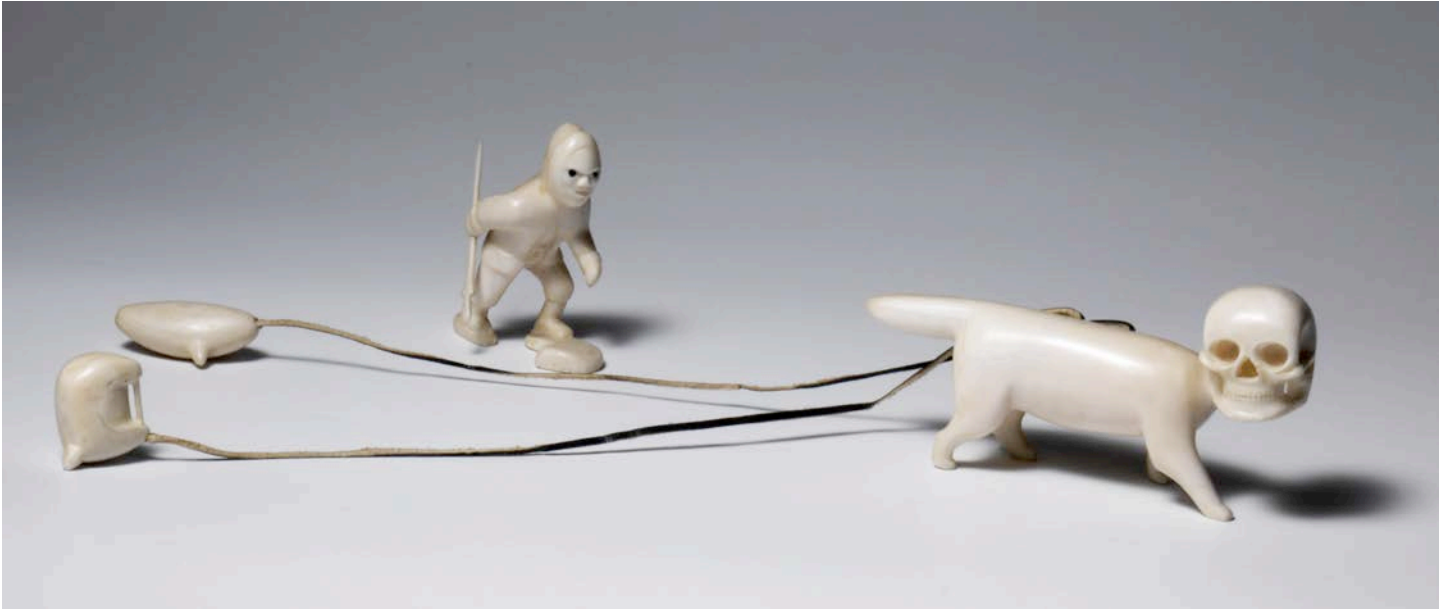


Ivory Carvings from Kulusuk (Kap Dan), East Greenland

Although most mid-twentieth century (1940-1965) ivory carvings from East Greenland show evidence of hasty production and stereotyped representations derived from the shape of the sperm whale tooth, a small portion reveal an artistic imagination and technical skill that make them worthy of more than passing attention.



Bruce White photo

Ivory carvings by Sejer Kunak (born 1934) of a hunter who has harpooned a tupilak that has the body of a fox and a human skull, and is dragging two inflated sealskin floats attached to the harpoon lines. Fox/Tupilak: 11.5 cm

Provenance: Collection of Jakob Sivartsen, Manager, Kap Dan KGH (Kongelige Grønlandske Handel/Royal Greenland Trade). Carved in the early 1960s and acquired in 1974.

The Greenland Tupilak

For visitors to Greenland, the name "tupilak" signifies a small, grotesque figure carved in ivory or soapstone. It usually has a body, head, and four limbs, but resembles several animals at the same time. It often has a distorted face, and not infrequently a skeletal ornamentation (for the modern production of tupilaks in East Greenland, see Enel, 1980, 1981). Strictly speaking these carvings are not "tupilaks" but "tupilak figures"; representations of the real tupilak without having their magical significance. Today these figures correspond in type to the original tupilak representations that were made on request for Gustav Holm when he discovered the Angmassalik Eskimos of East Greenland in 1884, and to those of other mythical creatures and animal fantasies (see illustrations of early wood tupilaks below).

The real tupilak was a magically created monster, which in former times the heathen Greenlanders made from a child's corpse or with a combination of different animal and human bones,

to which they added objects belonging to a particular person. According to folklore, the bones were put together into a skeleton following a definite ritual, and the new being was given life with the help of magical songs, and frequently through contact with the tupilak creator's genitals. This creation process was supposed to happen, like all magic, in the greatest secrecy.

The new being had only one task - to kill the tupilak-maker's enemy, whose different possessions had been inserted into the tupilak's skeleton.

According to the West Greenlandic and southern East Greenlandic conception, tupilaks resembled ordinary animals and behaved like them. But they could change in appearance and size to another animal. Thus, they could appear as any animal of whose bones they were composed. This accounts for the many representations of animals that after being harpooned by a hunter, were revealed to actually be tupilaks. These characteristics are clearly seen in the drawings of Kârale Andreassen (1890-1934), the son of the *angakkoq* (shaman) Mitsivarnianga. (Kârale, who was born near Ammassalik, produced a great many drawings representing the life, and especially the mythical beings, of his people; Geertsen, 1990.) In northern East Greenland, however, tupilaks were beings that resembled several animals at the same time, for example with a human head, dog's body and fox legs, or a seal with human feet.

Some of the material for this brief description of tupilaks is translated and adapted from Robert Petersen: *What is a Tupilak?* (*Havd er en Tupilak?*, five page manuscript dated November, 1967). For a more detailed discussion of the Greenland tupilak, see Petersen (1965) and Gilberg (2001).

Literature:

Enel, C. (1980): Souvenirs d'Ammassalik – Le tourisme au Groenland oriental, *Boréales*, No. 15-16:441-448.

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Gilberg, R (2001): Tupilakken - den usynlige dræbeber og turistfiguren, *Grønland*, No. 2, 67-79.

Petersen, R. (1965): The Greenland tupilak. *Folk*, 6:73-101.



Two representations of a tupilak made by the *angakkoq* Mitsivarnianga in Ammassalik around 1905

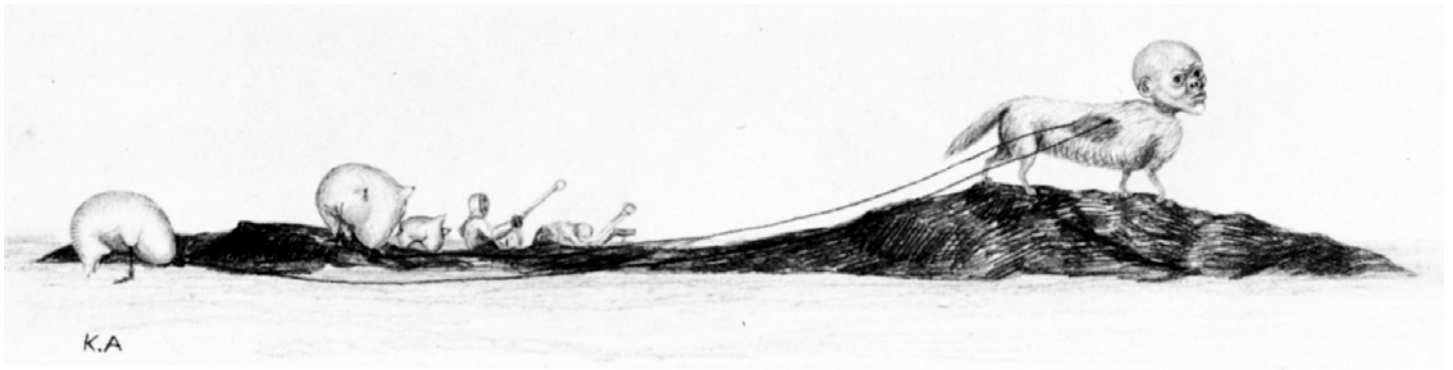
The figure at the left has eyes and teeth from a dead child, and the one on the right represents a harpooned tupilak with the body of a fox to which two inflated sealskin floats are still attached. Collected by William Thalbitzer and now in the Handels- og Søfartsmuseet (Danish Maritime Museum) at Kronborg Castle in Helsingør.



Tupilak figure from around 1900 in the National Museum of Denmark



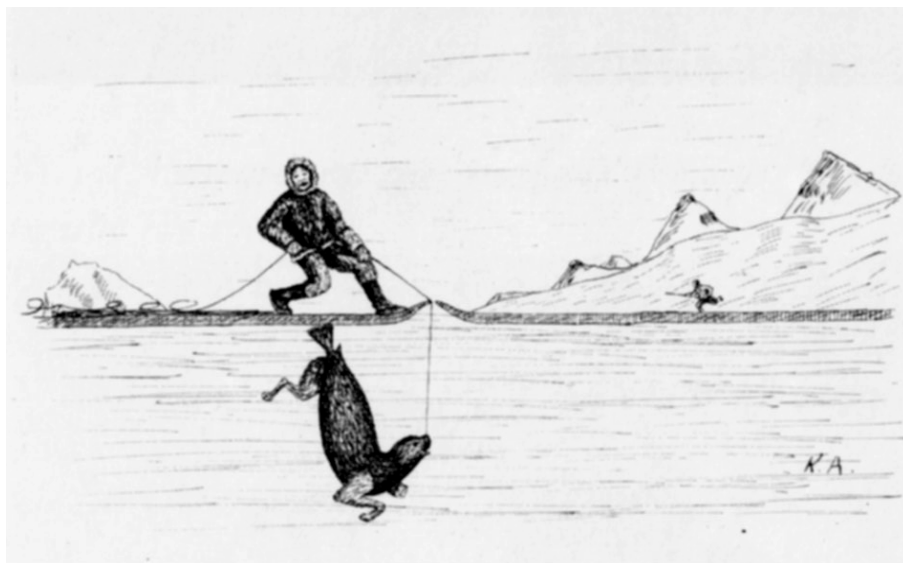
Three tupilak figures made around 1930



Kârale Andreassen, 1919: “A tupilak in the form of a dog with a human head is harpooned by two kayak men, whose hunting floats it drags behind it. To harpoon a tupilak means death, and one sees that one of the kayak men is therefore already about to capsize.”



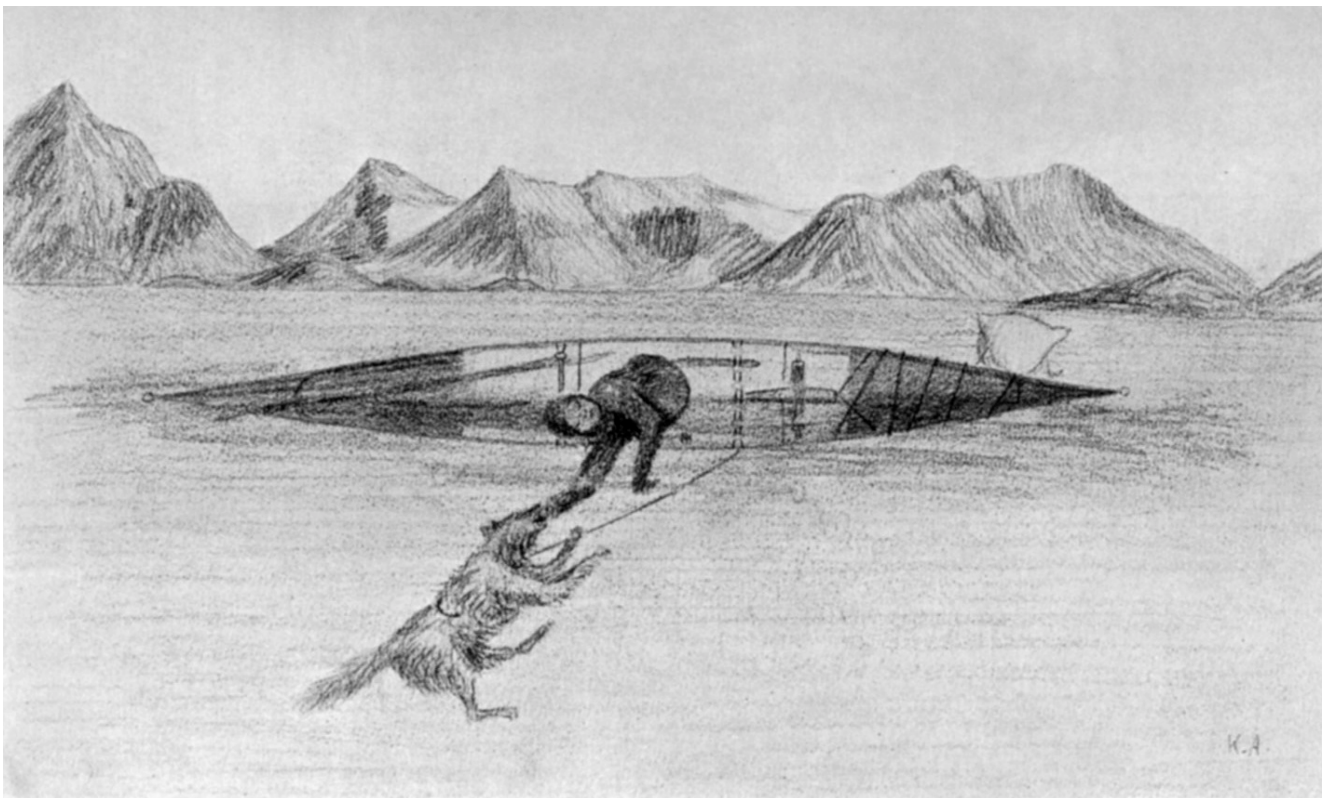
Kârale Andreassen, 1926-28: “A tupilak is harpooned by a kayak man.”



Kârale Andreassen, 1930: “A hunter has caught a tupilak.”



Kârale Andreassen, 1930: “Kayak man catches the evil spirit, a tupilak dog.”

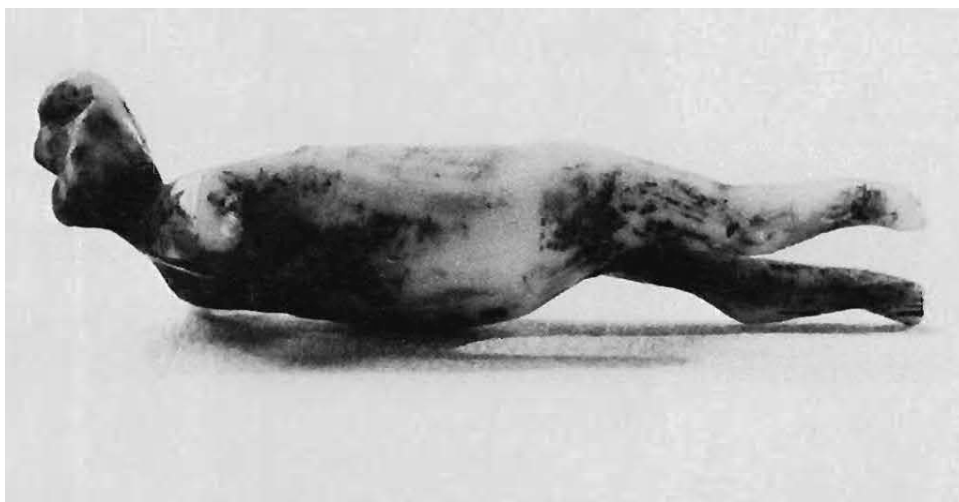


Kârale Andreassen, 1930: “Tupilak in the form of a dog drags the kayak man down to the bottom.”

East Greenland seal bone carving, 1930/40s, 9.8 cm



Bruce White photo



A similar 3 cm Dorset culture human figure from the Igloolik area, Canada
(Fig. 36 from *Sculpture/Inuit*, Canadian Eskimo Arts Council, University of Toronto Press, 1971).



Carving from a seal otolith, 6 cm







Bruce White photos