JENS MUNK'S SEARCH FOR THE NORTH WEST PASSAGE IN 1619–20 AND HIS WINTERING AT NOVA DANIA, CHURCHILL, MANITOBA

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During the Viking Age we know that people from the Nordic countries set out from the settlements in Greenland to explore the unknown lands further west. The sagas tell us that Norsemen settled there about 1000 AD, a fact proven in the 1960s when Helge and Anne Stine Ingstad found and excavated a Viking settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows on the northernmost tip of Newfoundland.[1] It is well known that the Norse settlements in Greenland and Vinland disappeared, probably due to climactic changes and pressures from Indians and Eskimos.

According to history, Captain Jens Munk (1579–1628) is the next 'Norseman' to make a recorded appearance on the North American Continent. On May 9th, 1619, two Danish naval vessels, *Enhiorningen* (The Unicorn), a frigate, and *Lamprenen* (The Lamprey),a sloop, sailed out from Copenhagen with orders from King Christian IV of Denmark and Norway to find the North West Passage to China and the Far East. Since 1500 British merchants and explorers in particular had tried to find such an assumed passage north of the American continent. A passage like that would mean a short-cut to gold and spices, safe from Spanish and Portuguese men of war.

In 1624, Jens Munk, who was commander of the expedition, published his diary, *Navigatio Septentrionalis*, in Danish. In this, he gave a vivid presentation of what it was like to explore the arctic region and to be forced to winter in Hudson Bay, a situation that had not been foreseen at all. It is well known that Munk lost sixty-two out of sixty-five crew and the bigger of the two ships belonging to the Danish navy.

The king's instructions to Munk, however, whether these were detailed or not, have never been found. Denmark was at that time a considerable naval power which in the early years of the century pushed northwards into the arctic seas north, east and west of Norway. In 1605, 1606 and 1607, the king had sent three arctic expeditions to Greenland[2] not only to see what had happened to the Nordic colonists there, but also for purposes of trade and to ascertain the best sea route to Greenland, the old dominion of the Danish-Norwegian crown. In 1609 Jens Munk was sent out to find

a navigable North East Passage, north of Siberia, but the ice conditions forced him to return.

The early Danish expeditions seem to have relied on British navigational expertise. They would nearly always be at least one Englishman on board who had experience of the ice flow round the southern tip of Greenland and between Greenland and the North American continent. Martin Frobisher had been there on three voyages – 1576, 1577 and 1578 – in search of a passage to China.[3] On his last expedition he commanded a flotilla of fifteen vessels, which ensured that a number of English mariners had arctic experience. Similarly, in 1585, 1586 and 1587 John Davis searched for the same passage, exploring the strait now named after him and rediscovering Greenland.[4]

In 1610, Henry Hudson was also sent out to find the navigable passage to the Far East, the North West Passage or the legendary strait of Anian[5] that was supposed to offer a shortcut to the Pacific through the unexplored regions of North America. After incredible hardships Hudson passed through the strait and into the bay which both bear his name, and sailed down along the east coast of the bay where, in order to winter, he beached his ship, the *Discovery*, at a river mouth, presumably the Rupert River at the bottom of James Bay. The mutiny among the crew and the tragic fate of Hudson, his son and seven others, who were placed in a shallop and cut loose in open sea to disappear, is well known.

A year later, in 1612, Sir Thomas Button was sent out in search of Hudson and, of course, the North West Passage. Survivors from Hudson's expedition, who returned in 1611, had told about his optimism concerning a passage. Both the printer of Hudson's chart, Hessel Gerritzoon[6] and Samuel Purchas[7] seem to have believed that Hudson had found a passage. Button wintered at the Nelson River, which he named.

The search for the North West Passage continued; almost every year expeditions were sent out financed by London or Bristol merchants. After Button had been in Hudson Bay in 1612–13, however, no-one, as far as we know, managed to go there until Jens Munk did so in 1619. Other exploresrs, like Bylot and Baffin, surveyed the Hudson Strait carefully, and they noticed the strong tide that according to both Hudson and Button might be indicative of a passage. When Baffin returned to England in 1615, however, he said with confidence that no passage existed via the Hudson Strait.[8]

A statement like that, if Munk knew of it, would probably not have discouraged him at all. It was not until 150 years after Munk's expedition to Hudson Bay in 1619–20 that the world was finally convinced that there was no passage from there to the Pacific. By then, all the deep inlets had been explored, the Wager in 1747 and in 1762 the Chesterfield Inlet. In 1769 the Hudson's Bay Company explorer and fur trader,

Samuel Hearne, and his Indian guide, Matonabbee, went overland to the Arctic Ocean without finding the passage.[9]

Towards the end of June 1619, Munk's small two-ship flotilla sighted Greenland. Cape Farewell was recognised by one of the Englishmen aboard, William Gordon. From then on he seems to have been relying on Hudson's chart, which was no doubt in Munk's possession. As noted, Munk's sailing instructions have not been preserved, but it is clear from his diary that he should enter Hudson Strait at 65° Latitude North. North America was sighted on 8th July. They went wrongly into Frobisher Bay. Munk realised the mistake and turned into the strait proper at the south eastern point of Resolution Island. That cape Munk named after himself: *Munkenes.*

It goes without saying that navigation in this labyrinthine archipelago was difficult. Charts were sketchy and unreliable and the ice conditions often dictated the course taken: from Munk's diary we learn of many near misses with the ice. They sailed west along the south coast of Baffin Island but on 17th July found the strait (i.e. Hudson Strait which Munk renamed *Fretum Christian*) blocked with ice and the two ships found shelter in what was named *Rensund* by Munk. Here they shot reindeer and made the only contact they had during the expedition with the indigenous population. They had a friendly meeting with the Eskimos with an exchange of gifts. Munk gave them knives and pieces of iron in exchange for sealmeat and birds. At Churchill, where they wintered, they saw signs of human presence but never met any of the local Indians.

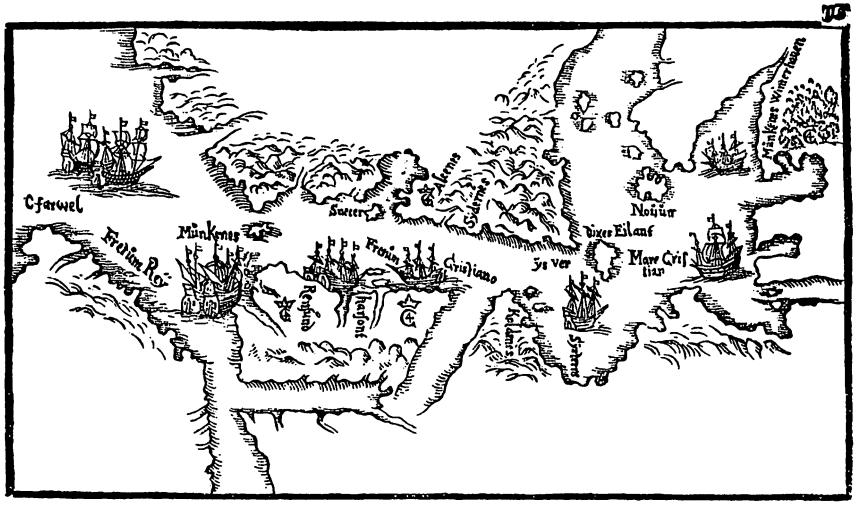
The expedition spent precious time here and at another shelter named *Haresund* further west in Hudson Strait. When the ice conditions improved they sailed west again and too early to the south. The result was that they ended up in what is now called Ungava Bay. After this blunder, made by the navigator William Gordon, it seems that from then on Munk followed his own instincts, developed through long experience in the Barents Sea north of Norway and Russia. On 20th August they were back in Hudson Strait having lost ten days.

Seen from our vantage point and certainly from Munk's after his return to Denmark, it was now a race against time. It must have crossed Munk's mind that the ice conditions, already unbelievably bad, would soon be worse and that the strait would in fact freeze up. Nevertheless, one is deeply impressed with his drive to go on. What held up the spirit of the commander and the crew was no doubt the assumption that after the passage of the Hudson Strait the course would be set more southerly, and they would soon be on well-known latitudes, hopefully with a climate similar to that of Scandinavia. They had, however, no knowledge of the chilling Labrador Current affecting water temperatures in Hudson Strait and Bay; nor did they know about the benevolent influence of the Gulf Stream on the climate in Scandinavia. Certainly, everybody was still warmed by the thought that they would find the Passage and not have to return by the same icy route and especially at a bad time of year.

In early September Munk explored the Digges Islands, which he renamed *Sostrene* (the Sisters) even though he knew their name and position from Hessel Gerritzoon's chart. Munk was now in Hudson Bay, which he renamed *Novum Marum*, and the course was set south west after the passage of Mansel Island. That course must have been on his instructions and fits very well with the area of the west side of Hudson Bay where neither Hudson nor Button had been.

On 7th September, during a violent storm from the north east which separated the two ships, Munk made a daring entry into the mouth of what was later called the Churchill River and found a sheltered anchorage for the *Enhiorningen*. A couple of days later, smoke and fire signals brought the smaller *Lamprenen* into what is a unique natural harbour. Munk took the surrounding land in the name of the Danish King and called it *Nova Dania*.

Soon after the arrival at what Munk later called his *Vindterhaffn/Winterhauen* in *Nova Dania* the fall in temperature and the appearance of ice made it necessary to make the decision to stay there over the winter. First it was important to find a place where the ships could be safe from the ice flow in what is really a tidal river. At a point approximately 10km from the mouth of the Churchill River Munk took his ships across the shallow water at high tide and as close as possible to the west bank



1. From Jens Munk, *Navigatio Septentrionalis*, 1624. A woodcut of Munk's chart from Cape Farewell to *Munkenes Winterhauen* at Churchill, Manitoba. The map is seen from north to south; the unfortunate absence of degrees of longitude and latitude led to serious misunderstandings as to the position of *Munkenes Winterhauen*.

and mades beds or docks of branches. At low tide the men could walk around the vessels and to the shore. This place was recognised by Thorkild Hansen and Peter Seeberg during the Munk Memorial Expedition in the summer of 1964.[10] Hansen and Seeberg found chiselled-out holes in five big stones to which at least the *Enhiorningen* may have been fastened.

From Munk's diary we learn that the heavy cannon were placed at the bottom of the hull for reasons of stability in a ship out of water. In this way the battery deck of the*Enhiorningen* was cleared and turned into a common room with two fireplaces that could hopefully warm two crews. The diary reveals hectic activity. The signs of coming winter were everywhere. Firewood was cut and hauled to the ship. There was still plenty game to be shot, a welcome relief from the standard diet of salted meat and dry biscuits that had been brought from home. Munk seems to have been good at motivating his men as long as the weather and the cold were bearable. The ships' carpenters built a couple of sheds ashore for storage, e.g. of gunpowder. But soon the cold began to bite in earnest, and it is clear that no member of the crew, including Munk himself, was equipped for an arctic expedition. On 4th October, Munk distributed among the crew all the clothes, shirts, shoes and boots available in the ship's stores. It was also at this time and before the ground was covered by snow that Munk became aware that the natives seem to have had a summer camp at this place. Some flat stones were found, accordi ng to Munk, arranged in an altar-like fashion. One night, some weeks later, the guard shot a black animal which turned out to be a dog with its mouth tied together. Munk wrote that alive it could have been sent back to its owner with gifts, and contact could have been established as a result.

From 22nd October the ice ceased to move and from then on *Enhiorningen* was secured in its 'dock'. On 10th November, St.Martin's Eve was celebrated. Some grouse made up for the lack of a goose and the crew were treated to wine. Munk noted that the beer was frozen by that date, but the crew were at liberty to drink what they could thaw. Christmas was celebrated in an optimistic mood and the Reverend Rasmus Jensen delivered the first Protestant Christmas sermon in *Nova Dania*. The crew ate grouse and a hare and were given wine and strong beer to drink. They got 'half drunk' but they were happy and well-behaved, according to Munk.

It was after the New Year, however, that living conditions began quickly to deteriorate. They had to give up hunting due to extreme frost and snow. The lack of fresh meat and exercise made the crew an easy prey to scurvy and from the New Year Munk's diary becomes primarily a record of the many deaths which followed. At first they were able to bury the dead, but in the end there were corpses everwhere. On 4th June Munk was so weak and sure of death that he asked the finder of his diary kindly to bury him and his crew and take 'denne min relation' to the king. On 8th June he was still alive and managed to crawl out onto deck to escape the stench of the decaying bodies. There he was seen by two surviving crew members who had found shelter on the shore.

Spring had now come and with it the supplies of fresh meat and green shoots needed for recovery. They began to prepare *Lamprenen* for the return voyage and managed to get it out of its dock at spring tide. Normally a ship like *Lamprenen* required a crew of sixteen, so it was obvious that Munk and his two men had a superhuman task in front of them. On 16th July, before the voyage home began, Munk drilled three holes in *Enhioringen* so that she would remain in her dock until he returned for her. The bay with his *Vindterhaffn* he named after himself: *Jens Munckes Bay* [sic].

The passage back to Denmark/Norway was dramatic. They fought ice and storm; the ship leaked so that one man had to be at the pump all the time. They were too few to operate the sails optimally. Yet, on 20th September they sighted Norway and the following day they made landfall at Dalsfjorden south of Trondhjem. According to Munk, they cried for happiness and thanked God for their deliverance.

The rumours of what had happened to Munk's expedition were very slow to spread and to find their way into written sources. From 1624 to 1897 Munk's diary was only

2. From Jens Munk's *Navigatio Septentrionalis*, 1624. This woodcut shows Munk's meeting with the Eskimos, reindeer shooting, and the strong, ice-filled tide.

available in Danish. In 1897 C.C.A. Gosch translated it into English for the Hakluyt Society.[11] In the summer of 1631 Captain Luke Fox and Captain Thomas James were both circumnavigating the bay, sponsored by merchants in London and Bristol, respectively. The two ships met accidentally off Cape Henrietta Maria. In their published reports we find no reference to Munk even though Fox entered the mouth of the Churchill River where Munk had wintered. He did not land, but the topography and landing conditions he described can be recognised in Munk's report.[12] That the search for the North West Passage stopped for nearly one hundred years after these futile attempts is a different story.

For quite a long time the position of Munk's winter harbour was uncertain and disputed. Today, however, it is beyond doubt that he wintered in the mouth of the Churchill River at a place on the west bank approximately 10km upstream and 6km south west of present-day Port Churchill situated on the opposite bank. The reason for the uncertainty concerning the location was that Munk left no position in his diary.[13] It seems to have been left out on purpose, perhaps by royal command. One should bear in mind that a valuable vessel belonging to the Danish navy had been left in perfect condition. If it had not been for a serious weakening of the king's political position in Northern Europe, Munk would no doubt have been ordered to return to *Nova Dania* with settlers in the following year (1621).

One source in particular is responsible for the confusion which has reigned concerning the correct position of Munk's 'Vindterhaffn' in *Nova Dania*, and that is Isaac de la Peyrere's *Relation du Groenlande* which was published in Paris in 1647. La Peyrere was a French diplomat with a great interest in arctic matters. When posted in Scandinavia, he collected information concerning Danish activities in the arctic region. He did not know Danish well enough to translate correctly from Munk's report and broadcast Munk's last position before he left Hudson Strait for his *Vindterhaffn*. That position was on lat. 63° 20 Min. or nearly 5° north of the real position of Port Churchill (59°). He also offered his own estimate of the longitude, i.e. 4° further to the west than the true position. La Peyrere made public that Munk had wintered at a position near Chesterfield Inlet, for a long time thought to be the entrance of a possible passage to the Pacific. He even amended Munk's chart and supplied it with latitudes and longitudes.

The wrong position was accepted by other Danish explorers and scientists until P. Lauridsen in 1883 in Copenhagen published a new edition of Munk's *Navigatio Septentrionalis* with an introduction, notes and a reprint of Munk's maps. Lauridsen pointed out La Peyrere's mistakes and the existence of other literary sources that substantiated that the position of Munk's *Vindterhaffn* was very close to Port Churchill.

After Munk left the locality where he had beached the two ships, no other white man seems to have made a landfall there for the next fifty years. We know that a

Hudson's Bay Company ship was there in 1685 and in 1689 a post had been built there.[14] To begin with, the Hudson's Bay Company ships returned before the winter without leaving personnel behind. Soon, however, the area and Hudson's Bay Company posts like York Factory at Hayes River, south of Churchill, and other posts were drawn into the fur trade war between England and France. During that time the posts changed hands many times and the war did not stop until a settlement was reached at the Peace of Utrecht in 1713. It is known that the famous D'Iberville led his attacks on the British in the Bay area from what he recognised to be a superb natural harbour, i.e. the mouth of the Churchill River.

Another French officer, Nicolas Jeremie, who was in the Hudson Bay area from 1694 to 1714 and served as governor from 1708 to 1714, published an account of his experiences.[15] In his book, Jeremie wrote about Munk and especially what he had heard about him and his fate from the Indians. He is the one who tells the story about the astonishment of the Indians when they came to the place, probably in 1620–21, and saw what the ice had left of the ship and found all the unburied corpses of men

3. From Jens Munk's *Navigatio Septentrionalis*, 1624. *Enhiorningen* and *Lamprenen* at *Munkenes Winterhauen*. The scene is characterised by brisk activity before the coming of winter.

belonging to an unknown race. It is also from Jeremie that we learn that some Indians blew themselves up when they lit a fire in one of the sheds built by Munk and his men for safe storage of gunpowder. We also hear that for many years the site became a cherished place for collecting iron. Jeremie, who knew La Peyrere's book and his false position for Munk's *Vindterhaffn*, was in no doubt that he was in the correct location. Among the French, Churchill River, as it was later named,[16] was always La Riviere Danoise or Riviere de Monc. The Indians called it Manoteousibi (river of foreigners). As late as 1744 in De Charlevoix's *Histoire de la Nouvelle France* Churchill River is called La Riviere Danoise and Riviere de Monc. It is interesting to see that the old name is still in use in a British source from the same year. In his *Accounts of Hudson Bay* (London, 1744), Arthur Dobbs refers to 'The Danish or Churchill River'. Otherwise it can be said that with the disappearance of French influence from the Hudson Bay area the place names referring to Munk's presence were lost.

It was not until 1704 that written sources in English make reference to Munk and his expedition. In that year John Churchill's *Collection of Voyages and Travels* appeared with a translation of La Peyrere's problematic book.[17] From 1719, however, there is an on-location report by Captain James Knight, the Hudson Bay's Company Governor-in-Chief in Hudson Bay.[18] Knight rebuilt the Hudson's Bay Company post at Churchill River on a low, wind-swept hill containing many of the graves of Munk's crew. Even then, nearly one hundred years later, the landscape was still marked by Munk's wintering and the following catastrophe. In his diary, Knight returns repeatedly to the visible and sad fate of the Danes. He also mentions the finding of two brass cannon and several cast iron bars (ballast weights) that he obviously related to the Danish presence.

A cannon referred to by Nicolas Jeremie was probably found as early as 1689 when the Hudson's Bay Company was first established at Churchill.[19] The cannon mentioned was marked with King Christian IV's sign: *C IV*.[20] Unfortunately, all the cannon referred to in the literary sources have disappeared.

Jens Munk's Maps

In *Navigatio Septentrionalis* (1624) Munk printed three woodcuts by an anonymous carver. One is a chart covering the area from Cape Farewell to 'Munkenes Winterhauen' (or *Vindterhaffn*) in *Nova Dania*. Although it is compressed, the chart is fairly accurate for that time. It is also easy to see the consequences of La Peyrere's 5° mistake. The other woodcut renders three incidents from the voyage: the meeting with the indigenous population; the reindeer shooting; and the two vessels in strong tide and ice. The third woodcut shows the *Vindterhaffn* at the mouth of the Churchill River. The estuary is also recognisable if we compare it with a modern map. This woodcut gives an idea of the brisk activity before the coming of winter. The sailors are hunting, building, and cutting fire-wood. To sheds have already been built ashore. From Munk's diary we know that coniferous trees could be cut close by and not the

deciduous trees seen on the picture. Today the area is treeless and north of the timberline.

In 1965 Thorkild Hansen's book on Jens Munk became a bestseller in Denmark and in 1976 it was translated into English[21] . In 1964, Thorkild Hansen and Peter Seeberg, writer and archaeologist, carried out the Jens Munk Memorial Expedition, sponsored by the National Museum of Canada. The main objective of the expedition was to find the exact location of Munk's *Vindterhaffn* in the mouth of the Churchill River. By means of Munk's own description of the topography of the area, how he went about beaching the ships and, of course, his map, Hansen and Seeberg approached the problem with the tools of well-established archaeology. The report[22] that appeared in 1965 is convincing and it comes to an exact location of Munk's *Vindterhaffn*. They found two cannon balls and a bar of cast iron in the low water, items that can be attributed with great certainty to foundries in the Copenhagen area.

Nothing came out of Jens Munk's Nova Dania in Canada; the names he gave islands, promontories, straits and waters disappeared, and today there is nothing to remind visitors to Port Churchill of the heroism of Munk and his men.

NOTES

1. H. and S. Ingstad, *The Norse Discovery of America*, 2 vols. (1986).
2. C.C.A. Gosch, *Danish Arctic Expeditions* 1605–20, vol I (London, 1897).
3. V. Stefansson, ed., *The Three Voyages of Martin Frobisher*, vols 1–2 (London, 1938).
4. J.J. Shillinglaw, *A Narrative of Arctic Discovery* (London, 1850), Chap. 5.
5. In the second half of the sixteenth century cartographers showed such a passage between North America and Asia in the Far North. By the seventeenth century this passage had moved south in the minds of mariners and explorers. Even in the later eighteenth century the Strait of Anian was imagined to go from Hudson Bay to the Pacific. British explorers talked about the North West Passage, the French referred to 'Detroit d'Anian' and the Strait of Anian. In 1624 Jens Munk wrote in his report: 'Nordvestiske Passagie'.
6. Amsterdam, 1612.
7. S. Parchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes* (1625; Glasgow, 1906).
8. G. Williams, *The British Search For the Northwest Passage in the Eighteenth Century* (Imperial Studies N° . XXIV, 1962).
9. S. Hearne, *A Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean*, 1795.
10. T. Hansen and P. Seeberg, *Jens Munks Minde-Expedition* (Gyldendal, 1965).
11. Gosch, *Danish Arctic Expeditions*, ii.
12. See *The Voyages of Captain Luke Fox and Captain Thomas James in Search of a North-West Passage 1631–32,* M. Christy, ed., 2 vols (London, 1894).

13. Munk gives a fairly accurate position, i.e. 63° 20 Min. before setting the course south west (see diary entry for 20th August 1619).
14. In 1670 the Hudson's Bay Company had been given a charter to trade in all of the Hudson Bay drainage area, i.e. Prince Rupert's Land. The post mentioned here was most likely built on the site where James Knight (see note 16) rebuilt a post after the French had left the area in 1714; it was built on the location where Knight found significant evidence of Munk's presence. This post, or fort, was called the Prince of Wales's Fort and was situated 11km from the mouth of Churchill River. From the 1730s onwards a stone fort (the new Prince of Wales's Fort) was constructed on Eskimo Point overlooking the entrance to the river. In 1782 the French captured the fort and blew it up. When Samuel Hearne returned in 1783 he moved up river to the old location of Munk's *Vindterhaffn*, where he established a Hudson's Bay Company post that was active until 1938 (Hansen and Seeberg, 60).
15. Jeremie's account appears in Bernard's *Recueil de Voyages au Nord* (Amsterdam, 1720). See also Nicolas Jeremie, *Twenty Years of York Factory 1694–1714. Jeremie's Account of Hudson Strait and Bay* (*Ottawa*, 1926).
16. The river was named after John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, and Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company 1685–91.
17. Gosch, ii, 180.
18. J. Knight, *The Founding of Churchill. Being the Journal of Captain James Knight Governor-in-Chief in Hudson Bay, from the 14th of July to the 13th of September*, 1717, J.F. Kenney, ed., (Toronto, 1932).
19. J. Richardson, *The Polar Regions*, 107; Gosch, ii, 134.
20. Gosch, ii, 134–5.
21. T. Hansen, *Jens Munk* (Gylendal, 1965); T. Hansen, *The Way to Hudson Bay: The Life and Times of Jens Munk* (New York, 1976).
22. Hansen and Seeberg, *Jens Munks Minde-Expedition*, 61–68.