

Arctic History & Exploration

Since the earliest days of exploration people have attempted to reach the farthest-flung corners of the earth, and for many years the polar regions remained an elusive goal. The vast expanse of the Arctic was *terra incognita* and this was as much a part of its allure as the quest for new shipping routes, financial reward, geographical discovery and personal recognition.

Long before the early explorers headed north, though, the indigenous people of Asia had settled there. New Stone Age artefacts found in the Yana River Valley in Siberia, 500km north of the Arctic Circle, suggest that humans may have been hunting big-game animals in the region 30,000 years ago. When a fall in sea levels at the height of the last Ice Age formed a land bridge between the Russian Far East and North America, the distant ancestors of the Native Americans followed the mammoth herds across to the New World (see p263). Anthropologists believe that a second migration, this time of the ancestors of the Na-Dene people (see p45), occurred 12,000 to 15,000 years ago. The Inuit (see p39) were the last group to migrate east, making their way to Alaska 7000 to 8000 years ago.

The history of the Arctic's indigenous people reflects the harsh and unforgiving landscape in which they choose to live. Life was always a struggle against the elements, but the arrival of the *qablunaq* (white man) created a whole new array of problems. The early explorers had no idea how devastating their contact with local people would be: disease decimated the indigenous populations (see p20) and the influence of their culture began the transformation of the traditional way of life.

The Arctic's extreme weather and environments and newcomers' ignorance of how best to survive them have meant that the history of exploration in the region is pitted with accounts of tragedy and the many expeditions that never returned. Inaccurate maps, cruel temperatures, fluctuations in the extent of sea ice and the arrogant belief by some that rank, class and formal education were more important than practical experience led to the downfall of many.

In the winter, perpetual night severely limited any surveying; in summer, navigation was difficult because the stars were invisible against the midnight sun. The travelling season was short, there was scant knowledge of compass deviation, and sea ice severely constrained movement. Despite the best efforts of countless brave explorers, it was 1948 before the first person stood on the North Pole and 1977 before a surface vessel managed to reach it.

The indigenous people of the north were largely considered savages by explorers, and their knowledge and experience was ignored. However, the Inuit were familiar with vast swaths of land and could draw highly accurate maps. Their dog teams, meat diet and fur clothing could have

DID YOU KNOW?

The word Eskimo means 'eaters of raw meat' and is now considered offensive in some parts of the Arctic.

TIMELINE 30,000 BC

Evidence of ancient Siberian hunters in the Russian far north

4800–5400 BC

The first migration of Inuit to North America

saved many lives if only the early explorers had deemed them fit for their lofty endeavours. Later explorers who adopted traditional Inuit ways and consulted the local people on travel routes found much greater success.

THE SPECULATIVE PERIOD (TO 1595)

The voyage of the early Greek explorer Pytheas to 'Ultima Thule', as it was known, in about 325 BC, was the first recorded journey to the far north, but exactly how far north he reached is unknown. Later accounts tell the story of the 5th-century Irish monk Saint Brendan, who made the voyage north to Iceland and possibly as far as Newfoundland in a skin boat. At around the same time a Buddhist monk, Hwui Shan, was making his way up Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula and on to Alaska.

The next landmark in Arctic exploration goes to Erik the Red, who was exiled from Iceland in 982 and later founded a settlement in what is now known as Qassiarsuk (see p104) in Greenland. A wealth of Norse ruins covers the area today. At much the same time, the Europeans came into first contact with the Siberian Yup'ik and the first missionaries arrived among the Sami of northern Scandinavia.

For centuries little more was known about the Arctic, and it was 1555 before Olea Magnus, the last Catholic Archbishop of Uppsala in Sweden, wrote a detailed account of the area. His monumental publication, *A Description of the Northern Peoples*, is a mixture of fact and fantasy but still served as the chief source of knowledge about Arctic regions for over two centuries.

By the 16th century Spain and Portugal had monopolised the lucrative southern trade routes to the Orient and charged hefty levies for anyone wishing to pass. Rumours of a Northwest Passage to Asia gripped England and in 1576 a group of London merchants employed Martin Frobisher to find the route on their behalf. Over the next three years Frobisher traversed uncharted territory around Greenland and the eastern Canadian Arctic but he failed to find the fabled route.

Between 1585 and 1587, John Davies also attempted to find the elusive trade route; although he too was unsuccessful, he mapped the coast of Greenland, Baffin Island and Labrador, and was the first to keep detailed notes on ice conditions, flora and the indigenous people. He was also the first person to bring attention to the sealing and whaling possibilities in Davis Strait, thereby heralding a new era for both Europeans and the Inuit. Meanwhile, in northern Scandinavia the Sami were beginning to trade with southern Scandinavians and thus to pay taxes. As zealous missionaries flocked north and began a major push to educate the northern people, the Scandinavian monarchies were able to establish and assert political control over the area.

MARINE CARTOGRAPHY (1600–1700)

Most early voyages searched doggedly for the fabled Northwest Passage. Adventurous investors ploughed money into the quest, intent on making a fortune from a successful discovery, while the prospect of fame fuelled explorers' daydreams of discovering new land. However, Arctic charts were a highly inaccurate mix of real and hypothetical lands, and progress was slow.

Nanook of the North (1922), directed by Robert Flaherty, was the first major anthropological documentary set in the Arctic. It follows Nanook and his family for a year, showing a culture practically untouched by European influence.

DID YOU KNOW?

Around 1000 BC the Ancient Greeks named the Arctic after Arktos (the bear) for its position under the Great Bear constellation.

2400 BC

Suspected first arrival of Canadian Inuit peoples in Greenland

AD 982

Erik the Red sails for Greenland