

REPORT

NUVUK BURIAL I: AN EARLY THULE HUNTER OF HIGH STATUS

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On July 1, 1998, acting as cultural resources manager for the landowner, Ukpeagvik Inupiat Corporation (UIC), I responded to reports of an eroding burial at Nuvuk (49-BAR-011). Historic burials were known from Point Barrow, but this one turned out to be spectacularly different.

Nuvuk is located at the tip of Point Barrow, Alaska (Fig. 1). In 1852 and again in 1853, Captain Rochfort Maguire in HMS *Plover* overwintered in adjacent Elson Lagoon, where he learned a great deal from the Inupiat Eskimo who were his neighbors (Maguire 1988) during those years. The tip of the Point Barrow spit had been eroding for generations. People told Maguire that erosion had forced their grandparents to relocate the village to the location he visited. The former location was under water. That older Nuvuk is long gone and most of the Nuvuk location that Maguire visited also has disappeared. In fact, most anthropologists believed that thanks to ongoing erosion, nothing is left of any significant archaeological value at Point Barrow (J. Bockstoce, E. Burch and E. Hall personal communications to G. Sheehan). Recent finds indicate that a reevaluation of that position is necessary.

NUVUK-01

The burial excavated in 1998 by the author and volunteer Jenny Asiangatuq Brower, designated Nuvuk-01, was that of an adult male with grave goods at his feet. The grave was discovered beginning to slump down the eroding bluff, with the top of the grave gone and the cranium exposed

and beginning to slump. It was reported in midafternoon on the day before a long holiday weekend, during which the Nuvuk area would receive large numbers of recreational visitors. It was clear that immediate excavation was necessary in order to avoid accidental destruction by visitors. Due to the circumstances of discovery, measurements of the intact grave were not possible.

The individual was skeletonized, with the cranium and long bones relatively well preserved. The small bones of the hands and feet were in a poor state of preservation, and the torso was quite decayed. The pelvis was sufficiently preserved to determine that the individual was male, and the length and (where preserved) epiphyseal fusion states indicated that he was an adult. He appeared to have been laid on his back, with knees slightly bent, and placed in a shallow pit. He was associated with fragments of an animal hide, too decayed to determine if it had been sewn into garments or merely placed under or around him. There were indications of decayed wood beside the individual and beneath his feet at the pit margins. The fragments of decayed wood slumping down the bluff, which had led to the initial discovery of the grave, suggest that wood may have been present at the head of the grave as well.

The style of the grave goods places the burial in the Early Thule cultural phase. The harpoon heads include two of the Sicco type (see Fig. 2), one of which had two vestigial barbs, and vestigial side blade slots. Stanford illustrates two Sicco harpoon heads from Walakpa, one from the Mound A test trench (1976:170:Plate 58b) and the other from level B-7 (1976:174: Plate 63c), which he

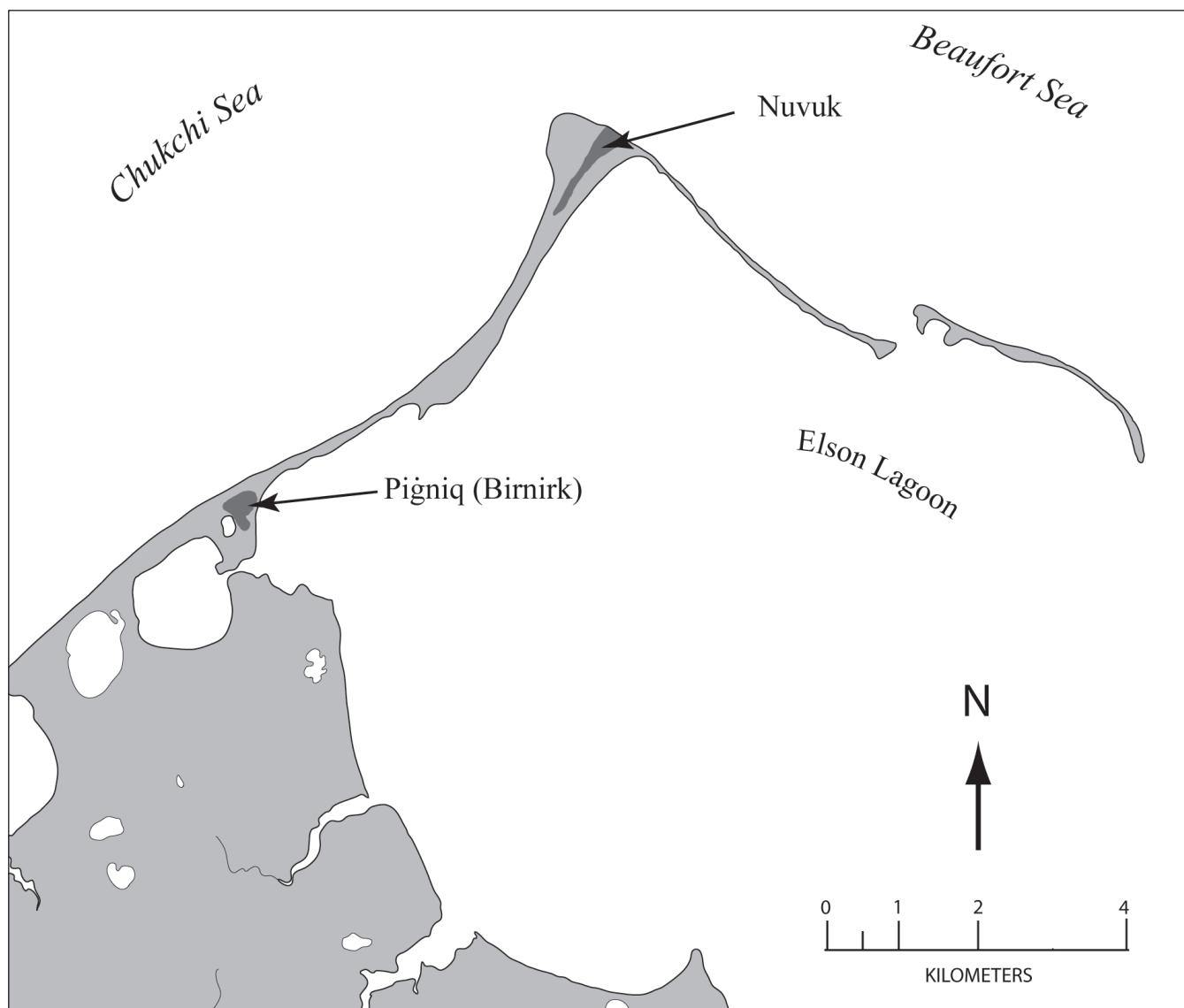


Figure 1: Map of Point Barrow area, showing locations and approximate extent of Nuvuk and Pigniq (Birnik). Map based on 1949 aerial photos.

describes as early Thule. The decoration on the harpoon heads from Nuvuk is relatively simple, similar to that seen on the harpoon heads illustrated by Stanford and some shown by Ford (Ford 1959:85:Fig. 38b,c). It is Sicco harpoon heads with this style of decoration that have been considered an “index fossil” for early/classic Thule.

The other four harpoon heads are all thin forms with open sockets, with lashing slots, single side spurs, and blade slots parallel to round line holes (see Fig. 2). One of them has vestigial side blade slots. They fall into Mathiasen’s Thule 3 type (1927) or Jordan’s Class 1B (1979:163) and resemble Sicco and Tasik Open Socket in terms of spurs, line hole/blade slot arrangement, and decoration, but they are not keeled. Ford (1959) does not illustrate

anything like them, while Stanford illustrates a very similar harpoon head from level B-7 (1976:174:Plate 63b) and another from level B-2 (1976:174:Plate 63a) at Walakpa. Schledermann and McCullough (2003:137:Plate 1f) show a similar harpoon head from Eskimobyen House 21, although it is made of ivory.

Other artifacts (Table 1) included additional hunting gear, including bola weights, a seal scratcher, bird dart side prongs, a foreshaft, a socket piece, a float inflation nozzle, a wound plug and a possible wound pin. There were also some manufacturing or maintenance items: a flaker or scraper handle, a beaver tooth graver, and one half of a composite knife handle. A probable bag handle and an ivory owl toggle or fastener were also present.

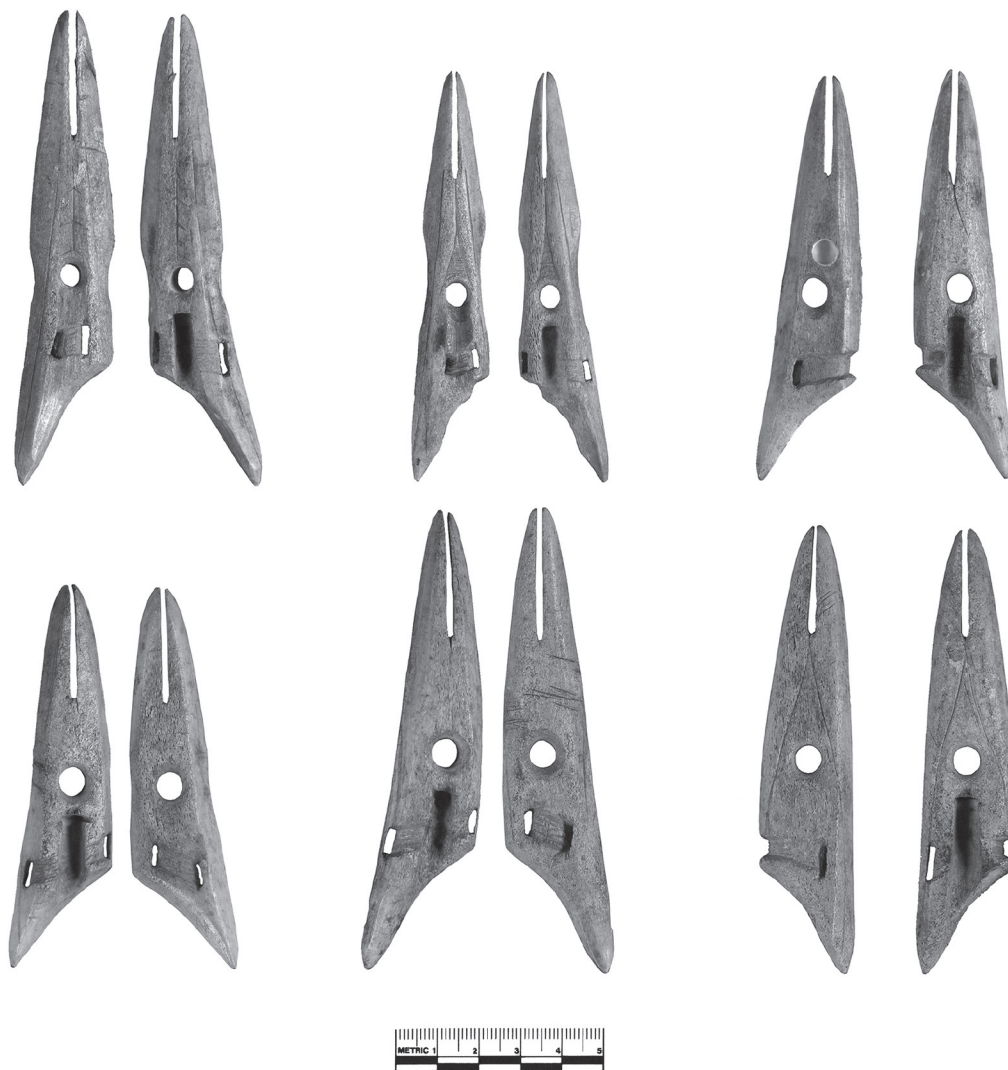


Figure 2: Harpoon heads from Nuvuk-01 burial. Note the Sicco type at upper left.

Unlike most sites in the Barrow area, the matrix at Nuvuk consists entirely of unconsolidated gravel with little organic content. The active layer is very deep, and in some areas there is no permafrost to a depth of 5 m or more. Therefore, preservation at Nuvuk is generally not as good as at other Neo-Eskimo sites in the Barrow area but still is excellent by most standards.

RADIOCARBON DATING

In 2003, Owen Mason was kind enough to date one of the non-Sicco antler harpoon heads from the Nuvuk-01 burial in connection with analysis of materials from the Uivvaq site. A number of additional dates have been obtained on graves excavated during the 2005, 2006, and 2007 Nuvuk field seasons (Jensen in prep.).

Nuvuk-01 (Beta-180329) yielded an AMS determination with a conventional ^{14}C date of 1110 ± 40 BP, with a calibrated two sigma range of AD 810–1020. The date for Nuvuk-01 grave is quite close to the dates for Aġnaiyaq, the frozen girl excavated at Ukkuqsi, Barrow, in 1994 (Zimmerman et al. 2001). It should be noted that this date corresponds almost exactly to the date of 1140 ± 60 BP (Beta-46510) from the Sivuqaq Grave 91-7, the two sigma range of which was primarily centered around AD 774–1018 (Staley and Mason 2004: 127).

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Table 1. Artifacts from Burial Nuvuk-01

Artifact	Description	Raw material	#
Harpoon head	Sicco	Antler	2
Harpoon head	Thule 3	Antler	4
Fastener/toggle?	Owl effigy	Ivory	1
Preform, harpoon head	Whaling?	Ivory	1
Wound plug		Ivory	1
Handle, composite knife	½, beveled butt, slot for alignment spline	Ivory	1
Graver	Beaver tooth		1
Side prongs, bird dart	Ford Class A	Antler	2
Foreshaft	Line slot	Ivory	1
Socket piece	Tapered butt, drilled hole for securing to shaft	Bone (dense)	1
Seal scratcher	Paired holes for rattle attachment, hole at base of handle, five “claws”	Wood	1
Handle, scraper or flaker		Wood	1
Handle, bag?		Bone	1
Marlin spike	Crude	Ivory	1
Inflation nozzle		Ivory	1
Wound pin?	Elaborately carved head, resembles Eastern Arctic “ornamental bodkins”	Ivory	1
Bola weight		Ivory	1
Bola handle/weight	Elongated	Ivory	2
Bola weight	Walrus tooth with drilled hole, found with other bola weights	Ivory	2
Bola handle/weight	Elongated	Bone	3
Bola weight?	Tablet-like with beveled edges and drilled hole, found with other bola weights	Mammoth ivory	1
Bola weight	Rib segments, rounded off by beveling	Bone	13
Bola weight	Rib slabs, unrounded	Bone	3

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