

Ulukaq – ULU



Ulukaq aturluku. – USE THE ULU.

The ulu—or semi-lunar knife—is an important piece of Alutiiq/Sugpiaq technology. Ground from a thin leaf of slate, these knives had a long, v-shaped working edge well designed for butchering fish. Alutiiq women once used ulus to gut, behead, and fillet salmon, which they stored in large quantities for winter. Many slate blades had a wooden handle. Baleen, spruce root, or sinew lashing secured the handle through a small hole drilled in the ulu blade. Some handles had finger grips. Others were decorated with animal carvings.

Ulus first appear in Kodiak’s archaeological record about 4,000 years ago and coincide with the development of net fishing. Archaeologists believe that slate knives were more efficient than smaller chipped stone cutting tools at processing the larger quantities of fish captured with nets. The ulu can be rapidly resharpened, with little damage to the tool, and its smooth surface can be cleaned easily. It also has a long blade perfect for filleting.

Commonly known as the “woman’s knife,” ulus are an item of technology used by Native peoples from Alaska to Greenland. Across this region, men also used ground slate knives—*nuusit*, though these pieces were shaped like a lance with two sharply ground edges. These knives are sometimes called flensing knives, as they were used to strip the blubber from the carcasses of sea mammals.



Slate ulu with a wooden handle, ca. AD 1400–1750, Koniag, Inc. Collection, Karluk One Site.