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History

In the end, even the hunger vanishes

In 1912, a group of explorers got the idea of trying to cross the Greenland ice cap using horses. It proved nearly as disastrous for the men as it did for the horses



CULTURE Dead horse walking (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

November 3, 2016 - 10:28am - By Iben Bjørnsson

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Do you remember Johan Peter Koch? He was the chief cartographer on the [Danmark Expedition](#) (the one who found the body of Jørgen Brønlund at '79 Fjord). He was the one who taught cartography to [Peter Freuchen](#).

At the beginning of the 20th century he had an idea: to cross the Greenlandic ice sheet with Icelandic horses. This is the story of that journey.

In 2015, historian Jan O Kongstad wrote a book about the expedition. He describes Koch this way:

“He was actually a very modest man. He didn’t care too much for attention, but, if he decided that something must be done, he was the one to take the lead, and he expected others to work as hard as he did. Nevertheless he was very well liked and respected by the other expedition members, because he didn’t shy from hard work, and he didn’t ask anyone to do something he wouldn’t do himself.

“And he could afford to be modest. He had a job when he came home, so he didn’t have to create (and make money from) an image of himself as an explorer and adventurer, like many others at the time.”



From the ‘Danmark Expedition’. JP Koch leaning against a theodolite
(Photo: Arktisk Institut)

For this expedition, Koch gathered a team consisting of German meteorologist Alfred Wegener (the one who came up with the theory of continental drift) and botanist Andreas Lundager. The three of them had been on the *Danmark Expedition* and even shared a 25 square metre hut, jokingly nicknamed ‘the Villa’.

Koch describes Wegener as follows:

“Wegener was very theoretically oriented, but he was also one of those scientists who liked to go new ways and was able to combine experience with theory. Already as a child, he was interested in nature and hiking, admired Fridtjof Nansen (Norwegian scientist and polar explorer who was the first to cross the ice sheet in 1888) and even dreamed of crossing the ice sheet on foot. He was practical – he had the dream of getting out of the lab, see things for himself and try them out. Often scientists wouldn’t participate in these expeditions themselves, but send an assistant to endure the misery. Andreas Lundager

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

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was such an assistant. He had had a quick course in botany, because the professors weren't keen on freezing during the trip themselves."

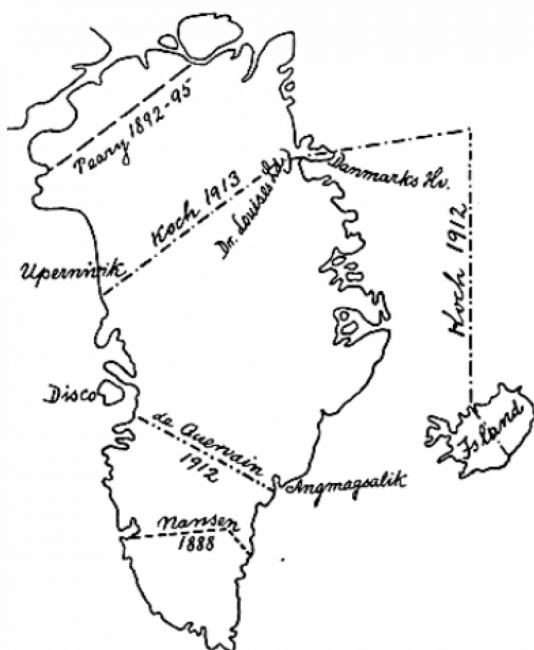


From the 'Danmark Expedition': Wegener at a meteorological station (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

The trip would go from Danmarkshavn, head towards Dronning Louise Land, and then across the ice sheet from there. Mr Kongstad: "The purpose was scientific. Not much was known about the dynamics of the glaciers in the Arctic – whether they behaved, for instance, like the ones in the Alps. And then they wanted to know more about meteorology, which was a relatively new science at this point. There were a lot of unknowns, but it was known that something went on in the air above Greenland. Today we know that Europe's 'weather kitchen' is up there."

The idea for the trip was formulated on the *Danmark Expedition*, but back then no-one had the strength to take on the task. Koch and Wegener had started to explore Dronning Louise Land and wanted to complete that task.

By that time, the ice sheet had been crossed by Nansen in the south, and Peary in the north, but no-one had crossed the middle, where it is widest. Greenland's inland was still unexplored, as Koch wrote in an article ahead of the trip.



Map drawn by Koch ahead of the trip. 'Geografisk Tidsskrift' 1911-12 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

And Koch had an idea. They wouldn't use dog sledges as was otherwise done on expeditions. Instead they would use horses, an idea that received some criticism, for instance from another Arctic explorer of the time, Ejnar Mikkelsen.

Mr Kongstad: "The reason for Koch's wish to use Icelandic horses was that they had served him well in Iceland, where he had been to map out some very rough terrain. It's a very sturdy horse. Also, he wanted to bring more equipment – 20 tons – than dogs could reasonably pull on sledges."

At the Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University in Copenhagen, Koch consulted with a professor who was working on a special feed concentrate for horses. Mr Kongstad has spoken with veterinarians who told him that the components and nutrients in the feed were correct, but it hadn't been tested under the right circumstances: "First, they tested it on a couple of skinny horses at the university. Second, they hadn't considered that horses, like humans, need extra fuel when working in very cold weather. They'd have had to be fed around the clock to be sustained."



From the trial expedition. Horses feeding on Vatnajökull, Iceland. June 1912 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

As described in earlier articles, it was **common for Greenlanders to come along on the expeditions** because they knew how to survive in those circumstances. They were especially needed for hunting and mushing. But since there would be Icelandic horses instead of Greenlandic dogs, Koch figured that an Icelandic would be best suited to steer the animals. The task was given to an Icelandic peasant and horseman, Vigfus Sigurdsson, described by Mr Kongstad as follows:

“He had been a mounted postman in an area of Iceland known to be rough, cold and inaccessible, which in itself qualified him for the job. But he was more than a skilled horseman. Like many Icelanders, necessity required him to be able to do a little of everything: he was a skilled craftsman, had worked in agriculture, knew motors and was even pretty well read. And then he was quiet and humorous by nature. And he was tough: he grew up poor and was no stranger to enduring hunger.”

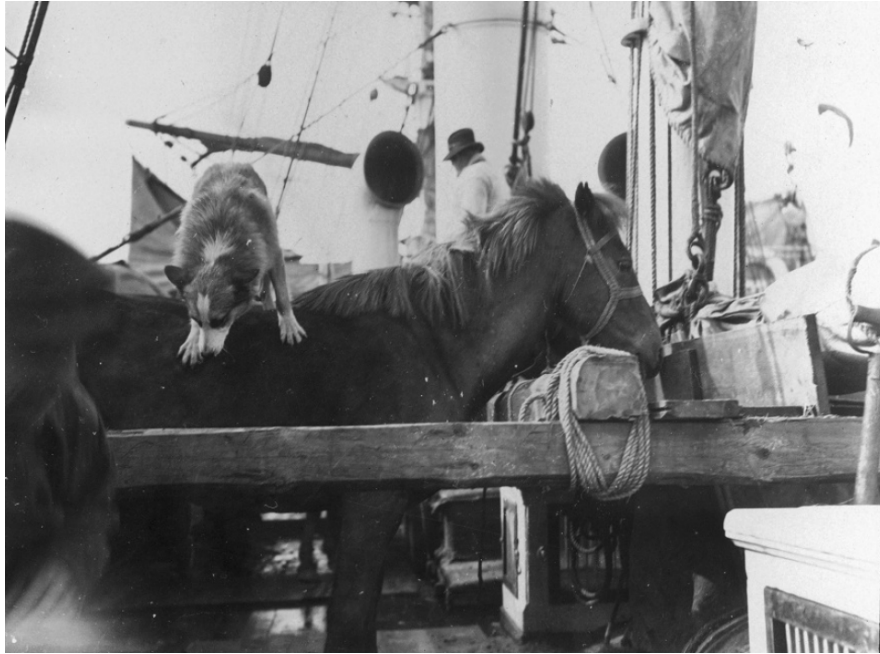


Sigurdsson holding up a dead fox cub. His dog, Gloi, looking particularly interested. East Greenland August 1912 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Koch had sense enough to conduct a trial expedition with the horses before going into the real thing. This expedition would go across Iceland from the northern town of Akureyri straight south to Vatnajökull, Iceland's biggest glacier, across Vatnajökull and back by the same route.

Back in Akureyri, the ship *Godthaab* was waiting to carry men, horses and equipment to Greenland. Vigfus Sigfusson even brought a dog, an Icelandic sheepdog named Gloi.

The trial expedition went smoothly, except for one thing; Lundager, the botanist, couldn't keep up. He simply didn't do his share of the work, which annoyed Koch endlessly. That sort of thing is nice to know before crossing the ice sheet together, so a new man was chosen in his place: a crew member from the ship by the name of Lars Larsen. And then, they were ready to sail off.



Gloi on horseback aboard 'Godthaab'. July 1912 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

On July 23 1912, the ship reached Danmarkshavn, where Koch and Wegener re-visited the Villa and found something quite unsettling. Remember Ejnar Mikkelsen and Iver Iversen who were **stranded on the east coast** of Greenland for nearly two years before being rescued? They had been in the Villa and left a note pleading for anyone who came by to search for them at Bass Rock. Upon learning this, the *Godthaab's* captain obviously went by Bass Rock on the way back, only to learn that Mikkelsen and Iversen had been rescued just eight days before!

Back in Danmarkshavn, the whole scenario far from impressed the horses. They made trouble. They were prone to running off and a lot of time was spent getting them back. In his diary, Wegener wrote:

"The little white one" did his best to tick me off. With astonishing audacity, right before my eyes, he gnawed holes in the hay sacks on the horse ahead of him. I hit him, but that didn't help. As soon as I let off, his muzzle was back in the hay sacks. I hit him again, but then he became coy, threw me on the ground and stepped on my left foot so it swelled up. After that, I gave up and let him eat.



Like you wouldn't run off after this ordeal. Horse being loaded from Godthaab to the barge 'the Can'. Danmarkshavn, July 1912 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

One day, when the humans went on reconnaissance, the horses got loose and into the fodder, ate a good part of it, and spread it around. This was a common scenario on expeditions, only usually the perpetrators would be dogs. The incident let Wegener to exclaim:

I don't know what's worse, Greenlandic dogs or Icelandic horses!

From Danmarkshavn, the expedition journeyed into the fjords and had some long workdays along the way: 34 hours on one occasion, 35 on another. A 21-hour sail by motorboat through ice and shallow waters. But it is August, and it is light around the clock and they keep going by a lavish intake of refreshing kola tablets, a stimulant made from the kola nut.

The reason for all this hardship was that, in order to get to the inland from Danmarkshavn, they had to cross Dove Bay and its myriad of fjords. Two of them took the horses overland, while to other two transported the equipment by motorboat and a barge nicknamed 'the Can'. But after the Can wrecked, all transport had to be done by horse. In some places the ice couldn't hold up and the horses fell through.



Loading equipment on the horses. East Greenland, September 1912 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

While out on reconnaissance Wegener had an accident that immobilised him for some weeks. While Koch went back to the camp to fetch a sledge, Wegener lay on the ice for hours, contemplating what to do if a polar bear came along while he lay there unable to move. Fortunately, that didn't happen. And fortunately, those kola tablets were also great painkillers. For snow-blindness, the best remedy was cocaine in liquid form.

They had started with 16 horses. Two of them ran off for good. The remaining 14 started getting skinny. After reaching the mainland, they were able to switch from carrying the equipment on the horses' backs to having it on horse-drawn sledges. Thus needing fewer horses, they put down the four weakest ones. It had to be done, but it made everyone sad. Another horse had to be put down after being drenched in gasoline and charred rather severely.

The trip into Dronning Louise Land was also off to a dramatic start. They had to climb a glacier, a task that took several days. But already on the first night, the glacier, Brede Bræ, calved. Calving basically involves huge amounts of ice breaking off from the front of the glacier, making a thunderous noise. The expedition's equipment was thrown around, but almost miraculously the camp was not hit by any of the ice blocks, some of which weighed several tons. Instead, they landed on some sacks of hay next to the camp. Both horses and men were frightened by the episode, but they had to remain there for some days while getting their things together.



After the calving: equipment thrown around (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Once they reached the higher, stable grounds of the glacier, Storstrømsjøklen, they set up their winter quarters, a hut they named Borg (Castle). It is October 9, and it has taken them three months to travel just about 100 kilometres.

Mr Kongstad: “They had so many accidents and could have been killed so many times, individually or together.”

The accidents delayed them considerably, and they had to skip the part of the planned trip, he says: “As soon as they hit the east coast at Danmarkshavn they were in a race against time, because with winter comes absolute darkness. They never went into Dronning Louise Land, because they were delayed and to get there they still had to cross the glacier, which was a maze of twisted ice and cracks.”



Koch outside Borg, February 1913 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Koch had moments of despair. He is 42 years old at the time and he was tired of accidents. After an episode in which the sledges wrecked, he wrote:

I have become too old. Luck no longer follows me. Luck follows the young – and I am no longer young.

But it wasn't over. The drama continued when Koch fell into a crack in the glacier. He might not have thought himself lucky, but he was, because an ice shelf stopped his fall. However, he took a bad hit to the head and the ankle and had to rest in bed for a while. What's worse is that their theodolite was lost in the accident. A theodolite was used for navigation, and as such pretty instrumental in crossing the ice sheet. Instead, they had to invent a new way of measuring the position of the sun and stars – and actually succeeded. They also built a meteorological station at Borg.



The 'Jakobs' baton' built by Sigurdsson to measure the sun's height after the loss of the theodolite. The ice sheet, May or June, 1913 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

They also have some peculiar episodes, like when Koch lost the nail of his big toe because of gangrene and it turned up in Sigurdsson's slipper. Sigurdsson, incidentally, also lost his toenails when falling down an ice slope.

During the winter, they had to put down four more horses, which they then feed to the remaining animals. The horses are still skinny, and they have to be taken outside and exercised daily. Polar foxes and bears haunt the camp at night, eating the horse fodder. The only one who's enjoying the winter is Gloí, who used to sleep outside but whose owners take mercy on him when the overnight temperature begins to dip to -30°C . From then on, he slept inside, and Koch, who missed his children, even took a liking to the dog. He started calling it the *kamik* creature and it even got to sleep in his bunk.



Koch & Gloí at Borg, March 1913 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

In the new year, 1913, they started moving their equipment west. Of course, this too, was full of trials. As Koch wrote:

No-one knows a glacier before he has walked across it.

The monotonous landscape sometimes caused them to be in kind of a daze. But they had to be on their toes:

The rocks in the mountainsides and the snow formations twisted into weird shapes, stretched their necks, poked out their heads and begged at me: "You forget to look at us, we are here too; we are part of the ice dance. Now watch and ..." - - - Goddammit! I forgot to brake. The sledge drove into the horse that had his hind legs entangled in the reigns. I was soon given something else to think about.



March 1913: 'The ice dance' photographed by Koch (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

But west they went. And on May 7, they reached the rim of the ice sheet. They generally had bad weather, storm and snowdrift, but nonetheless they started the journey across the sheet the next day.

It is a rough journey we have embarked on. I worry because I see that our horses will hardly make it all the way so there is a good chance we will be pulling the sledges ourselves.

And the horses are indeed fatigued and emaciated, and the drifting snow is bothering their eyes.

The horses are not doing well. Polaris and The Cavalier are all but broken down. Polaris lays down every other minute and demands a break, even though he is pulling the lightest sledge. The Cavalier halts every five minutes.

Both these horses are snow-blind in their right eye (the eye that is up against the snowdrift) and they seem to be suffering quite a lot from it. They haven't lost their appetite, but there is little hope that they can regain their strength, considering the conditions.



The remaining horses after the winter at Borg. From left to right: Sigurdsson on Grauni, Fuchsrøde, Koch on Brinka, The Cavalier and Lars Larsen on Polaris. February 1913 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

A few days after Koch wrote these words, May 15, Polaris had to be put down. On May 20, it was The Cavalier's turn. Then there were three horses. And after a few weeks, two of them were so emaciated that they needed the humans to help them pull the sledges. To ease the burden, the humans began dropping all the equipment that wasn't strictly necessary.

When the snow wasn't drifting, the sun burnt their faces and lips until they were covered in blisters and sores. It hurt horrendously to smoke or even drink coffee. But the sun gave no warmth. On June 9, Koch measured -34°C .

On June 4, they had to put down another horse. Then, on June 9, one more. The last one, Grauni, got some help when the men attached a sail to the last remaining sledge. Koch dared almost hope that the horse would make it all the way. He imagined it living out its days on his uncle's farm in Denmark.

After a while, the men did all the pulling for Grauni, yet still he was not able to walk very far each day. In the end, they put him on the sledge and pulled him as well. And that became the routine from then on: he walked as far as he could, and was pulled the rest of the time. Koch knew that the most rational, perhaps even the most merciful, thing to do, would be to put the horse down. But he could not bring himself to do it.



Sails on the sledge. Grauni having a rest. The ice sheet, 1913 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

I still cannot bring myself to shoot the horse, although God knows he is now a considerable burden to us. But if we can save him, the rest of his life will be so good. Grauni has been our best horse. It is no coincidence that he is the one left. Of course Grauni is our pet – how could he not be? But he is more than that; he is a loyal companion that we can't just get rid of by giving him a bullet in the head.

They started feeding their own food rations to the horse in the hope that it would sustain him.

In the beginning of July, a thaw set in. Not because the ice sheet had suddenly become warm, but because they had reached its edge, they had made it across! Almost 1,200 kilometres of freezing white desert was now behind them. On July 4, they reached a depot that had been laid out in advance and stocked up on rations. But Grauni was not with them. He gave up on the last stretch of ice.



Grauni helped along by Koch. The ice sheet, June 1913 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

When we reached land, surely we could find a spot of grass for him. But as we got ready to move on, we saw that he hadn't eaten his fodder and he refused to come along. Then he

lay down. We had to leave him on the ice. I should have shot him right away, but I couldn't. We had spent so much time and effort saving this great animal that we all cared so deeply about, that it was impossible for me to give up hope that he could make it the last mile until we reached land where he would be able to graze peacefully for many days.

While Koch and Sigurdsson headed for the coast to do some reconnaissance, Wegener and Larsen brought back five kilos of biscuits for the horse, which was lying just a few hours walk from the depot. But even presented with this feast, he refused to eat or drink. Maybe it was good that Koch wasn't there, because then Larsen and Wegener could do what should have been done some time ago, but which Koch refused: to put the animal out of its misery. The lot fell to Larsen. And Koch didn't blame them. He almost seemed relieved that someone else made the decision for him.

It is the great sorrow of the expedition that we could not save this great animal. With the best intent, and in the hope that we could provide a good life for the horse upon the end of the journey, we pulled him along and actually tortured the poor animal, our good friend, to no use for the last eight days. We had pulled him on the sledge about 50 kilometres to save his life, and still he had to die one mile from the depot and rich pastures. I could not believe it. I felt that such a good and willing animal deserved a better fate.



Grauni and Sigurdsson on greener pastures. East Greenland, summer 1912 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

While Larsen and Wegener did what Koch could not, Koch and Sigurdsson went out to the coast where they were encouraged by the sight of settlements. They were close to the colony of Prøven (present-day Kangarsuatsiaq), which they couldn't reach because it is an island. Instead they placed a cairn with a report asking for assistance in getting their goods from the depot to the coast. Then, he and Sigurdsson returned to the others. Even if Grauni was gone, they received a royal welcome from Gloi, who was happy to reunite with his traveling mates.

By July 8, all men and all goods were down from the ice sheet and all were relieved. But it was a rough last stretch. They couldn't use the sledge because of the rocky terrain, and with no horse they had to carry everything themselves. Now the final stage began, and it was physically harder than walking on the relatively flat ice sheet. Their goal was Prøven, and on their way they had to cross rivers, fjords and mountains. It is a journey of about 70 kilometres.



Crossing Laksefjord. July 1913 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

They started out on July 9, with rations for five days. In theory that was enough: on July 15, they reached the coast off Prøven, or so they thought! Because it turned out that they had taken the wrong way and followed a Fjord not on their map. They had to march over another mountain. And they were already exhausted and emaciated. All they had left was a can of condensed milk and four biscuits.

They lost their way and took shelter from the pouring rain under a rock. Hungry and weak, they huddled up and dozed off. For 31 hours they lay there, on the edge of consciousness. When they finally came to and tried to walk on, Koch fainted after five minutes. It was a state he found very pleasant: he hallucinated about pancakes. The others brought him to. Then they fainted. They took turns giving each other camphor drops to stay awake. They were dying from hunger.



Exhausted, making coffee. Kangeq, east of Prøven. July 1913 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

According to Sigurdsson, Koch thought the best thing to do was to go down the mountainside, build a cairn for their papers and lay down to die. The others refused. Wegener wrote:

Everything in me rebelled. Should we, so close to the end of a long and dangerous journey, die like animals only two miles from the colony?

They hadn't eaten in 35 hours. There was nothing else to do. They had to. They had to kill Gloi, the *kamik* creature, the Icelandic sheepdog that had accompanied them all the way. The lot fell to Sigurdsson. Sigurdsson, who had brought Gloi along in the first place.

And then, when they sat there with a soup they couldn't really heat properly because it was raining, eating undercooked dog meat, there it was, a boat. Aboard the boat was Reverend Chemnitz from Upernavik. The four expedition members were picked up and sailed to Prøven, where there were people, food and warm beds.

They had made it.



A year before: Gloi and the horses aboard 'Godthaab', July 1912 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Literature and sources

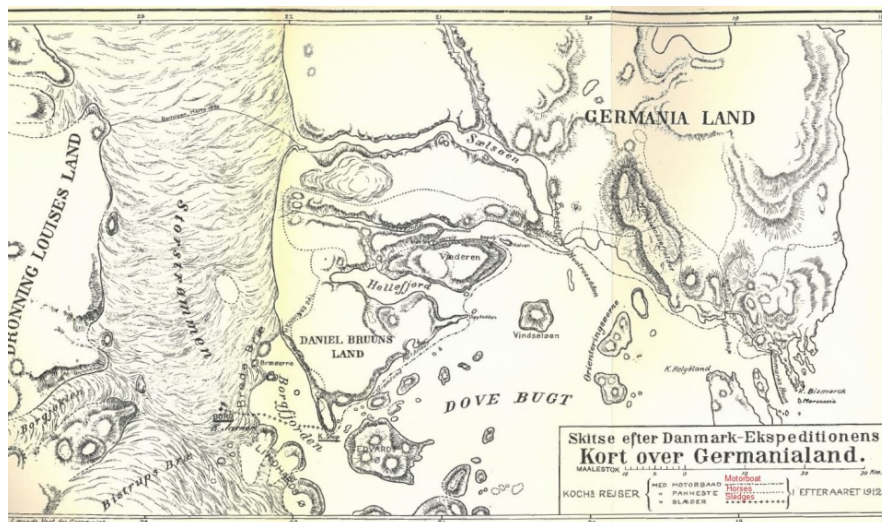
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Many more photographs from the expedition are available on Arktisk Institut/The Danish Arctic Institute's website. Visit arktiskebilleder.dk and search for 'louise land' and 'louiseland'



A map of the Koch's movements in 1912 (Click to enlarge) (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

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