

2. The Early Exploration of the Arctic and the Discovery of Svalbard

The Greek geographer Ptolemaios (2. cent. AD) established that the earth was a sphere and invented a method to fix geographical features to a map by using a grid of parallels and meridians. His maps, however, ended in the north at the mythical “Thule” on the 63rd parallel. The old Norse (around 1000 AD) concept of the Arctic areas implied that there was a land bridge between “Biarmeland” (Russia) and Greenland, thus making the North Atlantic a closed ocean. According to Nansen, “Svalbard” denoted this land at the end of the sea. During the Middle Ages religion and myths dominated the conception of the world, but with the advent of modern scientific thought (from ca. 1500) maps improved. Martin Behaim constructed the first known globe in 1492. The influential Gerardus Mercator published a map of the Arctic in 1558, which depicted the North Pole as a big rock surrounded by four large islands. Even though this was not based on any true evidence, it inspired for years a search for a northern sea route across the pole.

The important sea routes to China and India were completely dominated by Spain and Portugal in the 16th century. Therefore, rivalling seafaring nations like England and The Netherlands were eager to find a passage in the north. Numerous expeditions were sent out from the 1490s on to seek a North West or North East sea route. All were futile, but the geographical knowledge about the Arctic grew. Also, economic activity developed – for example cod fisheries and whaling off Newfoundland and trade in the White Sea.

In 1594, 1595 and 1596 Dutch expeditions were sent out to search for a North East Passage. The navigator Willem Barentsz took part in all three, and during the first he sailed far north along the west coast of Novaya Zemlya. In 1596 a more easterly course was chosen, based on advice from Peter Plancius. On the 9th or 10th of June Bjørnøya (Bear Island) was discovered. Continuing north the two ships met the pack ice at 80°. Having turned east and south they sighted – and later named – northwest Spitsbergen on June 17. Sailing southwards Barentsz made an outline map of the coast. Back at Bjørnøya the two ships parted; Rijp’s ship went north again, Barentsz turned east, eventually reaching Novaya Zemlya. In late August the ship froze in and the crew of 17 had to move ashore and winter on 76° north. Five men, including Barentsz, died during the winter and spring, but the remaining 12 managed to row and sail back to Russia, where they met a Dutch ship. In late October they were back in Holland and were deservedly celebrated.

The Dutch discovery of Svalbard in 1596 is not disputed, but were they really the first? There are three alternative hypotheses:

- The “Stone Age” hypothesis: Based on finds of flint fragments archaeologists Christiansson and Simonsen in 1970 suggested the existence of a Neolithic (3000 BC) settlement on Svalbard. Other archaeologists have rejected this hypothesis.
- The “Viking” hypothesis: Icelandic annals record “Svalbard found” in the year 1194, and there is also mention of a “Svalbard” in sailing directions from the 13th century. It is, however, not established that this corresponds to the islands we today call Svalbard.
- The “Pomor” hypothesis Russian historians and archaeologists argue that Pomor trappers exploited Svalbard long before Barentsz. Archaeologist V.F. Starkov has dated timber in Pomor sites on Svalbard to mid 16th century and also made other finds he believes corroborate this hypothesis. Most western scientists are sceptical towards the evidence.

Food for thought

- How can we be sure that Barentsz’ discovery of Svalbard in 1596 is a historical fact?
- Is it important, do you think, to know who came first to Svalbard? Why?