

HISTORY

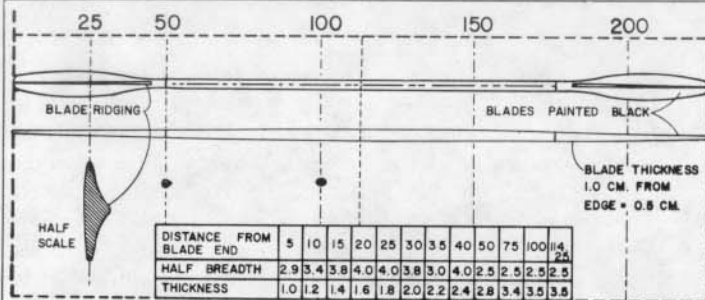


Figure 7: North Alaska paddle for a short retrieval kayak; measurements in cm.

Mackenzie Eskimo Paddles

The Mackenzie Eskimo, now virtually extinct, are known archaeologically to have lived in the Mackenzie Delta area for at least 500 years. But their kayak and paddles tell us that they originally came from the Bering Strait area of Alaska. The Mackenzie had single- and double-bladed paddles. Except for the Mackenzie Eskimo singles, only double-bladed paddles were used from North Alaska to Greenland. I have seen singles, looking like broken doubles, in photographs of Mackenzie Eskimos, but I do not know of any in museum collections.

Of all the paddles I have personally made and used, a reproduction of the one in Fig. 8 from the National Museum of Man in Ottawa is my favorite. It is light, beautifully balanced and very effective. The overall length is 8' 3-3/4". The blade is about 30" long by 4" wide and is symmetrically ridged with no concavity in the cross-sections. The loom is elliptical with the greatest diameter at right angles to the blade plane. Examining paddle types from Siberia to Greenland, this is the first one to have a drip ring, elementary and ineffective though it is. A single wrap of braided sinew is tied on just before the blade meets the loom. The paddle is painted with red ocher in a band around the middle with red ocher triangles on both sides of both blades.

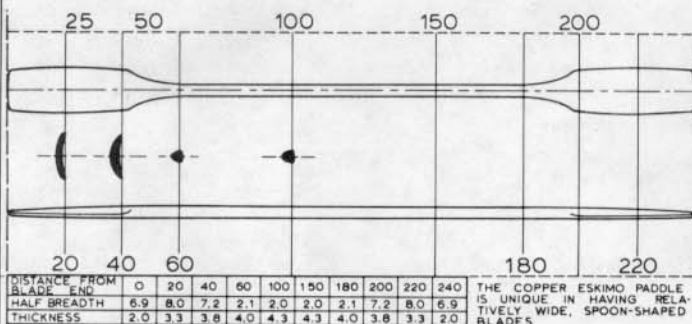


Figure 9: Copper Eskimo kayak paddle with unique spoon-shaped blades; measurements in cm.

Copper Eskimo Paddles

The Copper Eskimo had a very unique double-bladed paddle. It was short and wide with non-symmetric blades that were spoon-shaped, i.e., concave on one side and convex on the other. Figure 9 illustrates a Copper Eskimo paddle in the collections of the National Museum of Man. It is 7' 10 1/2" (240 cm)

long by 6.3" (16 cm) wide and was collected by anthropologist Diamond Jenness during the Canadian Arctic Expedition of 1913-16.

This paddle was used with a 15" wide (40.1 cm), round-hulled kayak that was over 23' long (711.2 cm). Perhaps the excessive blade width was useful in steadying what must have otherwise been an extremely crank craft.

Caribou, Netsilik and Iglulik Eskimo Paddles

The paddles of these groups are doubles with medium length blades just under 4 1/2" (11.2 cm) in width. Length averages near 9' (275.4 cm). These are good and sturdy but undistinguished paddles. Some exhibit carved-in drip rings. They were used in narrow round-bottom kayaks whose main task was to intercept caribou as they crossed inland lakes and rivers. Thus speed was the most important design parameter of the paddles.

East Arctic Paddles

By East Arctic I mean Baffin Island, Northern Quebec and the coast of Labrador, all in Canada. These paddles are all doubles and, at 10'3" (312.8 cm), have the greatest average length of any Arctic paddles. Many of this type exceed 12' (365.8 cm). The average width, however, is a narrow 3-3/8" (8.5 cm). The blades are very long and often have bone tips pinned on that help prevent end split caused by pushing off rocks and floating pieces of ice. Figure 10 illustrates a typical bone paddle tip. Figure 11 shows how the bone tip was attached and also shows some bone edging on the paddle blade.

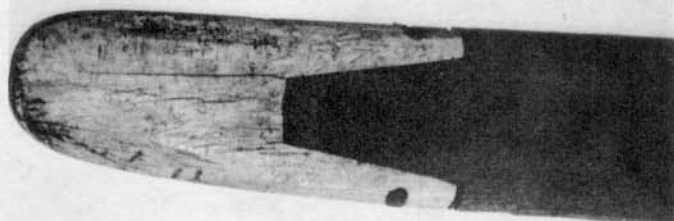


Figure 10: Pinned on bone tip prevents end split from pushing off rocks or ice

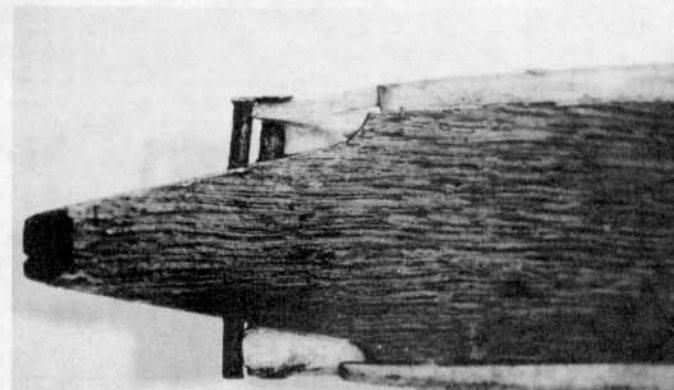


Figure 11: Bone edging on paddle blade. Also shows how bone tip, now broken off, was attached with iron rivets