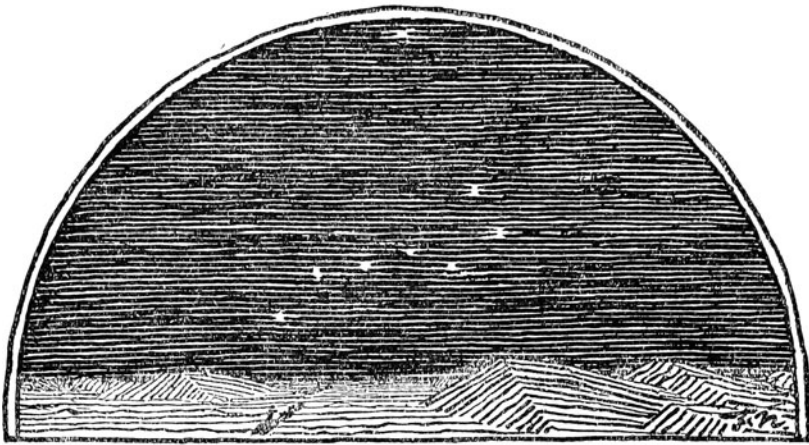


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978-1-108-07168-0 - In Northern Mists: Arctic Exploration in Early Times: Volume 1

Fridtjof Nansen Translated by Arthur G. Chater

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

“For my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset and the baths
Of all the Western stars until I die.”
Tennyson, “Ulysses.”

IN the beginning the world appeared to mankind like a fairy tale; everything that lay beyond the circle of familiar experience was a shifting cloudland of the fancy, a playground for all the fabled beings of mythology; but in the farthest distance, towards the west and north, was the region of darkness and mists, where sea, land and sky were merged into a congealed mass—and at the end of all gaped the immeasurable mouth of the abyss, the awful void of space. INTRO-
DUCTION

Out of this fairy world, in course of time, the calm and sober lines of the northern landscape appeared. With unspeakable labour the eye of man has forced its way gradually towards the north, over mountains and forests, and tundra, onward through the mists along the vacant shores of the polar sea—the vast stillness, where so much struggle and suffering, so many bitter failures, so many proud victories, have vanished without a trace, muffled beneath the mantle of snow.

When our thoughts go back through the ages in a waking dream, an endless procession passes before us—like a single

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mighty epic of the human mind's power of devotion to an idea, right or wrong—a procession of struggling, frost-covered figures in heavy clothes, some erect and powerful, others weak and bent so that they can scarcely drag themselves along before the sledges, many of them emaciated and dying of hunger, cold and scurvy ; but all looking out before them towards the unknown, beyond the sunset, where the goal of their struggle is to be found.

We see a Pytheas, intelligent and courageous, steering northward from the Pillars of Hercules for the discovery of Britain and Northern Europe ; we see hardy Vikings, with an Ottar, a Leif Ericson at their head, sailing in undecked boats across the ocean into ice and tempest and clearing the mists from an unseen world ; we see a Davis, a Baffin forcing their way to the north-west and opening up new routes, while a Hudson, unconquered by ice and winter, finds a lonely grave on a deserted shore, a victim of shabby pilfering. We see the bright form of a Parry surpassing all as he forces himself on ; a Nordenskiöld, broad-shouldered and confident, leading the way to new visions ; a Toll mysteriously disappearing in the drifting ice. We see men driven to despair, shooting and eating each other ; but at the same time we see noble figures, like a De Long, trying to save their journals from destruction, until they sink and die.

Midway in the procession comes a long file of a hundred and thirty men hauling heavy boats and sledges back to the south, but they are falling in their tracks ; one after another they lie there, marking the line of route with their corpses—they are Franklin's men.

And now we come to the latest drama, the Greenlander Brönlund dragging himself forward over the ice-fields through cold and winter darkness, after the leader Mylius-Erichsen and his comrade, Hagen, have both stiffened in the snow during the long and desperate journey. He reaches the depot only to wait for death, knowing that the maps and observations he has faithfully brought with him will be found and saved. He quietly

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prepares himself for the silent guest, and writes in his journal INTRO-
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in his imperfect Danish :

Perished,—79 Fjord, after attempt return over the inland ice, in November. I come here in waning moon and could not get farther for frost-bitten feet and darkness.

The bodies of the others are in the middle of the fjord opposite the glacier (about $2\frac{1}{2}$ leagues).

Hagen died November 15 and Mylius about 10 days after.

JÖRGEN BRÖNLUND.

What a story in these few lines ! Civilisation bows its head by the grave of this Eskimo.

What were they seeking in the ice and cold ? The Norseman who wrote the “King’s Mirror ” gave the answer six hundred years ago : “ If you wish to know what men seek in this land, or why men journey thither in so great danger of their lives, then it is the threefold nature of man which draws him thither. One part of him is emulation and desire of fame, for it is man’s nature to go where there is likelihood of great danger, and to make himself famous thereby. Another part is the desire of knowledge, for it is man’s nature to wish to know and see those parts of which he has heard, and to find out whether they are as it was told him or not. The third part is the desire of gain, seeing that men seek after riches in every place where they learn that profit is to be had, even though there be great danger in it.”

The history of arctic discovery shows how the development of the human race has always been borne along by great illusions. Just as Columbus’s discovery of the West Indies was due to a gross error of calculation, so it was the fabled isle of Brazil that drew Cabot out on his voyage, when he found North America. It was fantastic illusions of open polar seas and of passages to the riches of Cathay beyond the ice that drove men back there in spite of one failure after another ; and little by little the polar regions were explored. Every complete devotion to an idea yields some profit, even though it be different from that which was expected.

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But from first to last the history of polar exploration is a single mighty manifestation of the power of the unknown over the mind of man, perhaps greater and more evident here than in any other phase of human life. Nowhere else have we won our way more slowly, nowhere else has every new step cost so much trouble, so many privations and sufferings, and certainly nowhere have the resulting discoveries promised fewer material advantages—and nevertheless, new forces have always been found ready to carry the attack farther, to stretch once more the limits of the world.

But if it has cost a struggle, it is not without its joys. Who can describe his emotion when the last difficult ice-floe has been passed, and the sea lies open before him, leading to new realms? Or when the mist clears and mountain-summits shoot up, one behind another farther and farther away, on which the eye of man has never rested, and in the farthest distance peaks appear on the sea-horizon—on the sky above them a yellowish white reflection of the snow-fields—where the imagination pictures new continents? . . .

Ever since the Norsemen's earliest voyages arctic expeditions have certainly brought material advantages to the human race, such as rich fisheries, whaling and sealing, and so on; they have produced scientific results in the knowledge of hitherto unknown regions and conditions; but they have given us far more than this: they have tempered the human will for the conquest of difficulties; they have furnished a school of manliness and self-conquest in the midst of the slackness of varying ages, and have held up noble ideals before the rising generation; they have fed the imagination, have given fairy-tales to the child, and raised the thoughts of its elders above their daily toil. Take arctic travel out of our history, and will it not be poorer? Perhaps we have here the greatest service it has done humanity.

We speak of the first discovery of the North—but how do we know when the first man arrived in the northern regions of the earth? We know nothing but the very last steps in the

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migrations of humanity. What a stretch of time there must have been between the period of the Neanderthal man in Europe and the first Pelasgians, or Iberians, or Celts, that we find there in the neolithic age, in the earliest dawn of history. How infinitesimal in comparison with this the whole of the recent period which we call history becomes. INTRO-
DUCTION

What took place in those long ages is still hidden from us. We only know that ice-age followed ice-age, covering Northern Europe, and to some extent Asia and North America as well, with vast glaciers which obliterated all traces of early human habitation of those regions. Between these ice-ages occurred warmer periods, when men once more made their way northward, to be again driven out by the next advance of the ice-sheet. There are many signs that the human northward migration after the last ice-age, in any case in large districts of Europe, followed fairly close upon the gradual shrinking of the boundary of the inland ice towards the interior of Scandinavia, where the ice-sheath held out longest.

The primitive state—when men wandered about the forests and plains of the warmer parts of the earth, living on what they found by chance—developed by slow gradations in the direction of the first beginnings of culture; on one side to roving hunters and fishers, on the other to agricultural people with a more fixed habitation. The nomad with his herds forms a later stage of civilisation.

The hunting stage of culture was imposed by necessity on the first pioneers and inhabitants of the northernmost and least hospitable regions of the earth. The northern lands must therefore have been first discovered by roving fishermen who came northwards following the rivers and seashores in their search for new fishing-grounds. It was the scouting eye of a hunter that first saw a sea-beach in the dreamy light of a summer night, and sought to penetrate the heavy gloom of the polar sea. And that far-travelled hunter fell asleep in the snowdrift while the northern lights played over him as a funeral fire, the first victim of the polar night's iron grasp.

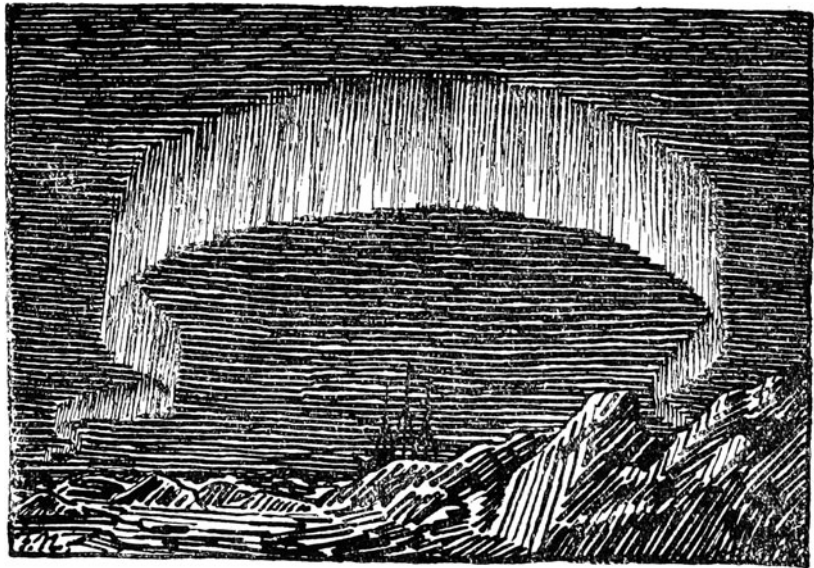
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Long afterwards came the nomad and the agriculturist and established themselves in the track of the hunter.

This was thousands of years before any written history, and of these earliest colonisations we know nothing but what the chance remains we find in the ground can tell us, and these are very few and very uncertain.

It is not until we come far down into the full daylight of history that we find men setting out with the conscious purpose of exploring the unknown for its own sake. With those early hunters, it was doubtless new ground and new game that drew them on, but they too were attracted, consciously or unconsciously, by the spirit of adventure and the unknown—so deep in the soul of man does this divine force lie, the mainspring, perhaps, of the greatest of our actions. In every part of the world and in every age it has driven man forward on the path of evolution, and as long as the human ear can hear the breaking of waves over deep seas, as long as the human eye can follow the track of the northern lights over silent snow-fields, as long as human thought seeks distant worlds in infinite space, so long will the fascination of the unknown carry the human mind forward and upward.

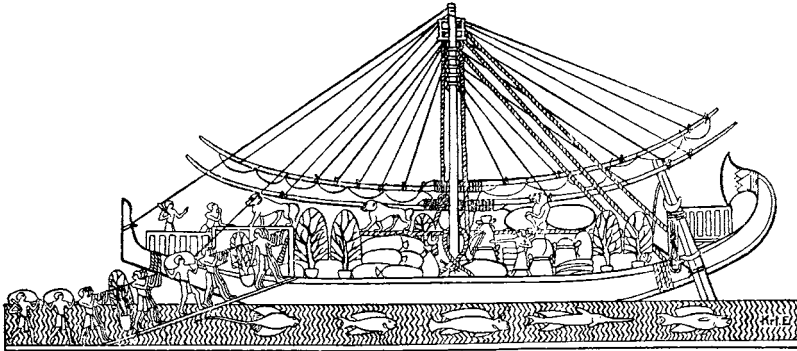


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Ship of the Egyptian Punt expedition, 17th century B.C. (J. DÜMICHEN)

CHAPTER I

ANTIQUITY, BEFORE PYTHEAS

THE learned world of early antiquity had nothing but a CHAPTER
I vague premonition of the North. Along the routes of traffic commercial relations were established at a very early time with the northern lands. At first these ran perhaps along the rivers of Russia and Eastern Germany to the Baltic, afterwards along the rivers of Central Europe as well. But the information which reached the Mediterranean peoples by these routes had to go through many intermediaries with various languages, and for this reason it long remained vague and uncertain.

What the people of antiquity did not know, they supplied by poetical and mythical conceptions ; and in time there grew up about the outer limits of the world, especially on the north, a whole cycle of legend which was to lay the foundation of ideas of the polar regions for thousands of years, far into the Middle Ages, and long after trustworthy knowledge had been won, even by the voyages of the Norsemen themselves.

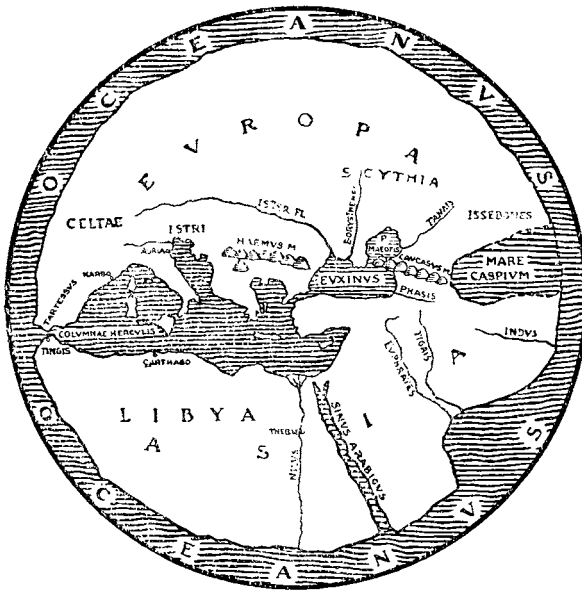
Long before people knew whether there were lands and seas far in the north, those who studied the stars had observed that there were some bodies in the northern sky which never set, and that there was a point in the vault of heaven which

Origin of
the word
Arctic

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never changed its place. In time, they also found that, as they moved northwards, the circle surrounding the stars that were always visible became larger, and they saw that these in their daily movements described orbits about the fixed point or pole of the heavens. The ancient Chaldeans had already found this out. From this observation it was but a short step to the



The world according to Hecataeus (BUNBURY)

deduction that the earth could not be flat, as the popular idea made it, but must in one way or another be spherical, and that if one went far enough to the north, these stars would be right over one's head. To the Greeks a circle drawn through the constellation of the Great Bear, which they called "Arktos," formed the limit of the stars that

were always visible. This limit was therefore called the Bear's circle, or the "Arctic Circle," and thus this designation for the northernmost regions of the earth is derived from the sky.

According to the common Greek idea it was the countries of the Mediterranean and of the East that formed the disc of the earth, or "oecumene" (the habitable world). Around this disc, according to the Homeric songs (the Iliad was put into writing about 900 B.C.), flowed the all-embracing river "Oceanus," the end of the earth and the limit of heaven. This deep, tireless, quietly flowing river, whose stream turned back upon itself, was the origin and the end of all things; it

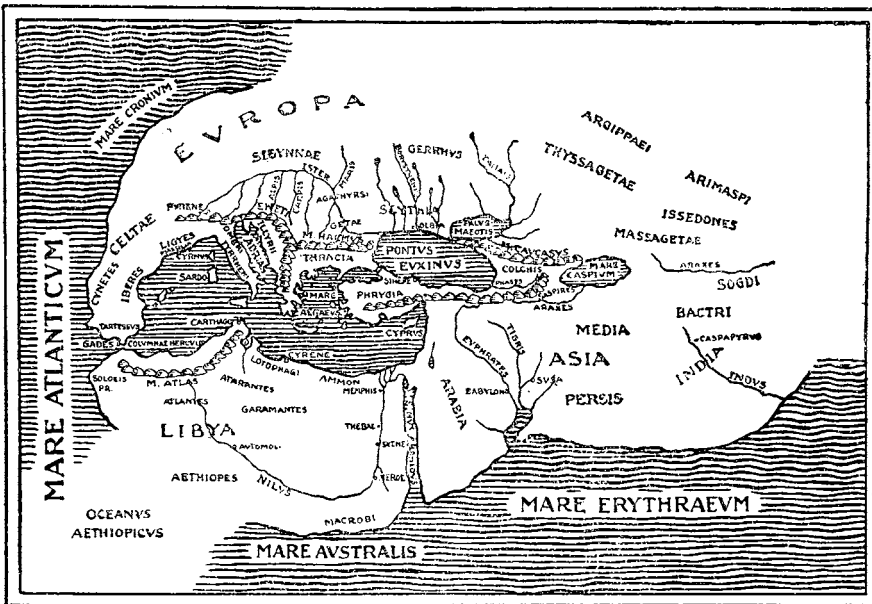
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Oecumene
and
Oceanus

ANTIQUITY, BEFORE PYTHEAS

was not only the father of the Oceanides and of the rivers, but also the source whence came gods and men. Nothing definite is said of this river's farther boundary ; perhaps unknown lands belonging to another world whereon the sky rested were there ; in any case we meet later, as in Hesiod, with ideas of lands beyond the Ocean, the Hesperides, Erythea, and the

CHAPTER I



The world according to the ideas of Herodotus (J. MURRAY)

Isles of the Blest, which were probably derived from Phœnician tales. Originally conceived as a deep-flowing river, Oceanus became later the all-embracing empty ocean, which was different from the known sea (the Mediterranean) with its known coasts, even though connected with it. Herodotus (484-424 B.C.) is perhaps the first who used the name in this sense ; he definitely rejects the idea of Oceanus as a river and denies that the "œcumene" should be drawn round, as though with a pair of compasses, as the Ionian geographers (Hecatæus, for example) thought. He considered it proved that the earth's disc on the western side, and probably also on the south, was surrounded by the ocean, but said that no one could know

Herodotus
on the
ocean

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CHAPTER I whether this was also the case on the north and north-east. In opposition to Hecatæus¹ and the Ionian geographers (the school of Miletus) he asserted that the Caspian Sea was not a bay of the northern Oceanus, but an independent inland sea. Thus the “œcumene” became extended into the unknown on the north-east. He mentions several peoples as dwelling farthest north; but to the north of them were desert regions and inaccessible mountains; how far they reached he does not say.

He thus left the question undetermined, because, with the sound cool-headedness of the inquirer, which made him in a sense the founder of physical geography, he trusted to certain observations rather than to uncertain speculations; and therefore he maintained that the geographers of the Ionian school had not provided adequate proofs that the world was really surrounded by sea on all sides. But nevertheless, it was, perhaps, his final opinion that the earth’s disc swam like an island in Oceanus.

Division of
the ocean

This common name for the ocean was soon dropped, and men spoke instead of the Outer Sea beyond the Pillars of Hercules in contradistinction to the Inner Sea (i.e., the Mediterranean). The Outer Sea was also called the Atlantic Sea after Atlas. This name is first found in Herodotus. South of Asia was the Southern Ocean or the Erythræan Sea (the Red Sea and Indian Ocean). North of Europe and Asia was the Northern Ocean; and the Caspian Sea was a bay of this, in the opinion of the majority. Doubtless, most people thought that these various oceans were connected; but the common name Oceanus does not reappear as applied to them until the second century B.C.²

Homeric
ideas of the
universe

According to the Homeric conception the universe was to be imagined somewhat as a hollow globe, divided in two by the disc of the earth and its encircling Oceanus; the upper

¹ Hecatæus of Miletus (549–after 486 B.C.) was the best-known geographer of the Ionian school. He made a map of the world, and summarised the contemporary Greek ideas of geography.

² Cf. Kretschmer, 1892, pp. 41–42.