

Thule

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Numerous place names in Greenland are beset with some confusion, and Thule is possibly the most nonspecific of them all. An attempt has been made in the following paper, therefore, to set out some of the various meanings which have been attached to the word.

ULTIMA THULE

In times of antiquity, "Thule" was the name given to an archipelago far to the north of the Scandinavian seas. The Greek explorer Pytheas told his contemporaries about this far-away place, and about the year 330 B.C. he sailed northward from Marseilles in France in search of the source of amber. When he reached Britain, he heard of an archipelago further north known as "Thule". The name was apparently Celtic; the archipelago what are now known as the Shetland Isles.

After Pytheas' time, the ancients called Scandinavia "Thule". In poetry, it became "Ultima Thule", i.e. "farthest Thule", a distant northern place, geographically undefined and shrouded in esoteric mystery.

As the frontiers of man's exploration gradually expanded, the legendary Ultima Thule acquired a more northerly location. It moved with the Vikings from the Faroe Islands to Iceland, and, when Iceland was colonized in the ninth century A.D., Greenland became "Thule" in folklore.

THULE STATION

Perhaps Knud Rasmussen had these historical facts in mind when he founded a trading post in 1910 among the Polar Eskimos and called the store "Thule Station". The committee managing Rasmussen's station was, incidentally, always referred to as the Cape York Committee, and the official name of the station was "Cape York Station, Thule".

Behind the pyramid-shaped base of the rock called Mount Dundas by British explorers, but generally known as Thule Mountain, on North Star Bay, the best natural harbour in the area, the Polar Eskimos had placed their settlement, Umanaq (meaning heart-shaped). Here Rasmussen built his house (76°30'N). The year before (1909) he had assisted a branch of the Danish Lutheran Church, the Greenland Church Cause, in founding the missionary station "Nordstjernen" (North Star), named after the nearby bay, at the same Polar Eskimo settlement, Umanaq.

THULE EXPEDITIONS

The Thule Station gave its name to Knud Rasmussen's scientific "Thule

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Expeditions" of which the trading post was the geographical and financial base. The two first Thule Expeditions went north around Greenland to Peary Land. The third Thule Expedition — the only one of which Rasmussen was not a member — went to Ellesmere Land. The Fourth, Sixth and Seventh Thule Expeditions all went to Angmagssalik in East Greenland. On the Fifth Thule Expedition (1921-24), the greatest of them all, Rasmussen visited most of the Eskimo communities along the northern coasts of Canada and Alaska.

THULE CULTURE

On the Fifth Thule Expedition, Knud Rasmussen and Therkel Mathiassen discovered a prehistoric Eskimo culture similar to that discovered in 1915 in "Commer's Midden" near Thule Station. This prehistoric culture was, therefore, named the "Thule Culture" in the literature on the subject. It was an Arctic whale-hunting culture which had originated in the Bering Strait area and spread along the northern coast of Alaska and Canada to Greenland, and settled in the Thule District around 900 A.D. The culture later moved southwards to the west and east coasts of Greenland. The Thule Culture people were the ancestors of the Greenlanders of today, and this culture is to be found not only in the Thule District, but also over most of Greenland, Canada and Alaska. Literature dealing with the Thule Culture, therefore, may not only have little to do with the "Thule" of the Polar Eskimos, but may not even refer to Greenland at all.

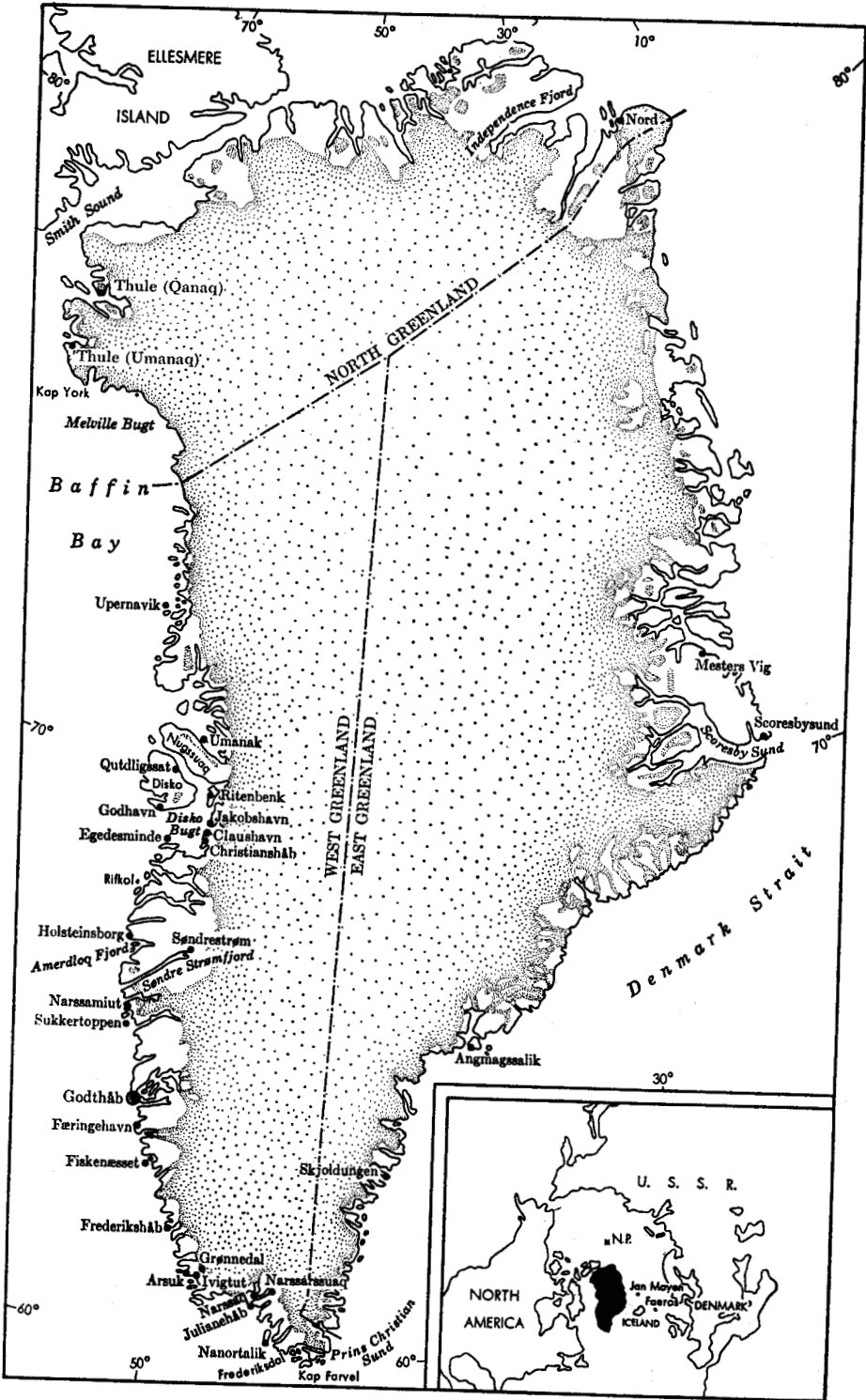
THULE PEOPLE

The Thule Culture should not be confused with the Polar Eskimo culture of the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries in the Thule District. Some authors apply the term "Thule People" correctly to those of the Thule Culture, but others have quite mistakenly given it to the Polar Eskimos. To add to the confusion, the Polar Eskimos are sometimes called, in older works, by other names, such as "Arctic Highlanders", "Itaner", "Central Eskimos", "Smith Sound Eskimos", "Cape York Eskimos", and "Thule Eskimos". The last-mentioned should not be used.

The author of this paper proposes that the term "Polar Eskimos" be used in the future as the standard means of reference to the native Eskimo population inside the Thule District of northwestern Greenland, while the term "Thule People" be reserved for those of the prehistoric Thule Culture.

THULE DISTRICT

According to Rasmussen (*Meddelelser om Grønland*), 60:517) the Thule District, like all other districts in Greenland, was named after the trading post or the missionary station established there. Thus Thule District got its name from Thule Station. This same area was also called "Cape York District", due to the fact that Cape York was, between 1818 and 1910, the most frequented place of call for both whalers and expeditions.



This vast territory, extending between Melville Bay (75°N) and the latitude of 79°N, was not brought within the Danish colonial administration of Greenland until 1937 (when Thule District came into existence formally), even though Danish sovereignty over the whole of Greenland was recognized internationally in 1921. As a consequence of this, Thule is not always to be found listed in works of reference under "North Greenland", a territory which before 1950 included that part of the west coast of Greenland which extended northwards from a point about 50 km south of Holsteinsborg. The present extent of North Greenland is more limited (see map). The population of North Greenland in 1974 was just over 700, as compared to West Greenland's 44,000 and East Greenland's 3,100 (approx.).

THULE AIR BASE AND NEW THULE

With the onset of the "cold war", it became necessary for the United States Air Force to have a base as far north as possible, accessible by sea in summer, and with room for a very large air-strip (3 km) and associated buildings. After negotiations between the United States and Denmark, it was agreed that such a base might be built on low ground adjacent to the Thule Station, provided the Polar Eskimo settlement of Umanaq was rebuilt farther north at U.S. expense to compensate for the ecological disruptions and, therefore, reduced hunting possibilities which would occur.

Thule Air Base was constructed during the years 1951-55. In its heyday, it was manned by 6,000 American airmen who, in everyday usage, referred to it either as "TAB" or simply as "Thule". The base's complement now consists of less than 1,500 American military personnel and an equal number of Danish civilians.

The new village was built at the Polar Eskimo settlement of Qanaq (a word which in rough translation means "the place where one first sees the sun rise"). The Danes insisted that the name "Thule" be used for it, so "Thule" was, in effect, once again pushed northwards. Although Qanaq was officially named "Thule", it is known in daily use as "New Thule" or "Thule Town". The settlement Umanaq, "Old Thule", abandoned by the Polar Eskimos, was officially named "Dundas" after the English name for Thule Mountain. A Danish weather station is situated at Dundas. The Polar Eskimos still call the settlements Umanaq and Qanaq respectively (see map).

"THE TOOLIES"

The Americans have left the legacy of a slang expression for Thule which has become a colloquialism among non-native Alaskan people. "The Toolies" has come to mean a wilderness, remote and undefined, a place where a primitive, undeveloped society exists. In so naming these isolated areas, the Americans have perhaps contributed, in a light-hearted way, to the removal of an atmosphere of mystery from them. But for those to whom "Thule" means an ancient past, a concept of primitiveness far from the centre of civilization, linked to poetry and literature, it would have been better had the Polar Eskimos' own place names been officially adopted. That a planetoid (no. 279) has, in astronomy, also been called "Thule" has only added to the confusion.