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History Exploring their inner Arctic

Danish Arctic expeditions have primarily focused on becoming wiser about Greenland, and, in a way, building up a national identity



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In the [previous article](#), we touched upon the Arctic expeditions and how important they were for Danish self-image and status as a science nation around at the turn of the last century. This article is an elaboration on this point, and a closer look at the history of Danish Arctic exploration.

This is a topic that is close to home for the **Danish Arctic Institute**: we were founded in 1954 to gather documentation and experience from the Danish Arctic expeditions. This has resulted in the creation of the country's largest expedition archive. I asked Bent Nielsen, the director of the institute, why one would go on expeditions in the first place.

"In short, to find the unknown. As goes for all research: to look for something you didn't already know, and become wiser."

This urge to explore is old. One might say that the Norsemen, the Vikings, who settled in Greenland in the 10th century, were the first of the Scandinavian Arctic explorers.

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Expeditions were usually named after their main vessel. The ship 'Danmark' of the 'Danmark Expedition' of 1906-08 is shown here and above stuck in the ice in 1907 (Both photos: Arktisk Institut) (Click for [larger image](#))

However, the scientific expeditions of recent times started to slowly take form in the 1600s. King Christian IV wanted to find passages through the Arctic as a way to strengthen Danish trade. Captain Jens Munk was appointed to make this happen. In 1619 he sailed out to reach India through the Northwest Passage. However, his ships made it no further than Hudson Bay, where they had to stay the winter. During that winter, 61 of his men died from scurvy. As the expedition had consisted of 64 men, this left behind only Munk and two others. Surprisingly, they managed to sail one of the three ships back. To add insult to injury, the liege lord in Bergen, then a part of the Danish kingdom, where they landed, threw him in prison for wasting the king's ships and men!

The king had Munk released, however, and asked him to try again. But Munk was too weak after his ordeal, and, perhaps to no surprise, no-one else volunteered to take on the task.

Then there were Hans Egede, who settled in Greenland and started the modern colonisation of the island in 1721. Obviously, he was more of a missionary than an explorer, but his initial job was to find the Norsemen and that took some exploring.

Mr Nielsen explains: "While he was there, he equipped an expedition to find the Norsemen and traveled down the west Coast, but, as we know, he didn't find them because they weren't there."

Purposes and geography of the expeditions

Egede, though, wasn't the first Dane traveling the Arctic in the 18th century.

"Around the same time, there was another Danish explorer, whose name most people will recognise. His name was Vitus Bering and he was a captain in the Russian army under Peter the Great. He equipped the world's largest Arctic expedition; several thousand men were involved. He travelled to Siberia and his task was to find out whether Asia and North America were connected. He found out that they weren't, and the water between those continents is today known as the Bering Strait."

However, Bering is an exception in Danish expedition history. He worked for the Russian czar, which meant a different geography than the one Danes think of first when it comes to the Arctic. For Danish explorers, Mr Nielsen says, Greenland was the place to go.

"In the 1800s, we see a number of Danish expeditions which almost all have Greenland as their destination. If you compare Denmark to Norway, the Norwegians have had

expeditions to the North Pole, Antarctica, different parts of the world. The Danish expeditions mainly went to Greenland and to a certain degree were a continuation of Hans Egede's attempt to find the Norsemen's Østerbygd.

“According to the Icelandic Sagas, the Norsemen had two main settlements in Greenland; Vesterbygd and Østerbygd (literally, Western Settlement and Eastern Settlement, ed.). In the late 1800s it was found out that Vesterbygd was the area around Nuuk and its big fjords, where a lot of Norse artefacts have been found. Østerbygd, we now know, is the southern part of Greenland, around Qaqortoq, Narssarssuaq and Igaliku. There are also a lot of artefacts here. If you look at a map you can see that this is in fact east of the Vesterbygd area, so in a way it makes sense – but it did confuse explorers and took more than 150 years to get right.”



Map of south-eastern Greenland, drawn by 'Umiak Expedition' leaders Holm & Garde after their return home (Photo: Arktisk Institut) (Click for [larger image](#))

Even if Østerbygd's location was finally identified as southern Greenland, the east Coast continued to fascinate. It was covered in sea ice most of the year and not easily accessible, and this made it difficult to explore.

Mr. Nielsen: “You still had the unknown east Coast of Greenland, which continued to challenge Danish explorers. It wasn't until the end of the 1800s that we see maps of the areas between Angmagssalik and Ittoqqortoormit (formerly Scoresbysund, ed.) and the fjords there. The *Danmark Expedition* of 1906-08 was a continuation of this work and managed to fill in the last white spot on the map. The Danish Arctic expedition history is, to a great extent, tied to East Greenland.”

There were, obviously, other expeditions with other purposes as well. In 1751, for the first time, an expedition had the sole purpose of exploring the ice sheet and, as early as 1806, the search for minerals started. But starting in the 19th century the expeditions were becoming so frequent that it's a wonder they weren't starting to get in each other's way. In 1884, there were three different expeditions taking place all at the same time. The pace kept up into the new century.

Expeditions as colonial encounters

Obviously, a lot of the areas being 'discovered' were in fact already inhabited. But we have to remember that the expedition culture and the notion of discovering the world were a part of colonialism and took place within a western European scientific framework. And as mentioned in the [previous article](#), it is necessary to understand colonialism, as much as

one may dislike it, in order to understand why the world looks as it does today, right down to why some locations have the names they have.

However, in the case of Denmark and its Arctic explorers, they quickly learned that it was next to impossible to do anything without involving the indigenous population. I asked Mr Nielsen to what degree Greenlanders were involved in an enterprise that seemed to be very Danish from the outset.

“It’s a good point. They were very Danish, but you also say ‘from the outset’ and that’s another point: typically people in Copenhagen decided that they wanted to investigate one thing or another in Greenland, but they very quickly found out that it couldn’t be done without the help of those who actually knew the land. Take Hans Island, between Greenland and Canada for example: it is named after a Greenlander, Hans Hendrik, who participated in a number of expeditions, American, Canadian and Danish, because he knew how to travel, survive and navigate in that land. Another expedition, from the 1880s, is called the *Umiak Expedition*, because they sailed up the east Coast in umiaks (an open boat made of hides and used by indigenous populations throughout the Arctic, ed.) with an Inuit crew. There were Greenlanders along on nearly all Danish expeditions, otherwise they would have been impossible.”



Members of the ‘Umiak Expedition’ of 1883-85 in front of a cairn at Tasiilaq/Ammasalik in 1884. Expedition leader Gustav Holm is standing on the left (Photo: Arktisk Institut) (Click for [larger image](#))

Speaking of colonialism, the expeditions gained political importance in the 1930s. In 1931 Norway claimed a large part of Greenland’s east Coast, which got Denmark busy documenting that it had an active presence there. That is the reason why, to this day, Denmark has the **Sirius Patrol**, which patrols eastern Greenland and upholds Danish sovereignty in the area.

Postwar changes

However, the Second World War put an end to the most intense period of Danish exploration. A few expeditions, most notably the *Peary Land Expeditions*, were sent out after the war, but the pace was considerably slower. Even so, Arctic research – that wish to know more than we already do – continues to this day, even if we don’t call it exploration.

Asked whether exploration is still something we do, Mr Nielsen answers: “Yes and no. We don’t see expeditions like the ones in the 19th and early 20th centuries anymore, when you left home and didn’t know whether you would return, didn’t have contact with your homeland and endured incredibly tough conditions. They are a thing of the past. But we still see research in the Arctic under conditions that are challenging and require special equipment because it is a special place. But whether or not you call it exploration, there is a direct line from Jens Munk in the 1600s, to the *Umiak Expedition* and on to the research activities we see in Greenland today.”

And what significance do these expeditions have? What have they meant for Denmark? As Inge Seiding mentioned in the previous article, they boosted national pride significantly. Mr Nielsen is of the same opinion.

“The expeditions probably didn’t mean a lot to the average Dane or his understanding of Danish nationality. But at a national, diplomatic level, I think it has meant a lot. There is a Danish self-image throughout the centuries of being an Arctic nation that has had, and continues to have, significant interests and activities in the Arctic.”

The article above is the second in a series published in collaboration with [Arktisk Institut/The Danish Arctic Institute](#), which seeks to inform the public about Danish-Greenlandic history.

*The articles are based on the institute’s **Arctic Stories** podcast series, which is produced by the author.*

*The original version of this podcast (in Danish only) can be heard below. All of the episodes in the series are available for download from most podcast platforms, including **iTunes** and **Soundcloud**.*

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Bent Nielsen · Director hos Danish Arctic Institute
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