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# FIELDIANA: ANTHROPOLOGY

*A Continuation of the*

ANTHROPOLOGICAL SERIES

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FIELD MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

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# FIELDIANA

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### An Early Archaeological Example of Tattooing from Northwestern Alaska<sup>1</sup>

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Although examples of tattooing occur throughout much of Eskimo prehistory, they are sufficiently rare in the early phases so that it is worthwhile to call attention to a previously unpublished example. This paper concerns a pendant, possibly a shaman's amulet, in the form of a human head (figs. 1-4). It can be attributed with some certainty to a site of the Ipiutak period in northwestern Alaska.

The pendant in question was obtained in 1951 by Charles Lucier from Mrs. Elsie Sanders of Deering, a small village on the south shore of Kotzebue Sound. Here, in 1949, Helge Larsen discovered and excavated a large house which, on the basis of the excavated material and a radiocarbon date ( $973 \pm 170$ ), he ascribed to the Ipiutak culture. At that time, the type site for the Ipiutak period, located at Point Hope, was believed to date at about A.D. 1000. Later and more refined carbon 14 dating suggests that A.D. 340 is probably more correct (Rainey and Ralph, 1959, pp. 369-370). Nevertheless, excavations at the Deering house (considered by Larsen to have been a *qalgei*, or ceremonial house, because of its size and contents) in 1949 and 1950 resulted in the recovery of a large number of artifacts of wood and other perishable materials that can definitely be attributed to the Ipiutak culture (Larsen, 1951, pp. 83-88;

<sup>1</sup> For helpful comments and suggestions during the preparation of this paper, the authors are grateful to Dr. William E. Taylor, Jr., Director, Museum of Man, Ottawa, Canada. The photographs were taken by Dr. Frederick Hadleigh West, Department of Anthropology Alaska Methodist University. Mr. Zbigniew T. Jastrzebski, Department of Exhibition, Field Museum of Natural History, made the line drawings.

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FIG. 1.

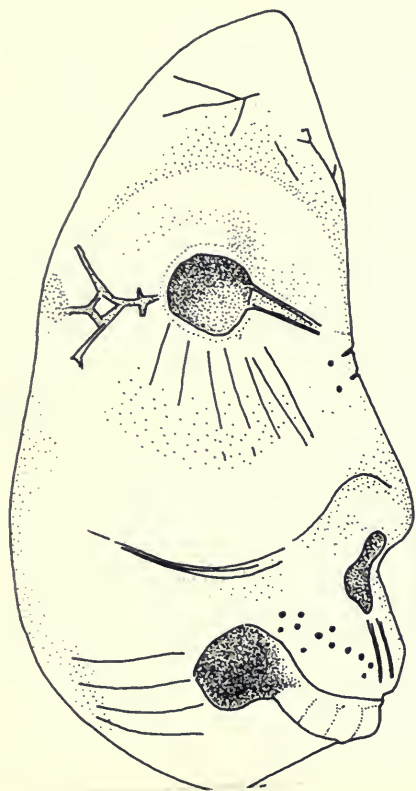


FIG. 2.

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FIG. 1.

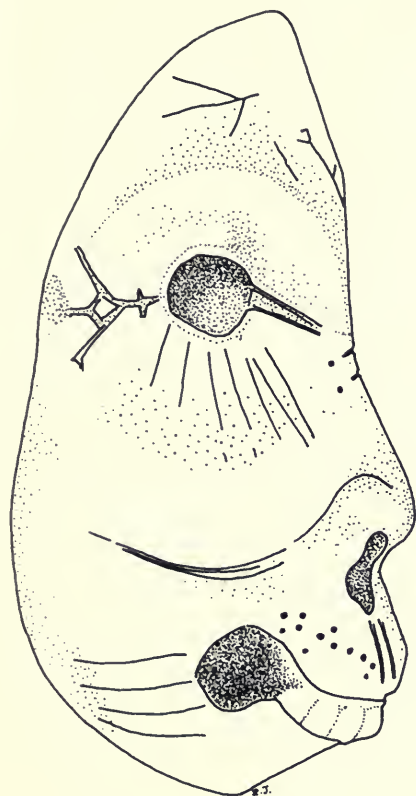


FIG. 2.

1953, pp. 604-605). The artifact that is the subject of this paper was found by Mrs. Sanders' son, Frank Wayne Wittie, in the immediate vicinity of the *qalgei* excavated by Larsen. It is presumed, on stylistic grounds and proximity of location, to have come from this structure.

The Deering Ipiutak pendant, which is 5 cm. high and 2.5 cm. in width at its widest point, is made of antler; the unworked reverse is slightly concave.<sup>1</sup> The grain of the antler shows clearly, and at the top a narrow slot has been cut for suspension. On the obverse is carved a human face in profile, a rare orientation in prehistoric Eskimo art. The forehead comes to a point while the lower part of the face is slightly prognathic. Around the eye is a concave area and an eyebrow is clearly indicated. An eye socket, 6 mm. wide and 3 mm. deep, apparently contained an inset of

<sup>1</sup> The authors wish to express their appreciation to Mr. A. C. Coleman, Coleman Dental Laboratory, Anchorage, Alaska, who made a mold in which reproductions of the pendant were cast for study. Mr. Richard Pearson and Mr. Roger Lyngklip, Department of Exhibition, Field Museum of Natural History, prepared the casts.



FIG. 3.

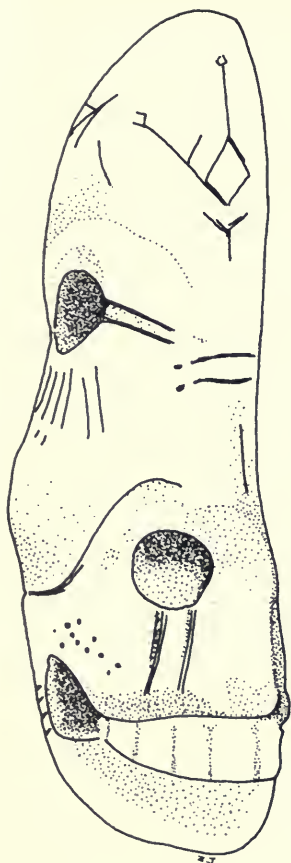


FIG. 4.

some material. Slightly smaller and shallower holes occur directly under the nose and at the corner of the mouth. The latter was almost certainly intended to contain a lateral labret. In historic times only men wore labrets in northwestern Alaska, but this need not necessarily have been the case at the time the pendant was carved.

The features of the Deering pendant are augmented with a number of incised linear designs, nearly all of which are interpreted as facial tattoo patterns. Above the eyebrow and over the bridge of the nose close to the edge of the specimen is an elaborate series of engravings which include lines with spurs, a round puncture, and two diamond-shaped designs. Almost directly above the eye is a single line with a short, slanting spur extending from each side.

The eye itself has seven parallel lines radiating downward from the lower rim, a pair of converging lines extending toward the nose, and a

series of lines and spurs on the opposite side. Across the bridge of the nose are two horizontal, parallel lines with a small, round puncture at each end; a vertical line extends from the tip of the nose to the parallel lines. Starting at the nostrils, a long line extends downward in a curve, serving to delineate the cheek. The hole which forms a nostril has two parallel lines extending vertically downward, while the labret hole has four near-parallel lines extending outward from the mouth. On the lower lip are five short notches which presumably indicate teeth, and on the upper lip two rows of small punctures, possibly representing moustache hairs.

Ethnographically, tattooing was known to all Eskimos and was most common among women. Designs usually consisted of a series of vertical lines extending from the lower lip to the chin (Murdoch, 1892, pp. 138-140; Nelson, 1899, pp. 50-52; Birket-Smith, 1959, p. 119). During the nineteenth century in the Deering region, however, four lines were tattooed on both cheeks of a man who had killed another man in battle. More rarely, a male shaman was tattooed in a similar fashion although not necessarily because he had killed a person. These marks were believed to protect the tattooed individual from revenge by the murdered person's spirit; women were never tattooed in this manner (unpublished notes of Charles Lucier from Buckland River Eskimos, 1950, Andrew Sunno, informant).

The archaeological distribution of tattooing is considerable, both in space and time, and designs were much more varied. Of particular interest in the present context are examples from the Dorset culture in the central and eastern Canadian arctic, the Okvik collections from St. Lawrence Island and the Ipiutak culture along the coast of mainland Alaska.

A characteristic feature of facial tattoo patterns on carvings of the Dorset culture (800 B.C.-A.D. 1300) is parallel incised lines, particularly in a horizontal position. Although the Dorset period was a long one, much of the art that has been reported from numerous sites in both the central and eastern Canadian arctic belongs to the Middle Dorset phase which has been dated at approximately A.D. 500. A wooden mask recovered from the Button Point site on Bylot Island appears to have two sets of four slanting, parallel lines on the chin (Taylor, 1971-1972, p. 37), and similar designs occur on one of 28 human faces carved on a caribou antler from a site on the island of Abverdjar in the northern part of Foxe Basin (Rowley, 1940, p. 493, fig. 1b; Meldgaard, 1960, fig. 25a, p. 43). A small maskette of soapstone from the Iglulik area has an arrangement of parallel lines on both cheeks (Meldgaard, 1960, fig. 27, p. 43).



Taylor (Taylor and Swinton, 1967, p. 40) has noted certain similarities between the art of the Dorset period and that of the Okvik and Ipiutak (both approximately A.D. 300) cultures in Alaska. This would appear to be particularly true with reference to facial tattoo patterns resembling those on the Deering pendant. An ornamental attachment of ivory from the Okvik site has three parallel engraved lines on the upper lip under the nose (Rainey, 1941, pp. 516-517, fig. 24, no. 5), while vertical lines under the eyes occur on a flat, mask-like object of ivory and on two fragmentary carved human figures of the same material (Rainey, 1941, pp. 526-527; fig. 29, no. 4, pp. 528-529, fig. 30, nos. 1, 8). Other presumed tattoo patterns found on carved human figures from the Okvik site include rows of punctures across the cheeks and parallel engraved lines in various combinations.

Incised lines that have been interpreted as tattooing occur as part of schematic facial designs engraved on antler tubes recovered from the Point Hope Ipiutak site (Larsen and Rainey, 1948, text figures 28a-c, 29) and on carved human heads of antler, bone, and ivory (pl. 25, figs. 1, 3-4; pl. 52, figs. 1, 3). The patterns vary, but cheek lines are a consistent element. If there are several lines, they are always parallel and horizontal. One schematic face (fig. 28b) and one carved head of bone (pl. 25, fig. 4) particularly resemble the Deering Ipiutak pendant in having short, parallel lines extending from the corners of the mouth.

Anthropomorphic carvings in the Point Hope Ipiutak collection have been interpreted as shamanistic paraphernalia by Larsen and Rainey (1948, p. 124), and all could represent males. Two (Larsen and Rainey, 1948, pl. 52, figs. 1, 3) appear to have been associated with male burials. In one case, a skeleton in the grave was that of a male, and both graves contained harpoon heads, arrow points, flint flakers, and other artifacts associated with male activities (Larsen and Rainey, 1948, pp. 240-241). As suggested earlier, the face portrayed on the Deering pendant is probably that of a man, and the specimen itself an amulet representing the spirit of a shaman. Both the interpretations of Larsen and Rainey and the provenience of two of the Point Hope Ipiutak carvings reinforce this suggestion.

As far as the basic design elements are concerned, it is apparent that the facial tattoo patterns which occur on the Deering pendant are quite similar to those of the Dorset, Okvik, and Ipiutak horizons. The patterns on the Deering specimen are certainly as elaborate as any from the Point Hope site, and more so than most of the examples illustrated by Larsen and Rainey. They are far more elaborate than any illustrated Dorset or

Okvik specimens, particularly in the combined use of short lines, punctures, and spurs.

In addition to the facial tattoo patterns, another distinctive feature of the Deering pendant is the realism with which the human face has been portrayed. Such portraiture is extremely rare in Alaskan Eskimo art from any prehistoric era and is unique for the Ipiutak period at Deering. The pendant was known to the children at Deering as "Ben Ahgupuk" because of its close resemblance to the features of a local resident who, in 1951, was in his twenties. Lucier has verified the fact that Mr. Ahgupuk's profile did indeed resemble the features on the pendant. Such a likeness recalls the similarity noted between the features of modern Maya Indians of the Yucatan Peninsula and representatives of the ancient Maya as depicted in their pictorial art (Morley, 1956, pp. 21, 23, pl. 8). It is one piece of evidence for the continuity of physical inheritance at Deering over a period of more than 1000 years.

If the Deering pendant was indeed recovered from the *qalgei* excavated by Larsen, which appears to be very likely, then it might not be as old as most of the stylistically related specimens that have been mentioned here. The dating of the Deering site, however, cannot be considered as definitely established, and from a cultural standpoint it is clearly Ipiutak. Thus the Deering pendant may qualify as one of the oldest known examples of Eskimo tattooing and realistic portraiture in Alaska. Certainly it is unique in being the only carved human face with tattoo patterns from an Ipiutak site other than the one at Point Hope.

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