

Mortar — Miiliwik

IQMILITAALLRIIT MIILWIGMEK ATURLUTENG CUUML. – THEY USED TO MAKE SNUFF IN A MORTAR.



Photo: Whalebone mortar, Koniag, Inc. Collection, Karluk One, AM193.

A mortar is a cup or bowl designed for grinding or crushing. There are two Alutiiq words for mortar. *Milliwik* comes from the root word *miili-* meaning grind, and *ciiwik* from the root word *cii-* for smashing. Both words can be used to describe similar tools. This dichotomy is also found in the Alutiiq terms for pestles. If you are going to grind tobacco to make snuff, you would use a *miiliwik* and a *millisuun*—a place for grinding and a tool for grinding. However, if you were crushing berries or fish eggs for cooking, you would use a *ciiwik* and a *ciisuun*—a place for mashing and a masher.

These terms and clues from archaeological finds suggest that there were once different types of mortars. Alutiiq people carved large mortars from sea mammal bone, hollowing out whale vertebrae to make bowls with a rough surface for grinding. Elders remember these tools being used to make *iqmik*, a mixture of tobacco, wood ash, and plants used as snuff. A much smaller sea mammal bone mortar from Karluk is cup-shaped, with tall, sloping sides and a wooden plug in the

bottom that could be removed to let the contents out. Smaller pieces like this one may have been used for mashing medicinal plant materials or grinding pigments for paint.