

Earring — Kulunguaq

KULUNGUAQA KATAIGHIYAQA. – I DROPPED MY EARRING.



Photo: Child making dentalium shell earrings.

Earrings are one of the many items of personal adornment that Alutiiq people once used to express social identity. Like labrets, nose pins, necklaces, belts, and decorated clothing, earrings were worn by men and women and incorporated valuable materials to illustrate the wearer's status. Historic paintings from the early nineteenth century show Alutiiq people with earrings tied in their earlobes and around the rims of their ears, with up to eight piercings per ear. These earrings were fashioned from strings of European glass trade beads. Other common materials included handmade beads of shell, coal, amber, and ivory and slender dentalium shells from southeast Alaska.

How long have Alutiiq people worn earrings? Archaeological data suggest that this practice may be more than 2,000 years old. Beads and other jewelry begin appearing in Kodiak's archaeological record about 2,700 years ago and coincide with a period of population growth, extensive long-distance exchange, and increased warfare. It appears that people began wearing jewelry at this time as a way to express their affiliation with particular social groups. Earrings may have been part of this expression.

People wearing earrings are also depicted on incised pebbles, small pieces of engraved slate that appear in archaeological sites about six hundred years old. Although the function of these pebbles is unknown, they show people in ceremonial dress, and some are wearing vertically dangling strings of beads that appear to be earrings.