

Zeitschrift: Jahrbuch des Bernischen Historischen Museums
Herausgeber: Bernisches Historisches Museum
Band: 63-64 (1983-1984)

Artikel: The problem of distinguishing between Old Bering Sea and Okvik ornamental styles
Autor: Alexandrovi Arutiunov, Sergei / Mokovi Bronstein, Michael
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1043470>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 14.04.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

The problem of distinguishing between Old Bering Sea and Okvik ornamental styles

Sergei Alexandrovič Arutiunov and Michael Mokovič Bronstein

Students of Arctic cultures have always paid great attention to the unique Old Eskimo art of ornamental ivory carving. At its earliest stage the problem of distinguishing between Old Bering Sea (further OBS) and Okvik (further OKV) ornamental styles is very important. The OBS and OKV cultures are so close to each other that in many cases the dating of a certain site or object is possible only by its ornament.

The history of studies in the ornamental art of the ancient Eskimos has been thoroughly summarized in the well-known monograph by H.-G. BANDI (1969). F. G. RAINEY (1941) was the first to note the problem of delimitation between OBS and OKV ornaments when he proposed to consider H. B. Collins's OBS-1 style as OKV style and thus to regard the OKV stage as a stage preceding the OBS stage. This point of view was later supported by many scholars.

The publication of many new objects of ancient Eskimo ornamental art from the Chukotka peninsula (S. A. ARUTIUNOV/D. A. SERGEEV 1969 and 1975. – N. N. DIKOV 1977 and 1979) has shed new light on this problem. There seem to be some grounds for regarding the OBS, OKV and Ipiutak cultures as more or less synchronous phenomena, representing local variations of a common Old Eskimo cultural tradition, which had formed in the northern Bering Sea area by the end of the 1st millennium B. C.

F. G. Rainey describes OKV ornamental motifs in saying that "the engraved designs, however, are much simpler, more sketchy, more irregular, and less pleasing than the complex curvilinear designs of the Old Bering Sea stage" (F. G. RAINEY 1941, 551). This statement, by and large correct, is however too general and does not reveal the peculiarities of the two contrasted ornamental systems. In OBS designs, by the way, rectilinear motifs can very often be observed alongside curvilinear ones.

From our point of view a comparative analysis of OBS-OKV ivory engravings provides evidence of the existence of two distinct ornamental traditions. The difference between them is of a qualitative nature and consists in the presence or absence of some specific micro-detailed elements, such as micro-triangles or dents, dotted lines, interrupted lines etc. These ornamental motifs frame the basic

composition lines all along their length. When we compare these ornamental traditions with the most important indicating feature of the OBS culture, i. e. the harpoon head with two line holes, we come to the conclusion that it was micro-detailed which was characteristic of the ornamental art of the OBS people. The constantly noted refinement and sophistication of OBS engravings is largely due to this wide use of these miniature motifs. Ornamental micro-details which we describe as specifically OBS are given in fig. 1. The basic motifs of OKV ornament are given in fig. 2. Their comparison reveals the simplicity, sketchiness and use of broad, deeply cut lines which has been noted by F. G. Rainey, S. I. Rudenko, H.-G. Bandi and others as typically OKV.

Differentiating OBS and OKV ornaments on the basis of the presence or absence of micro-detailed elements, we can verify the cultural affiliation of many sites and objects of the general OBS-OKV type. The analysis confirms earlier ideas of a close mutual penetration of OBS and OKV cultural traditions and at the same time helps to make more precise the areas of their distribution. So, in our view, the Okvik site (Punuk Islands) must be considered not as pure OKV but as mixed OKV-OBS. The ornament with micro-detailed OBS elements adorns many harpoon heads and other objects found here (F. G. RAINEY 1941, 477, fig. 4.3, 7-10; 481, fig. 6.7, 9; 493, fig. 12.12; 495, fig. 13.8-9; 503, fig. 17.3, 5, 10; 507, fig. 19.7-8; 511, fig. 21.6; 515, fig. 23.1; 519, fig. 25.6; 539, fig. 35.5; 541, fig. 36.7, 12). In some cases F. G. Rainey has himself noticed the difference of these ornamental designs from typically OKV ones and labelled them either "unique" or "close to OBS" (F. G. RAINEY 1941, 492, 494, 540). Of an undoubtedly OBS character are the finds from the Diomedede Islands (H. B. COLLINS 1937, 53, fig. 8; pl. 14.3-4, 6). Among the burials in the Uelen cemetery which can be identified on the basis of ornaments, there are 31 burials of OBS type (about one third of all burials containing ornamented objects), 6 of OKV type, and 6 burials which contain both OBS and OKV ornaments. In the Ekven cemetery there are 75 OBS burials (about one half of all identifiable burials), of which 7 include certain objects decorated in OKV style.

There are no pure OKV burials in Ekven. The numbers of all these burials are indicated in table 1. Contrary to the statement by H. Larsen and F. Rainey, the harpoon head found in Ipiutak on Point Hope is covered with OBS and not OKV ornament (H. LARSEN and F. RAINEY 1948, 73, fig. 14). A similar design can be seen on a dart prong and other objects from Point Hope. But the sculpture of a baby walrus found there bears an OKV ornament (H. LARSEN and F. RAINEY 1948, 125, fig. 31). Thus one can see that the OKV ornament distribution area is overlapped by the OBS ornament distribution area. Numerically all known OBS objects strongly prevail over OKV objects. So far there are no sites or cemeteries containing exclusively OKV objects.

A. OBS culture

1. Early stage (OBS-1 prevails)

Uelen: 14-15(58), 6(59), 10(59), 16(59), 17(59), 18a(59)*, 20(59), 23(59).

Ekven: 25, 35, 37-38, 40, 42, 47, 63, 68, 83, 123, 204*.

2. Developed stage (OBS-2 prevails)

Uelen: 1(55), 2(55), 3(58), 4(58), 5(58)*, 7(58), 12(58), 20(58)*, 7(59), 8(59)*, 9(59)*, 18(59), 19(59), 22(59)*, 2(60), 4(60), Dikov's N 9.

Ekven: 7*, 10-11*, 28, 29, 57, 71, 88, 95, 113*, 121, 130*, 133, 136-137*, 141, 187, 188.

3. Late stage (OBS-3 prevails)

Uelen: 5(57), 10-11(57), 13-14(57), 24(58), 26(58), Dikov's N 2, N 4B, N 29.

Ekven: 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 43, 44, 45, 46, 49, 150, 154, 157, 161-162, 168, 169, 170-171, 173, 176, 182, 183-184, 186.

B. Okvik culture

Uelen: 7(57), 18(57), 19(57), 22(57), 2-3(59).

Table 1. *OBS-OKV type burials in the Uelen and Ekven cemeteries*

An asterisk indicates the burials where some samples of OKV ornament can be observed alongside OBS ornaments.

The delimitation of OBS and OKV ornaments on the above principles provides some new grounds for the construction of a relative chronology for cultural sequences in the Bering Sea area. As our starting point we may take the evolution of the OBS ornament, first noticed by H. B. Collins, which allows one to differentiate in OBS between three subsequent styles (H. B. COLLINS 1937). From the point of view of micro-detailed elements we can introduce a further precision into H. B. Collins's periodization.

The widely and rightly recognized periodization of OBS ornament by H. B. Collins has a certain disadvantage, which is however completely excused by the absence in the 1930s of the vast amount of archaeological data discovered later. The differences between the ornamental motifs

classified by H. B. Collins as styles 1, 2, 3, are in our opinion more quantitative than qualitative. Elements 12, 17, 19, 20 of style 1 practically coincide with elements 2c, 6, 7a, 8a of style 2. The differences between style 2 and style 3 are rather ambiguous. H. B. Collins does not give a graphic representation of motifs for style 3. His book contains only a verbal description of them, and the author remarks that a chronological and graphic differentiation between styles 2 and 3 is rather difficult. Thus an absence of precise, easily recognizable demarcation lines between the ornamental styles of OBS culture as defined by H. B. Collins causes certain difficulties in the practical application of his classification.

However, such precise demarcation lines can be established if we consider the micro-detailed elements of the OBS ornament. A comparative analysis of data from the Uelen and Ekven cemeteries demonstrates that among the basic micro-elements of OBS design there are certain groups of motifs which cannot coincide on the same object. The motifs 1a, 1b of fig. 1 can never occur in the ornament containing motifs 2a, 2b, 2c. Ornaments with the motifs 1a, 1b, 1c or 2a, 2b, 2c can never contain elements 3a, 3b, 3c.

Thus OBS ornament, as H. B. Collins correctly observed, includes three different styles. All three styles are characterized by a clear typological unity (presence of micro-detailed elements, composition etc.) and yet are different from each other. Style OBS-1 takes as the basis of the design uninterrupted lines framed in triangles; style OBS-2 is based on dotted lines; and style OBS-3 is based on uninterrupted and interrupted parallel lines (fig. 1).

A comparative stratigraphy of Uelen burials enables us to establish a relative chronological sequence of these styles in OBS ornament. Burial 20(59) with style OBS-1 is overlaid by burial 19(59) with style OBS-2. Burial 2(60) containing some objects ornamented in OBS-3 overlays burial 4(60) with style OBS-2 (S. A. ARUTIUNOV/D. A. SERGEEV 1969). Hence the chronological sequence of styles in OBS must be OBS-1 to OBS-2 to OBS-3. This conclusion is confirmed by other data. In a number of burials in both the Uelen and Ekven cemeteries we meet a combination of objects ornamented in OBS-1 and OBS-2, or in OBS-2 and OBS-3. However, a combination of OBS-1 and OBS-3 is never met with. The burials containing style OBS-1 most often contain also the harpoon head with formulae 2A2x2M3 and 2A2y2M3, i.e. typologically the most archaic ones. The most representative for burials with ornament OBS-3 is the harpoon head 1BYM, which occupies one of the last places in the typological line of toggle harpoon heads (S. A. ARUTIUNOV/D. A. SERGEEV 1975)¹. In burials with style OBS-2 whalebones used as walls of buri-

als are found more often than in burials with OBS-1, and in burials with OBS-3 they are even more frequent than in burials with OBS-2. This corresponds to the well-known fact of the gradual rise of the role of whaling alongside the evolution of OBS culture.

A comparative analysis of burial complexes from the Uelen and Ekven cemeteries provides certain evidence that the ornamental styles OBS-1, OBS-2, OBS-3 correspond to three main stages in the development of OBS culture, i. e. the early, developed and late stage.

A comparison of Uelen and Ekven data with the archaeological finds published by H. B. Collins, F. G. Rainey, S. I. Rudenko and N. N. Dikov enables us to extrapolate this periodization of OBS ornament to all its variations irrespective of the localization of sites.

The presence of burials and sites, where various objects decorated in traditions of different ornamental systems are found together, enables us to correlate chronologically various Old Eskimo cultures, with reference to the periodization of OBS culture. In Uelen and Ekven there are 13 burials of a mixed OBS-OKV nature. In three of them the OKV ornament is combined with OBS-1 and OBS-2, in 8 burials with OBS-2, in two burials with OBS-2 and OBS-3. A similar correlation of OBS and OKV styles of ornamentation can be traced in the data of F. G. RAINEY (1941). Most frequently OKV ornament is met together with OBS-1, in several cases with OBS-2, and only in one case with OBS-3 (F. G. RAINEY 1941, 515, fig. 23.1). We may thus demonstrate that most probably OKV style co-existed with OBS first at the early stage of OBS development (or maybe at the end of the early stage), then at the developed stage, and finally at the beginning of the late OBS stage.

The upper limit (i. e. end) of OBS is probably nearer to the present day (i. e. later) than the upper limit of OKV. At least we must admit that among 32 burials (from Uelen and Ekven), where ornamental style OBS-3 prevails, none contains any objects with OKV ornamentation. Similarly there are no burials either where an OKV ornament is present together with any kind of Birnirk or Punuk. However, judging from the correlation of ornaments in burials 125, 135, 139 at Ekven, the "death" of OKV and the "birth" of Birnirk and Punuk fall into the same historical period, i. e. the initial phase of the late stage of OBS. Is this coincidence ac-

¹ Formulae deciphered:

2A2x2M3 means: 2 line holes; open socket; 2 lashing slots; side blades parallel to the line holes; 2 side blades; symmetric spur; 3 prongs.

2A2y2M3 is different only in that the side blades are perpendicular to the line holes.

1BYM means: 1 line hole; closed socket; end point perpendicular to the line hole; symmetric spur (without prongs).

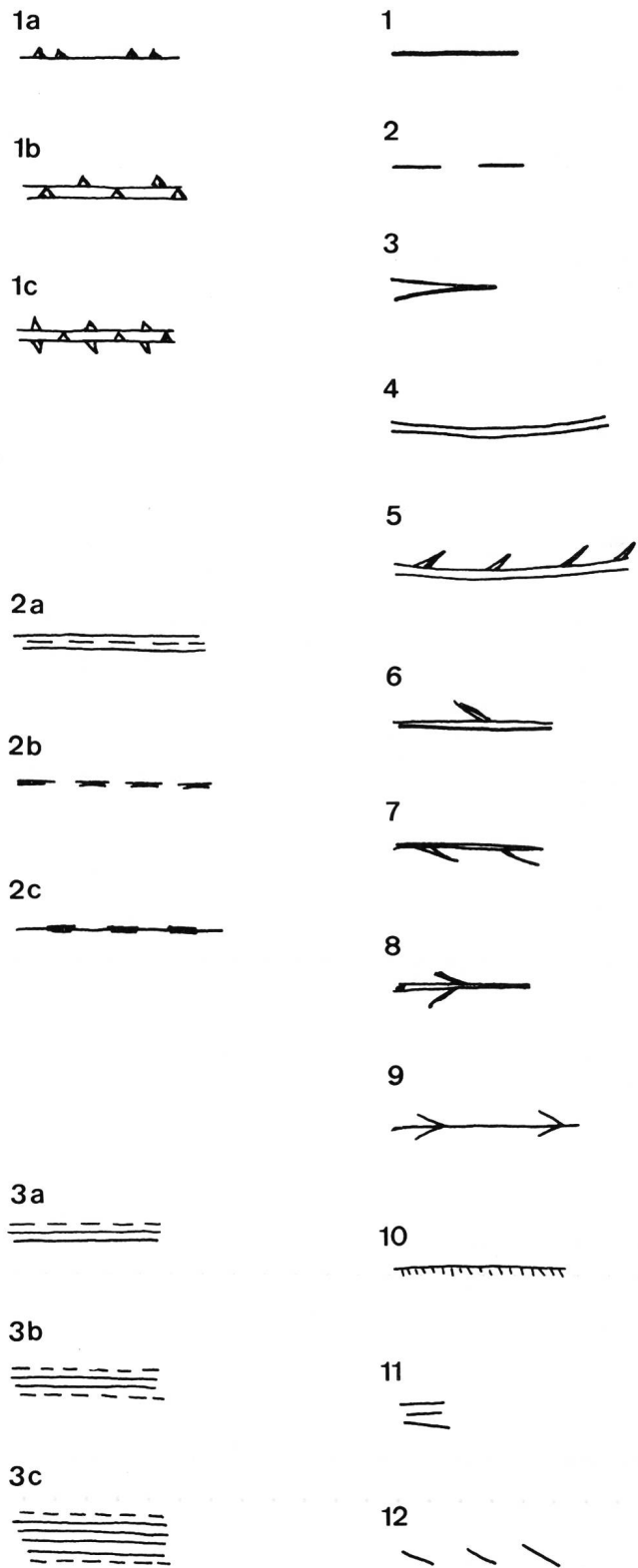


Fig. 1. Basic ornamental motifs of specifically OBS micro-detailed styles (OBS-1, OBS-2, OBS-3).

Fig. 2. Basic ornamental motifs of Okvik style.

cidental? Probably not, because between these cultures, especially between OKV and Punuk, certain moments of genetic connections and cultural continuity can be traced. Later we shall dwell upon this question in more detail.

OKV and OBS ornaments share some common motifs and principles of composition. Typologically the OKV style is closest to early OBS (OBS-1), while chronologically, at least at Uelen and Ekven, most OKV objects are correlated with OBS-2. Hence we may suppose that OBS-OKV similarities are due less to mutual influences than to genetic affinity, i. e. that there was some hypothetical common source from which both these ornamental systems originated.

Some moments of similarity between OBS and OKV ornaments do not contradict our earlier statement about the significant qualitative differences between them. The nature of these differences is so profound as to make impossible any attempt to deduce any one system from the other. The carving of micro-detailed elements of OBS ornaments requires some specific advanced technological know-how and probably instruments more sophisticated than those by which a simpler and larger OKV design was carved. Most probably OBS and OKV styles were born as a result of contamination of a certain Paleo-Eskimo ornamental tradition with two various techniques of ornamentation, differing in their ethno-cultural origins. It is also quite probable that an important part in the separation of closely related OBS and OKV ornamental styles was played by a conscious desire of their creators to reflect in their ornament a manifest ethnically differentiating pattern, i. e. to be manifestly different from each other. There are some arguments in favour of this hypothesis. In the Uelen cemetery OKV burials are concentrated in a small part of the cemetery. This signifies that their fellow tribesmen and kin clearly understood that they belonged to a certain ethnic entity, different from the OBS one (S. A. ARUTIUNOV/D. A. SERGEEV 1969, fig. 3). In Ekven, among 7 burials containing some OKV ornaments, two are placed over each other (113, 130), the other two in a common stone circle (10, 11). OKV ornament is virtually absent from classic OBS harpoon heads with two line holes. In mixed OBS-OKV burials in Uelen and Ekven OKV-ornamented objects look like separate intrusions and probably testify to some personal connections of the deceased with the OKV ethno-cultural milieu.

Data on ornaments are naturally insufficient for any definite conclusions about the ethnic entities represented by the OBS and OKV people. But as a working hypothesis we may suppose that OBS ornament indicates a rather large group of closely related tribes whose tribal territory embraced a large part of that settled by ancient Eskimos at the

beginning of the Christian era: the Asiatic shores and the islands of the Bering Sea. The OKV entity was probably a single tribe or a group of clans, genetically close to the OBS people but differing from them in various cultural features. The question of the causes of the cultural differences between the OKV and OBS people can hardly be solved today, even hypothetically. One can be sure, however, that a territorial separation could not have played any important part here and probably did not exist at all. The differences between OKV and OBS ornamentation could have been preconditioned by an influence of alien ethnic adstrata and substrata, different for the OBS and OKV people. For the OBS people it might be southern, Far Eastern adstrata and cultural impulses, for these undoubtedly took place in the history of the OBS people (H.-G. BANDI 1974. – S. A. ARUTIUNOV/D. A. SERGEEV 1969, 160. – S. A. ARUTIUNOV/D. A. SERGEEV 1975, 185). For the OKV people it might have been a cultural heritage of an earlier, possibly pre-Eskimo population assimilated by the OKV people (F. G. RAINEY 1941, 551).

A comparison of OBS and OKV ornaments with ornaments from Ipiutak, Birnirk and Punuk helps to reveal three basic cultural strata; one of them is common to all ancient Eskimo ornamental systems; the other is common to OBS and Ipiutak; and the third is common to Okvik, Birnirk and Punuk. This problem deserves a special study, and here we shall limit ourselves to some preliminary remarks.

Ornamentally, the proximity between OBS and Ipiutak cultures seems to be very close. The basic motifs and composition forms of OBS-1 are fully present in Ipiutak. A combination in a single design of the micro-detailed elements OBS-1 and OBS-2 is not typical of OBS, but is very widespread in Ipiutak. This enables us to suppose that the spread of the micro-detailed ornament went from West to East (from OBS in Chukotka to Ipiutak in Alaska) and not vice versa. Ipiutak in its turn might influence the development of the OBS culture, serving as a “bridge” or mediator through which cultural influences of Eskimos and Indians from Alaska could penetrate to Chukotka. An image of a peculiar mask which is typical of North-West Indian cultures was largely adopted by the Ipiutak people but among the OBS people it seemingly appeared only at the stage of developed OBS. Okvik, Birnirk and Punuk ornaments demonstrate a considerable proximity which may be evidence of some cultural continuity between Okvik and Birnirk (and Punuk too). In Birnirk and Punuk ornaments there are also motifs close to late OBS, which may be a result of mutual influences. Okvik and Punuk ornamental motifs can also be seen in objects found at Point Hope.

On the whole the data of ornamentation provide certain grounds for the following conclusions. By the end of the

1st millennium B. C. along the Chukotka shores and islands of the Bering Sea, on the basis of a common Paleo-Eskimo ethnic entity, there forms a group of closely affiliated OBS tribes and a less numerous OKV ethno-cultural entity. A little later a part of the OBS people migrates to Alaska and participates in the formation of the Ipiutak ethnic entity. By the beginning of the Christian era in the West and in the East of the Bering Strait area, in Chukotka and in Alaska several local variations of the ancient Eskimo culture are born. They occupy various areas of the northern Bering Sea region, receive various cultural impulses from the non-Eskimo environment, and maintain various cultural ties between each other.

In the network of these cultural connections later (by the end of the 1st millennium A. D.) the Birnirk and Punuk ethno-cultural entities are born, and the OKV people are dissolved among them. The Punuk entity gradually grows in number and importance and assimilates the remains of the OBS people as well as a part of the Birnirk people settled in Chukotka. The influence of Punuk is felt in Alaska among the late descendants of the Ipiutak culture. Judging from the character of the Eskimo and Paleo-Asiatic ornamentation of the 18th and 19th centuries, it was the Punuk people who were among the direct ancestors of Asiatic Eskimos, Coastal Chukchee and Kereks of the historic period.

Bibliography

- ARUTIUNOV, S. A./SERGEEV, D. A., *Drevnie kultury aziatskikh eskimosov (Uelenskii mogilnik)*. Moscow 1969.
- ARUTIUNOV, S. A./SERGEEV, D. A., *Problemy etnicheskoi istorii Beringomoria (Ekvenskii mogilnik)*. Moscow 1975.
- BANDI, H.-G., *Eskimo Prehistory*. College 1969.
- BANDI, H.-G., Chinesische Einflüsse auf prähistorische Eskimokulturen. *Bulletin de la Société Suisse des Américanistes*, No. 38. Genève 1974, 17-20.
- COLLINS, H. B., *Archeology of St. Lawrence Island, Alaska* (Smithsonian Institution, Miscellaneous Publications, Volume 96, No. 1). Washington 1937.
- DIKOV, N. N., Uelenskii mogilnik po dannym raskopok v 1956, 1958, 1963 gg. *Istoria i kultura narodov Severa Dalnego Vostoka. Trudy SVKNII*, vyp. 17. Moscow 1967.
- DIKOV, N. N., *Arkheologicheskie pamiatniki Kamchatki, Chukotki i Verkhnei Kolymy (Azia na styke s Amerikoi v drevnosti)*. Moscow 1977.
- DIKOV, N. N., *Drevnie Kultury Severo-Vostochnoi Azii (Azia na styke s Amerikoi v drevnosti)*. Moscow 1979.
- LARSEN, H. and RAINEY, F., *Ipiutak and the Arctic Whale Hunting Culture* (Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, Volume 42). New York 1948.
- RAINEY, F. G., Eskimo Prehistory: The Okvik Site on the Punuk Islands. *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, Volume 37, Part IV. New York 1941, 453-569.
- RUDENKO, S. I., *The Ancient Culture of the Bering Sea and the Eskimo Problem* (Arctic Institute of North America, Anthropology of the North: Translations from Russian Sources, No. 1). Toronto 1961.

Dr. Sergei Alexandrovič Arutiunov
Dr. Michael Mokovič Bronstein
Institute of Ethnography
19, Dim. Ulianova
117036 Moscow / USSR

