



HUNTING MAGIC

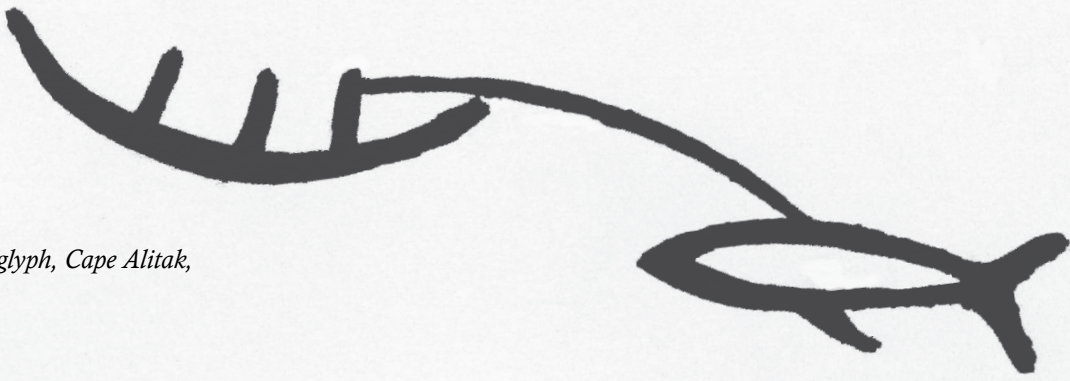
KEPSUUTEM CINGIA YAATALIRLUKI AR 'URSURTAARTUT - THEY HUNT WHALES WITH POISON SPEARS

Among the Alutiiq people, whaling was a dangerous activity, shrouded in secrecy and steeped in magic. Whalers were a special class of men, who lived apart from everyday society. They were considered dangerous, more like spiritual entities than human beings, for their ability to land enormous sea mammals. The title of whaler was hereditary and passed through certain elite families. Each whaler maintained a secret cave where he stored hunting gear and prepared for the chase. Here he acted out hunts with model kayaks and prepared deadly hunting poisons.

The pulverized root of the Monkshood plant (Latin: *Aconitum delphinifolium*), a herb with many blue, helmet-shaped flowers, was a central ingredient in these poisons. This plant contains a powerful toxin that can paralyze the nervous system and dangerously lower body temperature and blood pressure.

To this chemically potent plant, whalers added spiritually powerful human fat. On Kodiak, fat was taken from the mummified remains of dead whalers, or stolen from the corpse of a dead male child. When spread on whaling lances, this magical poison was strong enough to paralyze small whales and keep them from fleeing into open water.

In addition to poisoned spears, whalers carried amulets. Talismans included eagle feathers, bear hair, berries, roots, and luminous green stones. Collected privately, each hunter stored his charms in a small bag. A story from Afognak Island tells of the great success of a whaler who found a green stone. However, when the hunter fell in love and lost the stone, he could no longer kill game. He and his beloved died shortly afterwards.



*Whaling petroglyph, Cape Alitak,
Kodiak Island.*