

- The Arctic Region of Disko -

# Early Colonisation of Disko

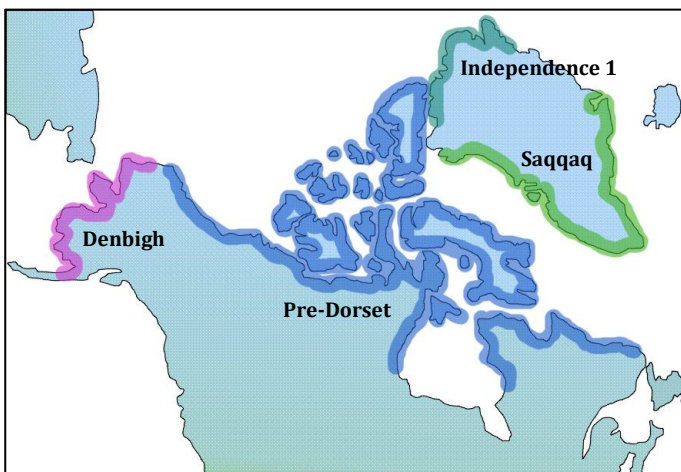
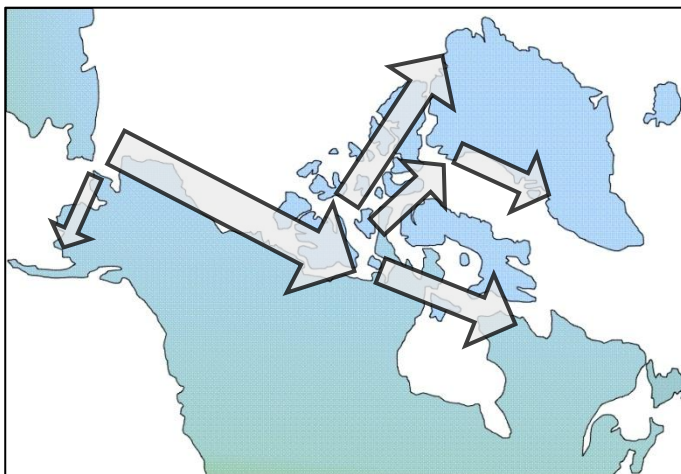


by

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The first people to venture into the arctic were the Palaeo-Eskimo. Their movement into the arctic, which originated from the Bering Strait area between Siberia and Alaska, resulted in tact with them perfecting methods for hunting marine animals throughout the year in the arctic conditions. This group of early Palaeo-Eskimos are known internationally as the Arctic Small Tool tradition (ASTt). Common to them are the small stone-tipped implements they used to survive. These Stone Age people spread along the northern coast of Alaska and Canada to Greenland in less than 100 years - an amazing speed considering the few numbers of people and the enormous distances involved. Their settlements were located close to their hunting grounds, either right on the coast by the sea ice, or along inlets from where they hunted land mammals such as reindeer (caribou) and muskoxen. Today, traces of these settlements are found on fossil terraces a little inland and often 30 to 40 metres above sea level due to continuing post glacial uplift of the land and changes in sea level since the time of inhabitation. The archaeologist Robert McGhee wrote that these people migrated into “the coldest, darkest and most barren regions ever inhabited by man”. Indeed, they were very bold to do so both in terms of coping with the harshness of the climate but also because of the psychological nature of their endeavours. The early Palaeo-Eskimo people who populated the arctic archipelago of Canada are called the **Pre-Dorset** Culture and two cultures populated areas of Greenland’s coast for the first time around 2400 BC. The **Independence 1** Culture colonised the northern coast of Greenland after probably journeying northwards over Ellesmere Island. The **Saqqaq** Culture colonised Greenland’s west coast, from Thule (pronounced Too’ lē) and southwards, after probably journeying around the southern end of Ellesmere Island. There are only minor differences between these two cultures and eskimologists are in fact unsure as to the cultural significance of dividing these two cultures - apart from the obvious difference in geographical location of their colonies. It was therefore the

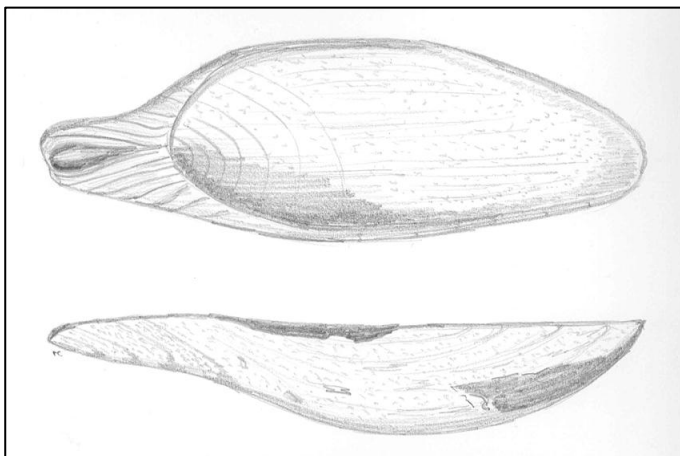
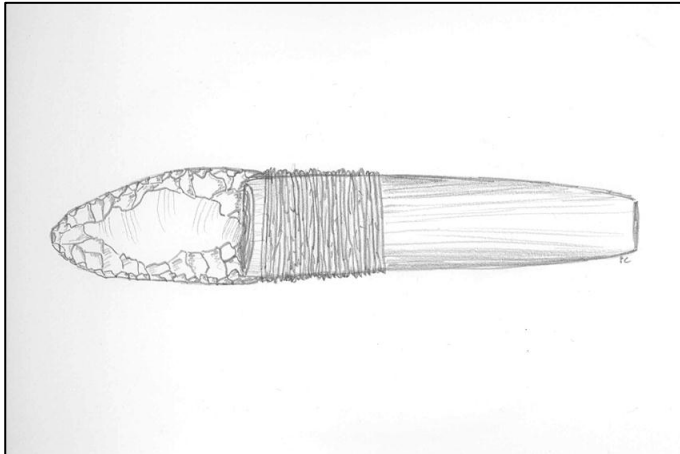


Saqqaq Culture that first inhabited the Disko region and evidence of their settlements have been found at many locations such as at Saqqaq on the Nuussuaq Peninsula (wherefrom the name derives), though famously at Qeqertasussuk and at Qajaa and Sermermiut. The settlements in the Disko region indicate that this must have been a wonderful place, being rich in wildlife and providing the necessary materials to support the early Palaeo-Eskimo population. Relics retrieved after being buried for thousands of years in chronological layers, spread throughout metres of frozen earth, have given an incredible insight into the Saqqaq and later cultures.

Front page: The Thule re-enactment group in Qasigiannuit with authentic clothing, tools, a kayak and umiaq of the Thule Culture. This page top left: The migration routes of the early Palaeo-Eskimo from the Bering Strait into Alaska, The Northern Territories, Nunavut and Nunavik regions of Canada and to Greenland around 4500 years ago. Bottom left: The primary population areas that developed and which were populated by the four early Palaeo-Eskimo cultures.

The Qeqertasussuk site on the island of the same name was discovered in July 1983 by Bjarne Grønnow and Appaa Magnussen from the local Qasigiannuit museum. They were in the process of mapping local archaeological sites and the sight of the terrace on Qeqertasussuk caught their attention, as it fitted perfectly the characteristics of sites typically chosen by the early Eskimo settlers. They were not disappointed and a large archaeological operation was put into action on the island that spanned the period 1984 to 1990. The dig revealed large numbers of well-preserved items such as stone, bone, wood, hair and skin artefacts - artefacts of an age and quality that were previously unheard of on the west coast of Greenland. Carbon-14 dating has revealed that the site was inhabited by the Saqqaq Culture over a 1000 year period from approximately 2400 to 1400 BC. The artefacts were in such good condition due to their preservation in layers of permafrost. In fact, the progress of the excavation was dictated by the slow thawing of the earth - typically only a few centimetres per day as each new layer was revealed - and only during the short summer period.

The housing utilised by the Saqqaq Culture was also revealed on Qeqertasussuk. It appears that they built a basic foundation as a quite large oval ring of big stones with a central rectangular raised cooking area. On each side was a raised platform where they sat and slept. These were built of turf covered with birch twigs for comfort and insulation. Above this they built a tent of driftwood rafters and animal skins. It appears that the Saqqaq heated stones, probably on a fire outside the tent, and then brought the hot stones inside to heat the living space. Their precise cooking methods are unknown, however we do know that they did not have soapstone pots or bowls and could only have heated water and such in skin bags. Their toolset was surprisingly well developed and the Saqqaq had many types of hand tools for cutting, forming and the sewing of skin - such as needles of fine bone.



Twenty complete knives were found at Qeqertasussuk. They also had stones for sharpening and stones for fire lighting. Interestingly, their knives and other implements were bladed almost exclusively with killiaq (churt). It appears that this stone is only found in the Disko region at one specific site, namely on the great Nuussuaq peninsula northeast of Disko Island. This supports the fact that the Saqqaq were mobile in skin boats and most likely traded goods up and down the coast. It has also been surprising to learn that the Saqqaq had quite large quantities of driftwood available. The arctic currents transported predominantly larch and

Top left: One of the many knives found at Qeqertasussuk (drawn with baleen in place). A sharp blade of killiaq (churt - similar to flint - a silica-rich microcrystalline sedimentary rock) is held in a slot at the end of a wooden handle and tied in place with baleen. This specimen is 15cm long. Bottom left: A 13cm long spoon carved from the tooth of a sperm whale. Drawings of Qeqertasussuk artefacts by the author.

spruce from Siberia and washed it ashore, particularly in the southern corner of Disko Bay. It also appears that the Saqqaq became adapt in recognising different types and ages of driftwood and selecting it for specific purposes, such as harpoon shafts.

The Saqqaq that lived on Qeqertasussuk fed themselves primarily with Greenland Seal (*Pagophilus groenlandicus*) and Ringed Seal (*Phoca hispida*) which accounted for approximately 50% of their diet. These were hunted with harpoons from kayaks and by breathing holes in the ice. The Guillemot (*Uria aalge*), Arctic Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*) and Dovekie (*Alle alle*) accounted for a further 30%. Possibly rather surprisingly is the fact that fish accounted for only 1% of their total diet with cod being the dominant species. This can probably be explained by the fact that the Saqqaq had not yet developed reliable fishing techniques - a suitable hook and line. The Saqqaq also hunted arctic fox and reindeer on land but these represented only 6% of their diet.

Two of the most sensational finds on Qeqertasussuk were the remains of the inner from a kamik boot made from seal skin - the oldest piece of clothing ever found in the Arctic, and pieces of human hair. Since excavation, the samples have been preserved and advances in DNA technology during the last 30 years have recently allowed for the hair to be analysed. In 2010, the results of human genome sequencing were published. The results substantiate significantly previous theories that the Saqqaq people were closely related to humans from Siberia and East Asia and not to people of the south or middle Americas.

Another site providing insight the Saqqaq Culture was Qajaa located on the southern shore of the Icefjord Kangia, about 15km from the mouth of the fjord. This unique archaeological site was first recorded after a visit by Carl Fleischer in 1871 and was later investigated in 1981-2 by Jørgen Meldgaard and team. Although Qajaa has not been fully investigated, these preliminary investigations have proven the presence of the Saqqaq people during the period 2000 to 900 BC, again by Carbon-14 dating techniques. In other words, overlapping with the inhabitation of Qeqertasussuk and proving the presence of the Saqqaq Culture in the Disko region through 1500 years. Incidentally, the settlement site at Qajaa was inhabited by modern Inuit right up until the mid-1700's when it was abandoned due to the glacier front being threateningly close (the front has since receded some 25km). Despite the extent of the archaeological excavations in 1981 and 1982 being relatively small, they revealed many thousand bone fragments from the Saqqaq and later Dorset periods. It is clear from the animal remains found that there was far less ice in the fjord at the time of the Saqqaq, such that walrus and other sea mammals populated the waters here in large

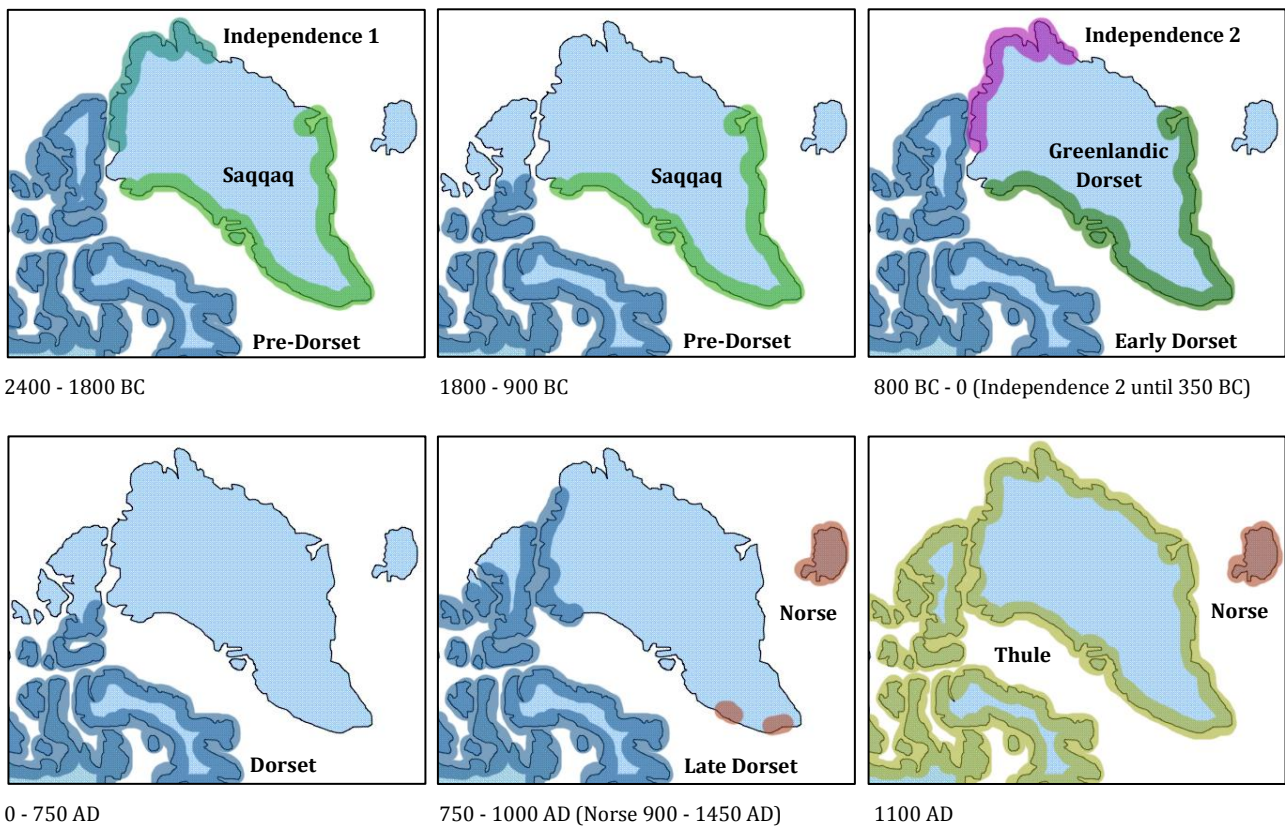
Right: The 8cm long tip of a harpoon made from reindeer antler and used for hunting seals at breathing holes in the sea ice. Drawing by the author.





numbers. Today, the quantity of icebergs in the fjord has increased dramatically making it impossible to sail directly to Qajaa from Disko Bay. Phenomenally, 17 dog bones were found in the Saqqaq layers at Qajaa - the first proof that the Saqqaq Culture kept dogs - of similar size and breed to the modern Greenlandic sled dog.

Following 1500 years of inhabitation by the Saqqaq people, all current evidence points to the conclusion that they disappeared from the west coast of Greenland completely in the period 900 to 500 BC. Not a single site has been found with evidence of colonisation in this period. However, evidence also proves that Palaeo-Eskimo activity increased during this period in the eastern high arctic - Ellesmere Island, Peary Land and northeast Greenland (this being a period of new activity after a period of uninhabitation in the period 1800 to 800 BC). Finds in Canada dated to the period 900 to 500 BC indicate a transitional phase from the Pre-Dorset to the **Dorset Culture** and thus continual settlement in the Canadian archipelago. The Dorset people had learned to fashion bowls from soapstone in which they burned oil rendered from blubber, thus giving them a source of heat and light throughout the year. The Dorset Cultures are named after an archaeological site on Dorset Island off the tip of Foxe Peninsula of Baffin Island. It is most likely that climatic changes, effecting mammal populations and sea ice quantities, drove these shifts in population. The diagrams below show approximate geographical areas of population of the different cultures during the various time periods.



Interestingly, there have been two gaps in the colonisation of Greenland since the island was first populated. These were after the Saqqaq people disappeared in the period around 900 BC and again in the period 0 - 200 AD to 750 AD following the disappearance of the Independence 2 and Greenlandic Dorset Cultures. During the entire period, it appears that the Palaeo-Eskimo population in the Canadian archipelago have developed, notably around 500 BC, evolving into the Early Dorset Culture. These cultural changes are represented by a change in

implements and techniques. A final chapter in changes to the Eskimo cultures was the influx of the **Thule Culture** from Siberia. Their apparent upper hand appears to have driven the Late Dorset from the Arctic. Certainly, traces of the Late Dorset people quickly disappeared and the Thule people migrated very fast across the Arctic and Greenland. The modern Inuit people who populate these regions today are descendants of the Thule people. We also know that the Thule Culture inhabited the same areas as both the Saqqaq and Greenlandic Dorset Cultures. At Sermermiut, a little south of the town of Ilulissat in Disko Bay, traces of all three cultures has been found, with Thule artefacts dating from 1200 AD onwards. Sermermiut *“the place of the glacier people”* is one of the largest settlements ever found. Notably, the Thule people built stone and peat houses with roofs of whale bone rafters and seal skin. They hunted whales and fished with long lines and nets made of baleen. The Thule Culture also interacted with the Norse on the west coast of Greenland. The Norse however, had a short stay on Greenland and they disappeared around 1450 AD. From the year 1600 onwards, there was contact on and off with Europeans who exploited the area dramatically for whaling and of course were interested in discovering a northwest passage. Following the beginning of the Danish colonisation of Greenland in 1721, the Inuit descendants of the Thule people then had regular contact with the Danes, particularly after the establishment of colonies at Christianshaab (Qasigianguit) in 1734, Jakobshavn (Ilulissat) in 1741, Egedesminde (Aasiaat) in 1759 and Godhavn (Qeqertarsuaq) in 1773 - all located around Disko Bay. The Inuit descendants of the Thule people lived at Sermermiut until 1850, when the last residents finally moved to the nearby colony of Ilulissat.

### Further Reading

- Qeqertasussuk, De første mennesker i Vestgrønland
- Saqqaq-Folket på Nipisat, Naturens Verden
- Ilulissat Icefjord, A World Heritage Site - Geus
- Arctic Dreams - Barry Lopez
- This Cold Heaven - Gretel Ehrlich

Right: Pictures of the Thule re-enactment group in Qasigianguit. Top: Returning with fuel for the fire. Centre: A fishing hook made from the throat-bone of a guillemot with soapstone sinker. Bottom: A boy expertly controls a reproduction of a Thule kayak. All photographs by the author.

