

The Archaeology at Qilakitsoq

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Andreasen, C. 1989. The Archaeology at Qilakitsoq. – *Meddr Grønland, Man & Soc.* 12: 11–22. Copenhagen 1990–01–26.

The following pages describe the site of Qilakitsoq where eight mummified Eskimos were found in two graves in 1972 and the exhumation of the bodies took place in 1978.

The find has been dated to the 15th century AD. At Qilakitsoq several structures have been surveyed and mapped, but excavation has not been carried out. Judging from the different types of structures at the site, the area seems to have been inhabited for the last c. 600 years.

The mummy find contains the bodies of six women, one child and a baby. Besides, a large amount of skins and garments were found, making this find extraordinary in Arctic North America.

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In the autumn of 1972 the brothers Hans and Jokum Grønvold from Uummannaq went hunting ptarmigans on their usual hunting grounds at the north side of the Nuussuaq Peninsula just opposite Uummannaq. The place is called Qilakitsoq. During the hunt Hans Grønvold noticed two graves which he looked into by lifting the stones. He saw two children and several adults all mummified and all dressed in skin garments unlike those he was familiar with. He also saw a number of loose pieces of skin. Returning to Uummannaq, he at once reported his discovery to the local authority, which forwarded the information to The Greenland Museum. In the autumn of 1977 the then Director of the museum, Jens Rosing, became aware of the note in the museum files. When the Grønvold brothers shortly afterwards also showed him pictures from the graves, Jens Rosing immediately took the necessary steps to secure the find which he knew was unique.

The first exhumations took place during Easter 1978, when the two children and a quantity of skins were taken out and brought to the National Museum in Copenhagen for an assessment of conservation problems and radiocarbon dating.

In August 1978 the first datings were available, based on three samples from the find. The datings were made on seal skin, caribou skin and human tissue from the child. The dates were 1460 AD cal. (K-3018), 1465 AD cal. (K-3019) and 1475 AD cal. (K-3020).

The final exhumation took place in September 1978, concurrently with the first survey of the site. More detailed surveys were carried out later, in September 1983 and September 1984.

In the September 1983 survey, 48 graves and meat caches and eight ruins were registered. The following

year another nine structures were discovered, three of which are tent rings.

In 1978 the whole find was shipped to the National Museum in Copenhagen, where in the following years it was conserved and subjected to a number of medical and other scientific analyses. Four years later the whole find was returned to The Greenland Museum where it has been on display since August 1982.

In the following the site, the different ruins, and the exhumation of the graves will be described.

Qilakitsoq

Qilakitsoq is the name of a small site situated in an inlet on the north coast of the Nuussuaq Peninsula in the Uummannaq municipality (see Fig. 1).

Qilakitsoq is mentioned twice in the early written sources. The missionary Peter Andreas v. Cappelen mentions in his report on the district in 1789 that the harbour at Qilakitsoq is very good, but the place is only seldom inhabited (Cappelen 1937). This was said to be due to the problems in the winter time when strong winds and currents might break the ice, destroying the possibilities for seal-hunting on the ice. Twenty-two years later in 1811, the German geologist K. L. Giesecke visited the Uummannaq district. In his diary he wrote that on the northern side of the Nuussuaq Peninsula only three sites are inhabited in winter. Among these is Qilakitsoq (Giesecke 1910). Apart from this scanty archival information it is also known from oral tradition that Qilakitsoq was inhabited in the nineteenth century, although only by a few people. The small inlet,

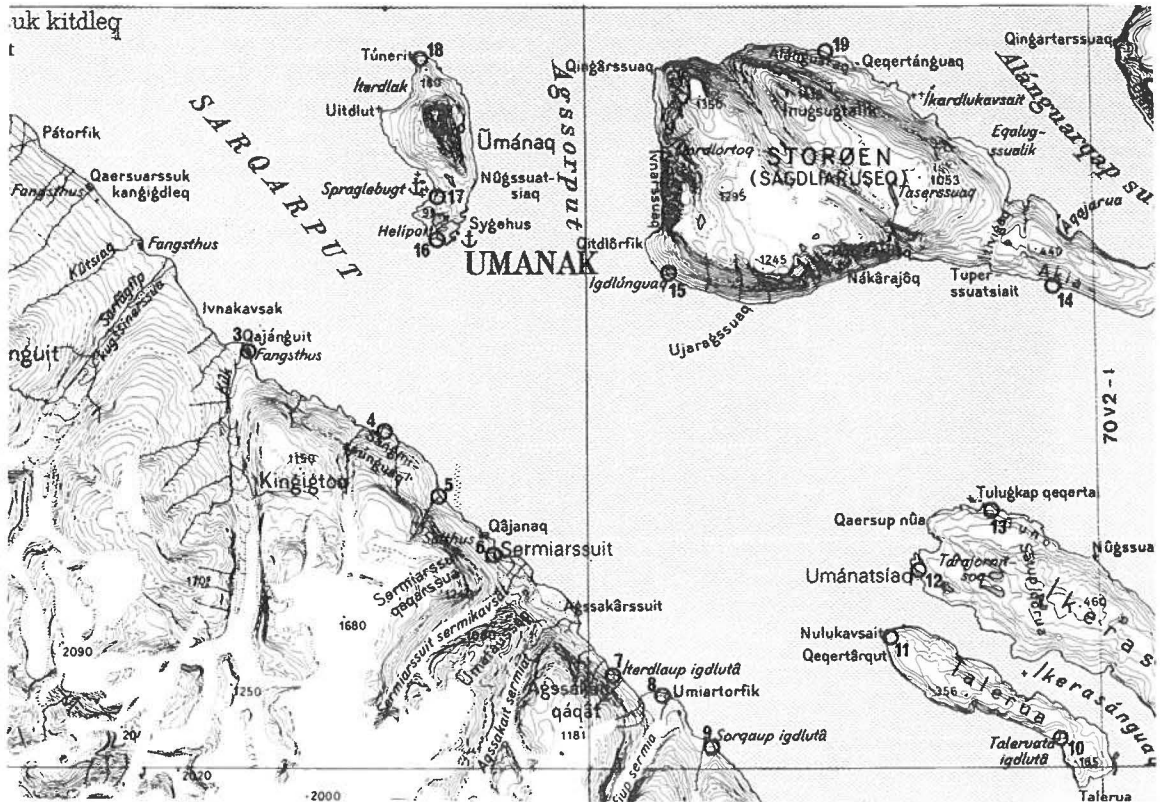


Fig. 1. The Uumannaq area with Qilakitsoq = No. 4. Scale 1:100.000.

which opens to the west, cuts into the coastline, creating a harbour sheltered from most winds (see Fig. 2).
 Entering the inlet one sees a gently sloping area de-

limited by steep mountains. Most of the ruins are on this sloping area.



Fig. 2. Qilakitsoq. View from east to west.

Description of the ruins

All the visible house structures are close to each other (see Fig. 3). Ruins A-E are clearly visible, while F-K are less clear. None of the ruins have been excavated. Their dating is based on typology.

Ruin A

This ruin lies farthest from the shore and is the largest ruin on the site. It appears today as a collapsed grassy mound, measuring 12 x 19 m. The wall contours are fairly clear, rising up to 0.8 m. above surface level.
 The ruin does not seem to have been destroyed in any way in modern times. There are traces of ancient re-building.

The structure is the ruin of a winter house, probably from the 1700s. The unbroken back wall shows that it was originally built as a long house. The house later seems to have been altered by the addition of two

QILAKITSOQ

Uummannaq municipality

Surveyed by H. Kapel and E. Buhl, September 21 - 24, 1984

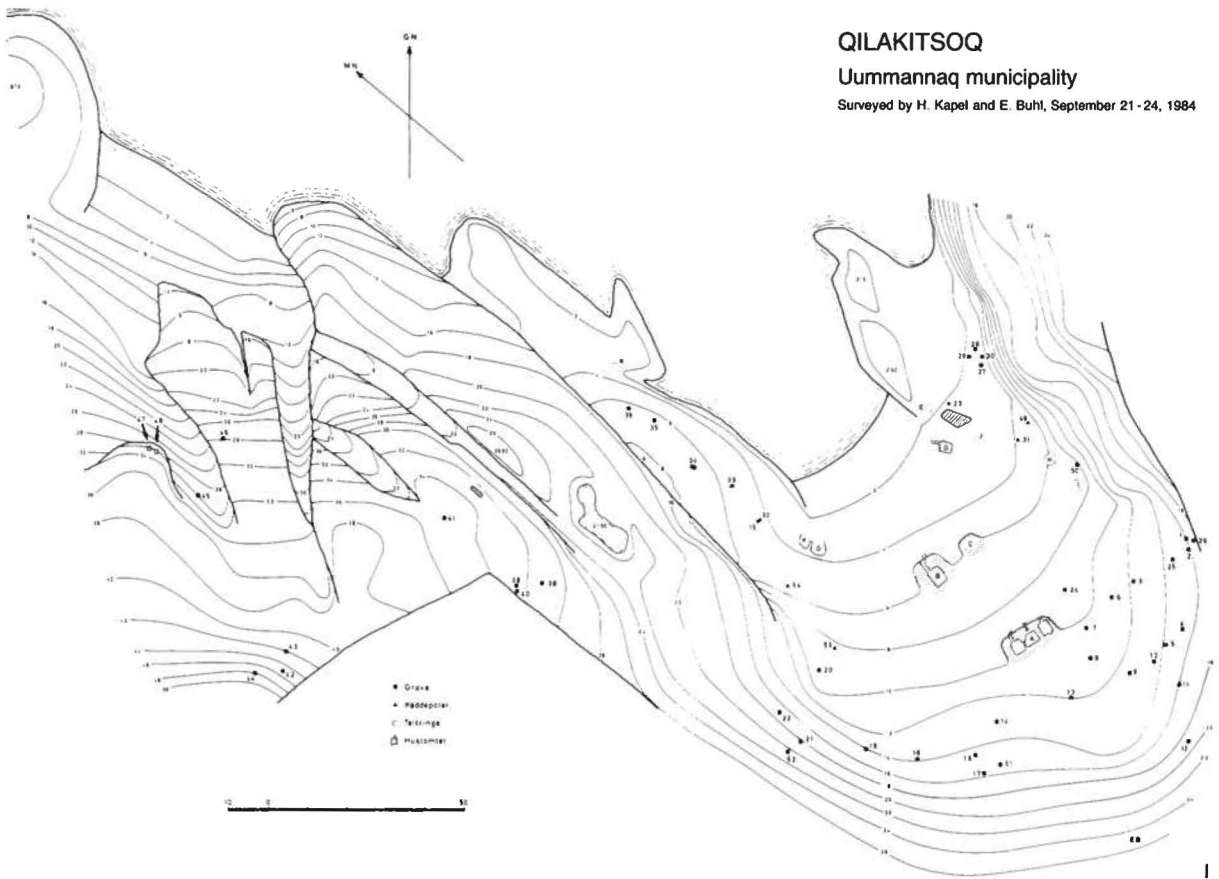


Fig. 3. Survey of Qilakitsoq with house ruins, tent rings, graves and meat caches. (Hans Kapel & Erling Buhl, 1984).

partition walls. The southwestern third must, because of its trapezoid form, be presumed to have been an independent unit which was in use up to the latter half of the nineteenth century. At the eastern end of the house a small depot is built up against a fixed stone block integrated into the wall construction itself.

Outside the house are slight midden traces. These are clearest in front of the youngest part of the house, i.e. the western end.

Ruin B

This ruin of a winter house is situated at the centre of the site and is today the best preserved ruin.

The layout is trapezoid with an asymmetrically placed entrance passage bent at an angle, turning the opening away from the sea. The covering of the innermost 1.5 m of the entrance passage is still intact. The ruin covers an area of approximately 10 × 15 m. The space of the living room is 3.5 × 5.0 m. The walls stand clearly with their alternating layers of turf and stone. Two recent, minor diggings can be seen in the floor.

Like the younger part of Ruin A, this ruin can also be dated to the nineteenth century when, according to oral

tradition, the site was still sometimes used as a winter settlement.

Ruin C

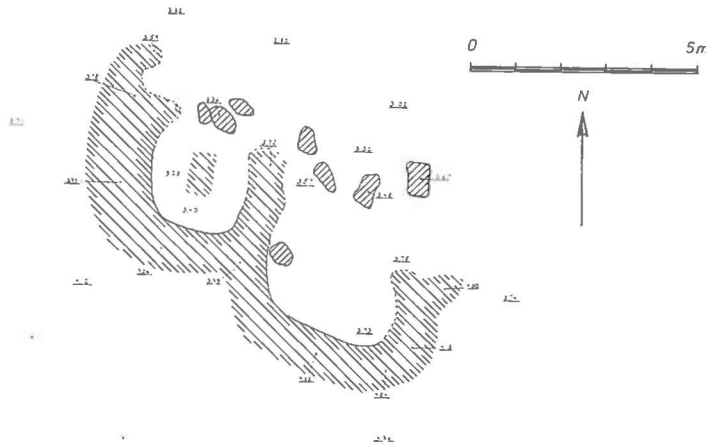
This is situated close to Ruin B. It is a very diffuse, roughly circular dwelling structure, the ground plan of which cannot be established in any great detail. The outer measurements are about 7.5 × 8.0 m. It rises about 0.5 m above surface level with a slight depression in the middle. Judging from the shape and the weak contours it is assumed that the ruin is one of the oldest visible dwellings on the site.

Ruin D

Ruin D is a trapezoid winter house with an asymmetrically placed entrance pointing towards the beach. The outer dimensions are 6 × 11 m, including possible midden remains at the end of the entrance passage. The 0.7 m high walls delimit a floor space of about 3 × 3.5 m.

The form and condition make it likely that the dwelling is contemporary with Ruin B, i.e. from the 1800s.

Fig. 4a. Ruins F and G – presumably among the oldest ruins on the site.



Ruin E

This tent ring has an almost circular ground plan with an outer diameter of about 2.6 m. No midden remains appear to be associated with the ruin.

Its state of preservation and overgrowth indicates an age of less than 100 years.



Fig. 4b. Ruins F and G.

Ruins F and G

These are the remains of a double house or two single houses built together at the western part of the site near the beach, cf. Fig. 3.

The ruin is rather decomposed. It was only possible to observe weak traces of the turf-built back walls, while the front was limited to a few loose stones (see Figs. 4a – b). The ruins covered an area of 5 × 9 m. The greatest height above surface level was 0.3 m. There were no traces of midden. Judging from decomposition, vegetation and form it is probable that this is a very old Thule culture dwelling. This round house-type or several round houses built together, were in use on the west coast up to the 1600s.

Ruin H

Ruin H is opposite F and G in the northernmost part of the site. It is a single, round structure of the same kind as F and G. It is seen as a slight depression in the ground with greatly decomposed turf walls measuring about 0.2 m above surface level. Outer dimensions: 3.7 × 4 m. The structure opens towards the west. Opposite the entrance opening, faint traces of a platform can be seen.

This ruin is probably contemporary with F and G, although it cannot be excluded that it might be of palaeo-Eskimo origin.

Ruin I

This tent ring, the outer dimensions of which are 3.5 × 3.8 m, is four-sided with rounded corners. The remains appear as a slight depression in the ground surrounded by head-sized stones. The tent ring is presumably of

some age, but a more precise date cannot be established from the present data.

Ruin J

A recent, circular tent ring marked by a single irregular stonecircle. Outer diameter: about 2.8 m. The tent ring is unlikely to be more than 100 years old.

Ruin K

A recent, rectangular tent ring marked by a stonecircle made of a few stones. Outer dimensions: 3.8 × 2.5 m. Inside the ring stands the characteristic flat stone used for the stove ("the primus"). This indicates a date within this century.

The ruins in summary

The surveys have shown eleven ruins scattered over the area. All the registered ruins but one, Ruin A, seem to have maintained their original form. No traces of European buildings have been observed at the site.

The situation of the dwellings within the settlement area does not indicate any kind of horizontal stratigraphy. Similarly the dwellings cannot be dated on the basis of their height above sea-level (cf. Table 1).

Since no archaeological excavations have taken place and no datable objects have been found in connection with the ruins, dating can only be done by comparing their form with other known, dated ruins on the west coast. The most reliable chronology of house forms have been based on dwellings in the Nuuk area (Gulløv 1983). When evaluating the probable dates of the various dwellings given in Table 1, it must be kept in mind that the two areas, the Ummannaq area and the Nuuk area, are far apart and that their cultural development may not have been exactly contemporary. To establish a more precise dating, excavations are necessary. Still, it can be said that the most interesting ruins, seen in relation to the mummies, are Ruins C, F, G, H, and I.

Table 1. Probable datings of the ruins at Qilakitsoq.

ruin	type	m above sea level	probable date
A	long house	10.5	orig. 1700s, rebuilt in the 1800s
B	trapezoid	8.0	winter house, 1800s
C	round	7.0	probably one of oldest
D	trapezoid	3.5	winterhouse, probably 1800s
E	tent ring	1.5	probably 1800s
F+G	roundhouses	4.0	probably one of the oldest
H	roundhouse	6.0	probably one of the oldest
I	tent ring	7.0	old ruin
J	tent ring	3.5	less than 100 years old
K	tent ring	3.5	less than 100 years old

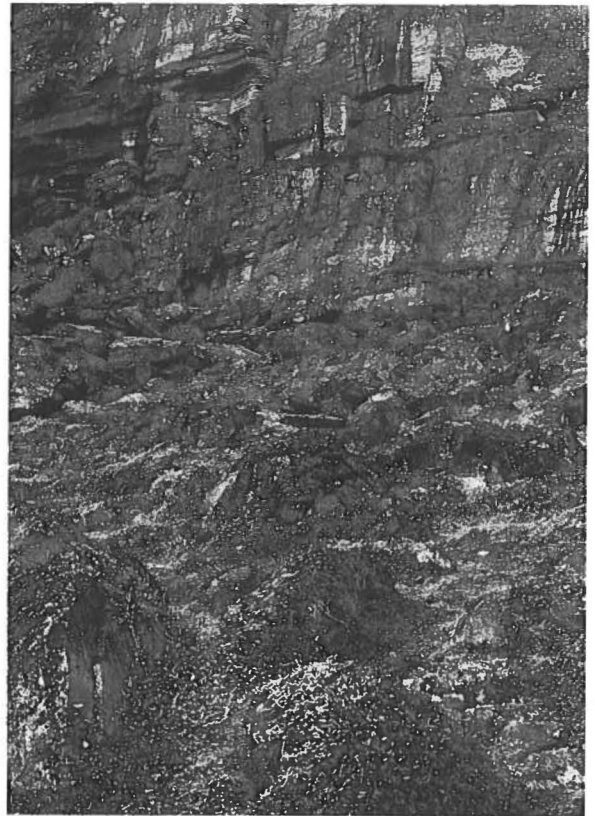


Fig. 5. Grave at the settlement area.

Other structures at Qilakitsoq

Besides the eleven above-mentioned ruins a large number of graves and grave-like stone structures were registered in the settlement area and in the scree slopes between the settlement and the mummy graves. The situation of these structures appears in Fig 3.

When mapping the structures no excavations were carried out but an attempt was made to establish whether they were graves or not. This was done simply by looking into the structures through the stones. Structures with visible human bones were classified as graves, while those with no visible content or no bones at all were classified as meat caches.

General description

All the structures are built of local stones without any cementing material (see Fig. 5). The bottom of the chamber is usually rectangular, while the superstructure makes the structures more dome-shaped. As a rule they are covered with large flat stones on top. A few struc-

tures are elongated – mainly those on the rock shelf between the settlement area and the mummy graves.

The stone size is generally 40–50 cm × 30–40 cm – often with rounded stones at the bottom and more flag-like stones at the top. The inner length of the chamber rarely exceeds 1.5 m. The length varies from 1–1.5 m. The greatest interior height was measured to 1.2 m (no. 22).

Several of the stones were partly overgrown with lichens.

Situation of the structures

A total of 54 structures were mapped, including the two mummy graves. Of these, 37 are situated within the settlement area, mostly at its periphery and with the majority behind Ruin A (cf Fig. 3).

Graves and meat caches

Nineteen of the structures could be classified as graves. In each of these there was at least one skull; in two cases two skulls were seen. The content of other bones varies greatly. The graves in the settlement area contained only skulls while in the graves on the rock shelf more parts of the skeleton were preserved. In three graves pieces of sealskin were observed and in two graves the orientation of the body could be determined. One lay with its head to the northeast, no. 43, and the other with its head to the northwest, no. 44. At one grave a structure resembling a side chamber was observed, no. 39.

Of the remaining 35 structures, nineteen had no contents while this could not be definitely established for the remaining sixteen. The nineteen meat caches are all situated in the actual settlement area and include all the structures on both sides of the cove.

A summary of the content of the structures is given in Table 2.

Dating

No artefacts were observed in any of the graves or the meat caches. Thus we are left with no means of dating these structures.

However, none of the graves were built like Christian graves – that is with rectangular stone cists or with wooden coffins. Generally the structures must therefore be dated to the pre-Christian period, i.e. the period before colonization in the early 1700s.

Till now no graves dating to the pre-Thule period have been found in Greenland. For the time being the graves have therefore been attributed to the Thule culture.

In the Thule culture both individual and communal

Table 2. Content of the graves and meat caches at Qilakitsoq.

no.	content
1–2	one skull in each
3	2 skulls
4–5	content not observed
6–9	one skull in each
10	three skulls
11–18	content not observed
19	one skull
20–37	no contents
38	two skulls
39	one skull, possibly one side chamber
40–42	content not observed
43	one skeleton, head in northeast; some fur preserved
44	one skeleton, slightly disturbed; head in northwest; some fur preserved
45	some human bones
46	content not observed
47	mummy grave I; five mummified persons; fur and garments preserved
48	mummy grave II, three mummified persons; fur and garments preserved
49	no content
50	some human bones
51–52	one skull and parts of a skeleton
53–54	content not observed

graves are found, but unfortunately no detailed study has been made of the various grave types of that period. A more precise dating within the Thule culture is therefore not possible.

The mummy graves

The so-called mummy graves are the two graves in which the mummified remains of two children and six adult women were found. The graves were the first to be registered at the site but have later been given nos. 47 and 48. They are situated about 200 m from the settlement and c. 27 m above sea level (cf. Fig. 3).

They can be reached by following the rock shelf westwards from the settlement area. On this shelf several other graves are found, too.

The mummy graves are situated between the solid bedrock and a large boulder. Above the graves the bedrock protrudes slightly, protecting the graves to a certain extent from rain and snow (see Figs. 6 and 6b). Both graves are built of local stones. From the graves there is a clear view through a short, steep gorge towards Uummanaq Island. The gorge is full of loose stones and ends in a small sandy beach.

Description of the graves

Like the other structures these are built of stones with no use of turf or earth as cementing material. The graves are built almost at right angles to each other (see

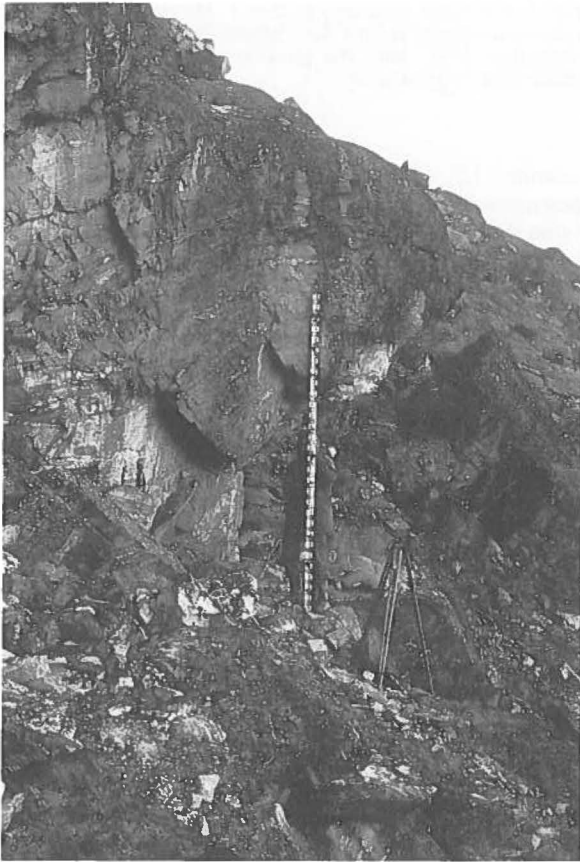


Fig. 6. The graves and the protruding rock.

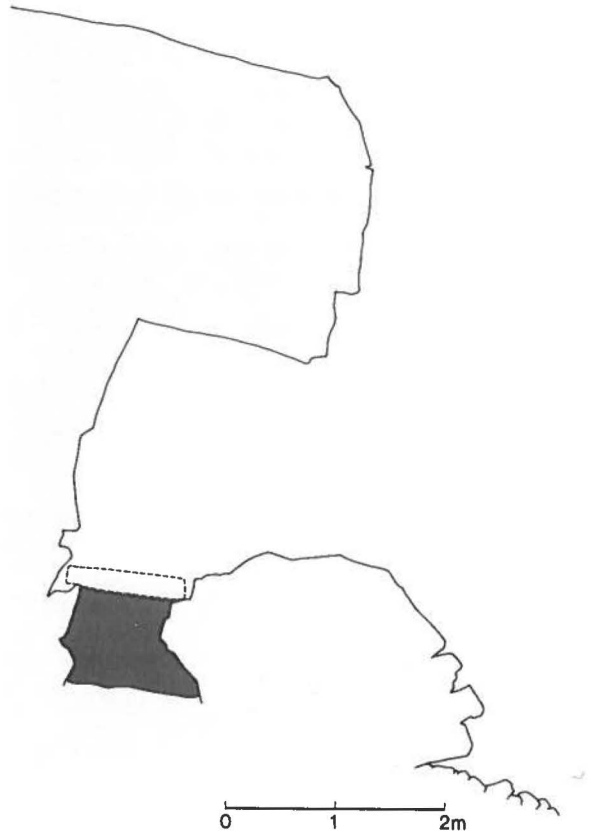


Fig. 6b. Cross-section of grave and rock.

Fig 8), with grave I lying roughly parallel to the coastline. The distance between the graves are about 1.7 m.

Grave I

This grave is about 1.7 m long, 0.9–1.2 m wide and 1 m deep at its deepest point. Its orientation is northwest-southeast. All the adult women had their heads in the northwestern end of the grave. Exhumation revealed two children, three adult women and a large amount of loose skin fragments and garments.

Uppermost lay the two children. At the time of the finders' first visit, the baby (mummy I,1) lay on some skins with its back towards the bedrock, facing the skins covering mummy I,2 and I,3. When they looked into the grave, the finders took up the baby and some skins. The baby was replaced, but the skins were taken to Uumannaq, where they later disappeared.

Next to the baby, the child (mummy I,2) was laying on its back with its head resting on the thighs of the woman below. The legs were strongly bent and spread wide apart. This child does not seem to have been disturbed. According to the finder, Hans Grønvold, the

child was covered with a skin. Mummy I,2 was fully dressed in skin garments.

The uppermost woman in the grave (mummy I,3) was lying on her back. Her arms were bent and the hands touched each other in front of the body. The legs were bent and slightly spread, partly because of bending, partly because the right foot had come to rest on a small projection in the rock during the burial (see Fig. 9). The body was partly wrapped in a large seal skin with its hairy side towards the body, leaving the thighs naked. On top of the body and in particular to the right of the head a number of smaller skins were lying (see Fig. 10).

Between mummy I,3 and mummy I,4 a large number of loose skins were found. Mummy I,4 was wrapped in a seal skin, too, the opening of which faced upwards so that the whole body was visible. Orientation and position of the body corresponded to that of mummy I,3. However, the body was lying slightly on its right side pressing the right arm upwards (see Fig. 11). Following the exhumation of mummy I,4, the rest of the grave's content appeared to be one large heap of skins. This was taken up as one unit without separating the skins. During this process it was observed that another



Fig. 7. The stone covering of grave I. The grave is known to have been opened at least twice before the final exhumation in September 1978. Still, the position of the stones probably reflects the original level.

mummy, I,5, was lying at the bottom of the heap wrapped in a caribou skin. This last mummy was lying in the same way as I,3 and I,4. The bottom of the grave was built of stone-flags placed horizontally and strewn with plant material, mostly cassiope and crowberry (see Fig. 12).

Grave II

Like grave I this was also built of loose stones with no cementing material. The grave is partly underneath the overhanging rock. The grave is about 1.5 m long, about 1.15 m wide and 1 m at the deepest point.

The orientation is almost north-south. The three mummies in the grave – all adult females – had their heads towards the south.

Fig. 8. Survey of the graves. Grave 47 = grave I; grave 48 = grave II. Grey area shows extent of overhanging rock. Hatched area is the solid rock.

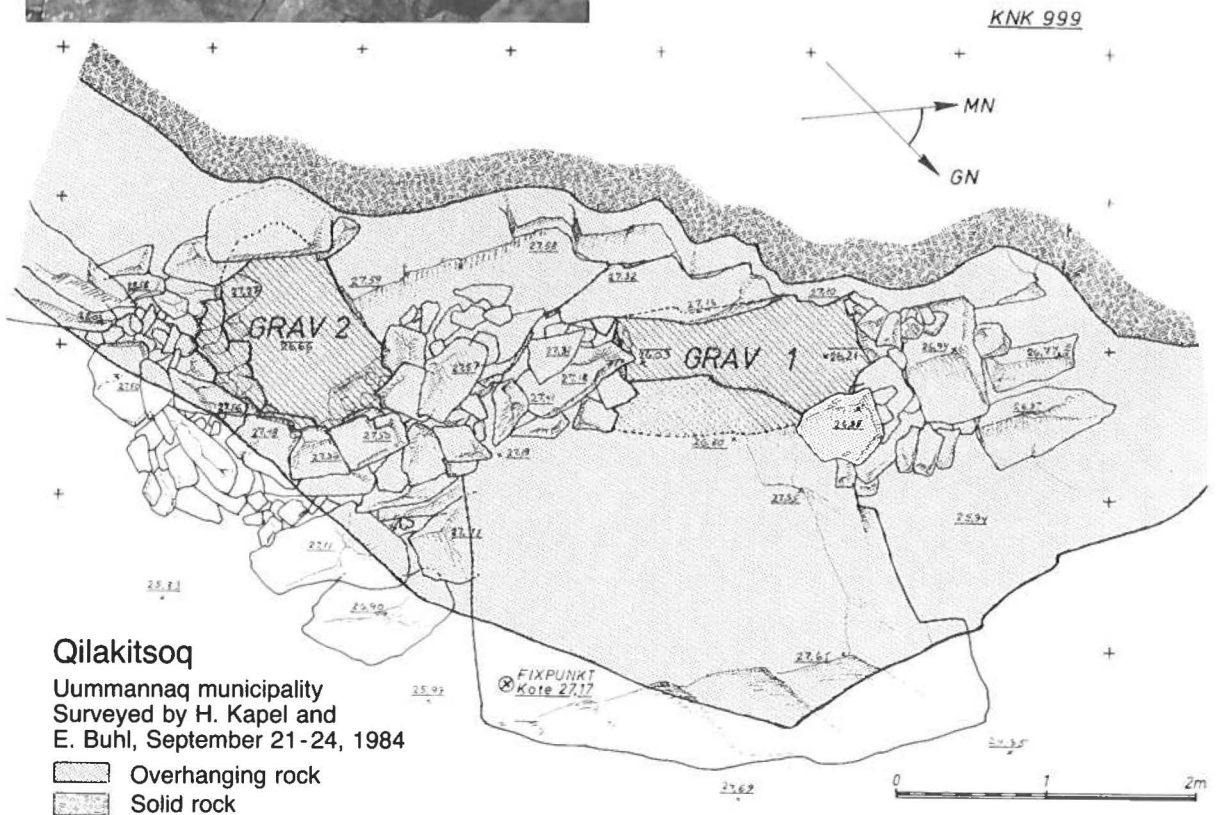




Fig. 9. Mummy I,3 in situ. The skin covering reaches mid-thighs.



Fig. 10. Mummy I,3. This skin-wrapped body was completely covered by loose skins.



Fig. 11. Mummy I,4 in situ. The skin wrapping held aside.

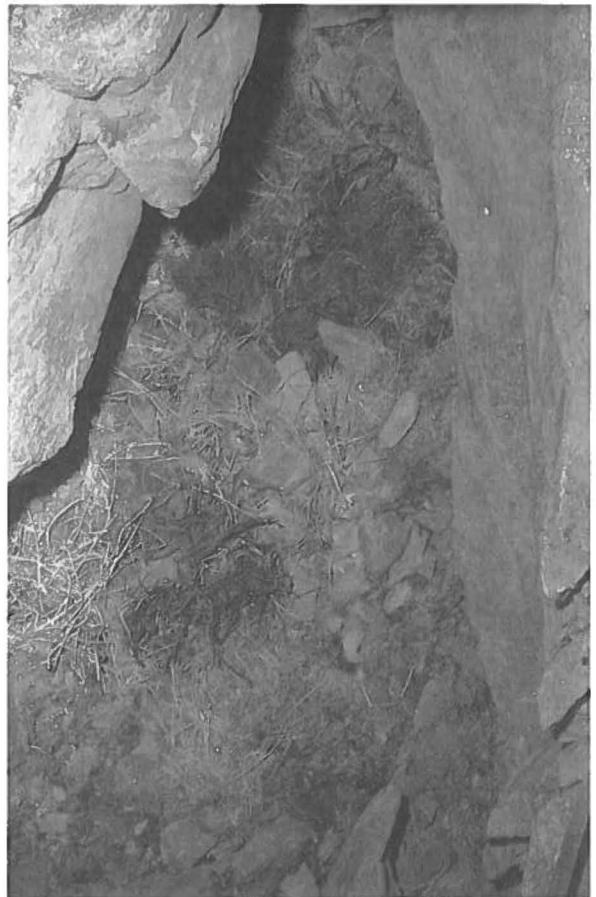


Fig. 12. Vertical photo of the bottom of grave I. All the adults lay with their heads at the wide end.



Fig. 13. Grave II. The skin covering mummy II,6.

After removal of the top stones a large sealskin covering the uppermost body was seen (see Fig. 13). Beneath it lay mummy II,6. The body was lying on its left side with strongly bent legs in a hocker-like position facing westwards. The hands were folded in front of the chest and the face was covered by an edge of the caribou skin which was wrapped around the body.

Again, a number of loose skins were found between this mummy and the next one, no II,7.

Mummy II,7 was lying partly on its side, partly on its back with the head towards the south and facing eastwards. It was not wrapped in skins. The body was partly covered by grass and lyme grass. This appears to have been put into the grave with the loose skins.

Beneath II,7 more loose pieces of skin were found covering the last mummy, II,8. The body was lying on its back with its head towards the south. It had very strongly bent legs, which must be due to the fact that the grave is actually too short for a body of this size. The feet were fairly firmly wedged under some stones. The mummy was not wrapped in skins.

The bottom of the grave was partly solid bedrock, partly loose flag-like stones with a partial cover of grass and cassiope.

Summary of the content of the graves

Grave I contained one baby, one child and three adult women, all fully dressed in skin garments. Above, between, and below the bodies a large number of pieces of skin were found; some of these were garments, but most were ordinary fragments of skin.

The three women were wrapped in skins; the children were not. Some gravel was found between the mummies and the skins. Geological examination shows that most of it is of local origin, i.e. from the settlement area and from the sandy beach in front of the graves. The mineral analysis also showed that some of the small stones embedded in the skins are from other areas in Uummanaq district. This indicates that the skins had been used by these people before their death. It could be demonstrated that some minerals came from localities further to the west on the Nuussuaq Peninsula and from the old settlement at Tupersuatsiaat on Storøen, just north of Qilakitsoq.

Grave II contained three adult women, all fully dressed in skin garments. Only the uppermost, mummy II,6, was wrapped in a skin. In addition, a total of 130 loose skins and garment fragments were found. Most of these are ordinary skins, but 25 pieces are from skin garments. 53 pieces of garments were found on the mummies (cf. Table 3).

The skins derive from harp seal (*Phoca groenlandica*), ringed seal (*Phoca hispida*), caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*), and birds.

Apart from this the find also includes some botanical material, small stones, bees and fish-scales (both probably of a later origin).

No artefacts were found in or near the graves.

Table 3. Types of skin garments in the two graves.

Type of garment	on the mummies	loose-lying	total
Anorak			
outer anorak	8	7	15
inner anorak	7	1	8
anorak between outer and inner	1	0	1
Trousers			
outer trousers	8	3	11
inner trousers	1	0	1
Kamiks (boots)			
kamiks	14	5	19
stockings	14	7	21
Sleeves			
half-sleeves	0	2	2
total	53	25	78

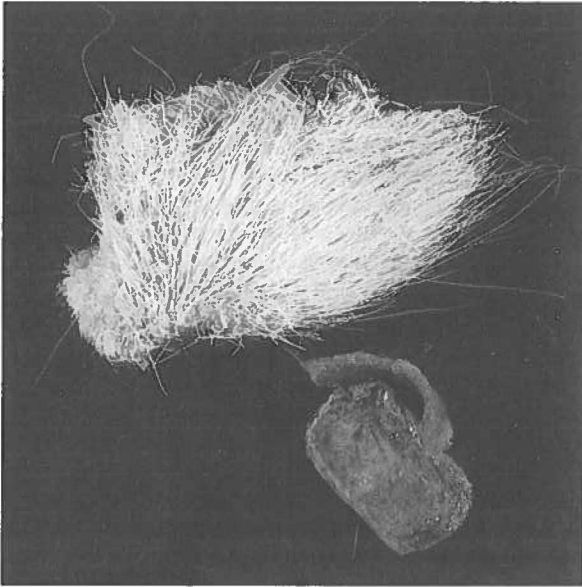


Fig. 14. Amulet from grave I.

Among the loose-lying items in grave I was a piece of caribou skin on which were sewn two small pieces of scraped sealskin in the form of two small kamik soles

(see Fig. 14). The item is thought to be an amulet. Judging from its position it belonged to one of the two children.

Dating

The first three radiocarbon datings of the find were carried out on pieces of sealskin, caribou skin and human tissue. The dating turned out to be c. 1460 AD. After the retrieval of the whole find another four samples were delivered for radio carbon dating.

These datings are shown below:

K-3393	sealskin	(mummy I,3)	1470 AD cal.
K-3394	caribou skin	(mummy I,5)	1480 AD cal.
K-3395	caribou skin	(mummy II,6)	1510 AD cal.
K-3396	sealskin	(mummy II,8)	1470 AD cal.

Average dating of the find is 1475 AD cal. according to the radiocarbon laboratory.

The Burial type

The two graves are communal graves, a common burial type for the Thule culture. In communal graves it is

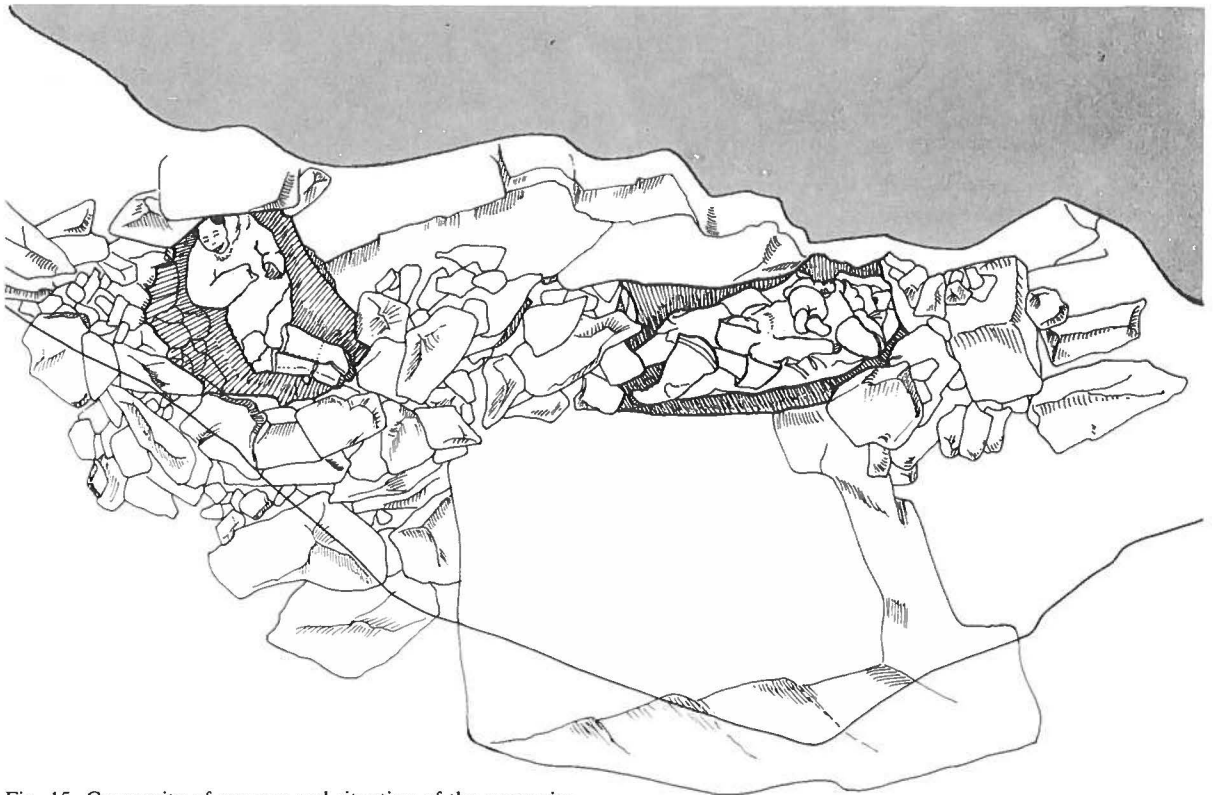


Fig. 15. Composite of surveys and situation of the mummies.

often seen that those buried first are pushed aside to make room for the following burials. This was not the case in these graves. Most communal graves are placed on a flat surface where a covered stone chamber has been built. The mummy graves are of another construction. They might be termed "vertical graves" in which the bodies are laid down one on top of the other. The Thule culture grave types have never been studied in detail. Therefore it is not possible at present to determine whether these graves are a common feature of the Thule culture. It is for instance still a question whether it is a mere coincidence or on purpose that the graves only contained women and children.

Burial in phases?

Since the mummies and the skin fragments lay directly above one another, the question has been whether one could distinguish between different burial phases in each grave.

In grave I, particularly above the skins that covered mummy I,5, a certain amount of small stones and gravel was seen. This might indicate that some time had elapsed between this first burial and the following. However, the "layer" was intermittent, which could be a result of the activities undertaken during the burial. In addition, the activities of the finders and the archaeologists resulted in some precipitation of gravel in particular. Archaeologically, no basis was found to determine whether the bodies were buried at the same time or not. Nor was it possible to establish whether the two graves are contemporary or not – apart from the evidence of the radiocarbon datings and the garments.

Conclusion

At Qilakitsoq two graves were found containing six adult women, two children, and a number of skin garments and skins. The persons were all mummified and

fully dressed in skin clothes. Based on seven radio carbon datings the find has been dated to 1475 AD cal. At the Qilakitsoq site eleven dwelling structures and 54 graves and meat caches were found. During the surveys undertaken by The Greenland Museum no excavations in any of these ruins were undertaken. It is therefore not possible at present to establish any contemporarity between the exhumated bodies and any of the structures at the site. Dating the ruins by means of typology and comparison with known house types at other sites on the west coast show that Qilakitsoq must have been inhabited for several hundred years, until the beginning of the twentieth century.

Note

All surveys by Erling Buhl and Hans Kapel, Copenhagen.

All drawings by Hans C. Gulløv in: Qilakitsoq. De grønlandske mumier fra 1400-tallet. – Copenhagen, 1985.

All photos by Kalaallit Nunaata Katersugaasivia/ The Greenland Museum.

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