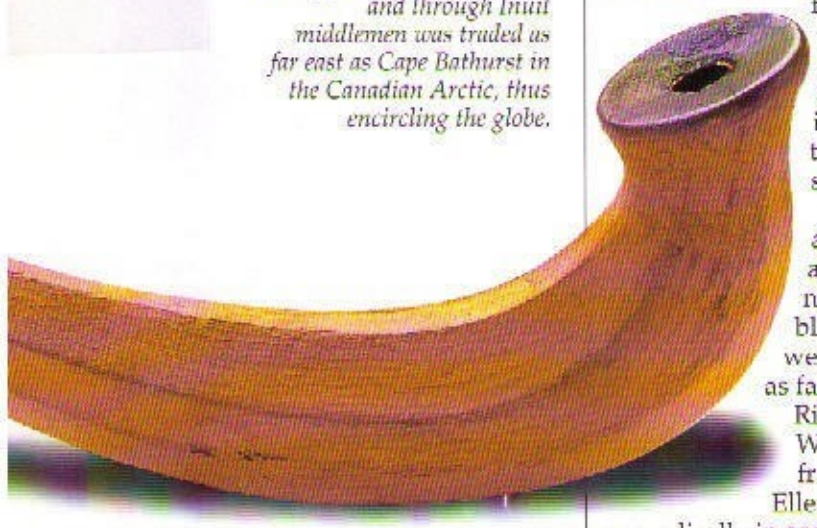
THE END OF A WORLD

Before Columbus, iron was already known and prized throughou the Arctic for its hardness and cutting abilities. Asian iron was fir traded across Bering Strait almost 2,000 years ago.

Tobacco was originally domesticated by the Indians of Mexico, the Caribbean, and the eastern United States. It was introduced to Europe in the 16th century, and later became a popular Russian trade item in Siberia. In the 19th century it became a staple of the Bering Strait trade network, and through Inuit middlemen was traded as far east as Cape Bathurst in the Canadian Arctic, thus encircling the globe.



By the middle of the Thule period 700 or 800 years ago, tiny bits of iron from one source or another were to be found in tool kits across the entire Arctic coast. It was certainly the most sought-after, long-distance trade item.

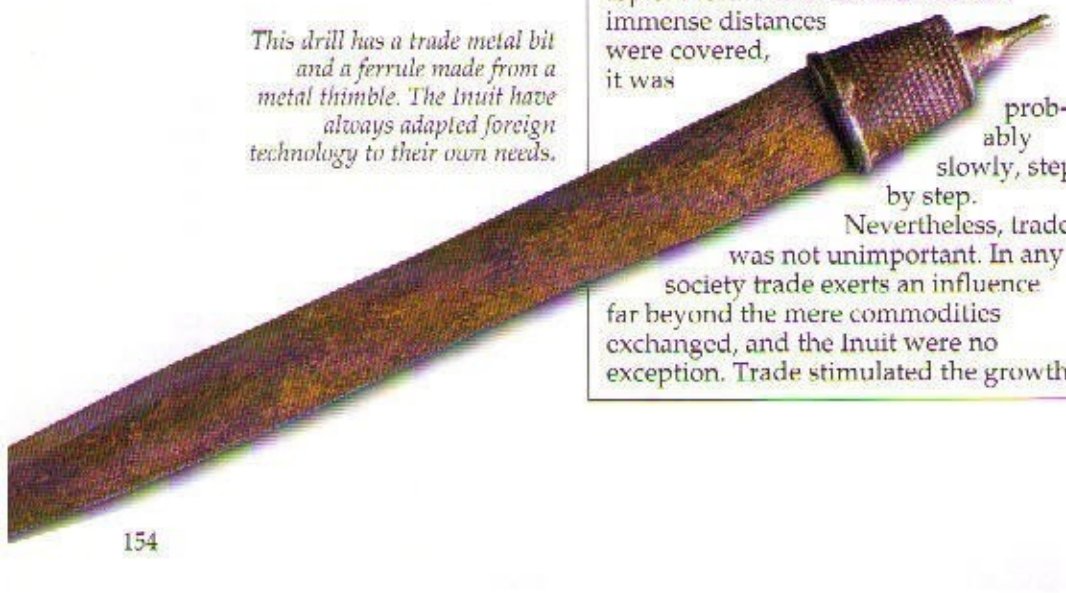
Copper was also traded, but more locally. There is some Alaskan copper, but in Canada the sole source was found in Copper Inuit territory. Traded to neighbouring groups to the east and west, it was less valuable than iron because it is so much softer.

Other raw materials were also desirable. A jade-like nephrite used for adze blades was traded from western Alaska at least as far as the Mackenzie River. Amber from the Western Arctic and from northern Ellesmere Island appears sporadically in archaeological sites throughout the Arctic, mainly in the form of beads. Copper Inuit soapstone, as we shall see, had a very wide currency.

IDEAS AND COMMODITIES

Most of this early trade was small in scale and based on low bulk, durable items that passed from hand to hand and from village to village across the top of North America. If in the end immense distances were covered, it was probably slowly, step by step.

This drill has a trade metal bit and a ferrule made from a metal thimble. The Inuit have always adapted foreign technology to their own needs.



Nevertheless, trade was not unimportant. In any society trade exerts an influence far beyond the mere commodities exchanged, and the Inuit were no exception. Trade stimulated the growth of important social networks between groups who might otherwise never have met. Along with materials went ideas and information, clothing styles, stories, games, even vocabulary, all facilitated by a basic common language and the comparative ease of transportation in the North. Trade and all that went with it was one of the major factors that held Inuit culture together and gave it a unified face across the immense distances of the Arctic.

Food and animal products also figured in the network, but because of weight and bulk the distances involved tended to be shorter than those associated with commerce in durable raw materials such as iron or nephrite. In north Alaska and in the Mackenzie Delta region, trade in animal products made some real regional economic specialization possible. People living inland could concentrate on caribou hunting, and trade for the blubber they needed for their lamps. Coastal people could hunt sea mammals over the crucial September caribou-hunting season knowing the hides they needed for clothing could be obtained elsewhere. This kind of symbiotic relationship was not possible under the simpler economic regimes of the Central Arctic.

THE FOREIGNERS ARRIVE

The medieval Norse were the first Europeans to trade with Arctic Inuit, and it was primarily animal products that interested them: walrus hide for ropes, ivory, narwhal tusks, and even live polar bears destined for European menageries. Some of these they could obtain for themselves, but there seems to have been a lively exchange with Inuit hunters, who were far more successful. The Inuit appear to have been interested chiefly in iron, and Norse metal has been found in Inuit archaeological sites as far west as the western coast of Hudson Bay. The arm of a Norse trader's balance found in an Inui site on Ellesmere Island hints of Norse travels into the Canadian Arctic. Another Inuit site on Ellesmere Island

has produced such a wealth of Norse material, including items such as a bladeless carpenter's plane, wooden barrel staves, and even chain mail, that it is very easy to imagine a Norse ship wintering there.

AN INTERCONTINENTAL TRADE NETWORK

The arrival of European goods everywhere quickened the pace of trade, long before the coming of Europeans themselves. In the Western Arctic, particularly, an immense all-Native trade network centred on Bering Strait grew up, one that eventually encompassed even the Copper Inuit. As we have seen, Asian iron was available in small quantities from very early times. Then in the seventeenth century, the Russians began pushing east across Siberia. In 1649 they established a small trading post at the mouth of the Anadyr River in eastern Siberia. Soon goods from this post were making their way into Alaska, and in much greater quantities than before.

The pace quickened again in 1788, when the Russians signed a peace treaty with the Chukchi of far north-eastern Siberia, and the following year opened a trading post at the mouth of the Kolyma River specifically aimed at the Bering Strait trade. What the Russians wanted were furs, and what they offered in exchange were mainly iron goods and, later, tobacco. An annual trade fair at the post attracted a growing body of professional Native middlemen, mainly Chukchi, but also Alaskan Inuit. They took Russian trade goods purchased at the post to Inuit trade fairs held at Cape Prince of Wales on Bering Strait, and at nearby Kotzebue, where they were exchanged for a considerable mark-up, along with other more local trade goods such as ivory, wooden artifacts, and spotted reindeer hides.

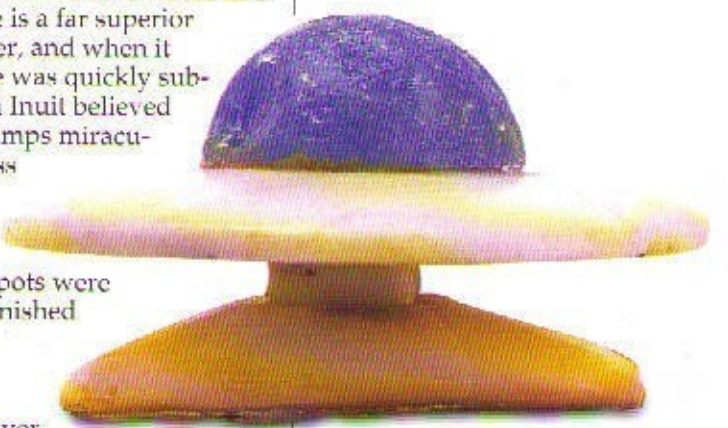
From here distribution networks fanned out to more distant trading centres. The most northeasterly trading centre in Alaska was located at Barter Island, near the present Canadian border. Here Alaskan Inuit traders were met by Mackenzie Inuit coming west from Herschel Island and the large beluga-hunting villages near the mouth of the Mackenzie River. A brisk trade was carried out every year, with Russian iron goods as a staple, along with animal products such as hides, furs, and sacks of blubber. In 1789, the same year the Kolyma post opened, Alexander Mackenzie visited the Mackenzie Delta and reported that Russian iron was already available there. It must have just become so, for thirty-seven years later Mackenzie Inuit told the explorer John Franklin that trade with Alaskans had begun within their own lifetimes.

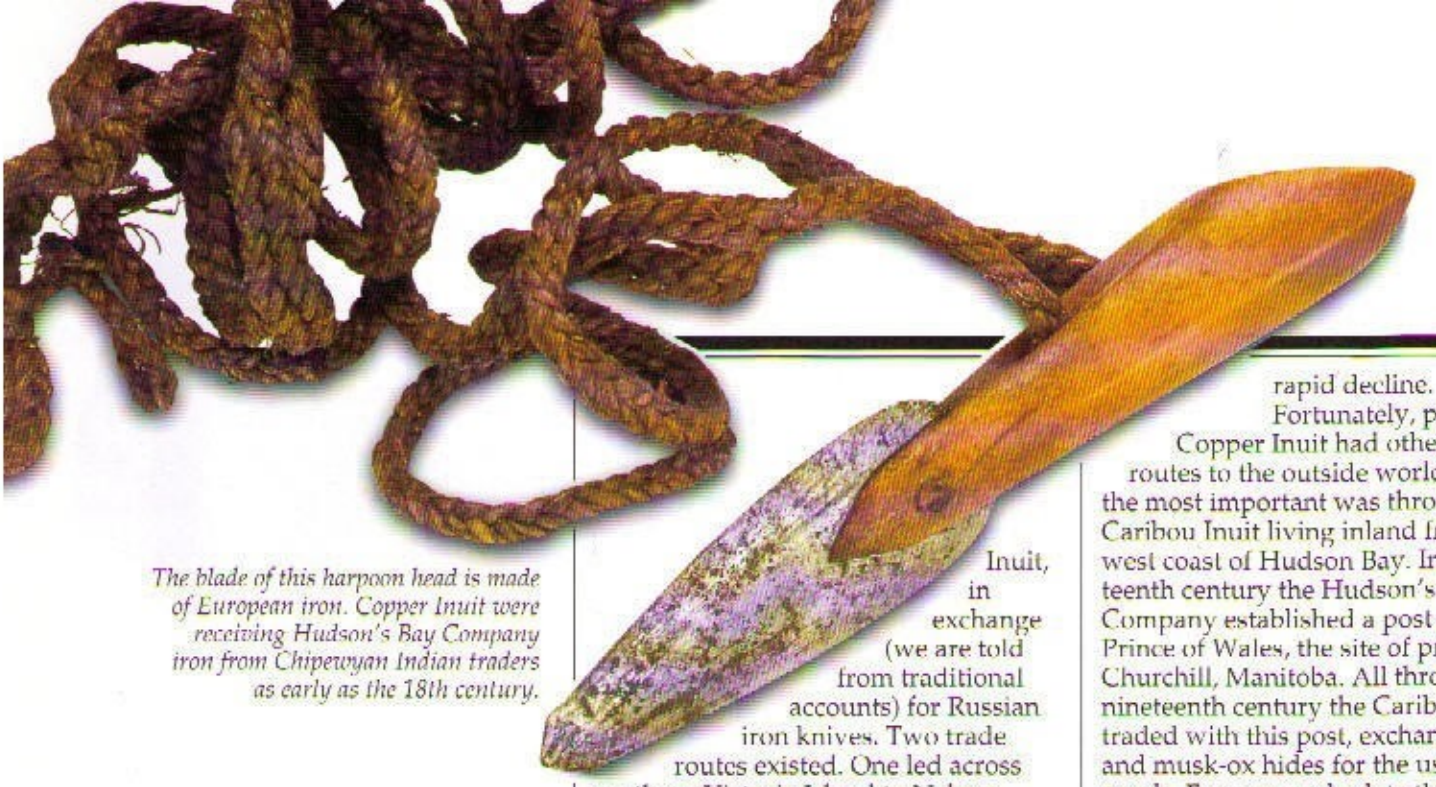
By the 1840s this network appears to have expanded east again to include the Copper Inuit, whose contribution seems to have consisted almost solely of soapstone lamps and pots. Soapstone is not available in the Western Arctic, where people had always made vessels from pottery or various other rocks like schist. Soapstone is a far superior material, however, and when it became available was quickly substituted. Alaskan Inuit believed that soapstone lamps miraculously burned less oil than those made of other substances.

Lamps and pots were traded already finished because of their weight. Manufactured mostly at Tree River on the southern coast of Coronation Gulf, where there was a

Western Arctic Inuit smoked an aboriginal style of pipe based ultimately on Chinese opium pipes.

The split glass bead that ornaments this Alaskan labret was traded across Bering Strait from Siberia, and perhaps ultimately from China or Korea.





The blade of this harpoon head is made of European iron. Copper Inuit were receiving Hudson's Bay Company iron from Chipewyan Indian traders as early as the 18th century.

Inuit, in exchange (we are told from traditional accounts) for Russian iron knives. Two trade routes existed. One led across southern Victoria Island to Nelson Head on the southern tip of Banks Island, then over the winter ice to Cape Bathurst. The other, probably more important, route led straight west across the Arctic coast. The Copper Inuit became known as far away as western Alaska as "the people who make stone lamps."

ON THE EVE OF GREAT CHANGES

For a brief period, the Copper Inuit were the outer terminus of this inter-continental all-Native trade network. Within a generation it was gone. In the 1850s the Hudson's Bay Company began direct trade with Inuit in the Mackenzie area, and the American whaling fleet out of San Francisco was opening up trade in north Alaska. Both could supply metal knives, pots, and iron lamps far more cheaply than Inuit middlemen, and the entire network went into a rapid decline.

Fortunately, perhaps, the Copper Inuit had other access routes to the outside world. One of the most important was through the Caribou Inuit living inland from the west coast of Hudson Bay. In the eighteenth century the Hudson's Bay Company established a post at Fort Prince of Wales, the site of present-day Churchill, Manitoba. All through the nineteenth century the Caribou Inuit traded with this post, exchanging furs and musk-ox hides for the usual metal goods. From an early date they also seem to have been trading with Copper Inuit, apparently acting as middlemen, taking Copper Inuit furs and hides and exchanging them at a considerable mark-up for Hudson's Bay Company trade goods. Tattannaaeuk, a Caribou Inuit interpreter on the first Franklin expedition, reported in 1819 that such a trade had already begun with Arctic coast people. It continued until 1916, when the first trading posts were established among the Copper Inuit.

The Copper Inuit met their Caribou Inuit trading partners at a rendezvous called Akilinik on the Thelon River, travelling southeast through Bathurst Inlet. It was customary for people to go down in

spring and return in autumn when there was enough snow cover for sledding. Sometimes Caribou Inuit made the trip in reverse, more out of curiosity and friendliness than for any other motive. They used a brief formula or song to describe their Copper Inuit friends: "They are good people to meet, they are pleasant companions. They always have plenty of seal meat. They are a friendly people. Whenever they go sealing they always secure plenty of seals."

A final source of exotic materials before the fur-trade era was a British Navy ship, HMS *Investigator*, abandoned off the northern end of Banks Island in 1853. It was soon found by wandering Kanghiryuarmiut hunters from Victoria Island and systematically scavenged for nearly forty years. The captain, Robert M'Clure, had left a depot on shore that was a particular target even after the ship itself sank (or was crushed by ice).

Not surprisingly, the Inuit were particularly interested in the metal: iron nails, barrel hoops, and the like. Softwood was also taken, but the hardwood fabric of the ship and the oak barrel staves were not of much use. Inuit informants remembered that hardwood, of which they had had no previous experience, was almost as difficult to work as antler but not nearly as strong. Material from the ship seems to have been traded widely among the Copper Inuit, in the days just before they were engulfed by the outside world.