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RUSSIAN ARCTIC SEAFARING AND THE PROBLEM OF THE DISCOVERY OF SPITSBERGEN

Abstract

The problem of the discovery and developing of the Spitsbergen archipelago is still disputable. Written sources do not contain information sufficient for its solution. Archaeology has shed new data on the problem. A number of settlements of Russian sea animal hunters dated from the middle-second half of the 16th century have been discovered as the oldest historic sources of Spitsbergen.

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For about two decades Spitsbergen has attracted the attention of archaeologists from various countries. Starting from 1955 scientists from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, the Polish People's Republic and the USSR have been working there.

Their investigations were aimed at enriching the very limited data on Spitsbergen's history as the available written sources are quite meagre and contradictory.

A separate group of these sources comprises the documents of the 15–16 centuries containing data on Russian seafaring to Grumant, the ancient name for Spitsbergen in the north of Russia. This name originated in "Greenland" with which Spitsbergen was then identified by Russian and West European geographers.

The earliest document of the above mentioned group is a letter by J.Münzer to King Juan II of Portugal dated July 14, 1493, which refers to an island named "Grundlanda" with a settlement under the reign of the Great Prince of Moscow (Frumkin 1957).

"Grumland" under the reign of Basil III, the Great Prince of Moscow, was mentioned by Admiral Severin Norby who visited Moscow between 1525 and 1528 in his report to king Christian II (Belov 1977 52). Some interesting information on "Engronenland" is given by the Austrian ambassador S. Herberstein in his

"Notes on Muscovite Affairs". He writes in particular that visiting this land is difficult "due to both high solid mountains covered by eternal snow and eternal ice floating at sea" (Herberstein 1908).

A letter by King Frederik II of Denmark to his viceregent in Norway Ludwig Munk dated March 11, 1576, also contains some information about Grumant. It suggests organizing an expedition to Greenland and engaging as pilot the Russian skipper Ivan Nishets who sailed there yearly around St. Bartholomew's Day. Despite the fact that the document refers to "Greenland", some other land is meant for Greenland proper was no mystery for the Danes and they needed no Russian skipper to sail there.

This and a number of other documents bear witness that Russian sailors of the 15–16th centuries sailed to the Arctic islands which they thought to be a part of Greenland. The islands might as well be the Spitsbergen archipelago. First, the word "Grumant" as a synonym of "Spitsbergen" had been used in the Russian North since ancient times up to the 20th century. Second, "Grumant" could be situated only to the north-west of Russia as to the east of the White Sea, according to the notions of the population of the Russian North, there was another land – Novaya Zemlya stretching far eastward. Third, Russian trips to Spitsbergen in

the 16th century are witnessed by archaeological data.

Nevertheless, it should be admitted that the written documents containing data on Grumant may in themselves be considered only as indirect sources requiring additional proof.

There are also references to the Viking trips to Swalbard described in some of the Icelandic sagas of the 12–14th centuries (Genning 1961). One of them, dated 1194, reads: "Swalbard has been found". Another one – "Monumenta Historica Norvegiae" (1200) – tells about a ship carried away by the wind to the north on its way from Iceland to Norway and thrown on to the shore of some land "between Greenland and Biarmia". "The Book of Landlords" of 1230 contains the following information about Swalbard: "Swalbard lies at a four days trip from Langanes in the north of Iceland". Finally, the Saga of Samson the Beautiful (the middle of the 14th century) narrates that "towards Greenland a land stretches named Swalbard. Various tribes live there".

Some Norwegian scientists admitting the possibility of identifying Swalbard with Spitsbergen note that material remains of that period are absent at Spitsbergen. This is pointed out in G. Jones's book (1964 60). He noted that neither Jan Mayen nor Spitsbergen could be Swalbard. It most probably referred to the eastern coast of Greenland, i.e. the region of the Scoresby Sound. The same conclusion has been drawn by the Soviet scientist Koryakin (1981 99) who considers the problem from the geographical point of view.

In any case, the stories about Swalbard as well as the information on Grumant like any indirect sources need confirmation by direct, specific data. Such data may only be the result of archaeological investigations.

All the above mentioned archaeological expeditions except the Dutch and the Danish ones investigated Russian settlements. The Scandinavian expedition excavated two settlements near the Is-Fjorden Cove, the Polish archaeologists discovered three dwellings and five burials in Palfjorden and the Norwegian specialists found a dwelling in Gipsdalen.

Much information was collected by the Soviet archaeological expedition. As a result of the examination of certain islands in the archipelago numerous remains were found of dwellings, burials and big crosses usually left by Russian sailors in the regions of their seafaring.

Of particular interest are finds of remains dating from the period before V. Barents's journey



Fig. 1. The 16th century remains: 1 – Sørkappvatnet, 2 – Mosvatnet, 3 – Sørneset, 4 – Van-Mydenbukta, 5 – Gravsjøen, 6 – Stabbelva.

of 1596 when Spitsbergen became known in Western Europe. There are six remains of this kind. They comprise the following settlements: Sørkappvatnet (1545), Stabbelva (1557), Sørneset (1561), Gravsjøen (1578), Van-Mydenbukta (the 1580s), Mosvatnet (1586) (Fig. 1).

For definition of the dates of all the monuments discovered four methods of dating were used: 1. topography data; 2. inscription dating by means of paleography; 3. dendrochronology; 4. direct dating on the basis of inscriptions containing dates and coins.

Topography data utilization is based on the differing positions of the monuments relative to the sea level. Most of them are situated near the crest of the ancient plain cliff. Such are the settlements of the 18th century (Figs. 2, 3). This position of the remains is quite natural for these lots are the most convenient from the point of view of construction. They are well drawn off and do not suffer from river erosion and sea abrasion.



Fig. 2. Position of dwelling 2 at the settlement of Russekeila (the 18th century) at the crest of the cliff.

The second group is situated in different conditions not suitable for living from the point of view of modern geography. It comprises the dwellings dated to the 16th century such as Stabbelva, Gravsjøen, Sørneset. They are positioned in the southern part of West Spitsbergen, i.e. Nordenskiöldland and Sørkapland. These regions are characterized by a well developed coastal valley, the cliffs stretching far to the coast, sometimes for several kilometres. The remains are situated below the crest of the cliff on the surface of the ancient beach plain (Fig. 4), the distance between them and the shore being about 50–110 metres (Fig. 5).

Even more illogical is the position of the third group the remains of which are found at the level of modern beaches. It comprises such remains as Langstrand and Mosvatnet dated to the 17th century. The remains of the dwellings are partly overlapped by modern beach ridges.

From the point of view of modern geography

the construction of the dwellings in such conditions seems senseless. One may suppose that since their construction significant changes of the local landscape have occurred, in particular the lowering of some coastal zones due to clod tectonics. This conclusion seems to contradict the generally accepted view assuming the unidirectional process of shore displacement in Spitsbergen due to glacio-isostatic developments but it does not exclude the recent effect of clod tectonics in limited areas of the archipelago. This is what probably took place in the above mentioned areas of Western Spitsbergen.

Thus, the local remains may be divided into three groups according to their location:

1. those at the cliff level (the 18th century);
2. those below the cliff level in coastal valleys (the 16th century);
3. those at the beach level (mainly the 16th century).



Fig. 3. Position of the Lågneset dwelling (the 18th century) at the crest of the cliff.

The order of the positions confirms that the supposed lowering of the land might have taken place at the end of the 17th century. Similar observations with regard to blubber-melting plants of the 17th century at Amsterdam Island were made by the Swede H. Christiansson (1961: 117).

By means of dendrochronology 20 dwellings were dated, six of which are of the 16th century, four of the 17th century and 12 of the 18th century.

The results of absolute dating are confirmed by a number of other disciplines. Thus, the time of existence of the Gravsjöen lower horizon (1578) has been confirmed by the find of an inscription dated paleographically to the 16th century. Four inscriptions were found in a Stabbelva dwelling (dendrochronological date 1667) also of the 16th century. At the settlement of Van-Mydenbukta a wooden object was disco-

vered with an inscription containing two dates — 1593 and 1594.

The age of the 18th century dwellings is confirmed with the most precision. In dwelling 1 at the settlement of Russekeila two wooden objects were found with the dates 1786 and 1778. The latter was inscribed on a ceiling beam and coincided with the time of the dwelling construction defined by means of dendrochronology. In the second dwelling of the same settlement a copper coin of 1749 was found (the dendrochronological date of the dwelling was 1756), in the dwelling of Brøgger — a board with the inscribed date 1790 (the construction took place in 1780). There is an absolute coincidence between the time of wood-cutting for V. Ya. Chichagov's expedition camp (1763) and the dendrochronological date obtained for these dwellings.

Thus, all the data witnesses that the dendrochronological method allows us to define the



Fig. 4. Position of the Stabbelva dwelling (the 16th century) in a coastal valley (before excavation).



Fig. 5. Remains of dwelling 1 at the settlement of Gravsjøen (the 16th–18th centuries).

time of the Russian settlements at Spitsbergen with great precision. Most probably there was no significant chronological interval between the wood-cutting and house-building at Spitsbergen where the wood prepared on the mainland was transported.

The results of absolute dating show that most of the settlements are the 18th century. Another obvious peak refers to the second half of the 16th century after which there follows a certain decay covering most of the 17th century.

With regard to the 16th century finds one cannot help noting that they are not the oldest at Spitsbergen. First, they are situated on a rather large territory of the archipelago. Second, the dwellings of the time do not seem to be temporary, i.e. made of materials at hand. They are large capital houses made of wood brought on purpose from the mainland. Third, trade itself was of so high a level that it was possible only through sufficient knowledge of the archipelago. Russian trade was based on operating in a large region which was supported by a system of central basic dwellings accompanied by smaller trade houses. This is the situation one can trace at Spitsbergen in the 16th century. The Russians hunted walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus*) and other pinnipediae as well as polar fox (*Alopex lagopus*), reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus platyrhynchus*), white bear (*Thalarctos maritimus*) and various birds. Fishery was also well developed.

Thus there are significant grounds to assume that the dwellings of the mid 16th century are not the oldest ones at Spitsbergen.

On the basis of the above one may define the following periods in the development of Spitsbergen.

1. the 16th century – active development of Russian trade; V. Barents's trip to the archipelago in 1596 after which Spitsbergen became known to the whole of Western Europe;
2. the 17th century – decay of Russian trade, obvious activity of British, Dutch and Danish whalers in the 1610–1650s;
3. the 18th century – Russian trade flourishing with a certain decay in the middle of the century; the first Norwegian trade in the 1790s;
4. the first half of the 19th century – decay of Russian trade and its termination in the 1850s.

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