

Old Copper ulu

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What is a Ulu?

The Eskimo ulu (pronounced ooh-luoo) is a remarkable tool. It is part chopper, slicing-knife, scraper and general do-it-all tool used for all forms of cutting, splitting and scraping. It is engineered to effectively cut a variety of soft and hard substances (e.g. bony meat, wood) by exerting a tremendous amount of force in one area of the blade and finest light-touch in another. It is the only cutting implement that can operate efficiently in a round bottom bowl as well as on a flat surface. The ulu is attributed to the Eskimo Indians who still culturally use this knife though many societies, worldwide, have used it since the neolithic (3200 BCE) (e.g. Korea, Sarswak, Malaysia, Peru, Australia) (Lowenstein, J.1958; Miller, 1990) Figures 1-2.

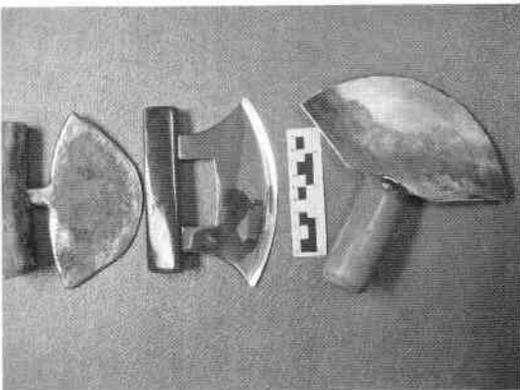
Ulu typology

There are three basic designs for the ulu. The Inupiat (Alaskan) ulu has a broad rounded blade supported by two tangs attached to a single handle. (Fig.1) The ulu us rocked back and forth. The Canadian Western Artic ulu has a narrow inverted "Y" shaped blade and a single narrow stem attached to a small handle. The Eastern Artic ulu is like the Western Artic ulu except for a broader blade, wide stem and handle (Fig. 1-2). It also has sharp, pointed ends. Most ulus range in blade size from 6 to 14 cm in length. They are made of stone, jade, ivory, antler and most often, metal.

Though there are few published examples of North American Indian stone ulu blades (Moorehead, W. 1900; Miller, 1990), blades made of metal are the most commonly seen in collections.

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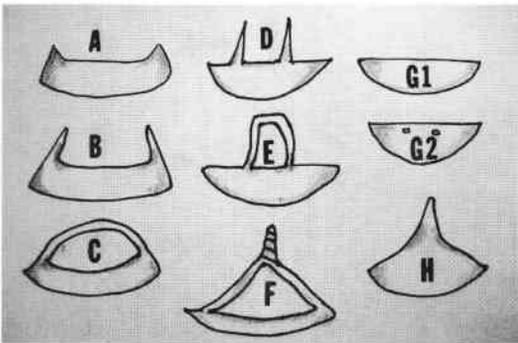
The Old Copper culture in North America existed from around 6000 BCE to 1910 AD where the inhabitants of the upper Great Lakes mined and collected naturally occurring float copper in vast quantities. (Martin,1999) The ancient Indians used this copper to fashion numerous tools, ornaments and weapons. By primarily hot or cold wrought working (there is some evidence of rare castings), the copper could be shaped to any configuration and size. The soft metal could be strain-hardened (small crystal growth) by hammering so as to develop and keep a tough cutting edge. The North American Indians made ulus. (Moorehead, 1900, Martin, 1999) They also traded ulus through the midwest and



(continued from page 26)

and South East American territories. (Martin, 1999)

In the late 1950's, before his prime interests focused on beer, archaeologist Warren Wittry (Wittry, W. 1957) developed a type classification for Old Copper artifacts. He died before any revisions could be published. Group III were named "Crescents" referring to their geometric shape and possible ornamental uses though all of these showed the utilitarian design for the ulu. There were nine subgroups designated A-H. (Figure 3)



These were a mixture of what we consider today's Inupiat and Canadia Artic types. There have been no studies on which varieties appear in any specific localities. In part, this effort would be futile since different cultures manufactured copper implements and traded them throughout the Americas (and world). Ulus have appeared from cultures in the artic such as the "Copper Eskimos" down to the Inca of Peru. (McGhee, 1972) (Figure 1-2)

The two basic modern ulu types (Inupiat-blade with two tangs attaching to a handle; Canadia Artic-blade with one stem attaching to the handle) have numerous subtypes. The Fish River, Shop and Greenland ulus all have a single stem (thick or thin) attaching to a

the handle. The Hooper Bay, Nunniak and Bristol Bay ulus have two tangs (in a variety of spacing and thickness configurations) attaching to the handle. These can be seen and typed using the Wittry Group classification.

Prehistoric types

Figure 4 shows two simple crescents believed to be ulus (e.g. sharpened and braided cutting edge) from the Riverside, Michigan Old Copper site (3000 BCE-1000 BCE). They are a typical Inupiat design where a wood, antler or bone handle was seated across the ends (horns) of the crescent. The ulu on the left would be classified as a Wittry type IIIA. The larger ulu on the right could be a Group IIIA. It could also be Group IIIB because of the high and pointed horns. These artifacts are in the collection of the Milwaukee Public museum.



Figure 5 shows five Old Copper ulus from the Milwaukee Public museum. These show a variety of Group IIIA and possibly Group IIIB (bottom) ulus.

Figure 6 shows five Old Copper ulus from the Milwaukee Public museum. They are surface finds in Wisconsin. The four ulus on the right are Wittry Group IIIA and IIIB>

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The ulu on the left has two long, vertical tangs which identify it as the Group IIID or an damaged Group IIIE (lost the upper loop connection). There is some conjecture as to how the missing handle was configured since the tangs are considerably longer than what would seem as needed for practical use.

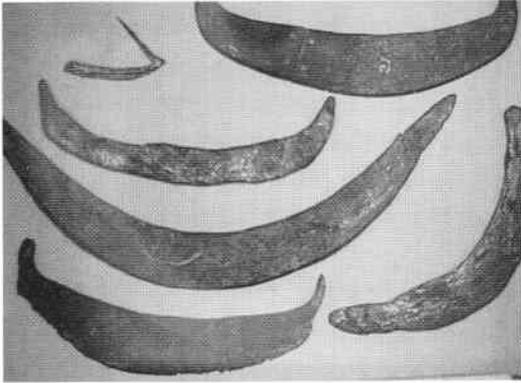
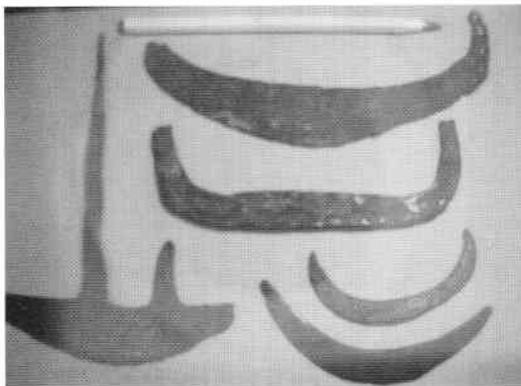


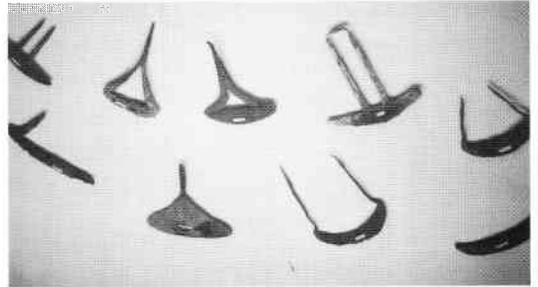
Figure 7 shows eight examples of Old Copper Crescents (ulus) from the Hamilton collection at the Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.



They were surface finds in Wisconsin. Across the top row, left to right, one sees (respectively) examples of Wittry groups IIID, IIIF, IIIF, IIIF, IIIB. In the lower row you can see examples (left to right) of groups IIIB or IIIF₂ (damaged), IIIF (Western Arctic style) IIIB and IIIG-1.

Conclusion

The Old Copper ulus have been considered Lunar symbol ornaments, crescent jewelry or knives. (Gibbon. 1998) The sharp cutting edges and evidence of wear found on most ulus indicate that they had a utilitarian purpose and were used as historic Eskimos use the ulu knife today. The ancient Old Copper ulus were primarily shaped in Inupiat Alaskan (double stem) or Canadian Arctic (single stem) designs. Though identified with the Eskimos and Arctic cultures, ulus were used throughout ancient North and South America as well as in Asia.



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