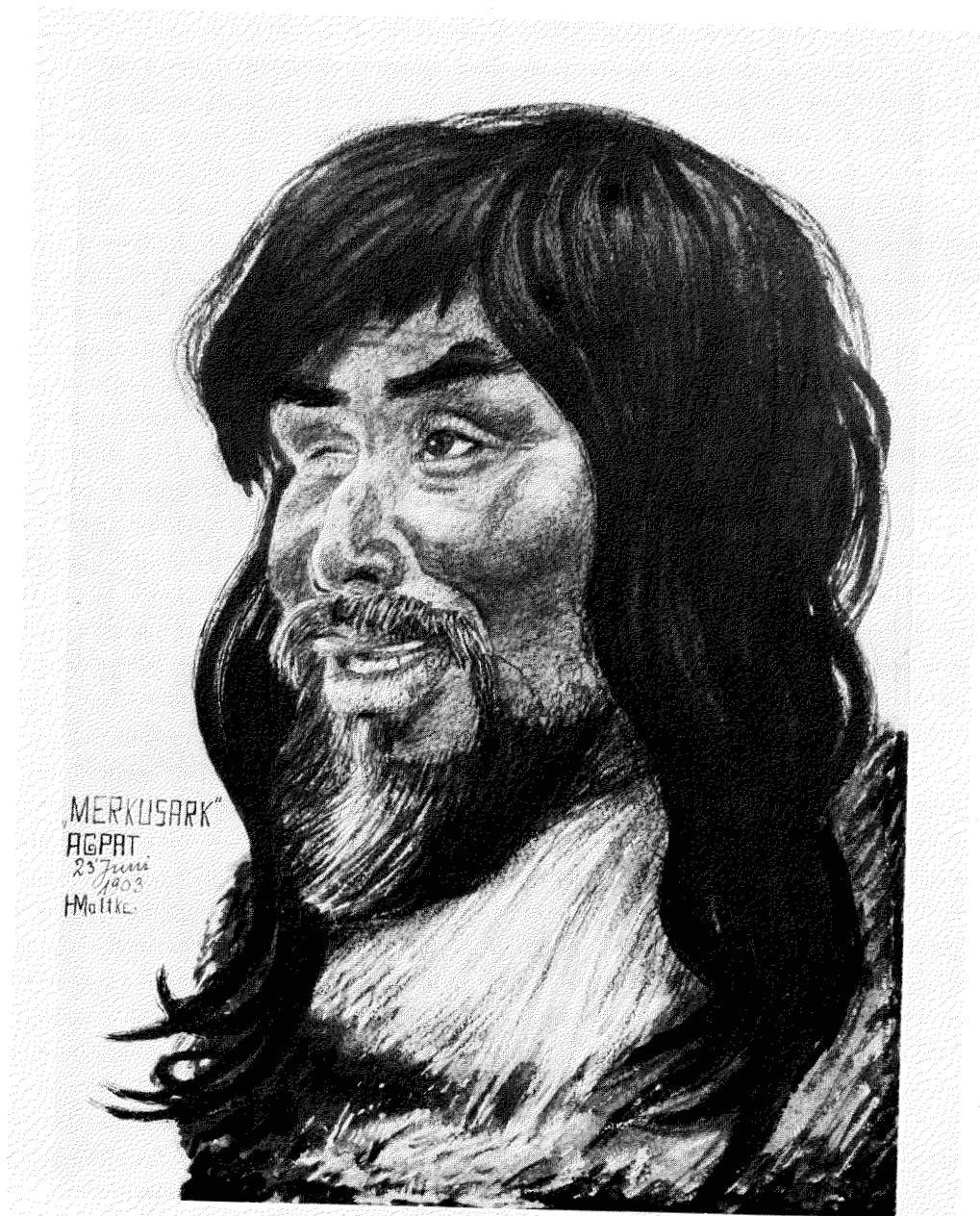


Merqusâq (ca. 1850-1916)

In 1903 when Knud Rasmussen, a member of Mylius-Erichsen's "Danish Literary Expedition", visited the Polar Eskimos for the first time, he interviewed a man called Merqusâq, one of the last of a group of Baffin Island Inuit who had migrated north and crossed to Greenland half a century previously.

Merqusâq was born during a winter journey, probably in Admiralty Inlet or Pond Inlet. His parents were Uqqumiut people who had come from the region of Cumberland Sound around 1840, along with several other families escaping a blood feud. After their enemies pursued them to Pond Inlet, these people decided to move even farther north, crossing



Portrait courtesy of the National Museum of Denmark, Department of Ethnography.

Lancaster Sound probably in 1851. Still in his infancy, Merqusâq would later recall little of his home on Baffin Island.

The migrants, numbering more than forty, were led by two men: Qitlaq, who was Merqusâq's uncle, and Uqi. Settling amidst plentiful game on the southeast coast of Devon Island, they were visited at Dundas Harbour in 1853 by the explorer Edward A. Inglefield. Inglefield told them of the Inuit he had seen on the Greenland shore and probably showed them his map of the region.

Merqusâq told Rasmussen that after hearing of Inuit on the other side of the sea, Qitlaq "could never settle down to anything again." He finally decided to search for the new people, and his drive and prestige as shaman were so strong that the migrants chose to follow him. In 1858, McClintock met the old leader and some of his followers near Cape Horsburgh on Devon Island's east coast.

The journey was long and difficult. They spent the darkest part of the winters in stone-and-turf houses, leaving only when the sun returned. Yet part of the summer had to be spent encamped, to allow them to stockpile food for the next winter. They had to pass over rough ice and to cross dangerous glaciers. Near Talbot Inlet most of the original migrants, having tired of following Qitlaq without ever seeing the promised land, lost faith in the old man. Led by Uqi, they turned back to the south, where most were to die of starvation several years later.

Merqusâq was barely adolescent when he crossed Smith Sound to Greenland. The group settled near Etah, and in the following year they finally met the long-sought Polar Eskimos, with whom they lived for several years. Merqusâq's people introduced several cultural elements — notably the kayak and the bow — which had been forgotten by these northernmost inhabitants of Greenland.

Not too many years passed before Qitlaq, who had just killed a local shaman, became sick. Wishing to see his homeland once more before dying, he decided to return to Baffin Island, and most of the migrants followed him. The followers included Merqusâq, his wife Agpaliapik (Uqi's daughter), his parents, his elder brother Qumangâpik, and the latter's family.

Qitlaq died soon after crossing Smith Sound. Although his people continued southward, they had lost their charismatic leader and ill fortune dogged them. By the second year they reached the head of Makinson Inlet, but game and fish were extremely scarce, leaving them in dire straits. The dogs had already been eaten, and the older people began to die. Two men, Minik and Maktaq, grew dangerous. Not only did they eat the victims of starvation, but they resorted to murder to get more food. One day, while Merqusâq fished alone through the ice, Minik, his brother-in-law, flung himself on him with a knife and succeeded in gouging out his right eye and seriously wounding him in the throat before Qumangâpik could come to his rescue. Later, recuperating from his wounds, Merqusâq watched as Minik and Maktaq stole the corpse of his father.

As soon as Merqusâq was able to walk, the two families hurriedly left. Still fearing the murderous Minik and Maktaq, they travelled for several days on the ice of Makinson Inlet, where

Qumangâpik managed to catch several seals. After Merqusâq recovered some of his strength and the party supplied itself with seal meat, the two families began the long journey back to Greenland, reaching the small island off Talbot Inlet where they had wintered the previous year. Refitting the kayaks they had abandoned there, they hunted seal and walrus that summer, and managed to catch a polar bear in a stone trap, which enabled them to spend that winter in relative comfort. In the following spring, they finally reached the Greenland shore.

Of the twenty or so people who had crossed Smith Sound westward a few years before, only five returned. Neither Merqusâq nor his brother ever tried again to return to Baffin Island; they settled permanently among the Polar Eskimos where their sister Aqiggiarjuk had found a husband.

It is not known in what circumstances Merqusâq lost to another man his wife, Agpaliapik, who had given him three children. Kavssâluk, the only female offspring of their union, later bore a daughter, Navarana, who married Peter Freuchen and died in 1921 just as she was about to join the 5th Thule Expedition with her husband. But perhaps the best known of Merqusâq's relatives is his grand-nephew Ôdaq (Útaq), who accompanied Peary to the North Pole in 1909.

Of Merqusâq, Rasmussen wrote in 1904: "He was born on a journey and all his life has been spent journeying. Although old now and somewhat bowed from rheumatism, he continues his journeys of several hundred miles a year on arduous fishing and hunting expeditions." He was famous as a polar bear hunter and could say to Rasmussen: "Look at my body: it is covered with deep scars; those are the marks of bears' claws. Death has been near me many times . . . but as long as I can hold a walrus and kill a bear, I shall still be glad to live."

Still suffering at times from the throat wound inflicted by Minik, the old hunter spent the final years of his life in the house of his granddaughter and Peter Freuchen. He died in 1916.

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