.



Elevated grave of a Tungus shaman (from Jochelson, 1926, Pl. 14)



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Loon's skull set with ivory eyes and jet inlay pupils (7), and polished ivory cylinder found with the loon's skull (8). From Larsen and Rainey, 1948, Pl. 49.