

THE QUESTION OF A UNIFIED BIRNIRK-PUNUK ARTISTIC TRADITION IN THE ESKIMO ART OF CHUKOTKA¹

E. S. Sukhorukova

State Museum of Oriental Art, Moscow

Abstract: The Birnirk and early Punuk cultural traditions flourished on the eastern shore of early Chukotka between the fourth and tenth centuries A.D. Most archaeologists believe that several archaeological cultures—Old Bering Sea, Okvik, Birnirk, and Punuk existed in the coastal regions of the Chukchi Peninsula at this time. Recently, K. A. Dneprovsky (2001) has promoted a thesis that emphasizes the unity of ancient Eskimo cultures in Chukotka. Contrary to earlier accepted ideas of Old Bering Sea, Birnirk, and Punuk as independent archaeological cultures, Dneprovsky (2001:23) proposes viewing them as different cultural traditions within the framework of a single Eskimo culture—“the common features in Old Bering Sea, Birnirk, and Punuk clearly prevail over the differences.”

Keywords: Bering Strait archaeology, Siberian Yupik art, Eskimo iconography

Background

Recent discoveries from 1987 to 2002, obtained by the Chukotka Archaeological Expedition of the State Museum of Oriental Art, permit a substantial revision of our ideas about the Birnirk and Punuk period. The inventory from Ekven House H-18 is especially significant because it seems that it was occupied only a few decades at most (Bronshstein and Dneprovsky 2001:589-590).² Following a detailed analysis, Bronshstein and Dneprovsky (2001:591) concluded that House H-18, had a Birnirk-Punuk association, based on harpoon head types, graphic designs and the plastic forms of the artifacts. Comparative analysis of materials from the house with burials from the Ekven and Uelen cemeteries permitted Bronshstein and Dneprovsky (2001) to distinguish an entire series of closely related complexes, which reflect different stages in the evolution of the Birnirk-Punuk cultures (Bronshstein and Dneprovsky 2001:590–591; Dneprovsky 2001:16–18). Starting from these conclusions, several observations follow. Only detailed stylistic and iconographic analyses and a renewed search for analogies will allow archaeologists to discover authentic and potentially unique stylistic groupings, as well to refine the

archaeological classification of decorated artifacts during the first millennium A.D.

Seeing Commonalities Rather than Differences

Two massive harpoon heads of the Punuk type from House H-18 (Fig. 1:1, 2) offer unique characteristics, according to Bronshstein and Dneprovsky (2001:590), by “a rarely encountered design,” termed early Punuk. Two analogous heads were found in Burial 1 (57) of the Uelen cemetery (Arutyunov and Sergeev 1969:81, Fig. 24:9, 10). By comparing the specimens it is evident that the four were decorated in accord with a certain schema that produces the impression of a purposeful composition rather than a random design. Such compositions, abstract at first glance, also decorate the surface of a “winged object” and the head of a harpoon foreshaft from Ekven Burial 319 (Figs. 2:1; 1:4) as well as the head of a harpoon foreshaft from Uelen Burial 2 (Dikov 1967:56, Fig. 10:1). The design of the foreshaft from both burials, like the harpoon heads, was clearly executed in accordance with a certain schema. The

¹Translated by Richard Bland, edited by Owen K. Mason

²Several articles on Ekven by Dneprovsky and Bronshstein were published by the University of Oregon in 2002, duplicating some or all of the material in the Russian articles cited by the author. [Ed.]

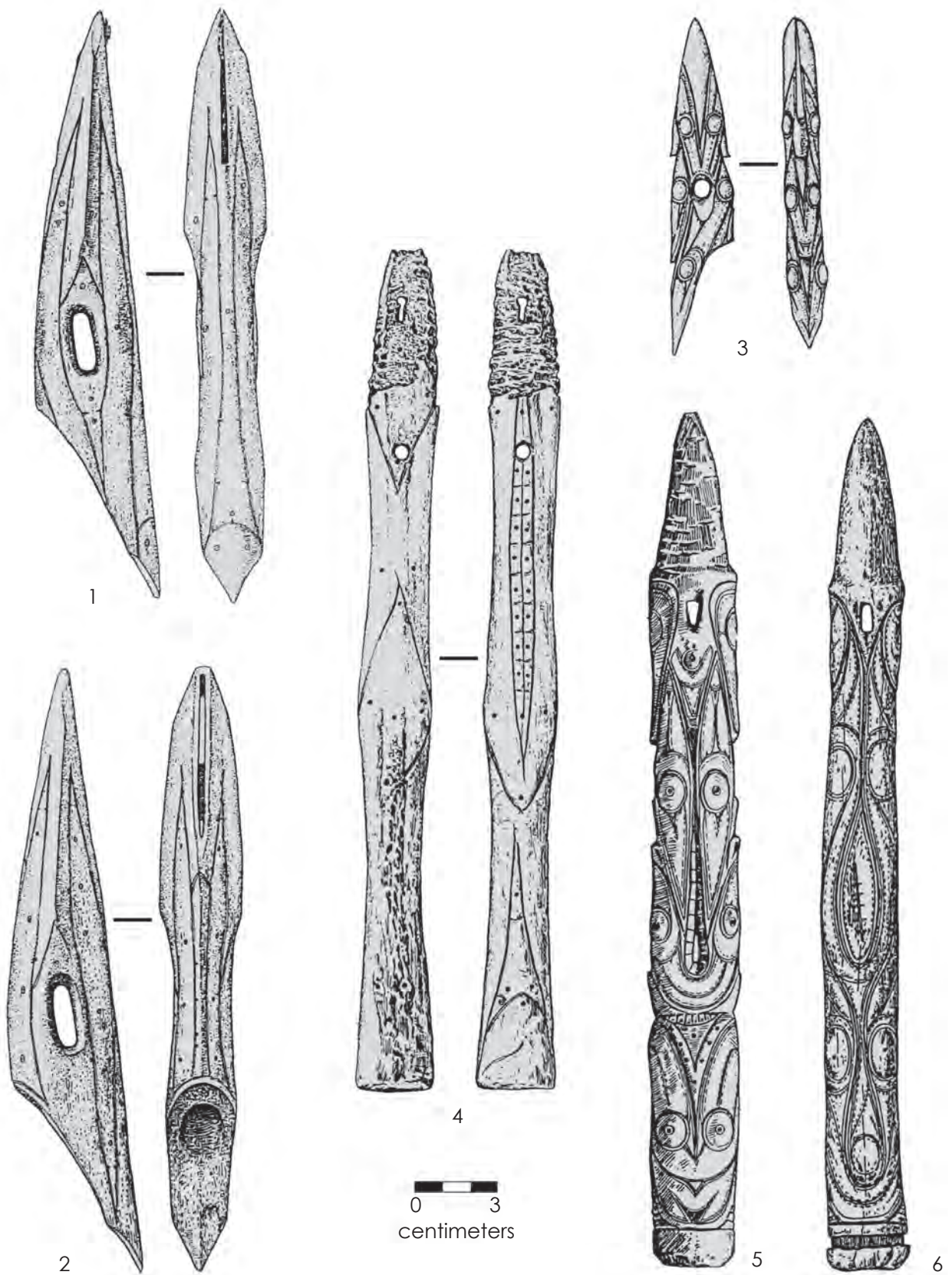


Figure 1. Harpoon heads and harpoon shaft heads. 1, 2. House H-18; 3-6. Ekven cemetery (3. surface material; 4. Burial 319; 5. Burial 9; 6. Burial 285A).

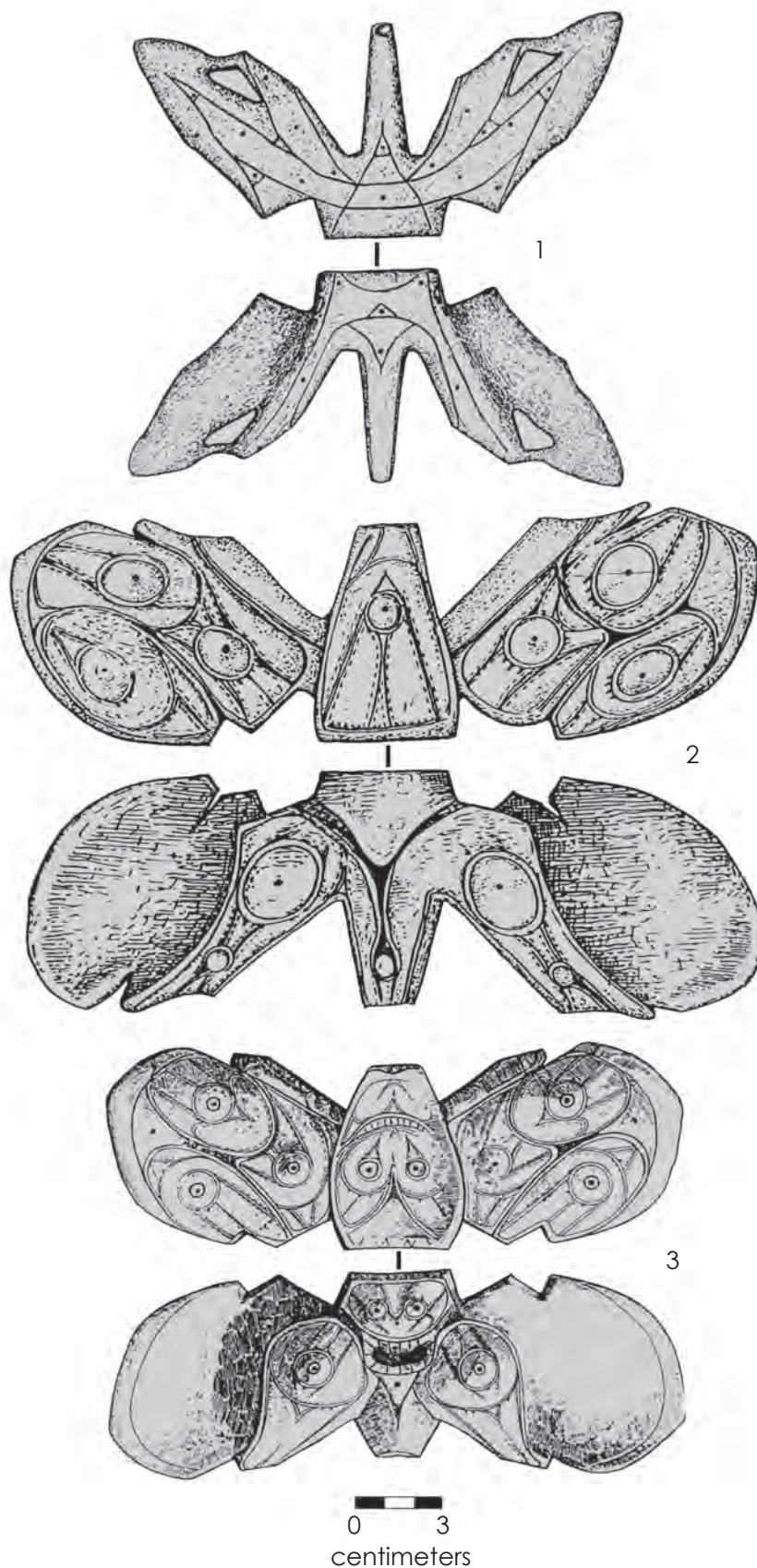


Figure 2. "Winged objects." Ekven cemetery. 1. Burial 319; 2. Burial 183-184; 3. Burial 9.

stylistic similarity of different artifacts that come from two different sites points to the presence of a common, long-lasting artistic tradition. This tradition can be characterized by a generalized correlation of plastic forms, with attention devoted primarily to the *form* of objects and not to the small decorative details. In distinction from Old Bering Sea, “early Punuk” artifacts have a single smooth and streamlined surface, not one divided into separate representational zones. The compositions are abstract, depicted by single engraved lines and drilled holes (in some cases, inlaid), and emphasized in low relief. Although, as noted, the objects suggest abstract designs, detailed analysis clearly establishes that these are compositions with a subject, analogous to Old Bering Sea, albeit one that is extremely simplified. Thus, comparing the early Punuk “winged object” from Burial 319 with specimens from Old Bering Sea burials (Fig. 2:2, 3) (Arutyunov and Sergeev 1975:121, Fig. 49:4; 137, Fig. 62:14) enable us to comprehend the meaning of the composition. On the one side of the wings the heads of sea mammals are recognizable while in the central part of the other side is a fantastic winged being (Sukhorukova 1998:71-72). Many other Old Bering Sea harpoon shaft heads decorated with complex zoomorphic compositions bear a subject similar to the specimens under examination. This is especially evident when compared with the animal or human figures that possess a characteristic design element provisionally termed a “grin” (Fig. 1:5, 6) (Arutyunov and Sergeev 1975:121, Fig. 49:5). The designs on large harpoon heads from Ekven House H-18 and Uelen Burial 1 (57) also show clear similarities with other widespread Old Bering Sea compositions (Fig. 1:3).

Thus, a distinctive feature of the artistic design of the artifacts examined is not a “rare variety of decoration,” but rather the absence of it. Evidently, for some unknown reason, complex graphic design lost its significance during the Birnirk/Punuk period. It would seem that this can hardly be explained as the loss of technical skills by craftsmen of the Birnirk-Punuk tradition---the artifacts examined still exhibit a high level of mastery of plastic (i.e., sculptural) techniques. An explanation for the paradigm shift from Old Bering Sea to Birnirk/Punuk may be inferred by several examples. The composition of the graphic design is even more simplified, on one harpoon head from Ekven House 18 (Fig. 1b); simplified and abstracted to the point that its subject has become nearly imperceptible. In addition, Ekven House 18 harpoon heads have typical Punuk elements that originate as small acute angles, receding from the lines. A similar pattern occurs in both the “winged object” from Burial 319 and the classic Punuk trident (Rudenko 1947:Pl. 29, Fig. 24). Apparently, the once obligatory subject canons of Old Bering Sea artists became the basis for new, purely decorative compositions in Birnirk/Punuk. Of course, it is

possible that the artifacts from Burial 319 and House H-18 characterize different stages of development of the Birnirk-Punuk art tradition.

In the inventory of Ekven Burial 319 the handle of a mattock with a relief image of a human figure was also found (Fig. 3:1). Dneprovsky (2001: 17, 22) notes that typologically, the mattock resembles most of the other wooden handles from House H-18, similar in form and size, but the subject of the design applied to the mattock and its technical execution are unique. Detailed stylistic analysis and the search for analogies do not permit me to agree with this point of view. At present, archaeologists do not have any analogy for the subject in the design of other mattocks, but it is possible to speak of the existence of an artistic tradition of representing human figures on handles. For example, one mattock-handle with images of human faces, unfortunately, badly preserved, was found in Uelen Burial 10 (59), which also contained artifacts with OBS-I decorations (Arutyunov and Sergeev 1969:180-181, Fig. 98:7). At Cape Krusenstern a handle with an image of two human faces and the figure of a person was found in House 4, considered Thule in affiliation (Giddings and Anderson 1986:Pl. 21:o). In general outline, the handle from Ekven Burial 319 shares a commonality in terms of style with the two artifacts, one from Uelen, one from Cape Krusenstern. As a matter of fact, the chief distinction of the Ekven piece consists of its representation of the design exclusively by plastic means. But this is not surprising, bearing in mind that the engraved compositions in the harpoon complex are not mere decoration but are actual subjects represented by designs. Very likely, the engraved lines and dots were employed to represent or supplement specific images. Seemingly, it was not a necessary distinction: a nude human figure is in itself remarkable. Old Bering Sea artifacts are well-known for anthropomorphic forms: typically, small figures or relief “visages” were placed on various objects, so that the similar relief image of a whole human figure looks rather original. Infrequent, but characteristic, representational analogs allow us to speak of this image as typical even in this case. More possibly, the use of anthropomorphic forms attests to an esoteric tradition solely based on transmitting of such forms in the Birnirk-Punuk culture. The image of the human figure on a ceramics paddle found in Ekven Burial 45 is characteristic (Fig. 3:3) (Arutyunov and Sergeev 1975:140, Fig. 65:6). Although many objects in this burial had OBS-III decorations, the design of the paddle closely resembles many specimens of the Birnirk-Punuk culture in that it is practically devoid of decoration; instead, raised relief “images” were added by engraved lines and hole punctuations. Another definitive anthropomorphic composition in relief can be found on a fragmentary artifact from the collection at the State Museum of Oriental Art, an object, unfortunately, found on the

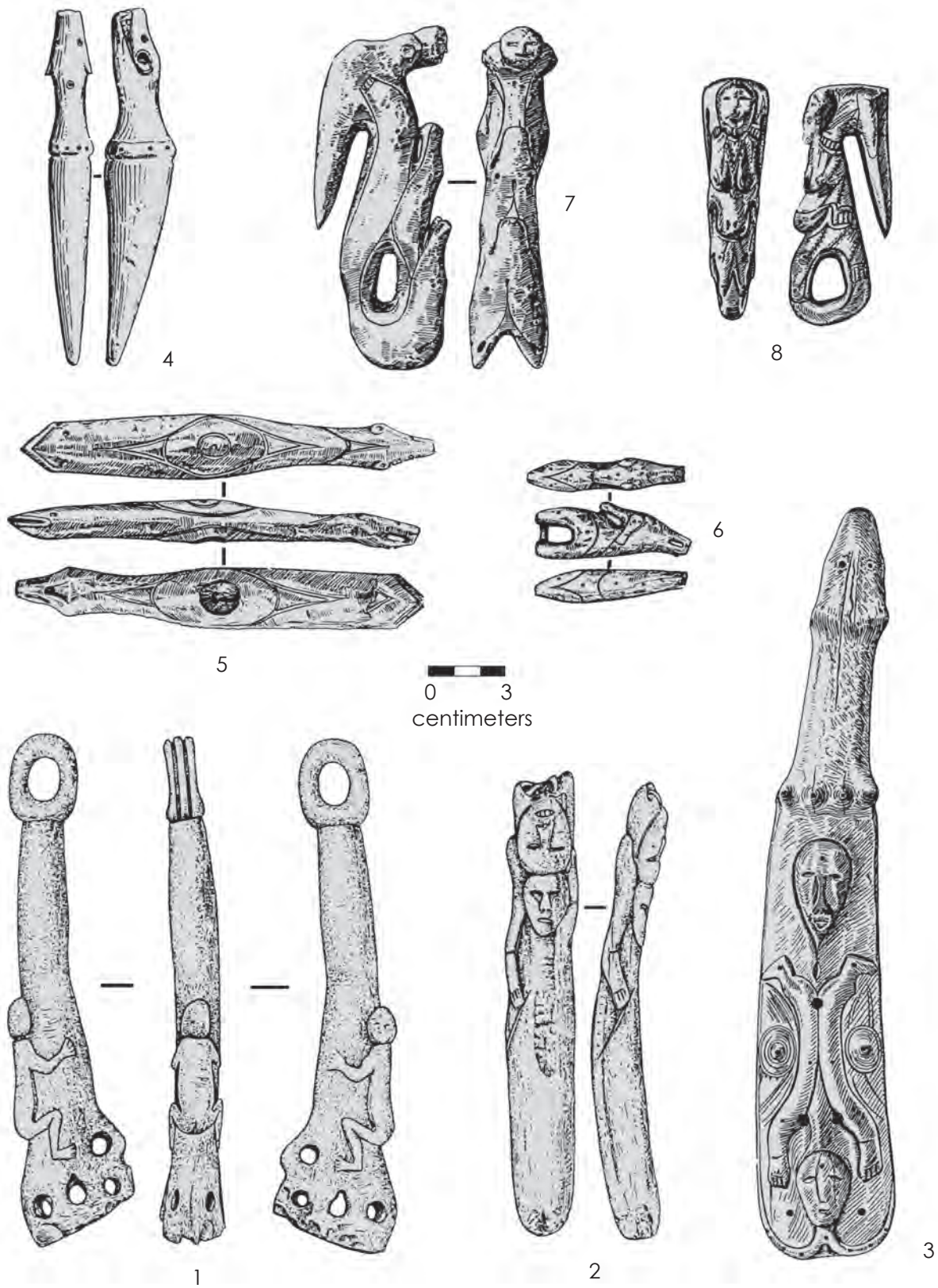


Figure 3. Artifacts with anthropomorphic and zoomorphic images. 2. Ekven Spit, surface material; 1, 3-8. Ekven cemetery (1. Burial 319; 3. Burial 45; 4. Burial 102; 5. Burial 52; 6. Burial 15; 7. Burial 99-100; 8. Burial 154).

surface in the vicinity of the Ekven barrier island (Fig. 3:2). This object bears an outlined visage in which the method of depicting the eyes, nose, mouth, arms, and hands coincides with the images on the handle of the mattock and on the stamp; this object may be confidently assigned to Birnirk-Punuk cultures.

A number of conclusions follow from the absence of decoration in the examined elements of the harpoon complex [i.e., foreshafts, harpoon heads, etc.], and of the heightened significance of plastic techniques in the artistic canon of the Birnirk-Punuk period. First, it permits one to link a considerable variety of artifacts into a single stylistic group. For example, several figurines, either of a polar bear or zoomorphic and anthropomorphic subjects can be grouped together in a single tradition rather than parts of OBS or Punuk, etc. (Fig. 3:4, 5, 7) (Arutyunov and Sergeev 1975:156, Fig. 79:7, 9; 155, Fig. 78:5).

The number of burials within the Ekven and Uelen cemeteries that are similar to Ekven House H-18 (Dneprovsky 2001:16–18) can be expanded to at least six graves. First, Ekven Burial 45, which contained the pottery paddle with the anthropomorphic image, was already discussed above. Birnirk-Punuk artifacts also occur within Burials 5, 15 (Fig. 3:6), and 17 of the Ekven cemetery (Arutyunov and Sergeev 1975:154, Fig. 77:18; 157, Fig. 80:1, 10) and Burials 7 (58) and 13 (58) of the Uelen cemetery (Arutyunov and Sergeev 1969:99, Fig. 42:9; 178, Fig. 97:1, 2, 5). The connection of this stylistic group with the Old Bering Sea artistic tradition is unquestionable. Parallels with Old Bering Sea art are not only apparent in the harpoon complex but can be found in other categories of artifacts as well. For example, a hook from “early” Punuk Burial 99–100 at the Ekven cemetery (Fig. 3:7) was executed in the form of a complex zooanthropomorphic figure, and is nearly identical to a hook with OBS-III decoration from Burial 154 (Fig. 3:8) (Arutyunov and Sergeev 1975:130, Fig. 56:1).

Several very unique carvings appear to corroborate the close relationship between the Birnirk-Punuk and Old Bering Sea artistic traditions. A wooden figurine excavated in Ekven House H-18 represents two joined whales possibly engaged in mating behavior (Fig. 4:1). A similar object was collected at the Birnirk site near Point Barrow (Ford 1959:Fig. 104:1) and serves as one of the most reliable indicators of Birnirk culture. By searching for analogies I discovered a nearly identical image of twin whales in Old Bering Sea art: two attached whale-like figures carved in relief on the surface of a model kayak from Ekven Burial 10-11 (Fig. 4:2) (Arutyunov and Sergeev 1975:119, Fig. 48:5), an otherwise typical, presumably early Old Bering Sea grave, which contained artifacts with OBS-2 decoration and a series of characteristic harpoon heads.

The Significance of the Open Jaw Motif

Among the artifacts from Ekven burials of the Birnirk-Punuk grouping and artifact complexes similar to it, one group of artifacts with a typical element of design warrants attention. The surface of some objects, while typologically like Old Bering Sea, bear an element produced by means of engraving several nested arc-shaped lines with transverse segments between them. In some cases, several similar elements are combined and resemble a decorative composition (Fig. 4:6, 8), while in others designs form an independent image (Fig. 4:3, 5, 7). All are schematic, which is characteristic for Birnirk-Punuk artifacts. [The combination of these elements seems to differ from OBS and thus identifies the objects as Birnirk-Punuk.—Ed.].

Examining a find from early Punuk Burial 144 (Fig. 4:4), it appears that the piece has a slightly open mouth (jaws?) with distinct teeth. Why is the image with the “grin” so popular. We can only guess at the meaning of this element. But some suppositions are admissible. In particular, the investigation of the canonical features of design on “winged objects” from the Ekven cemetery showed that at a certain stage, and specifically on artifacts with decorations of OBS-III style, one of its key elements is the image of a fantastic visage with an accentuated, large grinning maul (Sukhorukova 1998:71). The image of the “grin” is often present even in the design of the harpoon shaft heads accompanying them. Possibly, the depiction of the “grin” served to symbolize a specific entity, one of the important figures in Old Eskimo mythology that had special significance in the Birnirk-Punuk period.

Conclusions

This work does not pretend to fully embrace all the representational media of the Birnirk-Punuk period known to archaeologists, rather I provide only my personal perspective. Nonetheless, several important conclusions may be offered. First, a rather broad group of artifacts can be termed Birnirk and/or Punuk, executed in a single style, differing from Old Bering Sea. One of the chief features of the Birnirk/Punuk style is a rejection of decorative motifs and its replacement by the transmission of forms predominantly through plastic means. But in artistic design, many artifacts show clear genetic connection with Old Bering Sea art. The type of design, usually considered early Punuk, represents in fact a schematic treatment of Old Bering Sea subject matter or compositions. In turn, these schematic renderings probably served as the basis for the typical Punuk motif.

Second, anthropomorphic representations by no means lost their significance, in spite of the point of view of

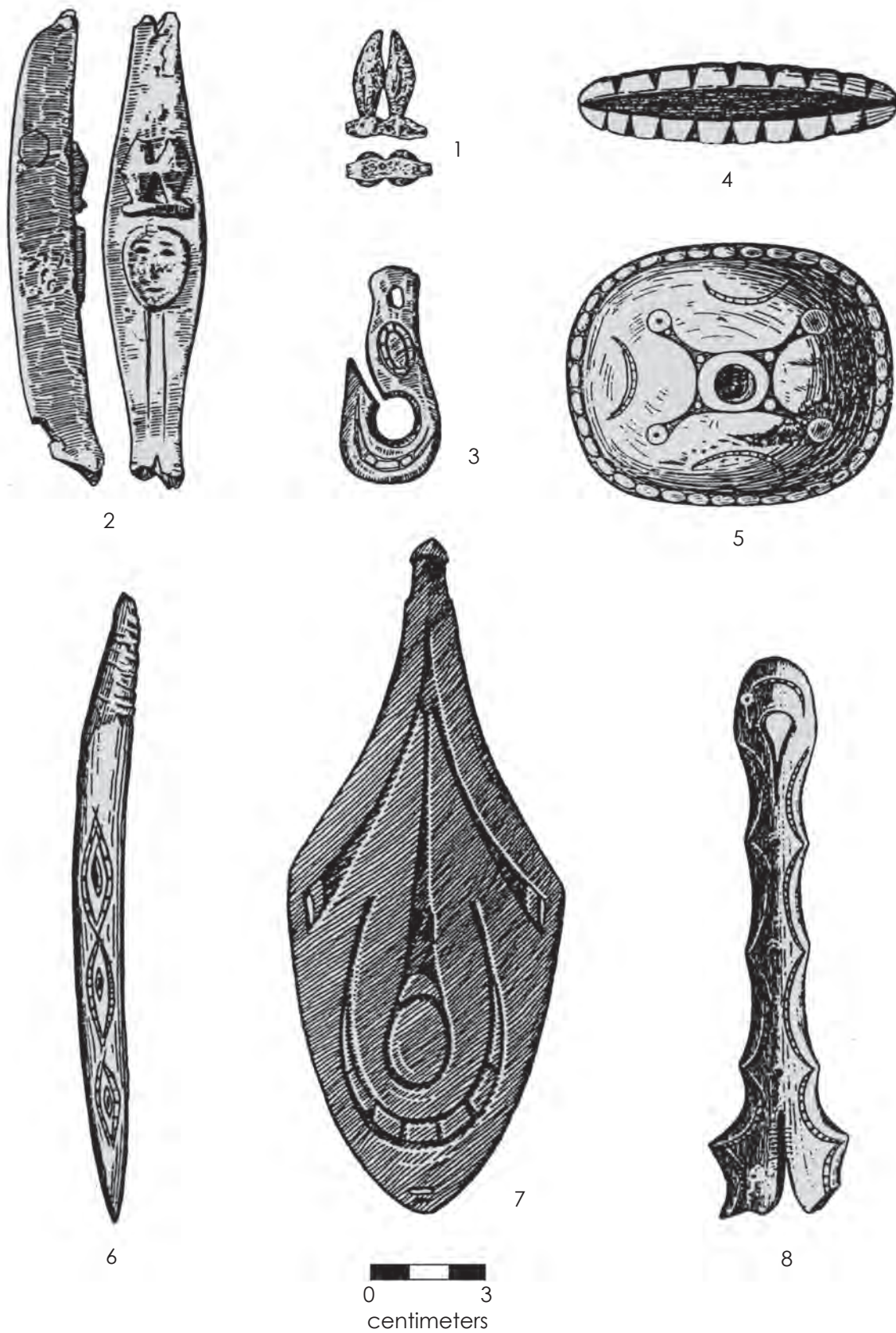


Figure 4. Artifacts with image of whales. 1. House H-18; 2. Ekven cemetery, Burial 10-11. Artifacts with an image of a "grin." Ekven cemetery. 3. Burial 187; 4. Burial 144; 5. Burial 155; 6. Burial 92; 7. Burial 99-100; 8. Burial 168.

Dneprovsky (2001:22). To the contrary, during the Birnirk-Punuk period a new artistic tradition of presenting the human figure in relief was developed.

Third, during the Birnirk-Punuk period, one particular representational motif, provisionally termed a “grin,” became widespread in the design of objects of various categories. Its popularity permits one to hypothesize a special significance for a certain mythological being or persona during this period.

As can be observed, the results of my research corroborate the thesis of K. A. Dneprovsky about the unity of ancient Eskimo culture of Chukotka on the whole and permit viewing the art of the Birnirk-Punuk and Old Bering Sea times as individual traditions of a unified artistic culture.

Obviously, only further study of the aesthetic structures of artifacts in the Birnirk-Punuk corpus will elucidate and define the distinctive characteristics of this single artistic tradition. Until recently, the basic criteria for determining the cultural associations of archaeological complexes were of harpoon head typologies and associated decorations. The results of my survey show that for a firm determination of commonalities and differences in Old Eskimo cultural traditions further study of stylistic, subject, and canonical features of artifact design will be necessary.

References

Arutyunov, S. A., and D. A. Sergeev

1969 *Drevnie kul'tury aziatskikh eskimosov* (Uelenskii mogil'nik) [The Early Cultures of the Asiatic Eskimos (The Uelen Cemetery)]. Institut Etnografii Imeni N. N. Miklukho-Maklaia, Moscow.

1975 *Problemy etnicheskoi istorii Beringomor'ia* (Ekvenskii mogil'nik) [Problems of the Ethnic History of the Bering Sea (the Ekven Burial Mound)]. Nauka, Moscow.

Bronshtein, M. M., and K. A. Dneprovsky

2001 *Zhilishche morskikh zverboev drevnei Chukotki* [A Dwelling of Sea Mammal Hunters of Early Chukotka]. Al'manakh Pamiatniki kul'tury. Novye otkrytiia 2000. pp. 587-619. Nauka, Moscow.

2002 The northeastern Chukchi Peninsula during the Birnirk and early Punuk periods. In *Archaeology in the Bering Strait Region: Research on Two Continents*, edited by D.E. Dumond and R.L. Bland, pp. 153-165, *University of Oregon Anthropological Papers* 59.

Dikov, N. N.

1967 Uelenskii mogil'nik, po dannym raskopok 1956, 1958 i 1963 gg. [The Uelen Cemetery, Based on Excavations in 1956, 1958, and 1963]. *Istoriia i kul'tura narodov severa Dal'nego Vostoka* 17:45-80. Moscow.

Dneprovsky, K. A.

2001 Dinamika drevneeskimoskoi kul'tury Chukotki v epokhu birnirka i rannego punuka (po materialam arkhelogicheskogo kompleksa Ekven) [The Dynamics of Old Eskimo Culture in Chukotka during the Birnirk and Early Punuk Period (Based on Materials of the Archaeological Complex at Ekven)]. Avtoreferat dissertatsii. Moscow.

2002 Ekven H-18: A Birnirk and early Punuk-period site in Chukotka. In *Archaeology in the Bering Strait Region: Research on Two Continents*, edited by D.E. Dumond and R.L. Bland, pp. 166-206, *University of Oregon Anthropological Papers* No. 59.

Ford, J. A.

1959 Eskimo Prehistory in the Vicinity of Point Barrow, Alaska. *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* 47(1).

Giddings, J. L., and D. D. Anderson

1986 *Beach Ridge Archaeology of Cape Krusenstern*. U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C.

Rudenko, S. I.

1947 *Drevniaia kul'tura Beringova moria i eskimoskaia problema* [Early Culture of the Bering Sea and the Eskimo Problem]. Moscow-Leningrad.

1961 *The Ancient Culture of the Bering Sea and the Eskimo Problem* [*Drevniaia kul'tura Beringova moria i eskimoskaia problema*, translated by Henry Michael] Arctic Institute of North America. Anthropology of the North, Translations from Russian Sources 1. University of Toronto Press, Toronto.

Sukhorukova, E. S.

1998 "Krylatye predmety" Ekvenskogo mogil'nika. Zakonomernosti khudozhestvennogo oformleniia i konstruktivnogo ustroistva ["Winged Objects" of the Ekven Cemetery. Regularities of Artistic design and Structural Arrangement]. *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* 5:67-82.