

## Greenland rolling throughout recorded history: 1605-present

By Martin Nissen

It is not known when someone first rolled a kayak. This part of kayaking history was forever lost hundreds of years ago, perhaps somewhere in the hazy waters of the Bering Sea. While rolling was a vital part of hunting, playing in water in slender boats was also fun and rolling was developed well beyond a means of survival.

Watching the kayak and paddling skills of the Greenland hunters impressed many an early visitor to Greenland. The graceful mastery of rolling in the icy waters was fascinating and seemed to the outsider like a dark art. There is no doubt that rolling was a vital part of many kayak hunters' repertoire, especially for those living on the outer coast and hunting along exposed shores. But rolling was not necessarily the most important skill for survival. *Piortoq*—the final soundless glide toward the prey after your last paddle stroke—and harpoon throwing were just as crucial for survival. Many Inuit families were fed by non-rolling kayak hunters.

The freedom and grace of paddling kayaks naturally led Europeans to use skin kayaks when they visited Greenland. There are no accounts of whether the Vikings who settled in Greenland circa 985-1408 ever rolled a kayak, only that they found skin boats on the shores upon arrival and met with natives. So unless a Viking swapped farming for seal hunting, we can presume that the first roll by a nonnative took place after the 1721 arrival of missionary Hans Egede, the so-called Apostle of Greenland.

### The Copenhagen kayak show in 1605

On several occasions throughout the 1600s, whalers brought kayaks and Inuit back with them to Europe. In 1605, a vessel that King Christian IV had sent out to reestablish connection between Denmark and Greenland returned to Denmark. A group of captured Greenlanders and kayaks were on board, and the first documented kayaking show, including rolling, outside the Arctic was put together for the king. The exhibition in the Copenhagen harbor attracted many spectators. The Greenlanders rolled their kayaks and raced against the king's fastest rowing boatmen.

In 1606, a second exhibition was held after the whaling vessels again returned from Greenland. In 1625 a similar kayak demonstration was performed in Holland, near the palace in the Hague, when Dutch whalers brought back Greenlanders and their kayaks.

Shortly after he settled in Greenland in the early 1720s, Hans Egede asked Greenlanders Pooq and Qiperoq from the Nuuk vicinity to travel to Copenhagen to help draw attention to Greenland. They arrived on the morning of October 11th—the birthday of King Frederik IV. According to tradition, a major kayak racing and rolling show was held, filling the streets along the canals. Pooq returned to Copenhagen again in 1728 and once again his rolling demonstration filled the waterfront streets and made the art of kayak rolling well known.

Hans Egede brought his wife, Gertrud Rask, and two teenage sons (Poul and Niels, both born on the Lofoten Islands in northern Norway) with him on his return to Greenland. After founding the present capital of Nuuk in 1728, Egede adopted a fatherless Greenlandic child. Unfortunately, the adopted son shortly thereafter lost his life while kayaking. The elder Egedes must have been hesitant letting their sons paddle, but nonetheless both Poul and Niels became skilled kayakers. Poul quickly adopted the Greenland language and customs and in the 1730s became one of the first Europeans—if not the first ever—to learn to roll.

Heinrich C. Glahn (1738-1804) came to Greenland at the age of 24 and did missionary work from 1763-1769 at a small whaling station near Sisimiut. Greatly fascinated by the Greenland hunters and their kayaks, he got himself a kayak soon after settling in Greenland and trained with the locals to become an enthusiastic and skilled paddler. Later, after leaving Greenland and settling in Copenhagen, Glahn wrote a fascinating treatise for King Frederik VI of Denmark. It is one of the more fascinating sources of 18th century Greenland kayaking history and concerns the possible uses of kayaks and kayakers for warfare and kayak post in Denmark and Norway (which was part of the Danish Kingdom). By Glahn's own account he was an accomplished kayaker skilled enough to go paddling on his own, but a near accident described in a letter on July 22, 1765, suggests that he might *not* have been able to roll: after capsizing, he was rescued by a Greenlanders. Glahn later married the daughter of Poul Egede and his writings inform us that father-in-law Poul was a decent kayaker, though not as skilled as the Greenlanders.

In his 40-page treatise to King Frederik, Glahn suggested that the king should develop a kayak army where the kayakers would be trained in Greenland by the best kayak hunters. In the treatise Glahn also mentions two

Danes who developed very fine kayaking skills in Greenland. One of them was a sailor from the time before Glahn came to Greenland (prior to 1763) who occasionally paddled along with kayak postmen on their rounds of carrying letters to towns or settlements. The other Dane that Glahn had heard about "spent so long at sea in his kayak that he in the end was as skilled at catching seals as a native."

Danish Michael Hvidsted (1747-1795) came to Greenland in 1764 at the age of 17 to work as a catechist. He soon became Heinrich Glahn's right-hand man and the two often kayaked together. Being young and fit, Hvidsted soon became a skillful kayaker. Glahn describes their kayak training as close to shore and coached by a Greenlander. Glahn also writes of Hvidsted going out in a storm to help an umiak—an open Inuit paddling boat—in need. While a text by H. Ostermann based on Glahn's diary notes from 1767 suggests that Hvidsted might have been able to roll, we cannot say this for certain.

Danish missionary, naturalist and ethnographer Otto Fabricius (1744-1822), a near contemporary of Glahn, was sent to Greenland where, among other things, he made an enormous collection of zoological observations from 1768 to 1773. Fabricius would paddle his Greenland skin-covered kayak to travel to the locations, most notably in Arsuk Fjord, where he collected numerous species. His ethnographic works rank among the best early descriptions of the Greenland kayaks and the associated seal hunting equipment.

It is interesting to note that German missionary David Cranz in 1765 wrote *Historie von Grönland* where he described a variety of rolling methods—10 in total. At that time, at least some Europeans were already accomplished paddlers, having been taught in the freezing waters of Greenland. Cranz mentioned that a few of the missionary brethren had become very accomplished paddlers, and it is not unlikely he was referring to some of the aforementioned Europeans. David Cranz described rolling with paddles, *norsaq* (throwing board), harpoon and hands.

### **An early record of hand rolling by a non-Inuit**

German missionary Carl Julius Spindler (1838-1918) was one of the most skilled European paddlers to ever visit Greenland. A saddler by profession, Spindler came to Frederiksdal in South Greenland in 1864 where he quickly learned to speak Greenlandic and hunt from a kayak. He lived at the Moravian missionary station at Lichtenau where he served from 1868-73, and later in Nuuk from 1873 until he returned to Germany in 1888. He is remembered both for his amazing kayaking skills and his great contribution of Greenland hymns—a labor that kept Spindler busy for many years after his return to Germany.

Spindler's extraordinary kayaking skills were still a topic of talk when a young kayak historian, H. C. Petersen moved to the Greenland capital of Nuuk to study in 1940. Petersen, a kayak historian and the author of *Skinboats of Greenland*, remembers that some of the elders in Nuuk told of Spindler's astonishing kayaking and rolling skills. Spindler was a gymnastics teacher and was very flexible, himself. He could roll a number of ways including *norsaq*, harpoon and hand rolls. Greenland hunter Jakob Eugenius (1863-1939) had him as a teacher and confirmed that Spindler could roll with just his hands. Another Greenland hunter who paddled with Spindler told the following story to catechist Josva Kleist (1879-1938). It was published in the periodical *Qaammarsaatissiat*:

"'Kaalinnuqaq (little nice Carl) as we locals called him soon learned to paddle and was entirely one with his kayak both in calm waters and in the stormiest of seas. In terms of hunting, he could operate all the hunting accessories and he could roll both by the help of the paddle, the harpoon, the throwing board—*norsaq*—and with the bare hands. In the winter months he was out hunting, which is normally considered hazardous for Europeans. But most often Spindler was among the hunters who ventured out to the skerries furthest west in the North Atlantic and more than once, he was the first hunter to catch a seal under those conditions. One evening Spindler asked me if I wanted to join him as he was heading for a settlement in the eastern end of Prince Christian Sound. This was back when I was a very strong paddler,' recalls the hunter. 'We fitted the kayaks to be able to hunt on the long trip and set off. A northerly wind was blowing quite strong. After some paddling, I noticed Spindler some distance to the south of me paddling full speed. Shortly after, he harpooned a seal and as I approached him I could tell it was a large ringed seal. Being a large seal I suggested to Spindler that we only take half of the seal since it was a long paddle and challenging conditions. But Spindler refused and strapped the big seal onto his back deck. Later on the trip, a fierce storm rolled in and the waves were piled up to the extent that we lost track of each other and were only able to see the upper part of the mountains. When we finally reached a place where the wind went against the current creating tidal race like waves, I shouted to Spindler that it was so impressive for a European to paddle under these conditions, just as a wave totally covered him in white foam. The next moment Spindler came surfing past me with the fat seal on the back deck. Later in the day the storm died and we could finally talk together as we neared Frederiksdal. We talked about the fickle storm we had just witnessed and Spindler's comment was, 'I just love paddling in stormy weather.' It was truly amazing to witness the paddling skills he developed during the four years he was living with us here in Frederiksdal before he, in 1868, was moved to the missionary station of Lichtenau.'"

## Kayaking and rolling demonstrations catch on in the U.S. and Europe

The second half of the 1800s were the pioneering days of recreational canoeing and kayaking in Europe and North America. Following the new craze inspired by the fascinating paddling trips of Scottish John MacGregor and his Rob Roy canoe, most recreational kayaks and canoes in use before 1900 had rather large cockpits and were not easily rolled. Kayak rolling was therefore largely inspired by expeditions returning from the Arctic, which on several occasions brought back skin kayaks and popularized kayaking with displays and rolling shows.

After an expedition to West Greenland in 1870, Swede John Lerberg gave a kayak show on Lake Åsunden in 1872. After the first crossing of the Greenland ice cap in 1888, Norwegians Fridtjof Nansen and Oluf Dietrichson demonstrated kayaking and rolling in Oslo, Norway ("Roll Call: Fridtjof Nansen, Oluf Dietrichson and Rolling in 1889," by Anders Thygesen, *SK*, Feb. '09). At the 1882 American Canoe Association meet held at Lake George, New York, Bowyer Vaux wrote that a paddler named Cook was able to roll. Naval Admiral V. Hansen, a former Danish authority of rowing and kayaking, wrote that kayak rolling was demonstrated at the big paddle meet on Grindstone Island in the St. Lawrence River, United States, in 1884.

## 20th Century

At the turn of the last century, just before the dramatic decline in the use of kayaks in Greenland and throughout the Arctic, a survey published in Greenland by Hans Reynolds noted that in 1911, of a total of 2,228 Greenland kayak hunters with a kayak of their own, 867 were able to roll. That is roughly 39 percent. Polar explorer Knud Rasmussen played an important role in making traditional kayaks known, bringing back many Arctic kayaks from his sledge journeys. He also demonstrated kayak rolling in Denmark in 1918.

In the 1920s, kayak polo became a popular training game for river running in Germany. The first canoe polo rules were written in 1926. The following year, Austrian Edi Hans Pawlata published *Kipp kipp hurra! Im reinrassigen Kajak*, an early account of Greenland-style rolling and paddling traditions in central Europe. The Pawlata roll soon became synonymous with an extended paddle roll often taught to beginners. Around the same time that northern Europe and North America were experiencing a kayak boom, British polar explorer Gino Watkins was taught rolling during an expedition to East Greenland in 1930. The year 1951 saw the use of the Greenland reverse sweep roll for the first time in the Canoe Slalom World Championships in Steyr, Austria. The roll still carries the name of the town.

## A master of rolling

Born in Qoornoq in 1915 and raised in East Greenland, Manasse Mathæussen ("Manasse," by John Heath, *SK*, Spring 1990) was fascinated by the kayak right from his childhood. As a young man he was a skilled hunter and developed rolling skills matched by few. After moving to West Greenland, he became a significant cultural figure in a time of change as a new nationalist movement spread throughout Greenland. Manasse was a national symbol, a living link to past traditions and a mentor for many in keeping the Greenland kayak traditions alive. Manasse rolled his kayak on anniversaries, in films and throughout Europe and Canada through five decades, and earned prestigious recognition by Danish King Frederik in 1952. A few years earlier he had participated in the first Indoor Canoe and Kayak Championships held in Copenhagen in 1949, and in competition against five other nations he won the unofficial world championships in kayak rolling. His win included 10 successive rolls in 18 seconds. Manasse performed rolling demonstrations until he was well into his 70s, and his passing in 1989 made the front page of the Greenland newspapers.

## Rolling as a kayak discipline

Rolling competitions and shows have taken place in Greenland as far back as anybody remembers. For the past centuries they have provided a fun water gathering at social events like birthdays and when outsiders visit. With the founding of recreational kayak clubs throughout Greenland in the 1980s—organized under the Greenland Kayak Association, Qaannat Kattuffiat—the kayak and rolling competitions formerly held by various cultural and sport organizations in several Greenland towns were taken into a new sporting framework.

## Kayak and rolling competition in Nuuk 1952

After Qaannat Kattuffiat, the Greenland Kayaking Association, was founded in 1985, a list of Greenland rolls was written with contributions by paddlers from older generations, including Manasse, who in 1986 received the cultural prize of the Greenland home rule for his social and cultural engagement. The first unofficial Greenland kayaking championship for all the clubs was held in Aasiaat in 1987, and the success of the competition carried on to be officially approved in Sisimiut in 1989. The Greenland National Kayaking Championship opened to foreigners in 2000, and today it is a weeklong competition and folk festival that draws great national attention. Kayak rolling has developed into a discipline in its own right, and the 35 rolling and kayaking maneuvers of increasing difficulty continue to inspire ambitious kayak rollers around the globe. Groups in several countries now have rolling competitions based on the Qaannat Kattuffiat scoring system, like Qajaq USA. While many methods of rolling developed from hunting needs, other ways of rolling have developed simply because they can be done, and because they are fun.

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