

THE SAUCER-SHAPED ESKIMO LAMP

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The saucer-shaped pottery lamp of the Eskimo has a limited distribution along the Bering Sea coast of Alaska, where it was the principal lamp type used during the late prehistoric period. The importance and general distribution of this form was recognized by Hough (1898) in his early study of Eskimo lamps, but the time periods during which the different styles dominated have not been previously defined. It is the purpose of this study to consider the saucer-shaped lamps in the University of Alaska Museum collections with reference to their origin, distribution, and the relative age of sub-types.

In the University Museum 19 complete, or nearly complete, saucer-shaped pottery lamps and 32 sherds comprise the series under consideration. These lamps form three units: those collected at random by the Museum during the past 25 years; specimens from an Eskimo burial ground on the Yukon River delta; and examples from the Hooper Bay Village archaeological collection¹. The complete lamps and sherds in these three groups will be considered under the following headings: source, age, temper and remarks.

source	Tanunak
age	Ethnographic
temper	Crushed stone
remarks	This specimen has one encircling line outside the rim, five lines just inside the bowl, a spoke-like design, and four more lines near the center of the bowl (Pl. 1, 1).

source	Tanunak
age	Ethnographic
temper	Pebbles
remarks	This lamp has a distinctive ridged ring near the center of the vessel, and within this circle is a prominent central knob (Pl. 1, 2).

source	Tanunak
age	Ethnographic
temper	Complete so that no temper is visible.
remarks	Pl. 1, 3.

Examples from the random collections:

¹Lamps in the random collection were presented to the University of Alaska Museum by Mr. Buzby of Fairbanks, Alaska; Mr. Otto Geist of College, Alaska; Mr. and Mrs. Misha Ivanoff, Nash Harbor, Alaska, and Mr. Frank Waskey of Dillingham, Alaska. The lamps from South Pastolik and Hooper Bay Village were collected by a University of Alaska field party under the direction of the writer. The trip was sponsored by the Arctic Institute of North America with funds from the United States Government as well as by the University of Alaska, the University of Pennsylvania, the Danish National Museum and the Wenner-Gren Foundation.

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source	Nelson or Nunivak Island, Acession 309
age	Recent-prehistoric (?)
temper	Complete so that there is no visible temper.
remarks	Pl. 1, 4.
source	Below Russion Mission M-4622 (no other data)
age	Recent-prehistoric
temper	Sand
remarks	Pl. 1, 7.
source	Anvik, M-1475 (Grayling Creek, probably the site investigated by de Laguna, 1947, pp. 65-7).
age	Recent-prehistoric
temper	Feathers and pebbles
remarks	Pl. 1, 10.
source	Mekoryak, Nunivak Island, M-5324
age	Ethnographic (?)
temper	Although a section of the lip of this lamp had been cut away with a knife before the lamp was received by the Museum, there is no recognizable temper visible.
remarks	A central cross decorates the bottom of the bowl and there is an irregular curved line at one side. This lamp is extremely hard and well made, with a slick original outer surface (Pl. 1, 11).
source	Nash Harbor, Nunivak Island
age	Ethnographic
temper	Sand ? complete vessel
remarks	This small undecorated lamp has a deep bowl which measures 38 mm. from the inside bottom of the bowl vertically to the level of the rim. The specimen is only 12 cm. across and therefore is classed with the small or "hunter's" lamps.
source	Tanunak, Nelson Island
age	Ethnographic
temper	Sand ? complete vessel
remarks	Measuring 15.2 cm. across and 4.1 cm. in height, this undecorated lamp is approximately midway between the large house lamp and the small hunter's lamp.
source	Tanunak, Nelson Island
age	Ethnographic
temper	Rather coarse sand, some of which protrudes through the outer surface.
remarks	This lamp measures 19 cm. across and has a relatively shallow bowl like Pl. 1, 2. A central knob, part of which has been broken away, also makes it similar to the illustrated lamp. In the bottom of the bowl are three small ridges spaced approximately 1.9 cm., 1.1 cm. and 1.2 cm. from the center of the bowl.
source	Tanunak, Nelson Island
age	Ethnographic
temper	Predominately sand with a little grass; an occasional piece of coarse sand protrudes through the surface.
remarks	This lamp is 19.8 cm. across and 4.6 cm. high (Fig. 1). It has five lines just below the rim lip on the inside of the bowl. Two concentric circles surround a raised knob in the center of the bowl; from these circles radiates a cross-like design represented by pairs of incised lines.
source	Nash Harbor, Nunivak Island

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age	Archaeological ?
temper	Coarse sand protrudes through the bottom surface of the lamp.
remarks	This specimen is very heavily encrusted with burnt oil and has lichens on the upper bowl surface. There is an indication of concentric circles at the center of the bowl, but the heavy oil crust makes it impossible to determine the extent of the bowl decoration. Outside the vessel lip are two lines encircling the rim.
source	Bristol Bay-Hooper Bay region ?
age	?
temper	Primarily sand, but also some grass
remarks	This small lamp is 8.6 across and approximately 3 cm. deep. It has three encircling lines near the inside rim of the bowl.



Figure 1. Saucer-shaped Eskimo lamp with a central knob and decoration. From Tanunak, Nelson Island.

The next group of saucer-shaped lamps is from a burial ground at the south mouth of the Yukon River delta near the former village of South Pastolik [local Eskimos insisted that the name of the village was Pastolik and that the group inhabiting this village was the one that had occupied the Pastolik located south of St. Michael (see Hrdlicka, 1930, p. 199); "South" is used to differentiate between the two localities]. The burials, which were primarily concentrated along an old beach line, were flexed, above-ground box burials which are common to the general locality. There were approximately 15 burials, all of which appeared to have been roughly contemporaneous. Most had some trade goods with the body, indicating that interment took place about the time of historic contact. Included among the trade items was

a small piece of cup identified as English Staffordshire ware dating after 1840.²

source	South Pastolik, Burial 5—female ³
age	Early historic
temper	Grass and pebbles
remarks	This lamp has two lines around the outside of the rim lip and seven lines around the bowl of the vessel. One unusual feature of this lamp is that on the outside below the rim is a constricted area around the entire body of the vessel (Pl. 1, 6).
source	South Pastolik, Burial 15—female
age	Early historic
temper	Large crushed stone
remarks	There are two encircling lines outside the rim and five within the bowl. The lamp bottom appears to have been brushed with a wad of grass before the clay had hardened, with a somewhat streaked appearance resulting (Pl. 1, 8).
source	South Pastolik, Burial 14—child of 5 or 6
age	Early historic
temper	Feathers and pebbles
remarks	Like the two previous lamps from South Pastolik this example has two encircling lines outside the rim. There is a large central cross at the center of the bowl, and outside the cross are nine encircling lines (Pl. 1, 9).
source	South Pastolik, Burial 14—child of 5 or 6
age	Early historic
temper	Grass and leaves
remarks	This lamp is considerably smaller than the previous South Pastolik examples; it has a single line outside the rim lip and six lines within the lip. This example also has a double lined central cross (Pl. 1, 12).
source	South Pastolik, Burial 6—male
age	Early historic
temper	Grass and sand
remarks	Two lines are around the outside of the rim, and four encircling lines are just within the rim. The innermost line meets four radiating spoke-like lines with four lines on each arm. In the center of the cross are three more lines, and there is a double lined cross in the center (Pl. 1, 13).
source	South Pastolik, Burial 9—male
age	Early historic
temper	Crushed rock is the dominant tempering agent, but a few pieces of grass were noted along with a single leaf impression.
remarks	One line surrounds the outside of this small lamp, and two encircling lines are inside the rim, with a cross near the center (Pl. 1, 14).

The collection of lamps from Hooper Bay Village midden (Oswalt, 1952 b) includes 29 sherds and one nearly complete vessel. These sherds will be considered in two associated groups.

source	Hooper Bay Village
age	Archaeological, from the ground surface to 24 inches deep. The

²The Staffordshire ware was kindly identified by Mr. Malcolm Watkins, Associate Curator of Ethnology, United States National Museum.

³Identifications by Dr. Ivar Skarland, University of Alaska.

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	associated artifacts include late Bering Sea Eskimo material culture along with beads and European trade goods.
temper	This group of 14 sherds has the following types of temper: crushed rock or sand (10 sherds), grass and pebbles (1), as well as grass and crushed rock or sand (3).
remarks	The collection from the upper two feet of the midden includes five decorated examples with one complete enough to reconstruct the entire lamp. The latter (Pl. 1, 5) has two encircling lines in the body of the bowl and two more lines near the center of the bowl. At the exact center is a raised knob similar to but less prominent than the center knob on the lamp in Pl. 1, 2. The four other decorated sherds are rim fragments with three, four, six, and thirteen encircling lines inside the bowl. The sherd with thirteen lines also has two encircling lines outside the vessel rim.
source	Hooper Bay Village
age	Archaeological, from 24 to 78 inches deep in the midden. These sherds are primarily associated with prehistoric Eskimo artifacts, the oldest of which date approximately 1600 A.D.
temper	The 19 sherds have the following tempering agents: crushed rock or sand (14), grass and sand or crushed rock (4), and pebbles (1).
remarks	Two sherds, both from the 54 inch level, are decorated. One has fragments of four encircling lines on the outside of the bowl and the second decorated lamp sherd has short horizontal striations in the shallow bowl. The latter type of decoration is common to cooking pots from the site and is found most often in the lower levels. It has been determined that this type of short striation was made with the back of a cockle shell while the vessel was still moist (Oswalt, 1952 a).

LAMP COMPARISONS

Pottery lamps are absent from only a few early Eskimo horizons of northern Alaska. The most conspicuous absence is at the Point Hope Ipiutak site (Larsen and Rainey, 1948, pp. 110-11), where no lamps at all were found prior to the appearance of stone lamps in the "Near" Ipiutak phase. The middle layers at the Iyatayet site on Cape Denbigh, which are Ipiutak related, contain only stone lamps (Giddings, 1952, p. 86), and again the Ipiutak related phase at Platinum Village site, Bristol Bay, also contains stone lamps (Larsen, 1950, p. 184). The oldest pottery lamps have conical bottoms and wide mouths; these are found in the Point Barrow Birnirk collection (de Laguna, 1947, pp. 249-58) and in Old Bering Sea sites on St. Lawrence Island (Collins, 1937, p. 342). This type is also reported in the more recent Punuk material from St. Lawrence Island (Collins, 1937, p. 342), from an old grave near Teller on Seward Peninsula (Collins, 1937, Pl. 53, 2), graves near East Cape, Siberia (de Laguna, 1947, p. 234) and from the Kobuk River village of Ahteut (Giddings, 1952, Pl. XXIV, 2).

The conical-bottomed clay lamp was largely replaced or modified, according to locality, during later phases of Eskimo prehistory. At Point Barrow the semilunar soapstone lamp (Murdoch, 1892, Figs. 20-1) from the eastern Arctic took its place. The same change occurred at Point Hope, where the soapstone lamp is also reported (Larsen and Rainey, 1948, pp. 35-6, Table 3), but here it is probable that the older form survived locally until recently, as evidenced by its presence in the Tigara burials (Larsen and Rainey, 1948, Pl. 91, 2, 3). Present in post-

Punuk remains on St. Lawrence Island are deep, round, conical-bottomed lamps with wick knobs near the rim, a form which links the Old Bering Sea-Early Punuk lamps and the late rectangular, flat-bottomed lamps with wick ledges (Oswalt, n.d.). Another transitional lamp form, from King Island (University of Alaska collection), has a conical bottom but rectangular outline. In the Kobuk River sites (Giddings, 1952, pp. 94-5) the conical-bottomed clay lamp from Ahteut⁴ (1250 A.D.) became modified in the succeeding Ekseavik Village (1400 A.D.). Here were found two pottery lamps which "were . . . saucer-like, curving gradually and thinning to rounded rims". In the Kotzebue site (1500 A.D.) saucer-shaped lamps are described as "shallow, thick-walled bowls," one of which has a line decorated bowl (Giddings, 1952, pp. 94-5). It should be mentioned that two Ekseavik vessel fragments described as lamps by Giddings (1952, p. 95) "were almost flat, plate-like vessels with sharply upturned walls about 2 cm. high". These are similar to the specimen illustrated by Larsen and Rainey (1948, Pl. 91, 7) from a Tigara burial at Point Hope. They also resemble the "griddles" recorded from the upper levels of the Kukulik midden on St. Lawrence Island (Geist and Rainey, 1936, p. 165). It would seem likely that these pottery containers are plates or griddles, as Rainey suggests, rather than lamps. This form is highly suggestive of the stone bottomed frying pans with clay sides used in the Aleutians (Birket-Smith, 1929, II, p. 104) and on the northern coast of Alaska (William Irving verbal communication).

The earliest saucer-shaped clay lamps are from the Kobuk River site of Ekseavik (1400 A.D.), the Onion Portage site (roughly contemporaneous with Ekseavik; Giddings, 1952, pp. 93-103, 121-2), and from houses at Kotzebue, dating a hundred and fifty years later (Giddings, 1952, pp. 93-103). Further south in the general Bristol Bay-Norton Sound region, where saucer-shaped lamps were more fully developed, there is no evidence at present that the form is as early as in the Kotzebue-Kobuk region. In Bristol Bay sites the saucer-shaped clay lamp seems to be late; it replaces the oval stone lamp (Larsen, 1950) probably derived from the Aleutians, where there is a stone lamp tradition. At the present time the oldest saucer-shaped clay lamps in the Bristol Bay-Norton Sound region are from Hooper Bay Village where they were found at the bottom of an excavated layer dating approximately 1600 A.D.

The oldest decorated saucer-shaped lamp is from a Kotzebue house dating approximately 1550 A.D. (grooves on one end of an Onion Portage lamp dating approximately 1400 A.D. might have been for decoration; Giddings, 1952, pp. 121-2). The design on the Kotzebue lamp consists of six broad concentric circles that cover the bottom of the bowl (Giddings, 1952, p. 54). This type of decoration is found on later lamps from the lower Yukon and Innoko rivers, Hooper Bay Village and Bristol Bay (de Laguna, 1947, pp. 148-9; Hough, 1898, Pl.

⁴This site, as all others on the Kobuk River, was dated by a tree-ring chronology which gives for the first time, concrete dates for Eskimo remains.

18, 2, 3; Pl. 19, 3). The lamps in the lowest levels at Hooper Bay Village were plain with the exception of one striated and one concentric circle decorated sherd. Undecorated lamps at the site are the dominant type until the period of historic contact. The undecorated variety is also reported archaeologically from along the Yukon River (de Laguna, 1947, pp. 148-9) and in ethnographic collections from Bristol Bay to Nunivak Island (Hough, 1898, Pl. 18, 1, 4, p. 1053; see also descriptions of random collection). Concentric circle decorated lamp bowls at Hooper Bay Village appear in the upper 54 inches of the still-inhabited site.

The Innoko and part of the lower Yukon rivers are inhabited by Athabaskan Indians, and the lamps reflect, in addition to the usual concentric circles, such local variation in bowl decoration as a circle of dots within the lamp bowl (de Laguna, 1947, Fig. 32, 5, Fig. 33 and 34). Another Athabaskan type is the spoke wheel design on the lamp from Anvik (Pl. 1, 10); this motif is also reported from Bristol Bay (de Laguna, 1947, p. 228).

Trade goods accompanying lamps from South Pastolik preclude any date for the lamps earlier than about 100 years ago. These lamps, with their bowl decoration of concentric circles and a central cross, are like examples from Bristol Bay (Hough, 1898, p. 1053, Pl. 19, 2; Larsen, 1950, p. 183; see also random collection descriptions) and the lower Yukon River (Nelson, 1899, p. 65; de Laguna, 1947, Fig. 33, 5). The small Nunivak Island lamp (Pl. 1, 11) with a single cross in the bottom of the bowl and a crooked line halfway around the bowl is obviously the same type. In no case thus far reported may we say with impunity that the cross motif in the lamp bowl antedates historic contact, and it is quite possible that the design was introduced during the early historic period. It should be mentioned that some of the line decorated rim sherds from Hooper Bay Village may have been from bowls with a cross in the center.

One decorative feature not considered thus far is the central knob in the bottom of the bowl (Pl. 1, 2, 5; Fig. 1, and random collection). The only previously described saucer-shaped clay lamp with such a feature is thought to be from the Bristol Bay-Norton Sound region (de Laguna, 1947, p. 257). De Laguna suggests that these lamp knobs were ultimately derived from the picket lamp of Asia and were later added to Siberian and Eskimo lamps, as reflected in the central knob on Reindeer Chuckee lamps and the ridged and knobbed Thule Eskimo lamps. To these reported lamp knobs should be added the knobbed lamps from the relatively late prehistoric period on St. Lawrence Island (Oswalt, n.d.). The feature is also present in southern Alaska, where one or two knobs are found at the rear of stone lamps from Kachemak Bay (de Laguna, 1934, p. 24, 2). It has been suggested that these were "elaborated into human figures and whales" (de Laguna, 1947, p. 257) which appear in southern Alaskan stone lamp bowls.

In a summary of saucer-shaped clay lamps it may be stated that (1) they were derived from the conical bottomed, wide mouthed clay lamps common to northern Alaskan sites during early phases of Eskimo

prehistory (Old Bering Sea, Early Punuk, Birnirk, and Ahteut); (2) the earliest examples of the saucer-shaped clay lamp are from the Kotzebue-Kobuk region whence they apparently spread south to become the dominant type in the Bristol Bay-Norton Sound region; (3) along the central Bering Sea coast of Alaska the oldest examples of this lamp are from Hooper Bay Village; (4) the lamps are often plain but may be decorated with encircling lines in the bowl, a form which continues down to historic times; (5) about 1830 A.D. the central cross motif appears to have been innovated; (6) the central bowl knobs which occur rarely in saucer-shaped clay lamps are derived from an old Asiatic lamp feature which is found in northern Siberia, on St. Lawrence Island, in northern Alaska and at Kachemak Bay in southern Alaska. Their presence in the Bristol Bay-Norton Sound region seems to be a local survival of the southward spread of the trait.

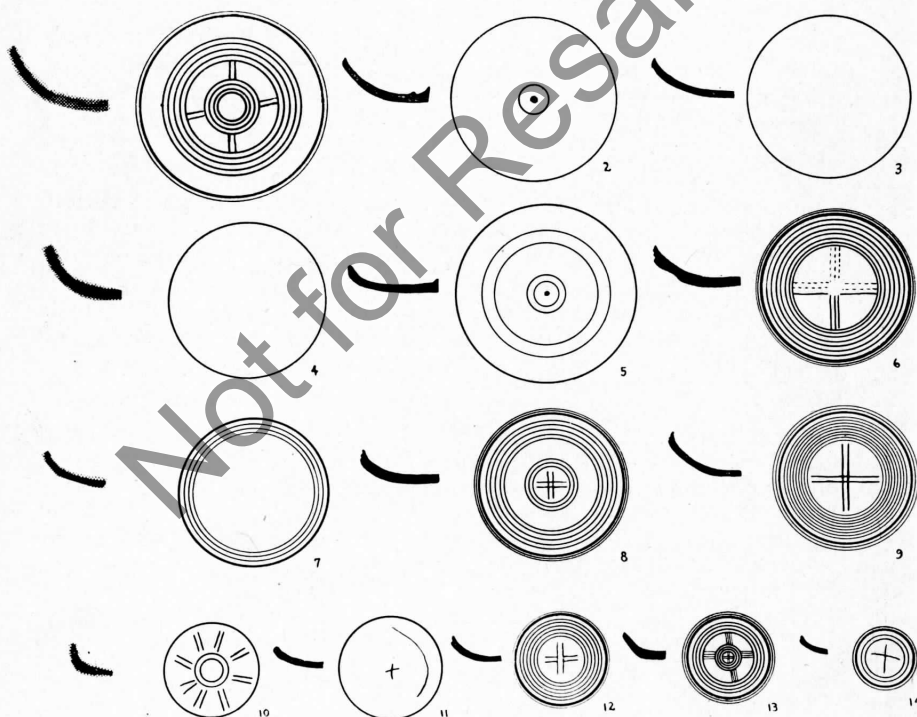


Plate 1. Schematic representations of saucer-shaped clay lamps from the lower Yukon River-Nelson Island area of Alaska. Number 1 measures 24.5 cm. across.

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