

Composite Masks: Chinese and Eskimo

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Of all prehistoric Eskimo cultures Ipiutak is the one with closest ties to the Old World. Its antler and ivory arrowheads, lances, daggers and knives with inset stone side blades have close analogies in early Neolithic and Mesolithic cultures of Siberia and western Europe; and its flint industry, like that of the older Near Ipiutak, was an outgrowth of the microlithic Denbigh Flint complex of the Arctic Small Tool tradition which, ultimately of Asiatic origin, is now generally regarded as the principal source from which the northern patterns of Eskimo culture were derived.

In addition to resemblances of this kind, which show that Ipiutak had retained basic features of far older, ancestral stages of culture in the Old World, there are also striking resemblances between Ipiutak and the Iron Age cultures of Eurasia with which it was more nearly contemporaneous. These are seen mostly in art and ceremonialism. As Larsen and Rainey have shown, there are many close parallels between Ipiutak and the Scytho-Siberian animal style of northern Eurasia, such as the skeleton motif, pear-shaped bosses as joint marks, carved griffin heads and other fantastic animal forms, and the Pyanobor type of bear carvings.¹ Burial practices, the importance of the loon, possibly as the shaman's spirit helper, and the probability that the openwork carvings and chains at Ipiutak were ivory equivalents of the iron objects attached to Siberian shamans' costumes, indicate strong connections between Ipiutak and Siberian shamanism. Larsen and Rainey conclude that

...there can be little doubt that its sculptural art is a branch of the Eurasiatic or Scytho-Siberian animal style, which has, for the first time, been recognized in the New World... When we add to its obvious connection with the Scytho-Siberian animal style, the similarity in burial customs and other traits of intellectual culture, as well as the knowledge



Figure 1. Mask-like ivory carvings, Ipiutak culture, Point Hope, Alaska: a, from Burial 64; b, from Burial 77.

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of iron, we consider it almost superfluous to discuss the possibility of its American origin.²

But cultural influences from China were also recognized.³ In 1943, commenting on Rainey's preliminary descriptions of the Ipiutak culture,⁴ I cited Laufer's description of Chinese burial practices,⁵ and suggested that Ipiutak burials with artificial ivory eyes, nose plugs, mouth covers, and an ivory back scratcher with one end carved to represent a human hand, were indicative of Chinese influences no earlier than the Chou or Han dynasties.⁶ Jenness, discussing Larsen's summary account of Ipiutak, also saw China as a principal source of Ipiutak culture, and suggested "...the strange religion and art of Ipiutak received their stimulus from China rather than from Western Siberia."⁷

The Ipiutak materials in which Larsen and Rainey, and Jenness, saw Chinese resemblances were the artificial ivory eyes and mouth covers, and in particular the mask-like set of ivory carvings 16.4 cm high, from Burial 64, illustrated by Larsen and Rainey in plate 55 and reproduced here as figure 1,a:

...we must consider possible influence from this cultural power center [China]. There is an undeniable resemblance between the mask-like set of carvings (Pl. 55) and ancient Chinese art, even though we are unable to offer a definite parallel from China."⁸

In 1964 on a visit to the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm I saw in the study collections of Shang dynasty bronzes and carvings a "Demon Mask", composed of pieces of marble and mother-of-pearl, that had a striking general resemblance to the mask-like carvings from Ipiutak. It consisted of twenty sections of marble forming the outline of the face, ears, nose, eyebrows and horn, and four pieces of mother-of-pearl forming the mouth. Dr. Jan Wirgin, Curator of the Museum, who kindly supplied a photograph of the mask (figure 2), wrote me concerning it: "The piece is said to have come from Anyang and was bought from a well-known art dealer in Shanghai in the 1930's. I remember I have seen an almost identical piece in the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto."

I am indebted to Dr. James W. VanStone, formerly of the University of Toronto, for providing information on the comparable material in the Royal Ontario Museum. It consists of two

stone and shell "tomb masks" originally described by Bishop William C. White and later by Dr. Hsio-Yen Shih. One of the Toronto masks is almost circular in outline with a diameter of 22.6 cm; it consists of twelve thin, narrow slabs of marble forming the face, eyes, nose, and horns, and five sections of mother-of-pearl forming the mouth.⁹ It is very similar to the Stockholm example and is evidently the one referred to by Dr. Wirgin. The other assemblage¹⁰ is reproduced here in figure 3.

The Toronto masks were assembled from pieces excavated from tombs at K'ai-fêng, near An-yang, the Shang dynasty capital in northern Honan province. White describes them as follows:



Figure 2. Demon Mask made from sections of marble and mother-of-pearl, Shang Dynasty.

Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, Stockholm.

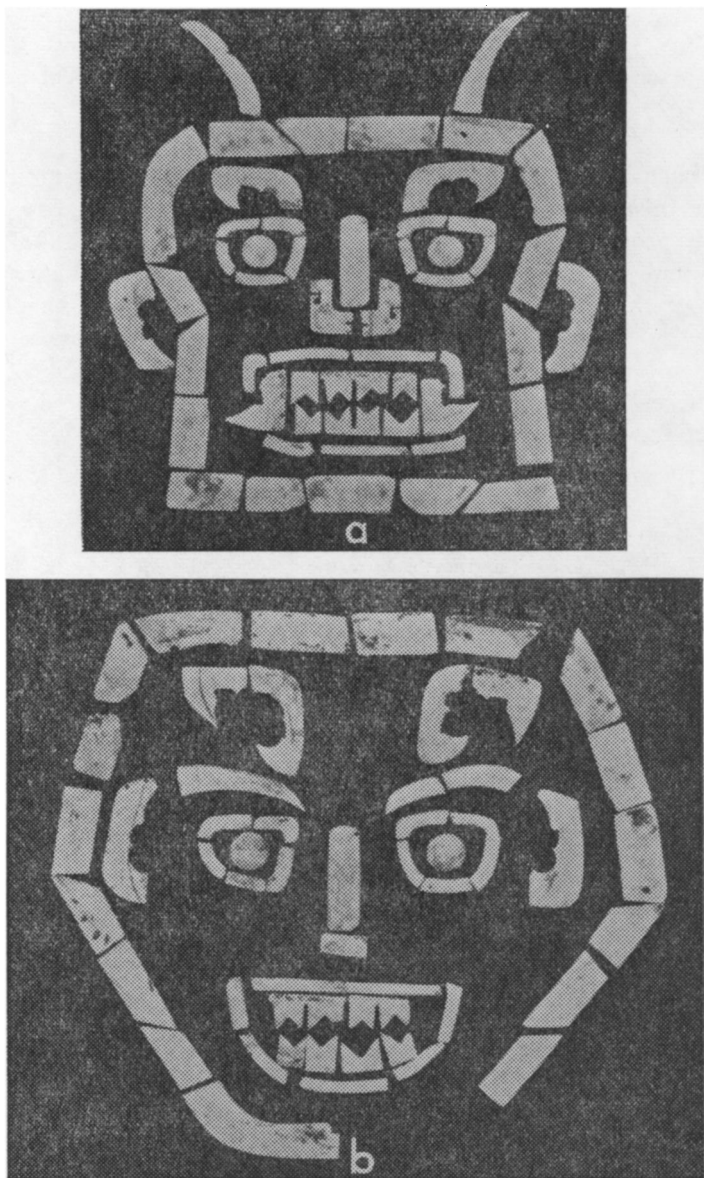


Figure 3. Inlaid shell motif, Shang Dynasty: *a*, first reconstruction; *b*, second reconstruction.

Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.

Plate XCIX. Tomb mask of shell sections... Most of the fragments were stained with red ochre. The eyes were convex... Plate C. Tomb mask of stone and shell sections... The teeth only are of shell. The borders and eyes and nose are of thin white marble sections. The eyes are almost hemispherical. Most of the sections were stained with ochre.¹¹

Hsio-Yen Shih cites later excavations of tombs at Hsün Hsien, near An-yang, and other Shang and Chou dynasty sites which provided further information on the construction of the shell and stone masks and led to a somewhat different arrangement of the pieces (reproduced here in figure 3) from that first made by White.¹² Photographs made *in situ*, remnants of the wooden backing, and impressions left in the ground, showed that the pieces had been set in as inlays on carved and painted wood. All of the sections had been coated with red pigment. Hsio-Yen Shih concludes his study:

In its present form the Museum's shell inlay joins a group of face motifs with largely human characteristics but some animal traits. Emphasis on eyes and teeth, as well as the addition of horns, lend these a demonic aspect. As we have seen, they are frequently found on horse and chariot ornaments in a burial context. The question of their significance cannot be fully resolved at this point, but a possibility can be presented. The Hsün Hsien report refers to such images as *fang-hsiang*, an ancient Chinese name for exorcists who performed their services upon occasion of death or disaster. Certain pictorial representations on Han tombs and clay figurines included among the offerings in even later burials have been similarly named, and do demonstrate the continuity of such images. All functioned as apotropaic symbols. The Museum's inlay motif offers one of the earliest versions of these devices.¹³

Comparison of the composite Chinese masks made of sections of shell and stone and the Ipiutak mask-like carvings made of sections of walrus ivory, portraying a human-animal face of demonic aspect, shows that we are dealing with a similar class of objects, having a similar function in mortuary practice. The nine ivory pieces (figure 1,a)¹⁴ from Ipiutak Burial 64, were found in a heap, unassembled; the reconstruction was made after a similar set of carvings (figure 1,b)¹⁵ was found in Burial 77, providing a key to the arrangement of the pieces found earlier. The seven ivory pieces and jet eyes of the latter (figure 1,b) were found in place, over the body of a child lying between the knees of an adult male skeleton, as shown *in situ* in a photograph of the burial.¹⁶

A set of ivory carvings lay on the knees of the made adult and on the breast and pelvis of the child. All the parts were in place. Obviously they had been fastened to a piece of wood, of which only a brown paste remained (Pl. 98, Fig. 4). This set of ivory carvings made up a mask-like object similar to, but somewhat less elaborate than, that found in Burial 64.¹⁷

There is no mention of red pigment in connection with the mask-like carvings, but some Ipiutak objects were so decorated, leading the authors to assume that it may have been a general practice to apply red pigment to the incised lines.¹⁸

The engraved decoration (figure 1,a), as a whole, in no way resembles Chinese art; in concept and design it is thoroughly Eskimo, its decorative elements being those of Ipiutak, Old Bering Sea, and Punuk. An important exception, however, is the pair of raised eyes at the base of the ivory section forming the top of the mask. This is one of the few examples in Ipiutak art of elevated circles to represent eyes, a motif that dominates late Old Bering Sea art, and brings to mind the staring, bulging eyes of the mask-like animal heads, *t'ao-t'ieh*, appearing so consistently on the bronzes and bone carvings of the Shang and Chou dynasties. The prominent, staring eyes of the creature depicted on the Ipiutak mask afford a closer parallel to early Chinese art than do the more rounded but less realistic paired eyes of Old Bering Sea art which, as I have attempted to show, were in some way related to the eyes seen on *t'ao-t'ieh* masks.¹⁹ Occurring here as part of the design on an object that was similar in construction and identical in function to Chinese composite masks of shell and stone, placed in graves, they add weight to the significance of these masks as evidence of early Chinese influence on prehistoric Eskimo culture.

Notes

1. Helge Larsen and Froelich Rainey, *Ipiutak and the Arctic Whale Hunting Culture*, Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, vol. 42 (New York, 1948).

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 145, 157.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 158, 182.

4. Froelich Rainey, "The Ipiutak Culture at Point Hope, Alaska," *American Anthropologist* 43(3):364-375 (1941); *idem*, "Mystery People of the Arctic," *Natural History* 47(3):148-150, 170-171 (1941).
5. Berthold Laufer, *Jade. A Study in Chinese Archaeology and Religion*, Field Museum of Natural History, Anthropological Series, Publication no. 10 (Chicago, 1912), pp. 299-305.
6. Henry B. Collins, "Eskimo Archaeology and Its Bearings on the Problem of Man's Antiquity in America," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 86(2): 220-235 (1943), p. 222.
7. Diamond Jenness, "The Ipiutak Culture: Its Origin and Relationships," in *Indian Tribes of Aboriginal America; Selected Papers of the XXXIX International Congress of Americanists*, ed. Sol Tax (1952), p. 33.
8. Larsen and Rainey, *Ipiutak*, p. 158.
9. William C. White, *Bone Culture of Ancient China*, Museum Studies no. 4 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1945), plate C.
10. *Ibid.*, plate XCIX; Hsio-Yen Shih, "A Chinese Shell-Inlay Motif," in *1962 Annual* (Art and Archaeology Division, Royal Ontario Museum, University of Toronto, 1963), plate XIX.
11. White, *Bone Culture of Ancient China*, p. 210.
12. Hsio-Yen Shih, "Chinese Shell-Inlay Motif," plate XIX (b).
13. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
14. From Larsen and Rainey, *Ipiutak*, plate 55.
15. *Ibid.*, plate 54.
16. *Ibid.*, plate 98, fig. 4.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 241.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
19. Henry B. Collins, *Archaeology of St. Lawrence Island, Alaska*, Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, vol. 29, no. 1 (Washington, D.C., 1937), pp. 298-300.