

Caribou and Iglulik Inuit Kayaks

A century ago the Tyrrell brothers descended the Kuu ("The River" in Inuktitut, or Thelon River). As they neared Qamani'tuaq ("The Big Broad," or Baker Lake), elegant slender kayaks appeared and easily outpaced their voyageur-driven canoes. Evidence of kayaks in the form of broken willow ribs discarded during bending had already been seen well inland on Avaaliqq ("Far Off," or Dubawnt River). The Tyrrells were in the country of the Caribou Eskimos (so labelled by the Danish Fifth Thule Expedition of 1921-24), who actually comprised several distinct named groups. The two northern ones who lived largely inland by the later 19th century are called Ha'vaqtuurmiut ("Whirlpools Aplenty People") and Qairnirmiut ("Bedrock People"). Their kayaks were especially sleek and well made, with striking long, thin horns at the ends. The stern horn angled up, while the bow horn was level after a slight jog up at its root.

These eye-catching slim end horns in the Caribou and Iglulik Inuit kayak design are not only attractive but also very useful. With them someone on shore, perhaps perched on a rock in the shallows, can steady the narrow, tippy craft as it starts off or returns. In case of upset, they provide handholds for rescuers. In a typical rescue not too far offshore,

the capsized victim exits his kayak and is towed hanging on around the base of the upturned stern horn of the rescue kayak. The overturned craft is retrieved by righting it and towing it with the stern horn tucked under one arm. The horns also help secure the cross poles tied on at their bases when forming a catamaran. With the poles spaced well apart, normal synchronized paddling can be done. A couple of spoon-shaped red ornaments might be hung from the bow horn tip to swing there gaily as *kuviahunnihautik* ("for the joy"). After all, to kayak swiftly is elating — a high point in the arctic summer.

The characteristic end horn configuration is useful, too, as an indicator of possible historical connections. The jogged-up stem is found on prehistoric models carved of thick bark in the Birnirk culture of ca. 500-900 A.D. far to the west in northern Alaska. An actual stern horn, shorter than those used on Hudson Bay, has been recovered as well (Ford, 1959: Figs. 78, 79). Since the Birnirk culture developed into the widespread Thule culture, which is immediately ancestral to historical Inuit, the Caribou-Iglulik kayak design might be seen as quintessentially Inuit.

This design was observed at Iglulik in northwest Foxe Basin in the 1820s by Captains Parry (1824:506) and Lyon (1824:321) being used for hunting caribou and sea mammals, including bowhead whales. Among the coastal "Iglulik Inuit," sea hunting with harpoons, floats, darts and killing lances predominated. This ethnological designation includes Iglulingmiut around Foxe Basin, Tununirusirmiut of Admiralty Inlet, Tununirmiut of the Pond Inlet region and Aivilingmiut to the south by Roes Welcome Sound. To the south again, around Chesterfield Inlet towards Churchill, the Qairnirmiut, Hauniquurmiut, Ha'vaqtuurmiut and Paallirmiut were also primarily coastal saltwater hunters until the last quarter of the 19th century. These latter "Caribou Inuit" became mainly inlanders when commercial whaling supplied ammunition for firearms to enable them to get enough caribou in the difficult winter conditions to survive without sea mammals (Arima, 1975:219-220). In the same period the Iglulik Inuit had their kayaks supplanted by New England whaleboats, since after a season it was more profitable to dispose of them as payment or in trade than to carry them back.

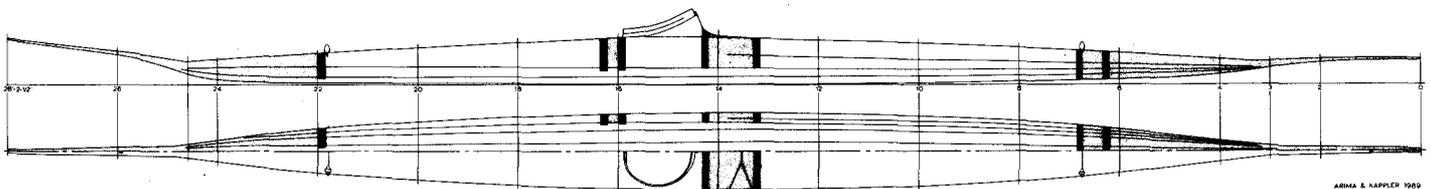


A. B. Tyrrell. Aug. 1894.

Accompanying the Tyrrells on the Whirlpools River, August 1894, these kayakers have slowed right down. Shallow draft helps speed. Pointed paddle blade is a carryover from sea hunting. Slight bump on near stern horn is from a drain plug. (Thomas Fisher Library)



QAIRNIRMIUT QAYAQ
AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY 601/3547
COLLECTED BY CAPT. GEORGE CONYER, LATE 1890'S
LENGTH 850 cm 28' 2 1/2"
WIDTH 47 cm 18 1/2"
DEPTH TO SHEER 30 cm 11 3/4"
HEIGHT 28 3/4" 11 3/8"
DAMAGED ESP. BOW LINES RECONSTRUCTED AIDED BY BOAS 1901:78, 77, 110, 105
BLACK STRIPES ■ RED PAINT ON LIGHT SEALSKIN

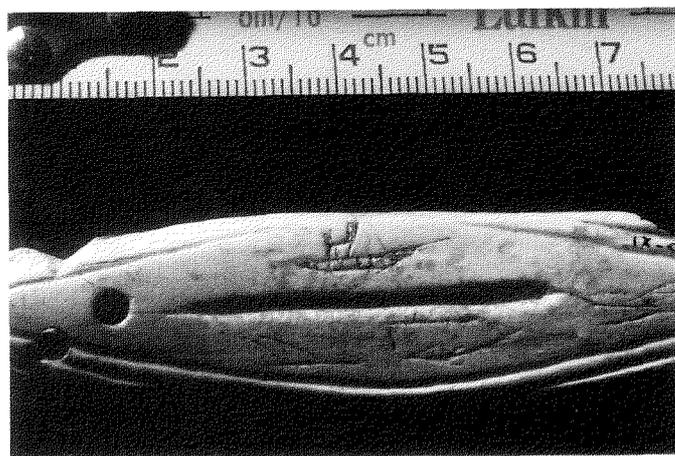


Caribou Inuit kayak — now badly broken, it is drawn to match measurements given by Boas (1901:76), but those may be from an already warped condition and the stern could be a bit higher for better handling.

As both whales and boats got used up by the end of the 19th century, kayaks were revived among the Iglulik Inuit but, mysteriously, in the different form of the wide, big-bowed east Canadian arctic design. This variant had a shallowly rounded multi-chine, rather than a flat bottom, as if hybridized. While this form appears recent, the earlier Thule culture design might have been ancestral to the flat-bottomed east arctic kayak, as suggested by a couple of carved wood Thule models from northwest Baffin and Bathurst islands. These models are flattened at the very bottom amidships and are deeper forward. Their cutwaters are sharp, but that is a feature traceable back to Alaska. End horns are lacking, as in other prehistoric models including round-bottomed Thule examples, perhaps being too fine to show. They are depicted, however, in engravings on ivory, bone and antler, as on the illustrated Thule image from Cape Dorset just 17 mm long with an exaggerated jogged stem horn (Canadian Museum of Civilization IV-C-2256). This south Baffin find confirms that the Birnirk-Thule design existed



Carrying an Iglulik kayak to go after caribou, stern first and no hands, the high cockpit front steadying it behind. It is light enough although covered in sealskin. Basically maritime adaptation is reflected in the deck fittings of baleen, edged paddle blade and birdskin jacket. (Parry, 1924: facing p. 274)

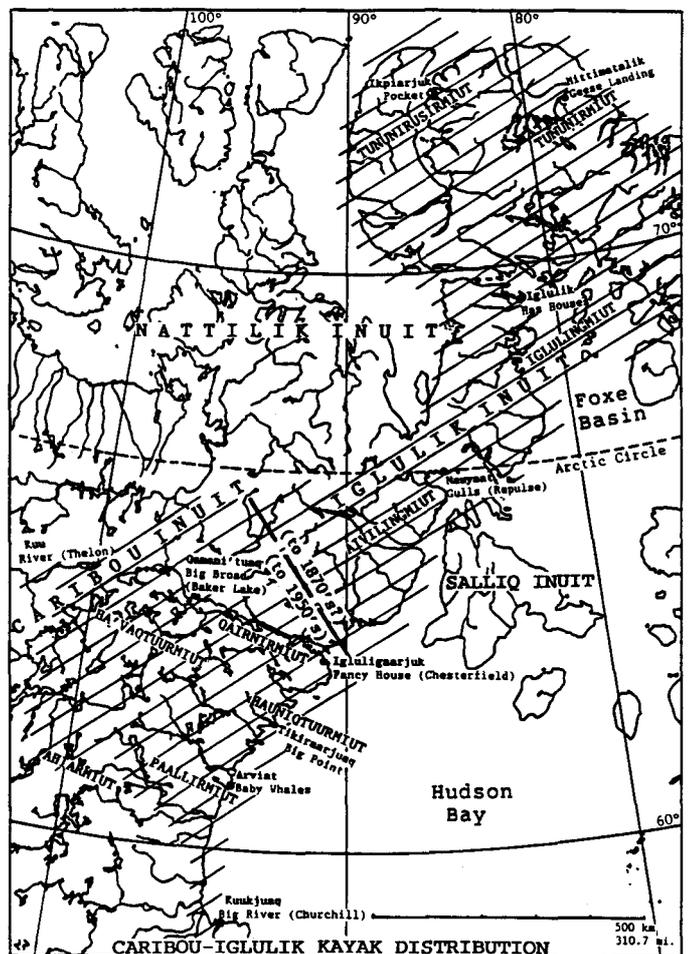


Thule culture kayak drawing from Cape Dorset (Canadian Museum of Civilization IV-C-2256). The characteristic bow with jogged-up sprit is emphasized, while the stern is reduced, bringing recent east Canadian arctic proportions to mind.

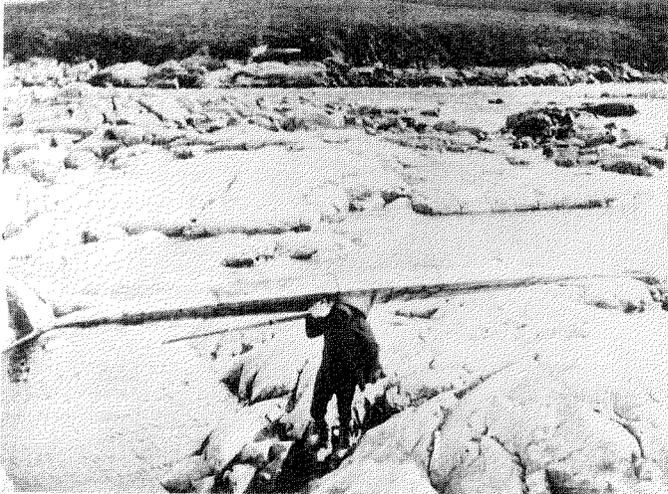
well inside the historical east arctic kayak area. But it is premature to say that the Thule kayak simply evolved into the latter, since the possibility of there having been a Dorset culture design as well has not been entirely eliminated. Whether or not the Dorset people had watercraft remains a fascinating question.

The Caribou-Iglulik kayak hull is multi-chine, with seven bottom stringers. Although built narrow for speed, it has quite "parallel" sides and full ends, maximizing its width for stability and volume. The gunwales are humped up amidships for depth, while the ends stay low for less windage. Blunt below, the ends still slip easily through the water since they are well raked, curving gradually from the bottom. The bow not being too sharp lessens the tendency to veer off heading into a current, as in a river. The bottom might be built quite level lengthwise for low draft and immersed cross-section for speed or be given some rocker curve to turn quicker, as Paallirmiut prefer for their rapids-ridden rivers.

In this century, size varied considerably, as is common in kayaks, but typically was about 5.3-7.3 m (17-24 ft.) long, including 30-75 cm (12-18 in.) horns, by 40-55 cm (16-22 in.) wide. Maximum width comes about a foot before the cockpit, whose front is amidships. The hoop is tilted high in front to facilitate entry and exit as well as to fend off waves.



Caribou-Iglulik kayak distribution, with differing approximate terminal dates for the two divisions. The Iglulik Inuit changed to the wider east Canadian arctic kayak, though with a multi-chine rather than a flat bottom.



Portaging a Caribou Inuit kayak in 1894. This time the kayak is carried at an angle, weight mainly on the shoulders with paddle helping, a better setup for the terrain. Caribou skin cover is extra light but weaker and less waterproof than sealskin. (Thomas Fisher Library)

Inland at least the cockpit was not sealed except imperfectly on occasion by a caribou skin wrapped about the waist. Lightly built with a ringed seal or caribou skin cover, the craft might weigh only about 15-20 kg (33-44 lbs.) for easy portaging, even "no hands." The double paddle was usually about an arm's span and a half long, with blades 9-10 cm (3.5-4 in.) wide, narrower and pointed for sea hunting for silence, blunter for sprinting to intercept caribou.

More is known about caribou interception than sea mammal hunting use. The fall migration hunt at water crossings was of key importance to the hunters' inland adaptation. At that time the fur is at the right intermediate length for clothing and the skin has healed from warble fly larva holes. Since inland snowhouses were unheated for lack of sea mammal oil, the warm caribou clothing was essential. At a crossing the caribou could simply take to the water or might be scared in by people waving things or making wolf sounds or by devices such as *inuksuk* stone pillars erected singly or in rows. The hunters waited motionless in their kayaks, which might be painted with bands of red ochre bordered with black to look like boulders lining the shore. When the caribou were halfway across, the kayaks shot out after them. If there were a current and enough hunters, the caribou could be

surrounded and headed upstream until they tired and became easy prey. Even with just one or two kayaks, effective methods existed. The light lance used was about 2 m (7 ft.) long, and a spare might be carried. In lancing, the animals were not killed outright but wounded enough so that they would make shore and collapse. Those expiring in the water were towed in up to several at a time on a line. This fall hunt gave rich returns, with surplus meat for caching for the winter. At this time, the big bull skins are at their best for covering kayaks.

Transport use cannot be overlooked. In moving about their country in summer, the people needed the kayak to cross the many water barriers. Passengers and baggage were carried on deck and inside. Kayaks were regularly rafted together, four being ideal. Extended voyages by kayak were also made, since historically there were no umiaks in the region. The northern Caribou Inuit used to go on trading trips to Kugjuaq ("Big River," as Churchill is called), even from as far as the Dubawnt River several hundred miles away by water. With fair winds, sail was set and rafted kayaks could cover much distance going around the clock with the midnight sun.

A few years ago the West Hudson Bay design represented traditional kayaks in a Canadian watercraft stamp series.

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