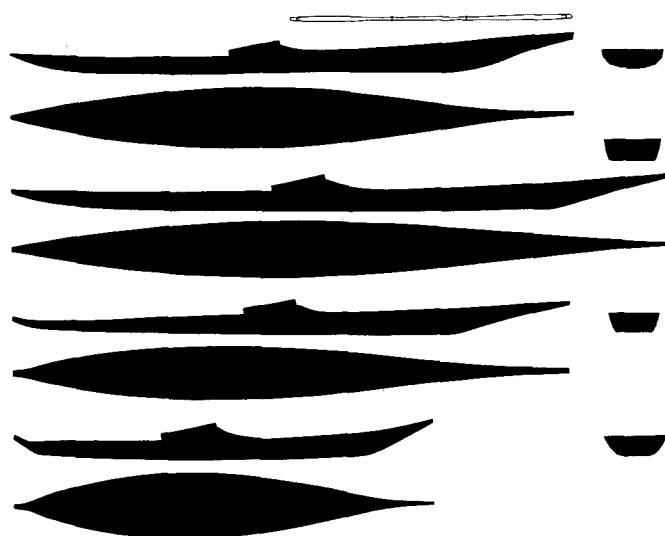


East Canadian Arctic Kayak

Hunting is the *raison d'être* of the East Canadian Arctic kayak, which should be thought of as one part of a greater weapons system. Even the great bowhead whale was hunted by kayak, sometimes solo, and the capture of such a mountain of meat and fat was the grandest achievement. Attacking a big walrus was also quite a feat. Seals were the basic prey. The East Canadian Arctic kayak existed into the 1960s, when it was superseded by the outboard powered canoe. Recently a score have been built at Iglulik, Mittimatalik, and Inukjuaq, more for recreation than hunting perhaps, and yet highly important in terms of Inuit identity and cultural continuity. Also, visitors to the Eastern Arctic might be able once again to glimpse one of its prettiest sights — long, sleek kayaks with graceful, well-raked bows cutting easily through the dark blue waves.

Several main regional styles might be distinguished as North Baffin, Northwest Greenland (c. 1860-1930), East and South Baffin and North Labrador, Atlantic Labrador, and West Labrador; finer distinctions can be made, too. Although they vary considerably in size and shape, these kayaks share a recognizable basic pattern, with a long, rising bow, low stern, wide, flat deck and narrower bottom, usually but not always flat. The cockpit hoop, tilted for easy entry, appears set well aft, with that great overhanging prow in front. Maximum width is past amidships, often behind the cockpit, in contrast to most other kinds of kayaks, which are widest amidships or, commonly, before. Without cargo aft, the bow



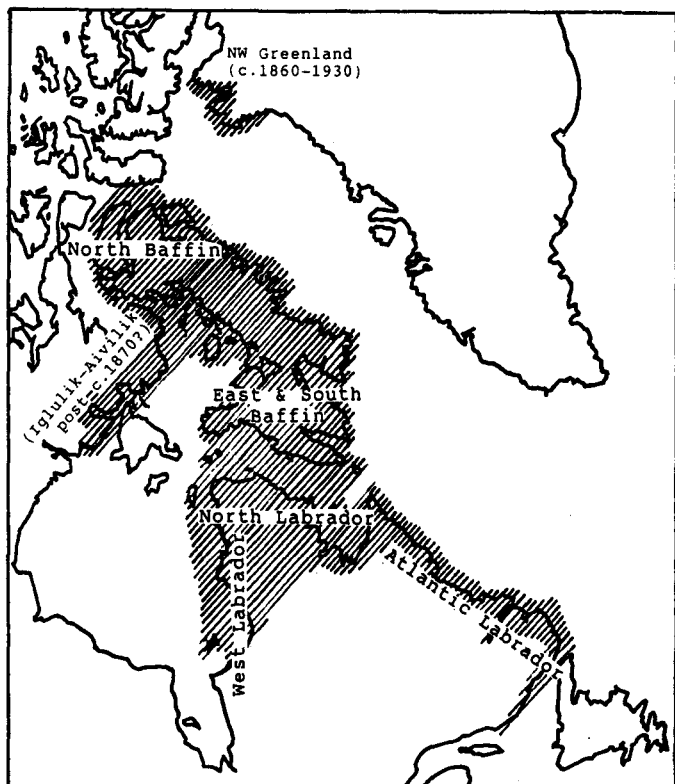
Examples of regional varieties, from top: North Baffin, Hudson Strait, Atlantic Labrador, Central East Hudson Bay.

rides lower than the stern, which is just awash, and the tendency is to turn into the wind. This hull shape is fast and easy to propel. Beamy for kayaks with the bottom flat (shallowly rounded in North Baffin) and the sides flared, the design is very stable, particularly when a good 6 m or more long.

Length ranges from 4 m for a floe-edge hunting retriever to 8.5 m for voyaging with cargo. Width can go from about 55 to 80 cm. Most models fell within 5-8 m by 60-70 cm. A typical hunting width was about 62 cm at the deck and 42 cm on the bottom, hull depth to the gunwales being about 25 cm at the cockpit. When harpoons and darts were displaced by firearms half a century ago, hulls were widened several centimetres, since fast swimmers like narwhal and beluga no longer had to be overtaken to within hand-cast missile range.

Strongly constructed, the East Arctic kayak commonly weighed 35-45 kg, sometimes much more, the maximum being close to 70 kg! To carry such a heavyweight to the water, a hunter needed his wife's help. On the other hand, smaller models for rivers weighed about 25 kg or less for easy portaging.

Load capacity varied but was comparatively great given the ample hull volume, with displacement increasing quickly from the flared sides as the waterline rose. A larger kayak could hold a bearded seal, and the big Cape Smith model carried up to ten ringed seals, inside and on the decks. Towing was also done, out of necessity with whales and walrus. Air could be blown in under the skin or a float inserted to keep the game from sinking. A passenger might be transported inside the front or sitting or lying on the after deck. Rafting together of two or more kayaks was done mostly to ride out storms rather than to move baggage or people, as was common with the more inland river and lake kayaks west of Hudson Bay. Some inland use occurred,



Historical area, schematic.

particularly in west and north Labrador Peninsula, where lighter (e.g., Payne River) or longer (Great Whale River) models were known, and where caribou were lanced at crossings. But the East Arctic kayak is primarily associated with sea hunting.

Mention might be made of the 1940s Belcher Islands two-seater, of which four were built, probably stimulated by a serviceman at Great Whale who knew of them in Alaska. Very wide (85 cm in a museum reconstruction), they were still fast by local standards and served as transports to the mainland before displacement by freighter canoes in the 1950s.

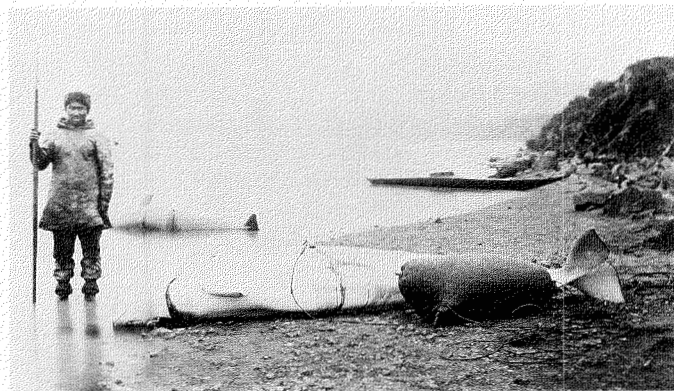
The *pautik*, or double paddle, was half as long as the kayak, with narrow blades three fingers wide to catch less wind. It was rested on the cockpit coaming when the kayaker was not trying to be silent or sealed in. Sharp bone or ivory tips and edging on the blades helped for silence. In places a single paddle was optional for stalking through ice-strewn waters.

Fully equipped for sea hunting, the East Canadian Arctic kayak packed quite an arsenal. The major weapon was the heavy *igimaaq* harpoon, about 2 m long with a shock-absorbing breakaway foreshaft of walrus tusk whose curve helped pivot the ivory harpoon head, or *tuugaq*, over at the strike to set the tail spurs. When ready for action, the *igimaaq* was positioned alongside the cockpit on rests pointing aft, so that picked up from above it would be turned forward in one motion. Its line was coiled before the hunter in a round rack or just on the deck, then run back past the cockpit to the sealskin float, or *avataq*, behind.



Set to throw the *igimaaq*, Hudson Bay, 1928 (National Archives of Canada PA 44871).

For big sea mammals a skin-covered hoop drag was attached before the float, and two or three floats might be used in a bunch. The heavy *igimaaq* was a close-range weapon; it might even be thrust into the bowhead whale. The tough-skinned and dangerous walrus was harpooned when just outside the sweep of the paddle.



At Little Whale River, c. 1865 (National Archives of Canada C-8160).

Harpooned animals usually still had to be killed, and for the larger ones there was a heavy lance, the *anguvigaq*, with a straight ivory foreshaft tipped with a blade, recently of iron. Again the foreshaft was tied to the wooden mainshaft in a way that allowed disjuncting at impact to avoid actual breakage. Repeated strikes might be made. The *anguvigaq* was carried on the after deck, to left or right as preferred, while the long-handled billhook, or *niksik*, was kept on the other side, the two helping to keep deck loads from falling overboard. A lighter lance, the *kapuutik*, was used for caribou on inland waters. The *igimaaq* was transported on the forward deck at the right. To its left was the *nuiq*, or dart, hurled with the extra leverage of a throwing stick, the *nuqsaaq*, at waterfowl and smaller seals like the ringed and baby bearded seal. To the left again might be the *akligaq*, or bladder dart, which was also propelled with the *nuqsaaq*. It was a lighter harpoon for game at greater distance whose shaft, with breakaway foreshaft and the bladder float, stayed attached to the detachable head. Deck cross straps and loops kept gear secured.

Other equipment included a stiletto for dispatching small seals if a hit on the head did not suffice, a towing hook, and a trolling lure for fish. The gill net could be counted as a recent addition, while bolas and sling are possible former accessories. Still more gear can be listed: a paddle drip silencer mat, though just some seaweed or cloth might serve, wound plugs to save the blood, carcass-inflating tube and stopper, deck de-icing knife, and cleaning stick to clear inside nooks and crannies of debris, which wear holes in the cover if lodged between it and the framework. Special clothing included waterproof jacket and pants of split gutskin strips and long gauntlet mitts for cold weather. The jacket could be tied down around the cockpit hoop; however, rolling is not recorded with certainty. A little sail might be put up for running with the wind, its stick mast tied against the bow. A larger sail could be set with kayaks rafted together.

How did the distinctive East Canadian Arctic design arise? Its pronounced prow, rearset beam, and flat bottom are unique. Could the preceding Dorset and/or Pre-Dorset cultures have been the source, as seems to be the case with the East Canadian Arctic harpoon head design? What looks very much like a flat-bottomed kayak rib has been excavated lately in Disko Bay, West Greenland, in Saqqaq (Pre-Dorset) remains about 4000 years old (Grønnow and Meldgaard, 1988:432 fig.). In historic times the closest relatives of the East Canadian



The Kangiqsukjuaq fleet, Wakeham Bay, 1904-05 (National Archives of Canada PA 51468, photo A.P. Low).

Arctic design are the West, South and East Greenland kayaks, which in the 18th century were similarly constructed and quite flat-bottomed, though very narrow, widest amidships, and more equal-ended. The Polar Inuit kayaks in Northwest Greenland were boxy 19th-century re-introductions from Baffinland, now replaced by current West Greenland models. To the west of the East Arctic area, hull shape changes completely, becoming round bottomed, with neither the sharp triangular cutwater bow nor the aft-set beam. This narrow, cigar-shaped design extending west to the Bering Strait may be from the Thule culture. Little can be said with assurance on design origins, since archaeological evidence of ancient forms remains scanty. However it arose, the East Arctic kayak was well suited to its use and provided the Inuit a vital edge in their successful pursuit of life.

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