Harvard’s Own St. Lawrence Island Umiak

The Umiak model at the Harvard Museum of Natural History Model best resembles that of St. Lawrence Island

The umiak was a symbol of community and a staple for survival for many native populations of circumpolar North America. Dating back as far as 2,000 years, the umiak has varied slightly in coordination with the needs and customs of different populations. The model of an umiak at the Harvard Museum of Natural History was catalogued with very little information about the specific boat it represents. Through closer analysis of its construction and a few minor exceptions, this model arguably is the closest in resemblance to the umiak of St. Lawrence Island.

The structure and construction of the St. Lawrence Island umiak is one of the more well-documented despite the fact that traditional boat construction is passed down generation to generation (Fair, 2005: 235). St. Lawrence Island is located in Nome, Alaska, in the southern inlet of the Bering Strait. Umiaks are distinct from kayaks, structures sometimes referred to as “Eskimo Hunting Boats,” for their wider shape and lack of a super-structure (United States National Museum, 1964: 190). The claims that support that this is an umiak of St. Lawrence Island, despite the fact that it is catalogued as an “Oomiak” of Northern Labrador and not Alaska, will hopefully be dispelled in the pages that follow.

Walrus hide typically bounds the umiak, commonly known as a skin boat. The St. Lawrence Island umiak was typically bound in the hide of a female walrus. This was because female hides are “thin, do not sport scars that their testy male cohorts have acquired, and absorb less water when in use” (Fair, 2005: 237). The material used to drape the model is unknown. It is, however, not far off to believe that it is made of natural material (read: actual skin of some
kind). Because of the natural material used, the model had to be preserved. When it was, decades ago, the substance used to preserve it contained arsenic; making our model in fact poisonous, and therefore a view-only kind of object.

*Full side view of model in storage at the Natural History Museum
Skenderian_longpost1 (photo by Alona Bach)*

Fasteners, small in scale but critical in construction, are often crucial in the identifying and dating of boat construction. In the umiak model under surveillance, it is clear that the material and techniques used best resemble those of the St. Lawrence Island umiak. In later decades of the St. Lawrence Island umiak, the frame would be “secured with commercial nails or screws, and exotic hardwoods [were] sometimes used as well” (Fair, 2005: 236). Visible in some parts of the umiak model are treenails, wooden fasteners, of a darker and seemingly more dense material, seamlessly secured into the top, outer-most frame, known as a gunwale. This could be
representative of the “exotic hardwood” used in St. Lawrence Island. The wrapping of the skin and its stitchwork fastening covers the rest of the gunwale. Although the material used to sew in the skin of the model umiak is not identifiable, it is possible to believe it is representative of the typical material used in a St. Lawrence Island umiak; “rope made from the hides of young walruses; caribou leg tendon or sinew thread” (Fair, 2005: 236).
Unlike boats that have planks made of the same material to compose the entire structure, umiaks involve a combination of a wooden frame wrapped in a skin cover. The frame, typically constructed by timber, serves as a skeleton that gives overall shape to the vessel. The St. Lawrence Island umiak had frames often “steamed and bent” (Fair, 2005: 236). The middle frame of the interior skeleton of the model was bent, producing a typical curvature of the St. Lawrence Island model.

Image of bent interior frames
Skenderian_longpost4 (photo by author)

Umiak propulsion is typically done by paddling with oars, but some sea-faring umiaks employ a sail. The umiak model being discussed lacked a full set of oars that would support the typical need for a large crew (Fair, 2005: 234). This could be a factor of time and previous owners of the miniature umiak. The model does however contain a small square sail. Although sails were not typically found on St. Lawrence Island umiaks, simple square sails made of woven
grass were found in umiaks of the Aleutian Islands, relatively close geographically (Natural History Magazine, 1992: 3).

Although the variability of boat construction poses a challenge to vessel identification, it does reveal something very important about the umiak. The skin boat was the staple vessel of native populations ranging from the Bering Strait to Eastern Greenland (Fair, 2005: 233). Beyond that, “skin boats appear traditionally in regions as climatically diverse as the arctic and the tropics,” which goes to show that this form of vessel may have been a product of independent construction (Fair, 2005: 235). This is significant because it demonstrates the universal superiority of this kind of vessel. The skin boat has been in use for millennia, and its construction has changed very little. This demonstrates the power of its construction and the reliability communities have on this boat for the survival of their people and their traditions.

Bibliography

