

Beaufort Gyre Exploration Project: Ancient Times (up to 15th century)

A foremost Arctic explorer in his own right, Fridtjof Nansen wrote on the exploration of the North Atlantic by western civilizations in ancient times. Nansen's account begins in antiquity with the discovery of Thule (which Nansen suspected was Norway, but now is believed to be Iceland) by Pytheas of Massalia (now Marseilles) around 330 BC. Nansen continues with subsequent voyages in Roman and Medieval times, the settlement of Scandinavia, and discovery and settlement of Iceland, Greenland, and Vineland (North America) by the Vikings. Also described are Norwegian expeditions to the White Sea and the Polar Sea, whaling and sealing, John Cabot's discovery of North America at the end of the 15th century, and Portuguese encounters with Greenland at about the same time.

Farther to the east, many historians believe that Pomors (Russians from the town of Novgorod) first began to appear in the far north along the coast of the White Sea at the beginning of the 12th century, and along the Murmansk coast in the middle of the 13th century. Every year, the Pomors sailed along the northern coast in boats that were constructed using axes. Sometimes storms forced the boats from their usual shipping lanes, leading to observation of the islands of Novaya Zemlya, Spitsbergen, and Bear Island. In fact, Spitsbergen was visited by the Pomors 150 years prior to being discovered by the Dutch in 1596. About the same time, other Russian adventurers crossed the Ural Mountains, entered North Siberia and reached the Lower Ob River.

Reference:

Nansen, F., [In Northern Mists, Vols I & II](#), AMS Press, New York, 1969.

Last updated: August 20, 2014



Engraving of ancient Pomor's boat (ladia) from old books.
(Image courtesy Ecoshef)



[Enlarge Image](#)

Ancient map of Kola Bay and Kildin Island. The Barents Sea coast.
(Image courtesy Ecoshef.)

Copyright ©2007 Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, All Rights Reserved.

Mail: Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, 266 Woods Hole Road, Woods Hole, MA 02543, USA.

E-Contact: info@whoi.edu; press relations: media@whoi.edu, tel. (508) 457-2000

Problems or questions about the site, please contact webdev@whoi.edu