The Early Exploration of the Arctic and the Discovery of Svalbard

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Content of today’s lecture

1st half:
• Early exploration of the Arctic
  – Concepts of the Arctic geography
  – The search for a northern passage to Asia
• The Discovery of Svalbard
  – Barentsz’ last voyage 1596–97

2nd half:
• Was Barentsz the first visitor?
  – Alternative hypotheses on the discovery of Svalbard

Problem:
• Which were the driving forces behind the exploration of the European Arctic?
• Who discovered Svalbard, and when?

The Concept of the Arctic

• Classical geography: Ptolemaios and the spherical Earth
• The Norse concept of the Arctic
• Medieval misconceptions, renaissance revival
• The rise of early modern geography
• The theory of the open Polar Sea
The Northern Passages

- The search for a northern route: motives and means
- The Northwest Passage
- Turning East: Willoughby, Chancellor and Borough 1553
- Steven Borough 1556
- Pet & Jackman 1580
- Oliver Brunel 1584

The Dutch and Willem Barentsz

- The Netherlands – the tiny great power
- Competing geographical paradigms: Mercator vs. Plancius
- Who was Willem Barentsz?
- The expeditions of 1594 and 1595

The Discovery of Svalbard

- 1596: Barentsz goes north again
- Historical sources: De Veer and Gerritsz
- The discovery of Bjømaya and Spitsbergen in June 1596
- Barentsz parts with Rijp and goes east
- In well-known waters: Novaya Zemlya
Shipwreck and wintering

- Heemskerk, Barentsz and 15 men
- 27 August: Stuck in the ice at Ijshaven (70° N)
- Medio September: ready for spending the winter in "Het behouden huis"
- Life during the Polar Night
- 13 June '97: Starting for home

The long voyage home

15 minutes break
The legacy of Barentsz

• The 1598 map proves the discovery of Svalbard and shows “state of research”
• De Veer’s account (1598) and Barentsz’ logbook (Gerritsz 1613) provide good evidence

Discovery: Alternative hypotheses

• A Stone Age settlement on Svalbard?
• The “Viking” hypothesis: Svalbard discovered in 1194?
• Russian pomors: hunting and trapping in the 16th century?

The Stone Age hypothesis

• C.S. Hansson’s flint finds 1899
• Christiansson & Simonsen 1970: “Stone Age finds from Spitsbergen”
• H.B. Bjerck’s archaeological survey in Bellsund 1997
The Viking hypothesis
- Icelandic annals: "Svalbard found" 1194
- 13th century sailing descriptions: "Svalbard north in the sea"
- Svalbard in the mythical sagas
- …but what was "Svalbard" (= the cold coast?)
- No archaeological evidence

The Pomor hypothesis
- Russian pomors: hunting and trapping before Barents? 
- Oral traditions; historical sources
- Dendro-chronological analysis
- Artefacts, inscriptions
- Topographical analysis

Summing up
- Driving forces of exploration:
  - The quest for knowledge, a growing scientific world view
  - Economic and strategic interests: the search for new trade, sea routes and territory
  - Technological advances in navigation
- The discovery of Svalbard:
  - Barents' discovery 1596 is a historical fact
  - The Stone Age hypothesis is rejected
  - Norse 12th Century discovery is not proved, nor are 16th Century visits by Russians
  - Does it really matter?
Next time on HOS

Whaling and sealing
- BIG GAME
- BIG MONEY
- BLOOD