The Early Exploration of the Arctic and the Discovery of Svalbard

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?

Today’s Cultural Heritage Quiz
What is this?
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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 sea 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 (1598) and Gerritsz (1613)
- The discovery of Bjørnøya and Spitsbergen in June 1596
- Barentsz parts with Rijp at Bjørnøya and goes east
- In well-known waters: Novaya Zemlya

Shipwreck and wintering

- Heemskerk, Barentz and 15 men
- 27 August: Stuck in the ice at Ijshaven (76° 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
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:
  - Barentsz’ 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

End of 2nd lecture