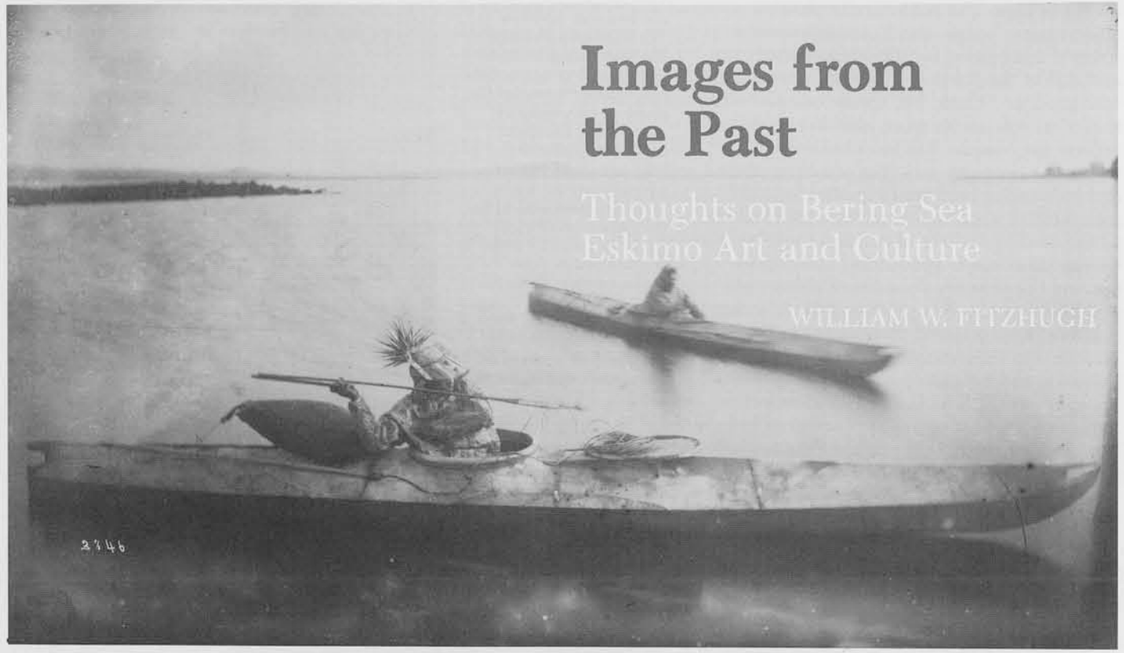


Images from the Past

Thoughts on Bering Sea Eskimo Art and Culture

WILLIAM W. FITZHUGH

Nearly fifty years ago Henry B. Collins completed his now-classic study on the last 2000 years of Eskimo prehistory in the Bering Strait region of Alaska (Collins 1937). Excavating stratified middens on St. Lawrence Island, Collins discovered highly ornamented bone and ivory artifacts in the deepest parts of the middens. Above them were levels containing similar but less decorated objects, enabling Collins to define a 2000-year sequence beginning with highly ornate implements representing the Old Bering Sea and Okvik Eskimo cultures, and leading to the ethnographic period. However, the sequence did not illustrate the usual gradual elaboration of form and style; it was one of gradual streamlining and simplification, leading Collins to remark:

> . . . recent excavations in northern Alaska have thrown considerable light on the problems of Eskimo prehistory, but they have by no means provided the final solutions thereto. They have revealed an ancient Eskimo culture which is seen to have been ancestral to the existing phases, and yet, paradoxically enough, this Old Bering Sea culture is in many respects a more highly developed, a more specialized Eskimo culture than any other known. This can only mean that we must extend our search still farther into the past if we are to find the simple beginnings of this old culture and presumably, therefore, of Eskimo culture generally. (1937:383)

Today, archaeologists interested in Eskimo cultural origins and northern adaptations are excavating in Siberia, Alaska, Canada, and Greenland. As a result of these efforts, new information has come to light concerning the Okvik and Old Bering Sea cultures; a new culture referred to as Ipiutak and dated to A.D. 200–600 has been discovered in Alaska (Larsen and Rainey 1948); and other cultures have been identified across the North American Arctic and Greenland.

For the purposes of this paper prehistoric Eskimo cultures are divided into two traditions—Palaeoeskimo and Neoeskimo (Fig. 2). In addition, the Arctic region inhabited by Eskimos is separated into the western Arctic (eastern Siberia and Alaska east to the Mackenzie River) and the eastern Arctic (the Mackenzie River east across Arctic Canada and encompassing Greenland); see map on p. 4.

The western Palaeoeskimo tradition is tentatively dated between 4000 and 1000 years ago and is represented by six cultures: Denbigh, Choris, Norton, Okvik, Old Bering Sea, and Ipiutak. Denbigh, Choris, and Norton remains consist largely of stone and some ceramic materials; few organic implements have been preserved. Old Bering Sea, Okvik, and Ipiutak implements include quantities of organic remains as well as stone tools. Their bone and ivory hunting weapons and utensils are frequently decorated with elaborate carvings and engravings of animals and fanciful beasts. Many of these are shown with lifelines and skeletal motifs, and are in the act of capturing or devouring prey, or being transformed from some real or imaginary creature into another.

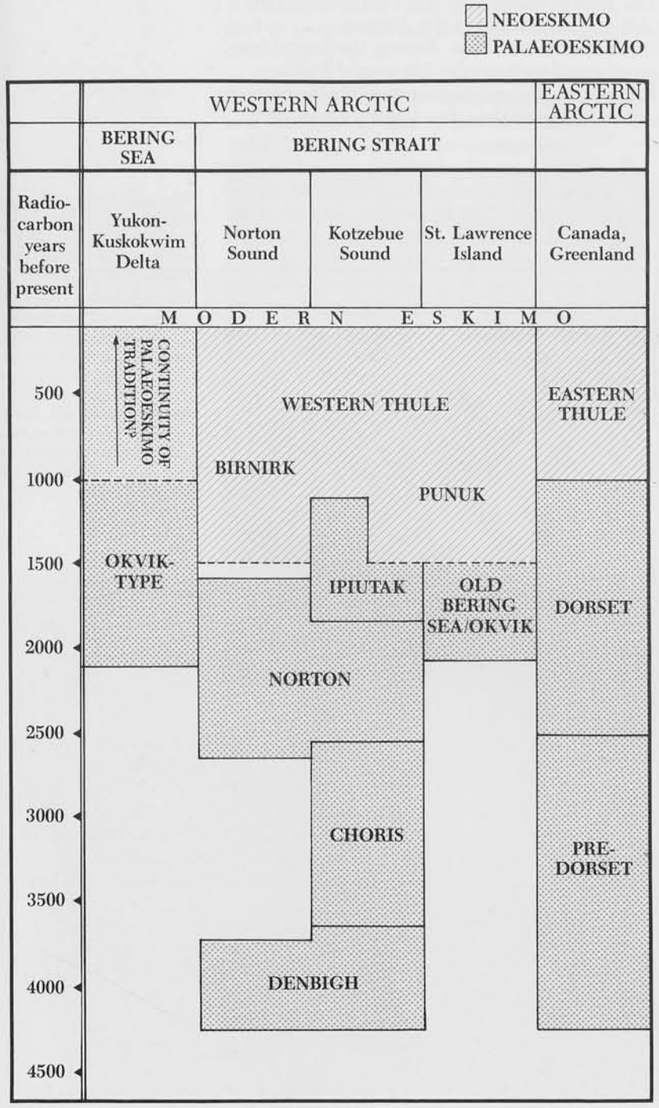
The eastern Arctic was first occupied by Palaeoeskimo people approximately 4000 years ago. Two major cultures, Pre-Dorset and Dorset, have been identified in Canada and Greenland. Few organic Pre-Dorset tools have been found, and one piece will be discussed later in this paper. Dorset implements dating between 2500 and 1000 years ago share many attributes with tools made in the western Arctic during that time. Small bone, ivory, and soapstone carvings, including maskettes (miniature masks), and stylized and realistic polar bears, seals, and falcons have been recovered. These pieces often carry skeletal or x-ray designs that may be variants of the western Arctic lifeline or spiritline motif. Despite many differences between western and eastern Palaeoeskimo traditions, there are common threads in subject matter, in style, and in artifact function suggesting a common ancestry.

The more recent cultural tradition has been called Neoeskimo because of its close connection to modern cultures and ways of life. The nature of the origins and evolution of Neoeskimo traditions in the western Arctic remain frustratingly unclear. For the purposes of this paper, the Neoeskimo tradition in Alaska begins about 1500 years ago, represented by the bone, ivory, and stone implements of the Punuk and Birnirk cultures. Thule Eskimos, descendants of Punuk and Birnirk Eskimos, swept east across north Alaska to Canada and Greenland approximately 1000 years ago.

Throughout most regions of north Alaska, Canada, and Greenland many aspects of

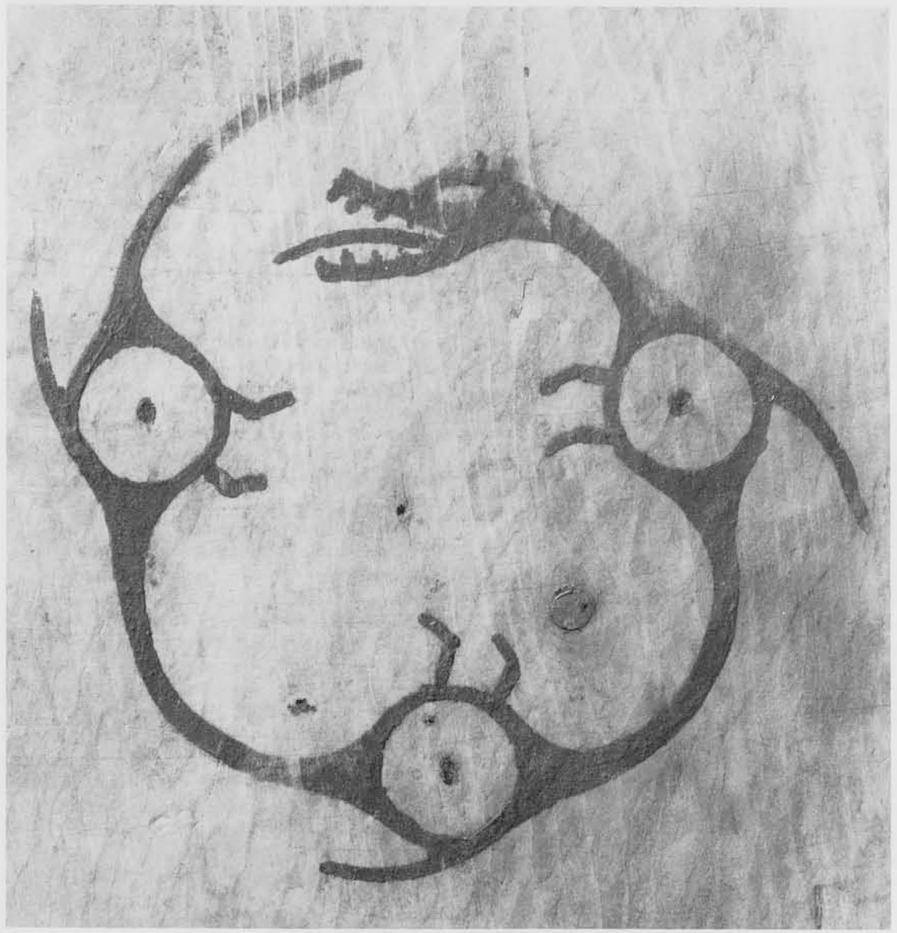
1
Norton Sound seal hunter with sealing harpoon, floatboard and float, dressed in a gutskin parka and ornamented visor. (E. W. Nelson photograph, Smithsonian neg. 3846)

2
Culture history of western Alaska and Canada.



Palaeoeskimo art and technology disappeared or became of little importance during the Neoeskimo period. Neoeskimo hunting implements are not as intricately decorated as Palaeoeskimo weapons, and animal figures do not occur as functional parts of the hunting magic system but rather are stock figures. Engraved decorations—primarily geometric motifs composed of dashed lines, Y-motifs, nucleated circles, and ticking—are used to outline and ornament artifacts rather than to create lifelike beings that serve as the *carriers* of an object's function. In comparison with Palaeoeskimo art, Neoeskimo work appears lifeless and stiff. In the more recent periods, Neoeskimo artifacts display little decoration and are quite simplified, following the sequence noted by Collins. These changes in style and in the relationship between art and material culture undoubtedly reflect important changes in economy, society, and religion; they should not be viewed simply as functionally isolated trends in the history of Eskimo art.

In this article I compare aspects of Palaeoeskimo cultures with the 19th century Bering Sea Eskimo culture of western Alaska. The ethnographic data used in this study come from collections and observations made by naturalist Edward William Nelson for the Smithsonian Institution between 1877 and 1881 (Nelson 1899). Re-examination of Nelson's data suggests that a previously unrecognized sea mammal hunting complex played a key role in the spiritual life of the peoples of this region. The artistic elements of this 19th century complex are reminiscent of the Alaskan Palaeoeskimo tradition. Among the Bering Sea people, and perhaps the Aleuts and Pacific Eskimos, these traditions apparently have continued, whereas they disappeared about 1000



3
Palraiyuk design on a wooden serving tray. Note multiple stomachs, spines and legs, and a dragon-like mouth. (Mission 45494, tray 14.5 cm.)

years ago elsewhere in the Arctic. Explaining their persistence into the 20th century south of Bering Strait is an intriguing problem.

Bering Sea Eskimo Life

Hunting at sea was the most dangerous and yet the most important economic activity pursued by a 19th century Bering Sea Eskimo man. The livelihood of a hunter's family as well as the man's standing in the community depended on the hunter's success with the harpoon and dart. From childhood, a young man was instructed in ways to make and prepare his hunting equipment so that it would be both mechanically and spiritually effective. Also, he had to receive and learn special hunting spells and songs (Fig. 1).

First, spiritually acceptable raw materials had to be obtained to fashion into weapons and boats. Once materials were at hand, careful design and craftsmanship were required in producing the finished articles, for people believed that the *inuas*, the spirits of animals, were pleased by well-crafted, beautiful things. Indeed, a sure way of displeasing the *inuas* and attracting the vengeance of the *tunghât*, the powerful spirit-controllers, was to fail to observe customary hunting beliefs and rituals. For instance, Nelson frequently noted the prohibition in northern Norton Sound against using iron axes, points, or knives to kill or butcher white whales. Use of iron rather than stone was thought to profane man's relationship with these important animals and could result in death. Spiritual obligations and taboos extended beyond the hunter himself to include his wife and family, who participated in making the kayak, the hunter's clothes, and in observing rituals before, during, and after the hunt.

Without question the hunter's most important possession was his kayak. As the principal vehicle for water transportation, the kayak was given special attention during construction and while in use. Images of the *palraiyuk*, a multi-legged sea and marsh creature known to prey upon people and boats (Fig. 3), were sometimes painted on boats. These images served as charms, protecting the hunters from *palraiyuk* attacks.

In addition to *palraiyuk* images, a kayak usually carried two carved face plaques (Fig. 4 a,b). One, a male (smiling), was lashed on the left inside of the cockpit; the other, a female (frowning), was lashed on the right. Smiles and frowns, respectively, denote male and female gender in Bering Sea Eskimo art. Nelson did not learn the meaning of these plaques, which probably were charms of some sort. Similar 'moon-face' images appear on many other types of artifacts, suggesting that the faces may represent male and female *tunghât*, deities whose residence on the moon may have inspired this imagery. Similar face charms are found on opposite sides of kayak frame sternpieces, again with the male on the left and the female on the right. These carvings were invisible under the skin cover of the kayak. The same charm faces are found on the handles of a pair of kayak paddles from Kushunuk. Although there is never-ending amusement and speculation on the meaning of the female

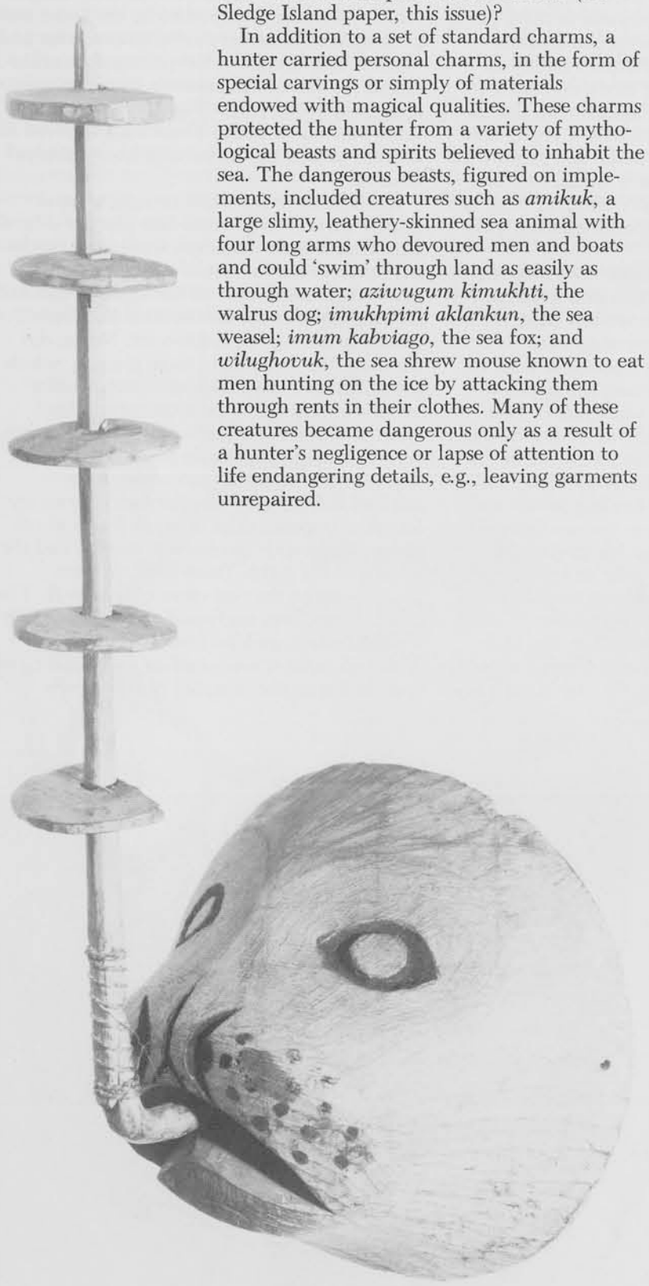
4a, b
Wooden plaques showing goggled (masked) images of a frowning woman with chin tattoos and a smiling man were mounted with the male on the hunter's left and the female on his right inside the kayak cockpit. Such images, perhaps depicting male and female *tunghât* or other spirits, are common forms and seem to have served as protective charms. (Nunivak Island 340373a,b, both 17 cm.)

frown, it is interesting to note that this image is nearly an exact replication of a seal's face (Fig. 5). Is there a special relationship between the spirits of women and seals that has given rise to this symbolism, as there is between whales and women in Inupiak-Eskimo culture (see Sledge Island paper, this issue)?

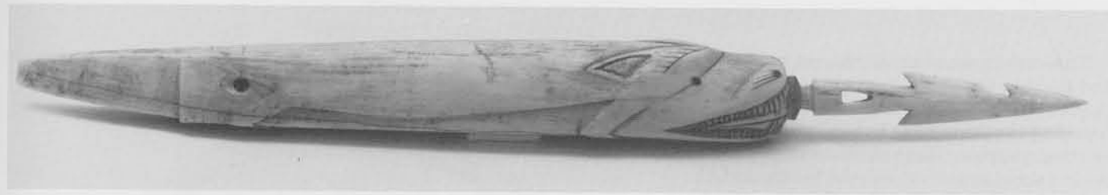
In addition to a set of standard charms, a hunter carried personal charms, in the form of special carvings or simply of materials endowed with magical qualities. These charms protected the hunter from a variety of mythological beasts and spirits believed to inhabit the sea. The dangerous beasts, figured on implements, included creatures such as *amikuk*, a large slimy, leathery-skinned sea animal with four long arms who devoured men and boats and could 'swim' through land as easily as through water; *aziwugum kimukhti*, the walrus dog; *imukhpimi aklankun*, the sea weasel; *imum kabviago*, the sea fox; and *wilughovuk*, the sea shrew mouse known to eat men hunting on the ice by attacking them through rents in their clothes. Many of these creatures became dangerous only as a result of a hunter's negligence or lapse of attention to life endangering details, e.g., leaving garments unrepaired.

Another set of beliefs involved the use of spirit-helpers who are represented on hunters' weapons, specifically on harpoon gear. The spirit-helpers take the form of animal effigy carvings on ivory or bone harpoon parts, float-boards, boat hooks, tool and weapon storage boxes, and other equipment (Fitzhugh and Kaplan 1982:60–73). Animal images may represent the hunter's intended quarry, an animal with particular meaning to an individual hunter, or a creature known to be a swift and cunning hunter. These animals are often shown with lifelines, joint marks, and multiple pairs of legs. Perhaps the most remarkable artifacts displaying predator-prey imagery are the carved socketpieces from the Nunivak Island-Cape Vancouver region depicting spirit-helpers in the forms of wolves, land otters, ermine, and other expert hunters (Fig. 6).

Visors and helmets, worn by kayak hunters to protect their eyes from glare, contain elements of female imagery and spirit-helper themes. In Norton Sound, open-topped visors were made of driftwood ornamented with old-squaw and cormorant feathers (Fig. 7). Visor brims were fitted with ivory carvings of walrus, gulls, and cormorant heads, and with effigies of seals, wolves, or land otters – all effective sea predators with the exception of the wolf, whose connection with the sea was through its transformational ally, the killer whale, the paramount marine predator. Visors were encircled with red 'lifeline' grooves. Around Cape Vancouver conical bentwood hunting helmets were common. A specimen



5
Dance mask, worn on the forehead, showing a seal exhaling as it rises into a breathing hole. Note the similarity to the female face in Fig. 4. (Lower Yukon 33115, 11 cm. head diameter)



6
Seal dart socketpiece and point with a carving of a predator (wolf?) helping spirit. (Lower Kuskokwim 38442, 22 cm.)

discussed but not illustrated by Nelson had red phallic images that "had a certain significance connected with the religious beliefs of the people, which I failed to ascertain" (Nelson 1899:167). Phallic paintings also were found on the pair of Kushunuk paddles mentioned above, and female sexual emblems were used as marks on detachable lance points in this region.

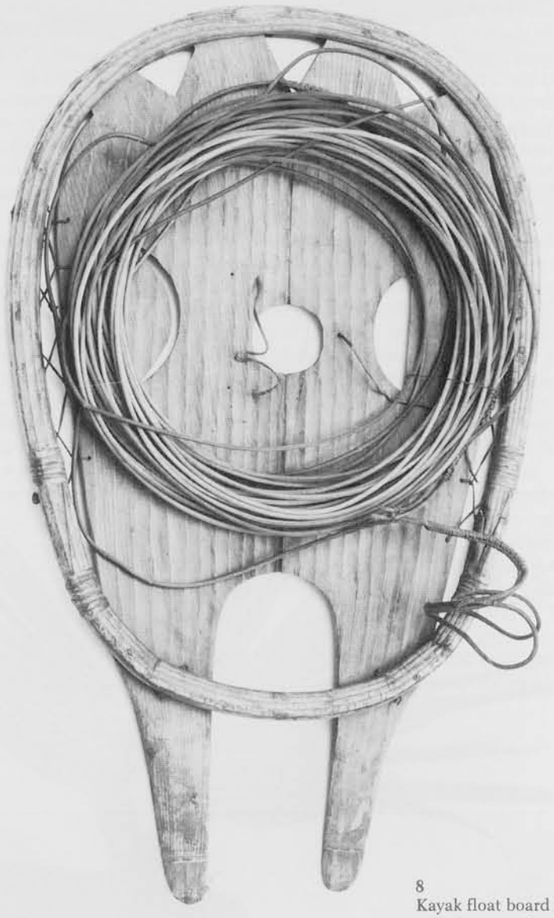
7
Lower Yukon hunting visor ornamented with red life-line grooves, oldsquaw and cormorant feathers set into grass hoop, and ivory walrus and gulls' heads. (Pastolik 176207, 35 cm. long)

These examples of kayak charms, marks, and insignia reveal a consistent pattern of human sexuality in the ritual system surrounding the Bering Sea Eskimo sea mammal hunting complex. These motifs and the beliefs behind them appear to link the hunter and his wife in a spiritual union in sea hunting activities. The presence of anthropomorphic sea otter charms in Aleut kayaks suggests that a similar ritual system existed in the Aleutians as well.

A final aspect of the sea mammal hunting complex involves the Bladder Festival, performed on a yearly basis to renew the supply of sea mammals, especially seals. Bering Sea Eskimos believed that the spirits of animals resided in the animals' bladders. In 1879 Nelson observed a Bladder Festival in Kushunuk, in which the dried bladders of the seals caught the previous year were inflated, painted with red and white spots, and hung from the rafters of the *qasgiq*, or men's house. In the presence of kayak paddles, visors, disarmed weapons, effigies of gulls, and the fragrance of burning *Angelica* (wild celery), and after much singing and chanting, the bladders were removed from the *qasgiq*. They were then pierced and sunk through a hole in the sea ice. In this way the spirits of the captured seals were released to find new bodies and be reborn.

In this festival one finds symbolic reference to many aspects of the hunting complex described above. Chief among them is the representation of circular interfaces separating changed states of being: the central hole of the kayak in which the hunter sits, bordered by lunar spirit face charms; his harpoon float board (Fig. 8) with its central hole and bordering crescent cutouts depicting lunar symbols and passageways between earth and sky; images of the breathing hole through which seals are caught in winter and bladders are sunk; and the circular entrance and smokehole of the *qasgiq* through which the bladders pass on their transformation journeys from sea to house and from house to sea. By these visual cues and through specified rituals, Bering Sea Eskimos honored and propitiated the spirits of *tunghât* and *inuas* that were vital to human existence and that gave spiritual and social meaning to people's lives.

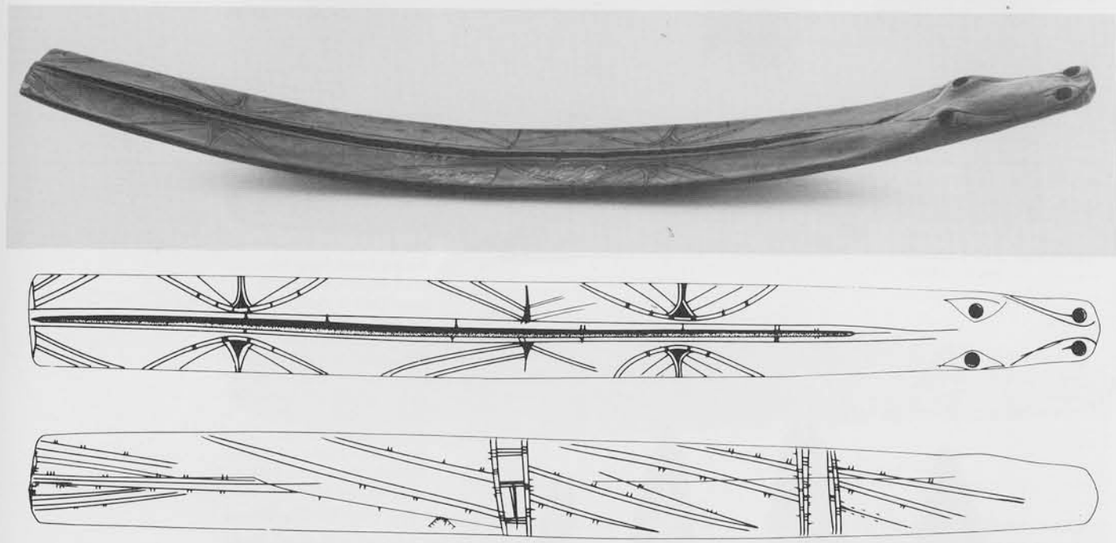
The foregoing has presented various materials and social aspects of a suggested sea hunting complex as far as it can be determined from incomplete 19th century data. Although not described as such by ethnographers, analysis of 19th century ethnographic collections provides sufficient evidence to have some confidence in this reconstruction.



8
Kayak float board with cutouts suggesting multiple interpretations, including a seal breathing hole, *qasgiq* entrance and smoke holes, and the passage used by spirits moving between the skyworld and earth. (Probably Yukon-Kuskokwim T-14611, 62 cm.)

Bering Sea and Northwest Alaskan Eskimos

Throughout the 19th century and continuing today, there have been significant cultural and linguistic differences between Bering Sea and north Alaskan Eskimo peoples. The sea mammal hunting complex just described was absent in north Alaska, as were a variety of individual objects, such as beast-like quiver stiffeners, women's sewing bags, birdbone needlecases, girls' storyknives, engraved socketpieces, and detachable lance points. Further, the predator-prey images, spirit-helpers, and male-female motifs seen on Bering Sea Eskimo objects are absent on northern implements. The latter exhibit simple animal images and geometric designs. In addition to material culture, differences in mythology distinguish these two Eskimo groups. In the south, Raven was an important character, while in the north Loon, and Sedna the sea goddess, were major mythological figures. These distributional patterns usually divide neatly on either side of the Yupik-Inupiak language boundary in eastern Norton Sound (Fitzhugh and Kaplan 1982), suggesting important cultural differences between the people north and south of Norton Sound.



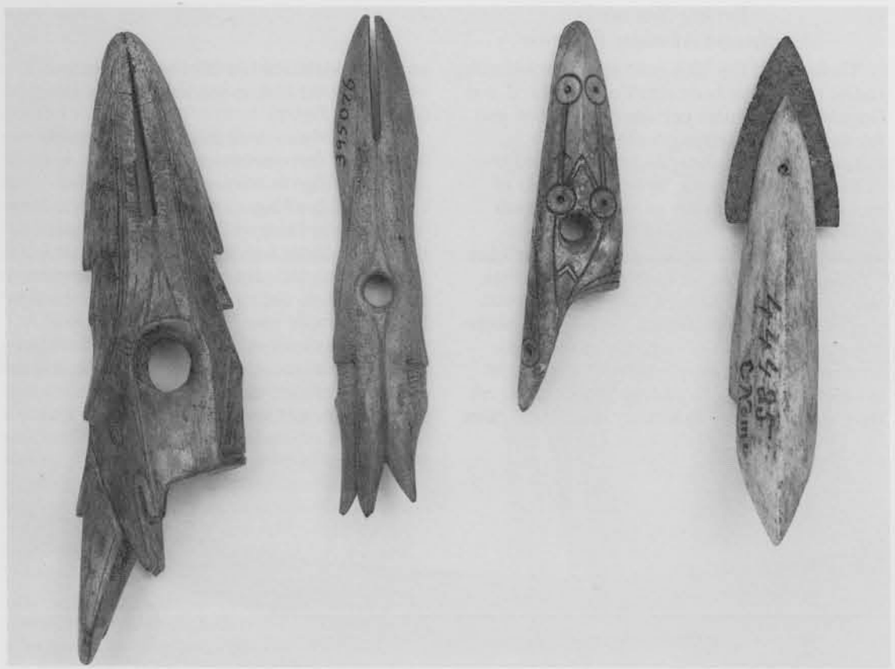
9a, b
Nelson's quiver stiffener from the Lower Kuskokwim, decorated with Okvik-like designs, pelvic girdles (joint marks?), vertebrae, and a beast-like head. Note similarity to socketpiece art and *palraiyuk* images. (Chalitmut 36396, 28 cm.)

Archaeological Considerations

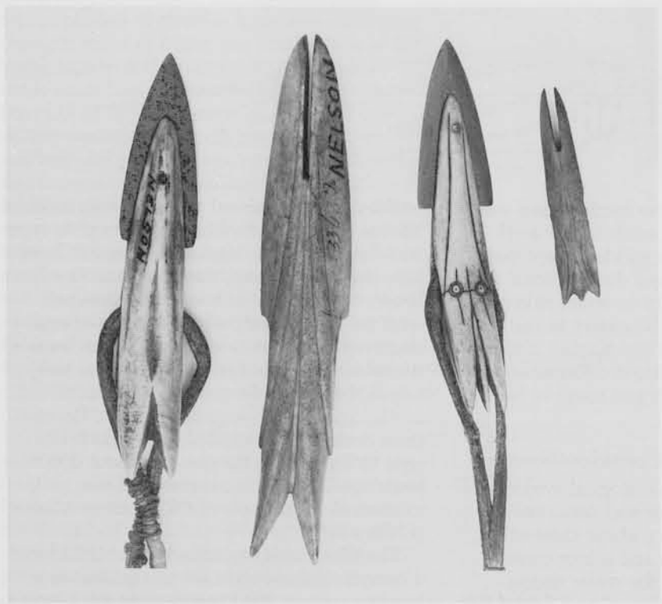
Searching for the archaeological evidence of Bering Sea Eskimo origins and development reveals how little is known about these subjects. Only a few surveys and minor excavations have been made in the entire region between eastern Norton Sound and Bristol Bay, and these data are too imprecise to throw much light on Bering Sea Eskimo prehistory (see chart, Fig. 2).

For one of the most informative artifacts bearing on this question, we turn to a specimen (Fig. 9) recovered by Nelson at Chalitmut, a village north of Kuskokwim Bay. The Eskimos from whom Nelson purchased this piece said it was so old "they knew not what it was made for." Nelson was also mystified and chose not to illustrate or describe it in his monograph. Many years later Henry B. Collins rediscovered the object in the Smithsonian Institution collections and identified it as a quiver stiffener, an artifact used to strengthen a soft leather quiver. In the 19th century, this implement was used only south of Norton Sound, and a fine specimen of its type was obtained at St. Michael by Lucien Turner. Like the Turner piece, the Chalitmut one has a beast's head carved at one end of the shaft with the beast's body and many sets of legs engraved down the side. This creature bears a resemblance to the Bering Sea Eskimo *palraiyuk*, but might be one of a number of mythological multi-legged creatures. Because these designs were applied in an Okvik-like style Collins dated the piece to about 2000 years ago. Even today, it stands as the southernmost example of Okvik art in Alaska (Collins 1959).

The Chalitmut find clearly established that a complex animal-style art was present in a hunting context 2000 years ago in the Lower



10a-d
Bering Strait harpoon head sequence showing trend (left to right), over the past 2000 years, from complex zoomorphic Old Bering Sea forms through progressively simpler Birnirk, Punuk, and 19th century forms. (Little Diomede Island 347940, 11.5 cm.; Cape Prince of Wales 395076, 10 cm.; St. Lawrence Island 371933, 8 cm.; Cape Nome 44485, 10.5 cm.)



11a-d
Nineteenth century Bering Sea Eskimo harpoon heads (with thongs) and archaeological specimens from Norton Sound showing incised decoration and multi-spurred bases reflecting Palaeoeskimo traditions. (Left to right: Cape Darby 44252, 10 cm.; Unalakleet 33632, 12.2 cm.; St. Michael 43448, 5 cm.; Lower Kuskokwim 176173, 8.8 cm.)

Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. Further, its similarity to ethnographic specimens from the same region suggested strong cultural continuity in artifact type and function, in design style, and in artistic treatment over a 2000-year period. Other evidence of continuity has come to light in recently excavated archaeological materials from a frozen site, dated ca. A.D. 900–1000, in the Lower Yukon Delta (Shaw 1982). The animal carvings, semi-human beast-like faces, small medallion-like masks, some with fur and feather implanted decoration, dated to A.D. 400–1000, form a thin chronological bridge between the Chalitmut artifact and aspects of 19th century Bering Sea Eskimo culture.

We do not have enough archaeological data from the Bering Sea coast to make comparisons at different prehistoric horizons. However, ethnographic Bering Sea Eskimo collections can be compared usefully with prehistoric collections from the Bering Strait region. When done, striking similarities are found with the Palaeoeskimo Okvik, Old Bering Sea, and Ipiutak cultures, and to a lesser extent with the Neoeskimo Punuk culture. The parallels between the archaeological and ethnographic collections are most obvious in harpoon head designs, hat ornaments, and carved and engraved socketpieces (Figs. 10, 11, 12). All the archaeological pieces have direct Bering Sea Eskimo analogs in form, function, design, and approach, and all are part of the spiritually based hunting complex described above. While one might discount some similarities in harpoon heads as being functionally determined, the chances of people with different traditions using what appear to be the same mythological spirit-helpers and beasts, in the same poses, and on nearly identical types of implements can hardly be attributed to chance. The imagery of beasts chasing and devouring other beasts and prey, the position of these images on the artifacts, and the intricate interweaving of design and function all suggest direct ancestry (Fig. 13).

These parallels even extend to the types of hats used, as seen on a small unprovenienced carving, probably from St. Lawrence or Punuk Island, that functioned, possibly, as a helmet crest ornament (Fig. 14). This faceless hunter is shown wearing a conical helmet with a charm image on its crest. The image is similar to Bering Strait and Bering Sea Eskimo 'open-chest' motifs (cf. Nelson 1899:Figure 150), and resembles the female sexual emblems on paddles, lances, and other hunting gear. This carving suggests strong connections to southern regions, perhaps even with ethnographic Pacific and Aleut cultures where crest figurines occur on hunting helmets.

12a, b
Old Bering Sea (top) and Bering Sea Eskimo ivory hunting hat ornaments depicting predator helping spirits. Similar ornaments were used by Ipiutak hunters. (St. Lawrence Island 371978, 9 cm.; Lower Yukon, Sabotnisky 49014, 19 cm.)

Beyond the area of the sea hunting complex, there are many other links between Bering Sea Eskimo and late Palaeoeskimo art in western Alaska. Animal effigy art is elegantly expressed in Ipiutak in its use of effigy head 'soul-catchers' or 'sucking tubes' (Fig. 15), bird head effigy hat ornaments, and other emblematic representations. Correspondence is also seen in multi-spurred Ipiutak and Birnirk harpoon heads and in animal effigy knife handles common in these collections and in Punuk as well.

Looking farther afield, we have previously noted similarities in the shamanistic art of eastern and western Arctic Palaeoeskimo cultures. Many of these same parallels also exist between Dorset and Bering Sea Eskimo art: skeletal and lifeline renditions, including windpipe 'ladder' motifs, joint marks, beast-like teeth, and caribou hoof effigies. Despite the chronological and geographical distances

13
Persistence of ancient hunting magic is indicated by toothy predator helping spirits on this Old Bering Sea harpoon socketpiece and on ones used by Bering Sea Eskimos (Fig. 6). The use of this image continued on 20th century socketpieces and then became a popular figure for engraved tusks made for sale by Nunivak Islanders. (St. Lawrence Island 378054, 19 cm.)

involved, there are more similarities between the Palaeoeskimo Dorset art of the eastern Arctic and modern Bering Sea Eskimo art forms than between the art of Dorset and its successor, Thule (Figs. 16, 17).

This last observation raises the oft-noted problem of Dorset connections to the west. Most Dorset art comes from the middle and late periods of that culture, from A.D. 300–1000. Its earlier development is not known, due to the absence of organic preservation in earlier sites. However, since there are important differences, also, between Dorset and Okvik-Old Bering Sea-Ipiutak art, these similarities probably result from earlier connections. Western Arctic influence is thought to have had some role in the Pre-Dorset/Dorset transition in the eastern Arctic, between 1000–500 B.C. Perhaps the similarities noted above stem from this period or, possibly, from the first peopling of the eastern Arctic 4000–3000 years ago. In this regard, one of the few specimens of Pre-Dorset art (Fig. 18) has a design reminiscent of the 'bent-leg' creatures found on Bering Sea Eskimo wedges, needlecases, and storyknives (Figs. 19, 20). This artifact from Banks Island in the western Canadian Arctic, although possibly being one of the earliest known examples of Eskimo art, has similarities so striking that one wonders about its attribution and dating.

Although this survey of prehistoric art has been brief and incomplete, it demonstrates the considerable similarities among the artistic traditions of various Palaeoeskimo cultures in the North American Arctic. From present evidence it appears likely that the earliest groups moving into the eastern Arctic carried with them religious and artistic notions that had developed in early Palaeoeskimo cultures in the Bering Sea or North Pacific region more than 4000 years ago. This group of concepts came to be expressed in a distinctive artistic treatment of material culture using religious and mythological imagery in a variety of ways, but especially as animal spirit-helpers on implements associated with hunting activities. It is probably from this base, within the context of a relatively productive and stable northern Pacific-Bering Sea maritime adaptation, that the basic features of Palaeoeskimo culture developed.

The appearance of Neoeskimo cultures, with their different artistic and religious traditions, brought an end to this spiritually-based Palaeoeskimo art tradition in most areas of the North American Arctic. Only along the Alaska Bering Sea coast and in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta did this tradition survive into later times.

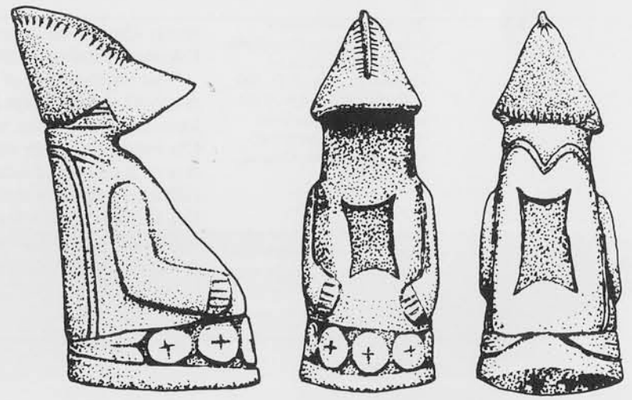
Palaeoeskimo Survival

Rather than tread farther out on this particular patch of thin ice, I would like to venture in another direction, toward a possible explanation for the persistence of Palaeoeskimo art and religion in Bering Sea Eskimo culture. What factors might have been important in preserving these traditions in this particular region? Two, geography and ecology, are worthy of special consideration. Even in the late 18th and 19th centuries, Bering Sea Eskimos were isolated from contact with Europeans longer than were Aleuts or Eskimos of the North Pacific, Bering Strait, and north Alaska. This was why Nelson found the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta so rich in traditional culture. The reasons for this isolation have to do with the shallowness of the Bering Sea which made it difficult for European ships to approach the coast; the absence of stocks of commercially-exploitable whales and walrus; and the limited scale of a land-based European-Eskimo fur trade. The lowland region of the Bering Sea coast, including the Lower Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, is where, during the 19th century, elements of the Palaeoeskimo art tradition occurred most abundantly. Although these traditions were practiced further south as well, it is in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region that they were best documented.

Today this area continues to be one of the most isolated parts of Alaska. Its people, many of whom still have only limited contact outside their villages and who still predominantly speak only Yupik, subsist to a large degree off

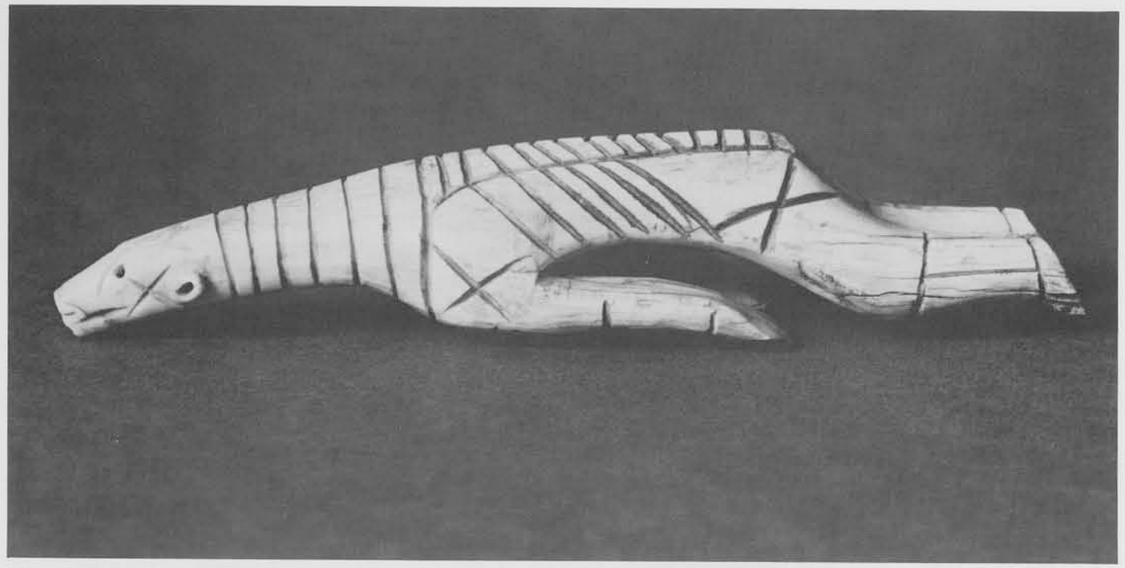
resources of the sea and tundra. These resources include huge fish and migratory bird reserves, but also seals, walrus, beluga (white whales), and many varieties of land mammals and plant foods (Ager 1982). Their subsistence base is larger and more stable, both in terms of annual and multi-year fluctuations, than that of Eskimos living in Bering Strait and northern Alaska. This wealth of resources has created the economic base for a largely sedentary existence in semi-permanent villages near productive fishing locations.

One of the important consequences of these factors—ecological abundance, efficient technology, and food storage capabilities—was that the Eskimo population in this area was larger than it was in other regions of Alaska. The extension of the arctic environment inland nearly to the head of the Delta allowed Bering Sea Eskimos to establish villages not only on the coast, as they had elsewhere in Alaska, but also up the salmon- and whitefish-laden rivers and into hundreds of square miles of food-rich tundra lakes, sloughs, and marsh environments. According to Petrov's census, in 1880 the area between northern Norton Sound and southern Kuskokwim Bay supported more than 12,000 Eskimos, while that of Bering Strait and



14
Bering Strait figurine showing faceless kayak hunter wearing visor with emblem resembling sexual motifs on Bering Sea Eskimo paddles and helmets, or 'open-chest' type depictions. (Private collection, 3.3 cm. tall)

15
Carved bone tube, perhaps a shaman's 'sucking tube' or 'soul catcher,' from an Ipiutak grave. The carving resembles socketpiece helping spirits; note windpipe/lifeline with 'ladder' motif. (Point Hope, American Museum of Natural History 60.1-7453, 38.9 cm.)



16
'Flying' or 'swimming' polar bear from Dorset site at Alarnerk, northern Hudson Bay, ca. A.D. 500, with skeletal design, joint marks, and ocher-filled throat cavity. (National Museum of Man, Ottawa, 15.6 cm.)

17
Bering Sea Eskimo toggle depicting polar bear heads with marked jaws. (Norton Sound 33620, 12.6 cm.)

north Alaska was occupied by only 3000 Eskimos (Fitzhugh 1983: Appendix 2).

The implications of these territorial and demographic features have been largely overlooked in discussions of Eskimo culture history. Obviously the large size of the population was due to a successful adaptation to the region's rich and relatively stable ecology. In addition, this Eskimo population was structured differently than other Eskimo groups in North America. A great proportion of the Bering Sea Eskimos lived in geographically remote river

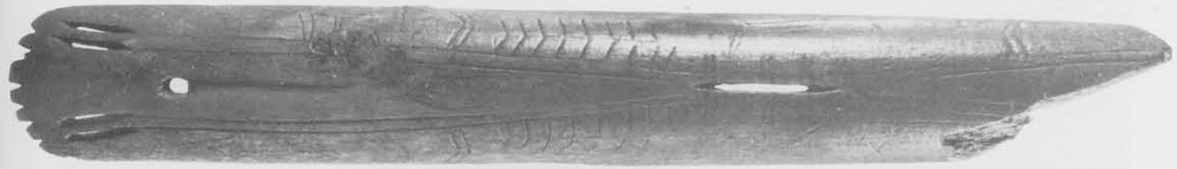
and tundra villages. They were isolated from the cross-currents of change emanating from the Bering Strait and North Pacific, where the hunting of large marine mammals (whale and walrus) was developing. Due to the absence of large marine mammals along their coastline, the Bering Sea people continued living as they had in the past, observing long-established subsistence patterns and ideas about religion, mythology and art. Today, no less than in the past, the Bering Sea Eskimos remain relatively isolated from the outside world and maintain a vast repository of traditional beliefs.

It is likely that the basic patterns of Bering Sea Eskimo culture were established long before Okvik and Old Bering Sea cultures came into being in Bering Strait. Nelson noted, for instance, that stories and images of the *palraiyuk* were common even in the most remote villages of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. One may safely presume that these ideas probably were not recent additions to the pantheon of beasts known to the carver of the Chalitmut quiver stiffener. More likely, their roots lie with the earlier but archaeologically unknown maritime cultures of the Bering Sea and adjacent North Pacific, perhaps even stemming from the original inhabitants of the submerging Bering Sea Land Bridge (cf. Laughlin 1963).

Whatever the origin of these early cultures, Siberia was probably the conduit for influences that began to affect this region about 2000 years ago. Most importantly, Asia is a possible source of the animal-style art in Old Bering Sea and Ipiutak cultures. In addition to similarities between Ipiutak and Scytho-Siberian art styles, parallels to Ipiutak death masks exist in the Shang dynasty (ca. 1800–1100 B.C.) of northern China (Collins 1971). Probably, also, the history of the *palraiyuk*, the large dragon-like beast of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, is linked with that of the oriental dragon.

New ideas could have been introduced through a chain of maritime contacts along the northwestern coast of the Pacific Ocean and

18
Fleshing tool from Pre-Dorset site at Umingmak, Banks Island, Northwestern Territories, Canada, showing engraved designs resembling bent-leg Bering Sea Eskimo designs. (National Museum of Man, Ottawa, U-10/114, 13.5 cm.)

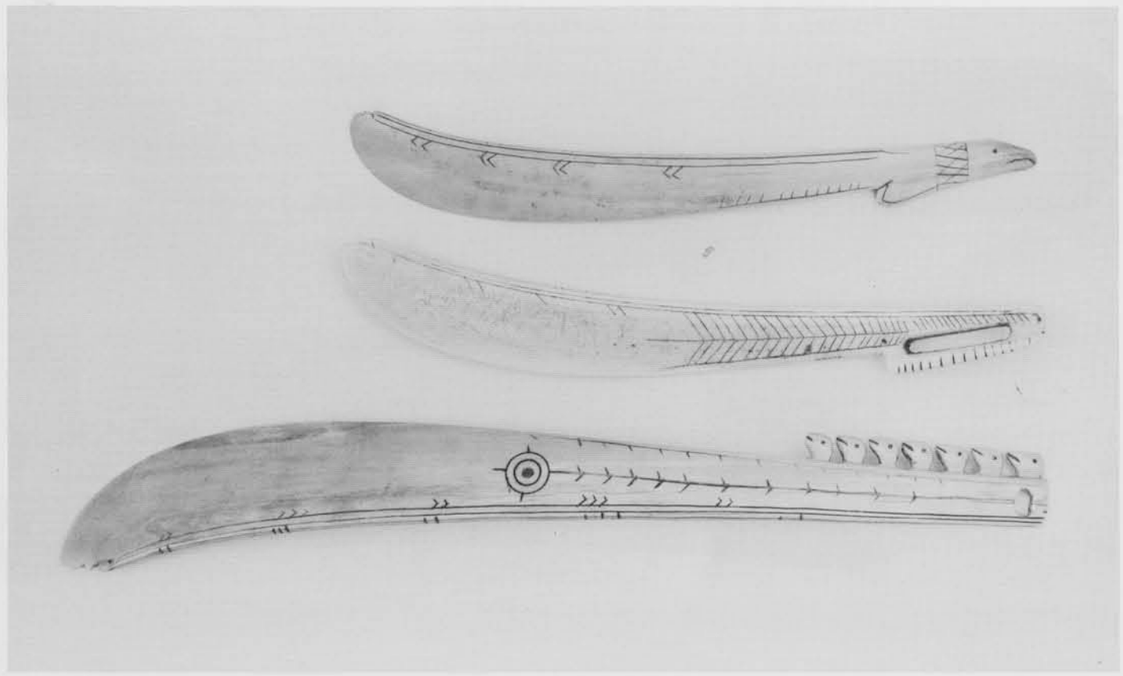


19
Skeletized Bering Sea Eskimo wood splint wedge with bent legs. The masked wedge creature is possibly a *tunghât*. (Cape Vancouver 43528, 19.5 cm.)

Bering Sea. These contacts would have become increasingly common with the eastward spread of iron through Siberia about 2000 years ago. The importance of iron in Okvik, Old Bering Sea, and Ipiutak cultures remains problematic, but it was certainly a key element in the Punuk period. At later times, at least by the 17th century, the impact of Siberian cultures on Alaskan Eskimos takes on historically documented substance with the establishment of the Siberian trade fair at Anadyr, the spread of reindeer nomadism into the Chukchi Peninsula, and the arrival of Chukchi peoples along coastal Siberia. These social and economic events resulted in increased trade, warfare, and raiding among all of the peoples of the Bering Strait region. The impact of these Siberian contacts has not yet been adequately studied, but the events produced an upheaval that is a common theme in Alaskan Eskimo oral histories dating to this period.

The increased contacts with Siberia beginning about 2000 years ago probably influenced the course of late Palaeoeskimo cultures in the Bering Strait region. The sudden decline of Palaeoeskimo traditions and the appearance of the Neoeskimo Punuk culture established a new course in cultural development in the northern part of the Eskimo realm. Punuk people seem not to have held many of the previous shamanistic and spiritual concepts and iconography associated with the earlier Palaeoeskimo art traditions, substituting new mythology and a functionally separate geometric decorative art style composed of straight lines and scrolls, drilled dots, and nucleated circles, all engraved with iron tools. Animals on Punuk implements were mostly in the form of decorative elements rather than being spiritual components of material culture. With the appearance of Punuk, probably, came the new more economically pragmatic and aggressive way of life that is frequently associated with northern Eskimo peoples today. Differences in social organization, mythology, and material culture between today's Inupiak- and

20a–c
Bering Sea Eskimo storyknives with bent-leg, vertebral, and skeletal designs. (Konigunugumut 36576, 36.5 cm.; 37285, 26.5 cm.; 37288, 25.5 cm.)



Yupik-speaking Eskimos may also have originated with the Punuk expansion.

The Punuk cultural tradition evolved into the Western Thule tradition. Thule Eskimos were whale hunters, some of whom expanded into the eastern Arctic, largely absorbing or displacing Palaeoeskimo peoples and their culture. Through diffusion and limited population infiltration, elements of Thule culture were introduced south along the Bering Sea Coast. However, here, Punuk and Thule influences were added to existing cultural traditions; they did not replace them. Owing to the large, stable, tradition-minded population of the Bering Sea region, and the absence of large whales to attract Eskimo whalers (or European whalers in later times), these northern influences were not overwhelming. Along the Bering Sea coast, the old spiritually-rich Palaeoeskimo way of life remained largely intact, with its traditions supported by ancient social, religious, and artistic values to the present day.

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Acknowledgments
I would like to thank Susan A. Kaplan for stimulating discussions and assistance in preparing this paper; Victor Krantz for printing illustrations, many of which were originally photographed by Joel Breger for the Smithsonian Institution's INUA exhibition catalog. Reuben Goldberg took the photograph appearing in Fig. 16. Line drawings were done by Jo Moore, Molly Ryan, and Martha Phillips; Annibal Roderiguez and the American Museum of Natural History permitted use of the Ipiutak illustrations; Robert McGhee of the National Museum of Man, Ottawa, provided the Umingmak flesher photograph. Secretarial assistance was provided by Marie Hantunen.