

Baidarka stories: The Aleutian Islands origins of the Baidarka boats

The Aleuts are, as George Dyson makes clear, a people of the sea. The Aleutian island archipelago, which continues across several hundred miles from the western edges of Alaska to Siberia, is the only known source of the kayak or Baidarka, and its larger cousin the baidar or umiak. What distinguishes this part of the circumpolar boat tradition is that the Aleuts created a boat from the immediate resources available: sea lion skin, whalebone and driftwood. No one knows for certain how long the Aleut islanders have been building baidarkas, even if there are a variety of theories. The islands have been inhabited for over eight thousand years, and it is possible that the skin boat design the Aleuts made their own originated elsewhere, perhaps in a land-locked part of the Asian interior, necessitated by an imminent ice age.

What is certain is that the Aleutians developed an unusually elegant, seaworthy and very fast vessel, a version of the kayak that appears repeatedly in different Eskimo cultures throughout the circumpolar North. Its main purpose, apart from transportation, was the hunting of otters, fish, whales, sea lions and other animals, which ensured the Aleuts' survival. The baidarkas were built with single through to triple hatches, while the baidaras were considerably larger open-framed boats covered with walrus skin, used both for long journeys and short ferrying of people and goods. The crucial baidarka material was the sea lion skins, used as a sheath to cover the frame, and artfully sewn onto the frame, usually by women.

The frame came from whalebone, was tied using the sea animals' sinew and gut, and waterproofed in seams of blubber. Boats were re-oiled after a week in water, and the skins would be replaced every few years. The versatile skin enabled the speed and waterborne flexibility of the Aleutians. It aided their intimate knowledge of the sea to great effect, and impressed European sailors with their comparatively slow rowing boats.

Next to nothing was known of the baidarkas until the voyages of discovery by explorers like Bering, followed by Russian and British travellers. The history of the colonisation of Alaska, and its cruel exploitation of the Aleut population is evocatively described in 'A Chain of Events', the first chapter of Dyson's *Baidarka* book. The Russians press-ganged the Aleuts into subjugation, and at the same time created baidarka fleets which hunted otters and seals for their pelts. These fleets ventured far down the north-west American coastline, one even reaching San Francisco in 1812. By the time of its outlawing in 1911, these fleets had hunted the otters almost to extinction, which meant the beginning of the end of the need for the baidarka for hunting. As a consequence, the twentieth-century survival of this remarkable boat technology has become increasingly marginalised and tenuous, although something of the building culture remains, along with a small band of supporters such as Dyson, promoting it wherever and whenever they are able. *OL*

