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Harpoons

Dear Wilson:

Eugene, on his return from Vancouver, told me about your research on the Nootka sealing harpoons and that you would like to have our material with regard to this problem. It sounds very interesting indeed; I checked all our resources but unfortunately was able to find only a few harpoons of this kind.

Here is all the information I can give you:

VII-F-213, "Spear for fur seal" (parentheses always indicate the verbatim quotation from our catalogue), Nootka, Clayoquot; C.F. Newcombe collection, between 1895 and 1901.

This is the complete harpoon with a shaft, two foreshafts, and a butt 14'5" long. The relation between the positions of the foreshafts and of the butt is like this: The foreshafts are on almost the same plane as the butt; it means that if (harpoon being held horizontally) the shorter foreshaft points downward the butt is in nearly vertical position with a very slight twist to the right (from the harpooners point of view).

↻ slight twist

VII-F-215, Sealing harpoon of the same collection and place of origin as the previous one, but unfortunately, the shaft has been cut in two (or three?) and the butt end is missing. It is only my guess that it was built the same way as VII-F-213.

VII-F-571, Seal harpoon shaft with two foreshafts, total length 15'3"; Nootka, Ucluelet; Harlan I. Smith collection, 1929. Butt perpendicular to the foreshafts, i.e. if the harpoon is held by the butt with the shorter foreshaft pointing downward, the butt is nearly horizontal, slightly twisted to the left.

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VII-X-50, "Shaft of spear"; obviously a sealing harpoon of Nootka type with butt, but the foreshafts are missing. Acquired through the Indian Affairs from the Canadian Pavilion at the Chicago Exhibition in 1893; there is no other information.

The flattened distal end indicates the position of the foreshafts which could be reconstructed. Their position in relation to the butt was the same as in No VII-F-571.

Our Museum also has two models of sealing harpoons, both belonging with the sets consisting of a canoe model, human figures, and accessories. They are interesting because they both show a man throwing the harpoon from the boat.

In the set VII-F-311, which is possibly from "Tsashaht, Alberni, B.C." (spelled Tsishaat on Drucker's map) and was made before 1893 (obtained from the Chicago Exhibition), the harpooner is sitting on the bow of the canoe; his right arm is outstretched to the back and the right hand holding the butt at about the height of his waist, supporting the shaft with his hand stretched forward. In this harpoon model the butt - foreshafts relation is of the type already described for the specimen VII-F-213; if the harpoon is inserted into figure's hands with the proper fit, the shorter foreshaft points downward.

The other model, VII-F-637, belongs to the Bosson collection, listed as Nootka but no location given. In this model the harpooner is standing on the bow and holding the harpoon high with his right hand, approximately behind his ear, the other hand in front; the harpoon is of the VII-F-571 type and, again, if held by the figure as intended by the carver the shorter foreshaft points downward.

It is, of course, difficult to come to any definite conclusions with so few specimens on hand, but I have the impression that the foreshafts - butt positional relation is connected with the throwing method used by the harpooner.

I have been too pressed for time to check the literature for these details but as you are working on this, I am sure you are familiar with what has been written - you will probably find easily whether I am right or not. It would be interesting to find the distribution of these two variants of the Nootka harpoon. Unfortunately, of the few specimens we have, only three have been located and they are all from the Central Nootkan tribes. Were these two traits coexistent?

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Has the mode of throwing any functional significance, or is it merely the question of preference?

I hope that the above information will be of use to you. I am sorry that I cannot send you the pictures of these specimens, but we have no negatives for them. If you think that the photographs will be of interest, please let me know and I shall get them photographed as quickly as possible.

Many thanks for the copy of your interesting article on Nootka canoe and Eskimo umiak. The problems of this type interest me very much.

Sincerely yours,

Ted

T. Twarecki
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TT: jc