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AN ATHAPASKAN TYPE OF KNIFE

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In the collections of the Department of Ethnology, Royal Ontario Museum, University of Toronto, are five knives of unusual shape. In the ethnology collection of the National Museum of Canada there are two knives of similar type. Although only fragmentary information exists about most of these knives, it seems appropriate to place them on record in the fond hope that additional data may be forthcoming in the future. Five of the knives are similar, with two outward flaring spirals at the proximal end, and are referred to by Leroi-Gourham (1946:298) as "le type à antennes." The other two have only one such antenna; although in one it is not a true spiral. Four problems arise in connection with these knives: their provenance, place of manufacture, age, and use. Only occasionally is the provenance given; no other data. Therefore, recourse must be had to the literature, and a detective's approach utilized. This leaves much to be desired anthropologically, yet it may stimulate an interest to find out more about such items through firsthand observation rather than by mere speculation.

A description of the knives in the Royal Ontario Museum (A-E), given in the following paragraph, is based on data from the museum catalogue and from an examination of the objects. All but "B" are illustrated in Plates I and II, and Figure I.

A - (963x18.2)

Length: 28 $\frac{1}{2}$ cm
Material: Iron and Hide
Shape: Blade, three facets on obverse side and flat on reverse with subconical point at distal end. Handle wrapped with thong. Proximal end Y-shaped with ends of Y rolled into inverted spirals.

Provenance: Fort Providence, Northwest Territories

B - (953.160.2a)

Length: 31 $\frac{1}{2}$ cm
Material: Iron and Hide
Shape: See "A"
Provenance: Unknown

C - (935.53a)

Length: 35 $\frac{1}{2}$ cm
Material: Iron and Cloth

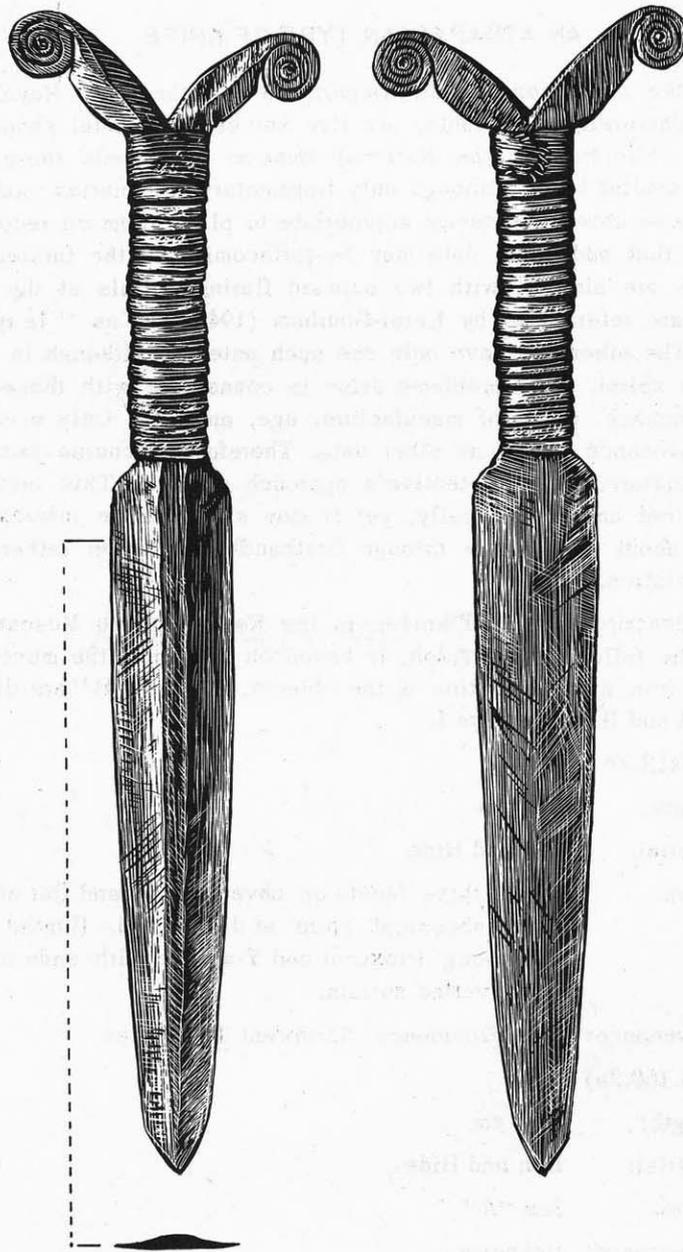


Figure 1. Knife D. Made of native copper.

Shape: See "A" except that handle wrapped with cloth, not hide.

Provenance: Unknown

D - (929.20.1)

Length: 36 $\frac{1}{2}$ cm

Material: Copper and Hide

Shape: See "A"

Provenance: Victoria Land (Victoria Island, Northwest Territories)

E - (920x70.11)

Length: 48 $\frac{1}{2}$ cm

Material: Iron and Vegetal Cordage

Shape: See "A" except for a single spiral at proximal end and handle wrapped with a vegetal cordage.

Provenance: Unknown

Information regarding the two knives in the National Museum of Canada was kindly supplied by Mr. T. Twarecki, Custodian, Ethnology Collection. They are illustrated in Plate III.

F - (VI-G-38)

Length: 28 $\frac{1}{4}$ cm

Material: Copper

Shape: Blade, three facets on obverse side and flat on reverse with rounded point at distal end. Handle not wrapped. Proximal end bends to one side and ends not in a spiral but in a circle open in the centre.

Provenance: Southern Tutchone, Lake Aishihik, Yukon Territory

G - (VII-A-176)

Length: 40 cm

Material: Copper and Hide

Shape: See "A"

Provenance: Dawson City area, Yukon Territory

Mr. Twarecki gives the following information regarding another knife (VII-A-261) in the Ethnology collections. It is of copper with the handle wrapped with 'leather' and with the proximal end split to represent the horns of the mountain sheep. According to the catalogue, it was made by "Chief Escalada of the Chitena band of natives living on the Chitena River, a branch of the Copper River in Alaska." The knife is approximately 31 cm long.

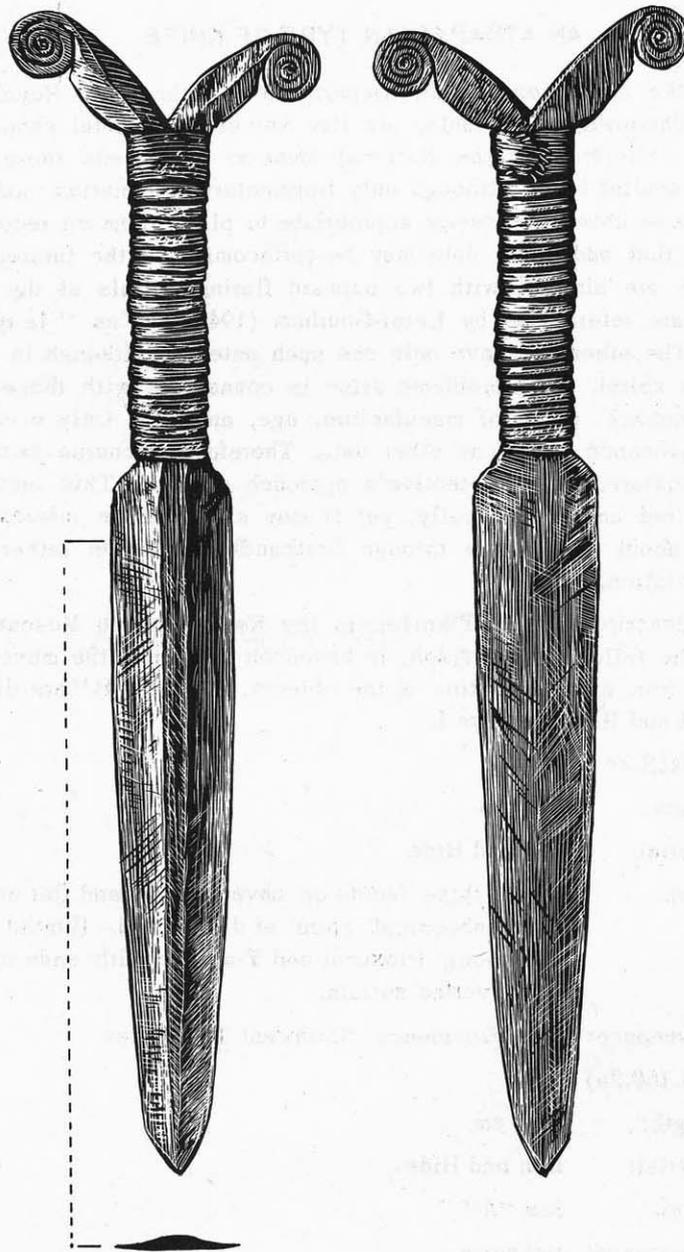


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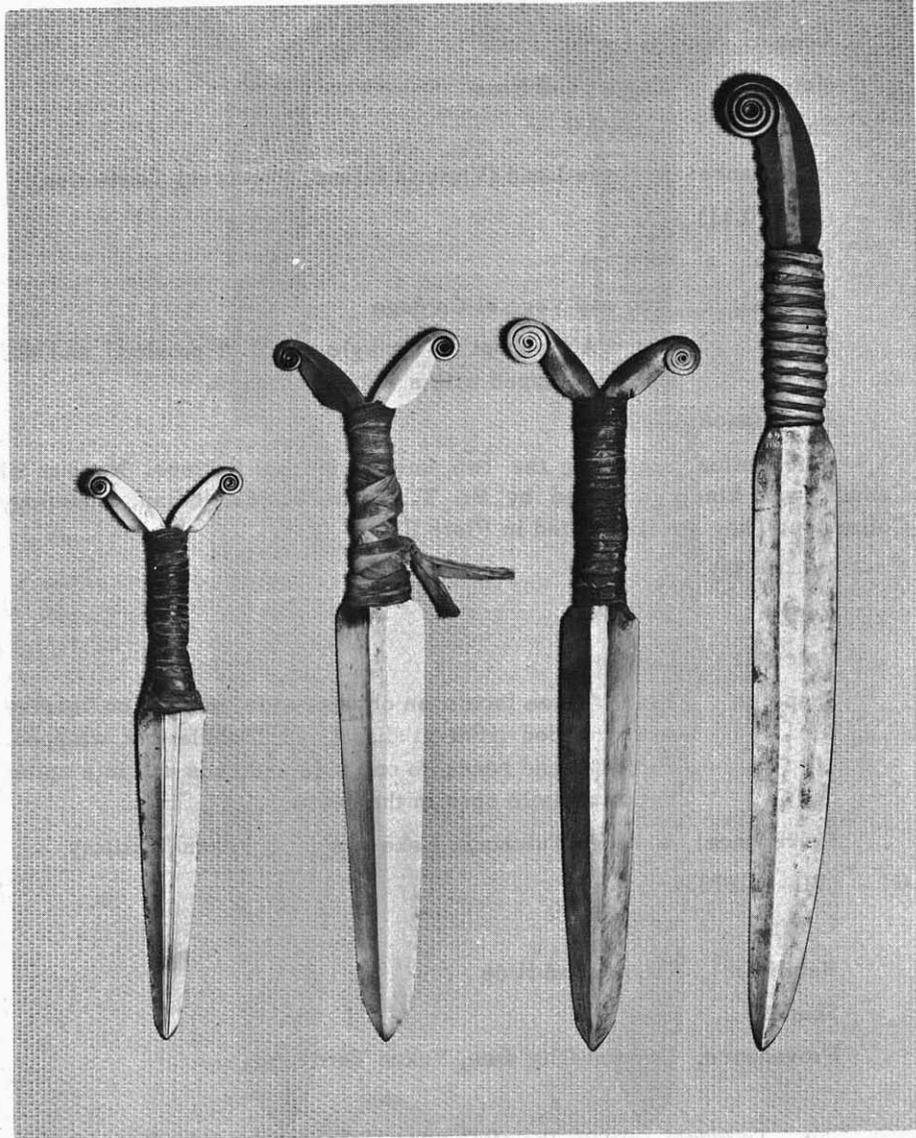
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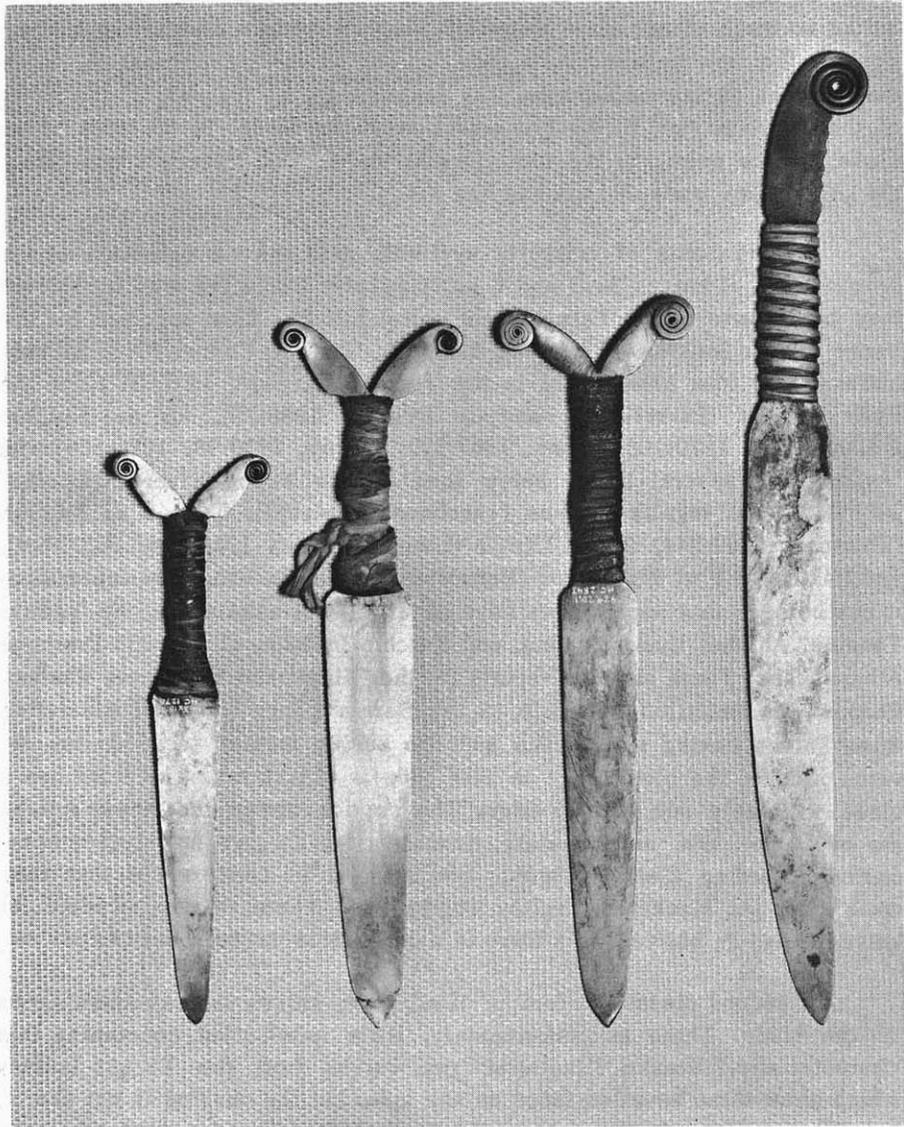


Knives. From left to right, A, C, D, E. The first three are probably of Athapaskan origin and the fourth is of Eskimo origin.

As is readily apparent, information as to the provenance, except in the case of the National Museum knives, as well as place of manufacture, age, and use of these particular knives is nonexistent. It is therefore necessary to have recourse to the literature and, on the basis of what is found, attempt to clarify the above points. In the case of these knives, unlike so much ethnological material, there are certain distinctive or diagnostic features pertaining to them which, taken in combination, allow one to make certain inferences. The features are as follows: 1) the shape of the proximal end, 2) the cross-section of the blade, 3) the edge of the blade, 4) the point, 5) the total length, and 6) the materials from which the knives were made and the handles wrapped.

On the basis of currently available data the configuration of the proximal end of knives A-D and G automatically limits the area from which they could have come. This type of spiral hilt has been reported for the Upper Tanana Indians (McKenna, 1959:58), from the Copper River (Ahtena Indians) and from here traded to the Tanaina (Osgood, 1937:102) and the Eyak Indians (Birket-Smith and de Laguna, 1938:75), for the Kutchin Indians (Dall 1870:105, Jones, 1867:322; Murray, 1910:98, 102, 106), the 'Ayans' and several tribes below them on the Yukon River (Schwatka, 1885:232), the Ingalik Indians (Jacobsen, 1884:197), Tanana or Kutchin (Whymper, 1869:244, 247), Tlingit (Leroi-Gourham, 1946:299, Fig. 499), and Eskimo at Fort McPherson (Petitot, 1887:246-7). From this information it can be seen that such knives have occurred in Alaska among the Ingalik, Tanaina, Ahtena, Eyak, Tanana, and Kutchin Indians, all Pacific Drainage Athapaskans. There are also reports for the Tlingit and Mackenzie Eskimo. Whitney, in describing his trip to the Barren Lands in 1894, illustrates three knives having spiral hilts and two having faceted faces on the obverse side of the blade. The reverse side is not shown. The third has a blade with only one cutting edge. The caption states that these knives are of copper. But, unfortunately, nowhere does he give any further information regarding them (Whitney, 1896:264). It is conceivable that they came from the Mackenzie Valley Athapaskans. There is no precedent for knives E and F, but certainly there is a connection between the two styles.

A second diagnostic feature of all seven knives is the cross-section of the blade. There is, unfortunately, little information concerning this characteristic. Krause illustrates two knives from the Tlingit Indians which show three bevelled faces on one side, but the obverse is not shown, nor is there any description in the text (1956:147, Plate IV). Similarly Drucker (1955:92, Fig.61) and Lafarge (1956:197) illustrate knives which may have this blade cross-section. All presumably come from the Tlingit. A knife (957:163) in the Ethnology collections, Royal Ontario Museum, presumably from the Tlingit, does have a blade flat on one side and with three facets on the other (Plate 4). The knives used by the Eyak, which had been obtained from Indians on the Copper River, had three bevelled



Knives. Reverse of each knife shown in Plate I, A, C, D, E.