

900 YEARS BEFORE US IN ALASKA, THERE WAS

THULE



A HANDFUL OF BOLD and resourceful Thule hunters in a small walrus-skin boat called an umiak regularly faced off against bowhead whales seven times their size and weighing some 40 tons. Whaling was so integral to Thule life that whaling captains and their families ranked highest in community status and whales were interwoven into Thule religion. Equally practical as spiritual, whale blubber could be stored, and such an abundance of essential nutrients in the harsh Arctic environment made Thule people wealthy. The whale provided more than sustenance though. The Thule used every piece of the massive prey to elevate everyday life: bones became house frames, oil provided light and heat, and baleen could be shaped as armor, buckets, and goggles—fitted with narrow slits to prevent blindness as the sun struck the stark white landscape. Not content to master the Arctic seas' biggest quarry, the Thule became some of the world's most successful and expansive settlers, filling in the 3,000-mile swath between the Bering Strait and Greenland. By land, the hardy Thule people proceeded on foot or by dogsled, becoming the first culture to harness the power of canines for transport.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO HUNT A WHALE



The whaling captain—or umialik—supplied the boat and gear and hired the crew, deployed charms and talismans during the hunt, and along with the harpooner sang songs to attract the whale. Other men helped hunt the whale and hauled the boat and gear to the ice's edge.



The umialik's wife led rituals considered vital for whaling success, represented the whale's female spirit, and organized feasts to honor dead whales' souls. Other women sewed walrus skins to make a watertight cover for the boat and helped heave the whale onto land.



Each whaling crew employed a boy—too young to be in the boat yet—that ran between the whaling camp and the village carrying food and supplies. He also alerted the umialik's wife when a whale was captured so she could begin rituals. Other children hauled whale meat and blubber.



Though too noisy to go near the whale hunt, dogs hauled caches of whale meat and blubber on sleds or their backs to the village and beyond as the Thule migrated and voyaged. Other dogs were land hunting aids and acted as guards to warn against approaching polar bears.

THULE INGENUITY AT WORK



Whalebone house frame

Snow goggles



Ulu (knife)



Seal float and rope



Harpoon



LEARN MORE ABOUT THE MARVELS AND MYSTERIES OF THULE AT [NPS.GOV/INUP](https://www.nps.gov/inup).

Alaska Archaeology Month is coordinated by the Public Education Group of the Alaska Anthropology Association and its sponsoring agencies. Visit them at alaskaanthropology.org.

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