

# A YUPIGET (ST. LAWRENCE ISLAND YUPIK) FIGURINE AS A HISTORICAL RECORD

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**Abstract:** The pursuit of scientific data often follows a fortuitous course, as a series of personal discoveries can evolve into a view of the past. In this paper, I recount my personal experiences with the various types of prehistoric armor employed on St. Lawrence Island. The knowledge of armor is preserved in the crafts tradition of modern Gambell, which served as my first introduction to defensive armor. Ethnographic collections of armor have served as confirmation for details in the figures first encountered in 1967.

**Keywords:** Warfare, St. Lawrence Island, Military Equipment

In 1967, following a number of earlier reconnaissance visits, I worked for the first time with a Swiss archeological team on St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, south of Bering Strait. Quite fortuitously, our team witnessed the spectacle arranged by the inhabitants of the village of Gambell at the northwestern tip of the island to celebrate the centennial of the sale of Alaska by Tsarist Russia to the United States in 1867. Gambell residents had constructed a modern replica of a traditional semi-subterranean winter house and of a large summer skin-covered tent, both in the old way. Wearing traditional fur clothing, they imitated the attack of enemies arriving in a large walrus skin-covered boat from the sea. Evidently, by that time some elders still remembered quite well the times when people had to live in the village, then called Sivuqaq, without purchased clothing and firearms and with no television, "iceboxes," canned food, motorboats, snowmobiles, gasoline, electricity and other modern inventions. The most important part of the event was the attack of the men coming by umiaq from the sea to the island. Yet the "enemies" jumping from the boat wore fur parkas and not slat armor, which was the usual battle dress of warriors in former times, as we discuss below.

A second time I came very close to such armored warriors during that same summer of 1967. The main purpose of our project was the search for prehistoric burials on St. Lawrence Island.<sup>1</sup> Until then practically no ancient graves had been discovered on the island during the extensive excavations of old dwelling sites by Geist and Rainey (1936), Collins (1937), and others. This posed the question of whether during the period of the Okvik, Old Bering Sea and Punuk cultures, going back to the first millennium B.C., the dead, instead of being buried, were covered with skins and exposed in the tundra or offered to the sea. If this were so, traces of them could not be found. But this became highly doubtful when, starting in the 1940s, Russian archaeologists discovered evidence of the same cultures of sea mammal hunters that inhabited St. Lawrence Island on the opposite side of the Bering Strait on the Chukchi Peninsula (Arutyunov, Levin and Sergeev 1964; Rudenko 1961). There they found huge ancient cemeteries with richly provisioned burials, first near Uelen, and later also near Ekven and other nearby sites. It would be very improbable that people of the same cultures and practically in sight of each other would have different burial customs.

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<sup>1</sup>The excavation was carried out as a research project of the Seminary of Prehistory of the University of Berne, Switzerland and was partially supported by the Arctic Institute of the University of Alaska, Fairbanks (see more in: Bandi und Bürgi 1971/72; Bandi 1984, 1987; Bandi and Blumer 2002, 2004).

Based at Gambell, we started our survey in the summer of 1967 that eventually led to the discovery of several ancient burials that—in contrast to nearby Chukotka—belonged mostly to the Punuk period (Bandi 1993, 1995; Bandi and Blumer 2002). Many of the old burials were carefully constructed and covered with whale bones and stones (cf. Bandi 1993, 1995). The second burial we opened that summer of 1967 revealed the skeleton of a man, 35 to 40 years old, who was laid stretched out on his back in a well prepared grave. Between his bones we found 15 arrow points made of organic materials, one still fixed in a vertebra, and one weapon point (arrow, lance or dagger?) of basalt (cf. illustrations in Bandi 1993:51; 1995:170). Only one arrow had hit this Yupik “Saint Sebastian” from the front, piercing the nose opening and probably killing him by reaching the brain. All the other arrows and also the basalt point had hit him from the back, probably when he lay defenseless on his stomach. At first I thought of a sacrifice or an execution. Of note is that 12 of the arrow points were made of ivory, but three were of caribou antler. Typologically, the points belong to the Punuk culture and all of them could be identified as weapons for war. The presence of caribou antler points to contacts—friendly or hostile—with inhabitants of the Chukchi Peninsula where, as opposed to St. Lawrence Island, caribou was evidently abundant during the Punuk period.

Scientific excavation in houses in 1967 yielded further evidence of ancient armored warriors, producing individual components of plate armor. In addition, a few native diggers from Gambell offered us similar bone or ivory plates for sale. These diggers knew the purpose of these plates, either by oral tradition or from the explanations they had received while assisting archeologists Otto Geist and Henry Collins during their earlier excavations on the island in the 1920s and 1930s (Collins 1937; Geist and Rainey 1936). Both Collins and Geist, as well as Edward W. Nelson before them (1899), had described Eskimo plate armor and reproduced their images in their publications. But the illustrations offered by Geist, Collins or Nelson show either single plates or groups of plates, but not complete plate armor sets.

Several 19<sup>th</sup> century ethnographers describe and chronicle the geographic distribution of slat armor of various types, commencing with Friedrich Ratzel (1886), Walter Hough (1895) and Berthold Laufer (1914). A full set of slat armor collected from Wales, Alaska by the minister H. R. Thornton, is illustrated in the two latter works (Hough 1895:Pl.2; Laufer 1914:Pl XXIX), as well as in Thornton’s book (Thornton 1931:24).

Later, in the 1970s, I was able to inspect a complete set of plate armor preserved at the Sheldon Jackson Museum in Sitka (Fig. 1). It reminds one of bullet proof vests of today

and consists of leather lining with cross straps on which the plates are fixed. In some cases the bone or ivory plates were replaced by metallic ones when sheets of brass or bronze alloys became available from American or European whalers in the late 19th century (cf. Hough 1895:633). This proves that plate armors were still in use at this period. But iron plates were used at least a century before that: the Thomas Burke Museum in Seattle has some armor and helmets made of iron plates of Koryak origin. They are dated by riveted French silver coins from the period of Louis XVI, crowned in 1774 and executed during the French Revolution, 1794 (Bandi 1974/75, 1995).

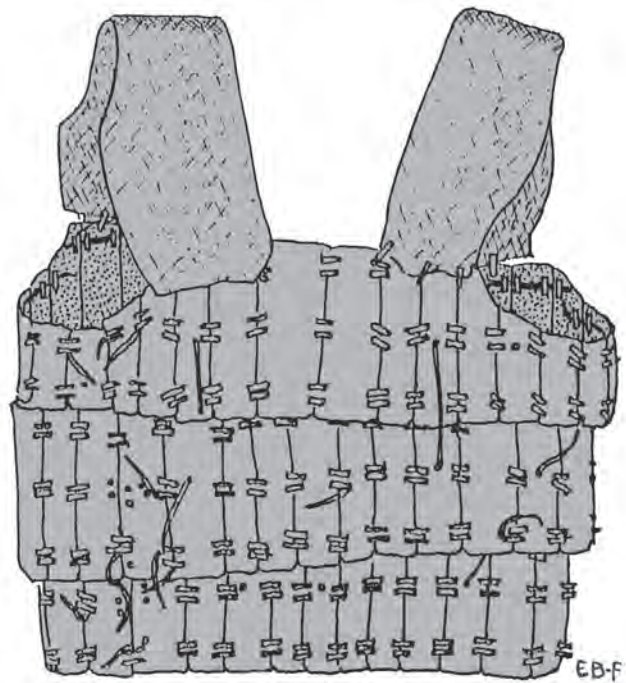


Fig. 1: Plate armor from Cape of Prince of Wales, Alaska. Sheldon Jackson Museum, Sitka, Alaska (drafted by Elisabeth Bürki-Flury after a photograph from the author).

A very special transition between the plate armor, for which Henry Collins postulated an Asiatic origin (Collins 1937:325ff, following the research of Laufer 1914:174ff), is a second variant of armor in the Bering Sea area termed by Hough (1895:633) “band or banded armor.” Band armor is also represented by a specimen collected (or received?) in 1851 by Ferdinand von Wrangel (Wrangel), then the Head of the Russian-American Company, without a precise location provided. At present, the piece (Fig. 2) is curated by the Ajaloomuseum in Tallinn, Estonia; another, incomplete specimen is at the Neuchâtel Ethnography Museum in Switzerland (Csonka 2005). Band armor lacks the leather lining and the cross straps. The upper part has at the back a neck cover made of split walrus tusks and on the front some plates protecting the face. The lower part is a skirt-

like construction consisting of five bands or rows of ivory plates fixed together with leather straps. The top row stays fixed, while the four others can be lifted up to the hips in the manner of a telescope (see the full reconstructed picture of an armor-clad warrior in Fitzhugh and Crowell 1988:227). A complete set of band armor was collected by Commodore John Rogers from the Chukchi Peninsula in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century and is archived in the Smithsonian Institution (Hough 1895:Pl. 4). While band armor is mentioned in the annals of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Khitin dynasty of northern China (Laufer 1914:191ff), it may be considerably older. The Yupik Eskimo from Plover Bay, Siberia, right across from St. Lawrence Island, also used another type of band armor, constructed of baleen strips (Hough 1895:634; in Hough's report the armor is called "Chukchi").



Fig. 2: Transition of plate armor to band armor (photo from Rousselot and Grammer 2004: 156).

I had my first direct contact with an armored warrior in the shape of a sculpture at Gambell early in the 1970s.



Fig. 3: Yupiget ivory sculpture of a warrior with band armor, by Larry Aningayou (H.G. Bandi, personal collection; photo Regula Bandi).

The then young hunter and carver Larry Aningayou once handed me a strange figurine of an archer made of ivory (Fig. 3). The figure is 11.5 cm in height and represents a man who has a large collar on his shoulders that is higher than his head and runs out in the direction of the arms. He is ready to shoot an arrow. From the hips to the ankles he wears a wide skirt made of alternating bands (rows) colored ivory and black. Evidently, the figure was not a representation of a hunter, because the Puvuk people were specialized in sea mammal hunting for which they used harpoons as opposed to bow and arrows. Furthermore, a wide skirt protecting the lower part of the body would be a handicap in hunting. Larry told me that he had sculpted the figure according to the description given to him by the old men of the village of the equipment of warriors in the former times. He had never seen such an outfit himself. Subsequently, I saw an authentic ethnographic specimen of a banded armor at the Smithsonian Institution, Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. displayed at the ground-breaking exhibit "Crossroads of Continents" (Fitzhugh and Crowell 1988:227). More banded armors can be seen at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (MAE) in St. Petersburg. This second variant of Bering Sea armors consists of an upper and a lower part (Fig. 4).



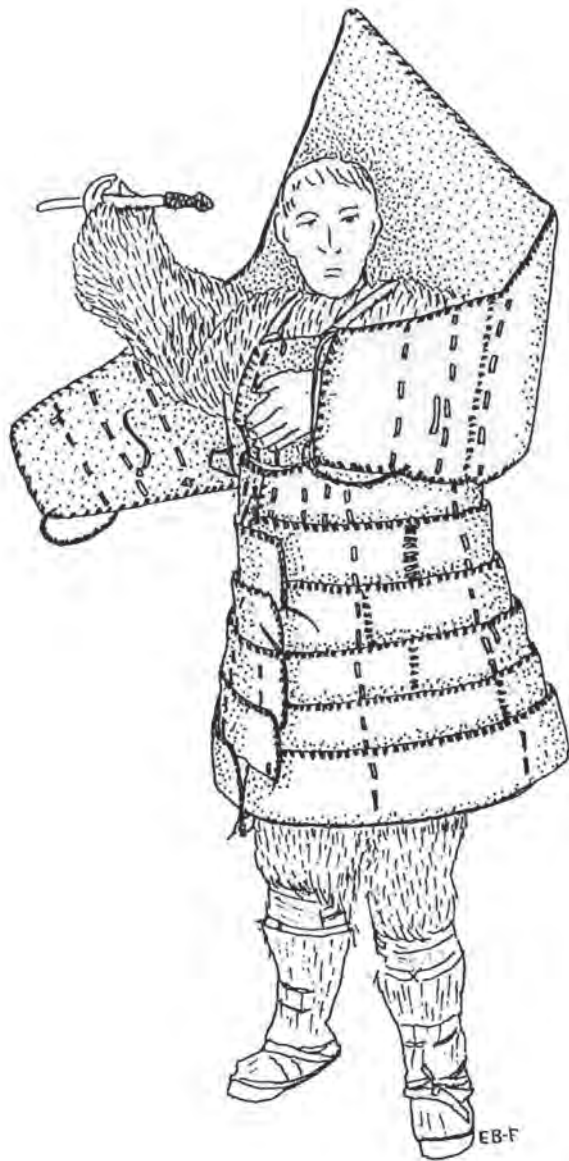


Fig. 4: Band armor of an Asiatic Eskimo Warrior. National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution (re-drafted by Elisabeth Bürki-Flury after Fitzhugh and Crowell 1988:227).

The upper part is made of sealskin and wood. It protects the head and the neck as well as the upper part of the back and both arms against arrows, lances and daggers. The lower part is formed by different colored bands, about 20 cm wide, of which the example in Washington has six, while Larry's figure has five. It is truly amazing how precisely the Gambell sculpture, based on the memory of the village elders, corresponds with the preserved original specimen. This would seem to prove with some certainty that warriors protected by banded armors were still remembered around 1900, when the generation of elders of the 1970s were

born and raised. James VanStone (1983:21) observed that an ivory figure from the Kukulek site near Savoonga on St. Lawrence Island, attributed to the Punuk culture, shows indications of banded armor. The memory of the equipment of armored warriors seems also to be present in Siberia: a young woman from a Chukchi village, who saw the figure of Larry Aningayou, was well aware of the equipment in connection with former tribal wars.

Collins (1937:326) wrote that the distribution of plate armor in Alaska was restricted to the Bering Sea region, mentioning especially the Diomed Islands, Cape Prince of Wales and St. Lawrence Island. Collins (1937:326ff) distinguished them from the types of armor used in Northeast Siberia by the Chukchi and also by the Koryak in the northern part of Kamtchatka. The distribution of banded armor, which never has been found in an archaeological context, might be about the same as plate armor. But the origin of this variant has still to be clarified. The fact that it is also known by the Itelmen farther south in Kamtchatka may point to an Asiatic origin as well. Documentary records allowed Laufer (1914:262) to infer that plate armor evidently diffused northward from southern Manchuria, among the Sushen who were in contact with the Chinese who had used various types of armor.

Numerous sources describe the sophistication as well as cruelty that were the common feature of raids and conflicts in the Bering Sea area.<sup>2</sup> Edward W. Nelson (1899:330), describing traditional warfare in the Bering Sea area, offered the following observation:

In ancient times the Eskimos of the Bering Strait were constantly at war with one another, the people of Diomed Islands being leagued with the Eskimos of the Siberian shore against the combined forces of those on King Island and the American shore from near the head of Kotzebue Sound to Cape Prince of Wales and Port Clarence. An old man from Sledge Island told me that formerly it was customary among the people of the Siberian coast to kill at sight any Eskimo from the American shore who might have been driven by storm across the strait, either in umiaks [sic] or on the ice.

One could argue that, even by the standards of other Arctic populations, the ancient warfare in the Bering Sea area and Northern Alaska was more intense, frequent, and brutal. One reason for this may be the proximity of different competing ethnic and linguistic groups. Very likely another

<sup>2</sup>The issue of the traditional warfare in Alaska and nearby Siberia is explored in great length in several publications (Bandi 1995; Birket-Smith 1959; Burch 1974, 1988; Fienup-Riordan 1990; Malaurie 1974; VanStone 1983, and others) and, most recently by Burch (2005) – Editors' note.

cause was probably a certain influence from the Asiatic side. Such influences probably reached the Bering Sea area at the time of Punuk culture around the second half of the first millennium A.D. New types of arrow points, the composite bow of greater efficiency, wrist guards and, of course, slat and band armors diffused northward into the Bering Strait region, as suggested by Collins (1937). But it is also probable that the transfer of the new military equipment was not the only reason for the spread of warfare in the vast area adjacent to the Bering Sea and Bering Strait area. Elsewhere (Bandi 1995:180–181), I hypothesized that it was the increasing importance of whaling in the Punuk era that required the coordinated activity of disciplined skin-boat crews commanded by experienced captains. But the same discipline and organizational skills were also the essential requirements for victorious raids on enemy villages along the shores.

Beyond being an example of the great skill achieved by the Yupik people as ivory sculptors, the contemporary figurine carved by Larry Aningayou from Gambell demonstrates that the memory concerning those bloody wars of the last 1000 or 1500 years in the Bering Strait region is still present among the Native people on both sides of the Bering Sea. This memory, together with archaeological and ethnological records, can offer a surprising insight into the hostile relationships that once terrorized arctic hunting communities for centuries and generations.

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