

Vitus Bering

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Vitus Bering's first Kamchatka Expedition 1725-1730, by order of Czar Peter the Great, proved the separation of Siberia and America. Furthermore, Bering's map showed north-east Asia in its true dimensions, both in longitude and latitude. On his return to St. Petersburg, Bering was met with much scepticism, which, after Bering's own proposals, led to the second Kamchatka Expedition, better known as the Great Northern Expedition of 1733-1743. Why such scepticism, and why is it still being shown? The most recent example coming from the American historian, Raymond H. Fisher's work.

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From the 'Age of Discovery', and particularly in connection with the first accurate mapping and scientific investigations made in the Arctic regions of Asia and the northernmost reaches of the Pacific Ocean during the first half of the 18th century, polar research in Denmark possesses a particularly precious jewel in its crown, the navigator, Vitus Bering. Sadly, along with several brave crew members, he died of scurvy and related illnesses towards the end of his gargantuan undertaking, and greatest triumph, the Great Northern Expedition, which lasted 10 years, and concluded once and for all that eastern Siberia and Alaska were not connected. His achievements have put him on a par with Columbus, Magellan, Cabot and Cook, as one of the greatest navigators and discoverers the world has seen.

Indeed, it was the famous English navigator and explorer, Captain James Cook, who later that same century insisted that the strait separating the world's two greatest continents be named after Bering. Cook, in particular, had been a great admirer of Bering's bravery, endurance and map-work.

Commissioned initially by the Czar of Russia, Peter I, more popularly known as Peter the Great (1672-1725), Bering devoted much of his life to opening up these northern reaches in the name of science as well as for Russian political and economic interests. He endeavoured to discover the relationship between the New World and the Old World. The scientific results of the Great Northern Expedition (1733-43) were recorded by the German biologist, Steller, who worked at one of Peter the Great's new scientific institutions, the Imperial Science Academy, at St. Petersburg. The Bering Strait has indeed been that vital continental 'bridge' which in the past acted as a vital link for the migration of plants, birds, animals, and moreover, the Asiatic Indian tribes, including the Eskimos and their cultures. Vitus Bering's discoveries formed the basis to later research undertaken by the two geography professors, H. P. Steensby and G. Hatt, who demon-

strated, once and for all, that the Eskimo culture had an Asian origin.

Who then was Vitus Bering?

He was born in 1681, in Horsens, Jutland, Denmark. He was christened on 12th August the same year. He was the son of customs officer and church warden, Jonas Svendsen. His mother's name was Anna Pedersdatter Bering. Vitus Bering was named after his great uncle, Vitus Pedersen Bering, who was a historiographer to the King. As a boy, Vitus Bering went to sea at an early age, travelling first of all to the West Indies and East India. He married Anna Christina Püllse of Viborg, Karelia, in 1718, subsequent to the Great Northern War campaigns. She was the youngest of merchant Mathias Püllse's three daughters. All three daughters had married high-ranking officers, the others being to Vice Admiral Thomas Saunders and High Commissioner Anton von Salza. Hans Christian Andersen's 'Mit Livs Eventyr - Sverigerejsen' (The Adventures of My Life - Chapter on Travels in Sweden) describes the famous Danish author's stay at the residence of Count von Salza, and gives a vivid account of life and an insight to high society from the period of history following the Great Northern War.

Almost a century earlier, King Christian IV of Denmark and Norway had already claimed the Arctic Sea as a Danish and Norwegian sea area. This was mainly to impose taxes on foreign whalers, particularly the Dutch and English, insisting that they paid for the right to operate there. This right was in the form of King Christian's Permit. The belief that the area was Danish and Norwegian territory was partly due to a misjudgment on the part of the Danes, who believed, incorrectly, that Svalbard, including its territorial waters of the Arctic Ocean, was an extension of eastern Greenland and therefore belonged to the Danish and Norwegian tax area. The English whalers had begun to operate off the coast of Svalbard in 1611-12. The Danish Pechora Trading Company had been established in 1619 to operate trade in the Arctic via the Kola Peninsula.

As early as the 1580's, a certain number of Danish ships each year had traded with Russia and the Arctic sea areas. These trips started mainly from the Danish ports of Copenhagen, Elsinore and Flensburg. As a consequence, Danish seamen had become well accustomed to the Arctic coastline and waters. A proper exploration of the northern sea areas was uppermost in the mind of King Christian IV based on existing navigational charts and directions from Bergen to Greenland made by the Norsemen. He funded expeditions to Greenland 1605-1607, and Jens Munk's expedition to Nova Zemlya and the entrance to the Kara Sea in 1610. For Danish overseas commerce, the period between 1615 and 1620 was a particularly lively one. In

this 'Age of Mercantilism', King Christian IV supported his Copenhagen merchants. The Danish East India Company and Icelandic Trading Company were set up in 1616, along with a series of commercial whaling companies to operate in the northern Norwegian Sea in the vicinity of Spitsbergen.

Many lucrative trading possibilities were envisaged. Firstly, from the Siberian region there were; furs, timber, whale-meat, whale blubber, whale oils for soap, ivory, fish. Secondly, there was the dream that a North-East Passage might lead to a short-cut to California and Mexico, where the Spaniards had started to find gold and silver.

It was the early trade by the Pechora Company and the Kola trade that brought trading ships with exotic Arctic goods to the Danish sea-ports, and kindled the interest of many a lad that stood upon the quays.

In Amsterdam, Vitus Bering had had the good fortune to meet Vice Admiral Cruys, who had been born in Stavanger. Through this contact, Bering became employed by the Russian Czar, Peter the Great, who was in need of able seamen to man the war fleet being assembled in the docks of the new port of St. Petersburg (founded 1703). Young Vitus Jonassen Bering was given the rank of sub-lieutenant, and then captain, in the Russian navy during part of the Great Northern War (1700-1721) against the powerful King Karl XII's Sweden. At the end of this war, Russia emerged as the greatest power in the Baltic, and Sweden's imperialist dream had been crushed for ever. After being disappointed, that Peter the Great had not awarded him a higher rank, Vitus Bering returned to Viborg in Karelia. However, in 1724, he was recalled by Czar Peter the Great, and commissioned to lead the First Kamchatka Expedition (1725-1730) to find out whether the continents of Asia and America were joined at the northernmost part of the Pacific Ocean, and this in turn led to his greatest achievement the Great Northern Expedition, during which he died in 1741.

In the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries, it had been the Spaniards and the Portuguese who sought quicker routes to the riches of the Orient (Columbus 1492, Da Gama 1497, Cortes 1519, Magellan 1521). Marco Polo's amazing overland return journey from Italy to China (1271-1295) had obviously inspired them to seek sea-routes around the great land barrier of Africa, or across the vast expanses of the Atlantic, to reach India, Japan and China. Later, it would be the turn of the English navigator, Captain James Cook (1768-1779) to conquer the Pacific and its islands.

Yet it was Bering (1725-1741) who probed the northernmost reaches of the Pacific to discover that Asia and America were not connected. His achievements were all the more magnificent when one considers the climatic

and topographic difficulties. Furthermore, before the exploration of the coast could begin, it was necessary for him and his party to traverse the whole of Siberia and build the necessary ships on the East Siberian coast at Okhotsk and Kamchatka!

In the history of great naval discoverers, Vitus Bering's name shines with the same brilliance as those of Columbus, Magellan and Vasco de Gama, who sought quicker ways to the wealth of India and China, that before had only been reached overland by Asian traders or the great adventurer Marco Polo.

During the 17th century, the Dano-Norwegian merchant fleet built up its renown, challenging the Dutch and the English in Indian, South American and African sea areas. Successful whaling was also being undertaken in the Arctic Sea area around Greenland and Spitsbergen. The North-West Passage and North-East Passage expeditions of the early 17th century must be seen in the light of this wish to expand commercial links even further. The Dano-Norwegian involvement in the Age of Discovery and the accompanying fact-finding led eventually to the first professorship in geography at Copenhagen University in 1635.

In 1618, the first Dano-Norwegian expedition to India set sail via the Cape of Good Hope, under the command of Ove Gjedde, famous for the Galathea Expedition to East India. The English and the Dutch were determined to keep other European nations out of their lucrative trade area, but their success was limited. This also encouraged the Danes to seek a northern sea passage to the Far East.

The English were already well established in these Arctic areas of northern Russia (Archangel) and were developing networks along the coastline of West Siberia. This was partly as a result of the Muscovy Company, the first great English Joint-stock Corporation of foreign trade, established on 6th February 1555. Whaling and fur-trading were of paramount importance. By the early 18th century, expeditions were beginning to probe eastward as far as the mouth of the River Ob. As the traders moved further east to the source of skins and furs, there was the great danger that Russia would lose valuable customs duty. The English or the Dutch would simply by-pass Russia, and trade directly with Siberia. Furthermore, Siberia would possibly be colonized by a foreign power instead of Russia.

However, trading in the Arctic waters to the north of Russia and Siberia meant inevitable clashes with the Russian Czar. It was to minimize conflict that the Danish King Christian IV requested the Czar's permission. An earlier agreement, signed on 15th August 1562, had already given the Danish sea merchants the right to free trade 'in all the Czar's land'. It was King Christian's desire to reconfirm this right. King Christian IV had also been aware of the possibility of finding a North-East Passage,

and the Pechora Company was established on 20th April 1619. Trade was under the control of the King and the Copenhagen sea merchants. Merchants wishing to trade, had to apply for either King Christian IV's Permit or the Northern Lands Trading Permit. The Lord Mayor of Copenhagen, Mikkel Vibe, was one of the first to have established regular trade with Russia via Vardø and the Barents Sea in 1598.

Previously, research of the northern sea areas had been confined to seeking a North-West Passage between Greenland and Canada. The area was virtually unknown to Europeans. So far, no passage had been found, although initial attempts had been made by other European navigators (Cabot 1497, Frobisher 1577, Davis 1585, Hudson 1610, and Baffin 1616). King Christian IV had been anxious to get a Dano-Norwegian expedition under way, and the Dane, Jens Munk, had been commissioned to lead an expedition in 1619-20. Munk reached as far as Hudson Bay and remained over winter on the banks of the Churchill River. He could go no further, lost several men, and had turned back.

On 15th May 1619, King Christian IV of Denmark sent an envoy to the Czar of Russia requesting permission to undertake summer and winter trade, utilize or establish warehouses, and negotiate the customs duties to be paid. The pilot was a crew member with great experience from the Pechora district, Marmaduke Wilson, an Englishman who had remained over winter in Puztozersk in 1611-12. The Danish expedition clashed with the Russians. The bater wares were confiscated and the crew were arrested and taken to the main settlement of the region, Kolmogorsk. Marmaduke Wilson was sent to Moscow. He was then sent with a letter from the Czar to King Christian IV in Copenhagen. In his letter, the Czar forbade all sailing and trade in the Pechora district, and requested the Danish king to refrain from encouraging his merchants to operate in that area in the future.

Apparently, the English ambassador, John Merrick, who had previously acted as mediator between Russia and Sweden during a peace conference in 1617, had also tried to renew the privileges already enjoyed by the English Moscovy Trading Company. He had requested permission to explore the possibility of entering China from the back-door, by opening up a route along the River Ob through Siberia. The Czar rejected the proposal, in spite of his desire to maintain good relations with England. These traders had been very successful, and their bypassing of the Russian customs posts would have drastically reduced the income received by the Czar. That was the reason why he banned such extended trading requests in his reply to Christian IV in 1619, informing him that if he so dared, he would have to face the consequences. There would be no compensation for damages.

Christian IV reacted strongly, and in 1620, he sent a small fleet under the command of Jens Munk to punish the Russian customs men for the bad treatment they had been giving several Dano-Norwegian traders, as mentioned above, imprisoning them and confiscating their goods. The punitive mission, during which Jens Munk and his crew confiscated money and goods from the Russian customs officers, led to a diplomatic crisis. The Danish punitive raid of 1623 was remembered long after, and was even criticized strongly during Malte Juel's visit to Moscow in 1631.

During the 17th century (1592-1679), the Russians had extended their own eastern frontier, reaching the East Siberian coast and the Sea of Okhotsk by 1638. This pioneer work was achieved by marauding parties of Cossack fur-trappers. There were inevitable border conflicts with China. In 1689, the expansionist Chinese Emperor, Kang Hi, forced the Russians to concede the Amur Basin. (The Russians reconquered the territory in the mid-19th century.) However, Chinese imperialism never reached as far north as the Kamchatka Peninsula, and it has remained Russian since 1679. Yet, most peculiar of all, is the fact that the discovery of the North-East Passage and the accurate mapping of the north-east coast of Asia was largely due to the ingenious work of a man who ironically came from the far side of the Eurasian continent, the Dane, Vitus Bering!

At the time, knowledge on the northernmost part of the Pacific Ocean was negligible. Magellan's navigation along much of the American coast had indicated that it was a very large continent. However, the Northern Pacific and the Arctic Ocean were still unknown. Only two possible routes offered the possibility of exploring the area, either by land across Siberia, or by sea following the East Asian coast in a northerly direction.

The coastline from northern Japan to northern California was at this time unknown. Cartographers fantasized. The famous French cartographer, Guillame Delisle produced a map in 1714, which showed Yeso Land (Hokkaido) to be joined to Japan, and stretching eastward to Company Land, Da Gama Land, and then to America. In 1720, in a speech addressed to the French Academy, Delisle claimed that Yeso Land was part of the Asian continent and that Japan was a peninsula extending southward from it (fig. 1).

Russian knowledge, based on reports by the Cossacks, was in many ways better founded, but even so there were many questions that needed answering.

During the Great Northern War, Vitus Bering had distinguished himself and shown great seamanship, and this was to be remembered by Czar Peter the Great as he planned the First Kamchatka Expedition between 1721 and 1725.



Fig. 1. Extract from Guillaume Deslisle's map of the Northern Hemisphere (1714).

Czar Peter the Great had in fact already sent an expedition off to southern Kamchatka in 1719 under the command of the Poles, Ereinov and Feodor Lushkin. His fear of the English or the Dutch colonizing the estuaries of the great Russian and Siberian rivers that emptied out into the Arctic Ocean stimulated his desire to unfold the mysteries that lay beyond that region, and discover a North-East Passage to China and India. In many ways, the Russian Czar must be seen as having been fundamentally instrumental in the snowballing effect that opened up the northernmost sea area of the Pacific Ocean, during which Vitus Bering led the Great Northern Expedition. In many ways, Czar Peter the Great was an academic. He had travelled widely himself, or had been sent on educational visits to Paris, Amsterdam, London before becoming Czar. He was the first to insist on geodetic measurements.

The First Kamchatka Expedition

The First Kamchatka Expedition by Vitus Bering took place in the period 1725-30, by order of Czar Peter the Great, who signed the project on 23rd December 1724, only five weeks before his death. His instructions to Bering were as follows:

1. Build one or two sailing vessels at a suitable place on the coastline of the Kamchatka Peninsula.
2. Sail northwards along this coastline, which is likely to

be part of the American coast.

3. Determine at which point the coast joins America. Continue sailing until you come across a European settlement or ship and ask for the name of the particular stretch of coastline. Write the name down, land, and gather detailed information on the territory. Draw a map and return it to the Russian Court.

It proved to be a very great and expensive expedition (fig. 2). It took three years to reach the southern tip of the Kamchatka Peninsula from which 'The Gabriel' sailed on 13th July 1728, under the command of Vitus Bering, assisted by two naval officers, the Dane, Spangenberg, and the Russian, Chirikov (figs. 3 and 4). The crew was 44 strong, and there was a year's supply of food and water. Not long afterwards, on 16th August, they reached 67° 19' North, before turning back. The next summer, greatly hindered by the summer sea fog that prevails in the region, Bering tried unsuccessfully to locate the elusive west coast of America, and sailed back to Kamchatka. However, the shallowness of the sea area, driftwood, seabirds, and the stories that he had received from his contacts with the Cossacks and coastal natives, had convinced him that he had not been far away from his goal.

By 1st March 1730, Vitus Bering was back at the Court of the Czar in St. Petersburg. Peter the Great had already died a few years earlier in 1725. His mapping of the

Nye Tidender

Om
Lærde og curieuse Sager.



Den 27 April 1730.

Udi Aaret 1725 den 5 Febr. er Sæ-Capitain Bering efter Czar Petri I. Foranstaltning under en vidløftig Svite af Officerer, Geodesister, Saa og Matroser og Soldater afferdiget til Kamtschatka, Samme Capitain er nu kommen til Petersborg tilbage, og har været 6 Maaneder undervejs fra Kamtschatka.

Ingermanland.

coastline had been highly detailed and very impressive. He had displayed the scientific know-how to utilize his equipment to the full. By comparison, the Cossack maps of the time were mere sketches, lacking the accuracy made possible by astronomy. For example, Peter Gudinov's map of 1667 resembles one of Ptolemy's maps. The whole of northern Asia is represented as a rectangle, the best contemporary map was drawn by Strahlenberg in 1730, even though its longitudinal width was 40° too narrow.

Bering's map showed north-eastern Asia in its true dimensions in both longitude and latitude. The lines of latitude were determined using navigational instruments such as a Jacob's Staff or a Davie's Quadrant, and the angle of the sun. It was the lines of longitude that gave the biggest problem. Bering chose to place his Meridian (0°) through the town of Tobolsk in central Siberia. From this starting point, his measurements were very carefully taken. His observations also included the mentioning of two eclipses of the moon observed in 1728 and 1729 from

Fig. 2. Vitus Bering's letter of 17th April 1730, sent from Ingermanland to Copenhagen. (Source: 'Nye Tidende om Lærde og Curieuse Sager' no. 17). An announcement of a letter sent to Copenhagen by Captain Vitus Bering from Ingermanland states, that on the initiative of Czar Petri I, he had left for Kamchatka on 2nd February 1725, together with geodetists, sailors and soldiers. In the letter, Bering writes that, in the spring of 1727, he had a boat built at Ochotskay in order to cross the Pensikiche Ocean to Kamchatka, and yet another boat built on the banks of the Kamchatka River in the spring of 1728. His explicit instructions were to investigate the frontiers to the north-east of Asia to see whether this land, as some people thought, was connected to America, or whether a free sea passage existed. He confirms that he travelled on the said boat as far as 67° 19' N and discovered that a real North-east Passage did exist, which meant that any boat leaving the Lena River, when not hindered by sea-ice, might continue to Kamchatka and even further to China and the East Indies. Furthermore, he adds that he drew a route map of the area, from Tobolsky to Ochotskay, and sent it to St. Petersburg in 1728. Moreover, he drew yet another map of Kamchatka and its sea course which is depicted as starting at 51° N and ending at 67° N. As far as the west coast is concerned, the longitude is given as 85°, based on the meridian passing through Tobolsk, which Bering again records as 173° and 214°, based on the meridian passing through the Canadian Isles. Vitus Bering concludes his letter by adding that he finally returned to St. Petersburg, following a 6-month overland journey from Kamchatka.

the Kamchatka Peninsula. The accuracy of Bering's measurements was praised by Captain Cook, who sailed along the coastline fifty years later. It was he who named the sea and the strait after Vitus Bering.

On his return to St. Petersburg, Bering was met with much scepticism, particularly from Joseph Nicolas Deslisle, Professor of Astronomy at Czar Peter the Great's new Imperial Science Academy. He resented any criticism of his brother Guillaume's work. In spite of the fact that his trusting sponsor, Peter the Great had been dead for five years, Bering rode the storm. Slowly, cleverly, and fired by a strong determination, he began to win support for a new expedition.

The Second Kamchatka Expedition

The Second Kamchatka Expedition, better known as the Great Northern Expedition, was one of the greatest and most expensive expeditions that the world had ever seen. It was to last more than ten years, from 1733 till 1743, and contained the following three programmes:

1. Mapping the coastline of northern Asia.
2. Mapping the sea area as far as Japan.
3. Exploring the Pacific Ocean east of the Kamchatka Peninsula to locate Gama Land, Company Land and America.

Among the members of the expedition were two other

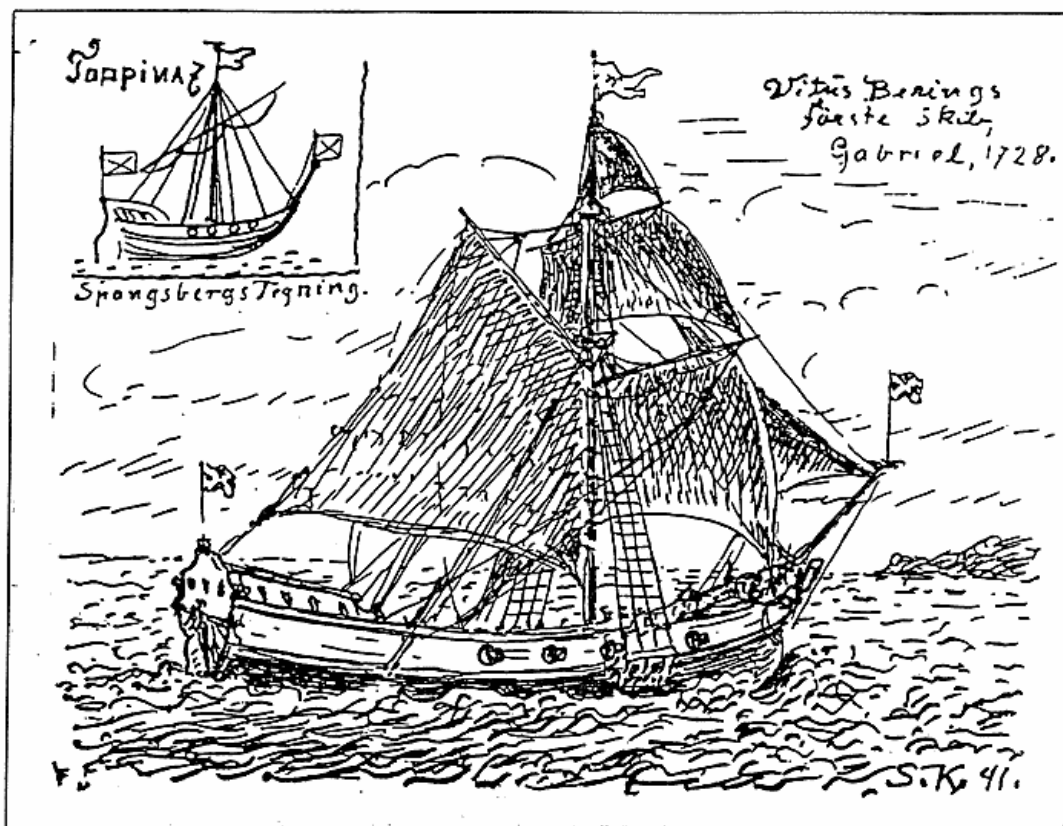


Fig. 3. 'The Gabriel', 1827, as drawn by Martin Spangsbjerg.

Danes, Martin Spangsbjerg and Peter Lassenius. The latter died of scurvy during an exploration of the Arctic coastline east of the Lena estuary. Martin Spangsbjerg distinguished himself by discovering that there was no land connection between the Asian continent and Japan during his mapping of the Kuril Island Chain. Furthermore, he disclaimed the existence of Gama Land as pure fiction.

Bering himself was required to summon all his physical energy and powers of judgement as he was responsible for the expedition once it had passed east of the Ural Mountains. Patience was required to deal with local officials, in particular the somewhat intransigent Governor of Okhotsk, Gregori Skornjakof Pisarev. Furthermore, his own officers had to be consulted on matters concerning the expedition's progress. There were often strong differences of opinion between the seamen and scientists. The former were responsible for mapping the coastline and ensuring that supplies would stretch long enough, as well as keeping an eye out on the weather and probable seasonal differences in the climate. Among the scientists was the gifted German biologist, Steller, and the youngest of the Delisle brothers, Croyère, who was also employed as a

professor at the Imperial Science Academy at St. Petersburg. He was present as a cartographer, of course! It had always been Peter the Great's intention to raise Russia's status as a center of scientific research and culture. Therefore, he had established his Imperial Science Academy and availed himself of many gifted scientists from other European countries. Some of these had been chosen to take part in the Great Northern Expedition.

It took eight long years to transport the supplies, equipment and team across the vast Asian continent, as the expedition painstakingly mapped the Arctic Ocean coast. They covered a total distance of 7,000 km from St. Petersburg to Avacha Cove on the eastern side of the Kamchatka Peninsula, where they founded the port of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky (53° N).

On 4th June 1741, Bering on his ship the 'St. Peter', and Chirikov on the 'St. Paul', set sail from Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky in a south-easterly direction in order to find Gama Land. Eight days later, they had reached 46° N without coming in sight of any land. The course was altered to north-east. A week later, the two ships lost sight of each other because of fog (fig. 5).

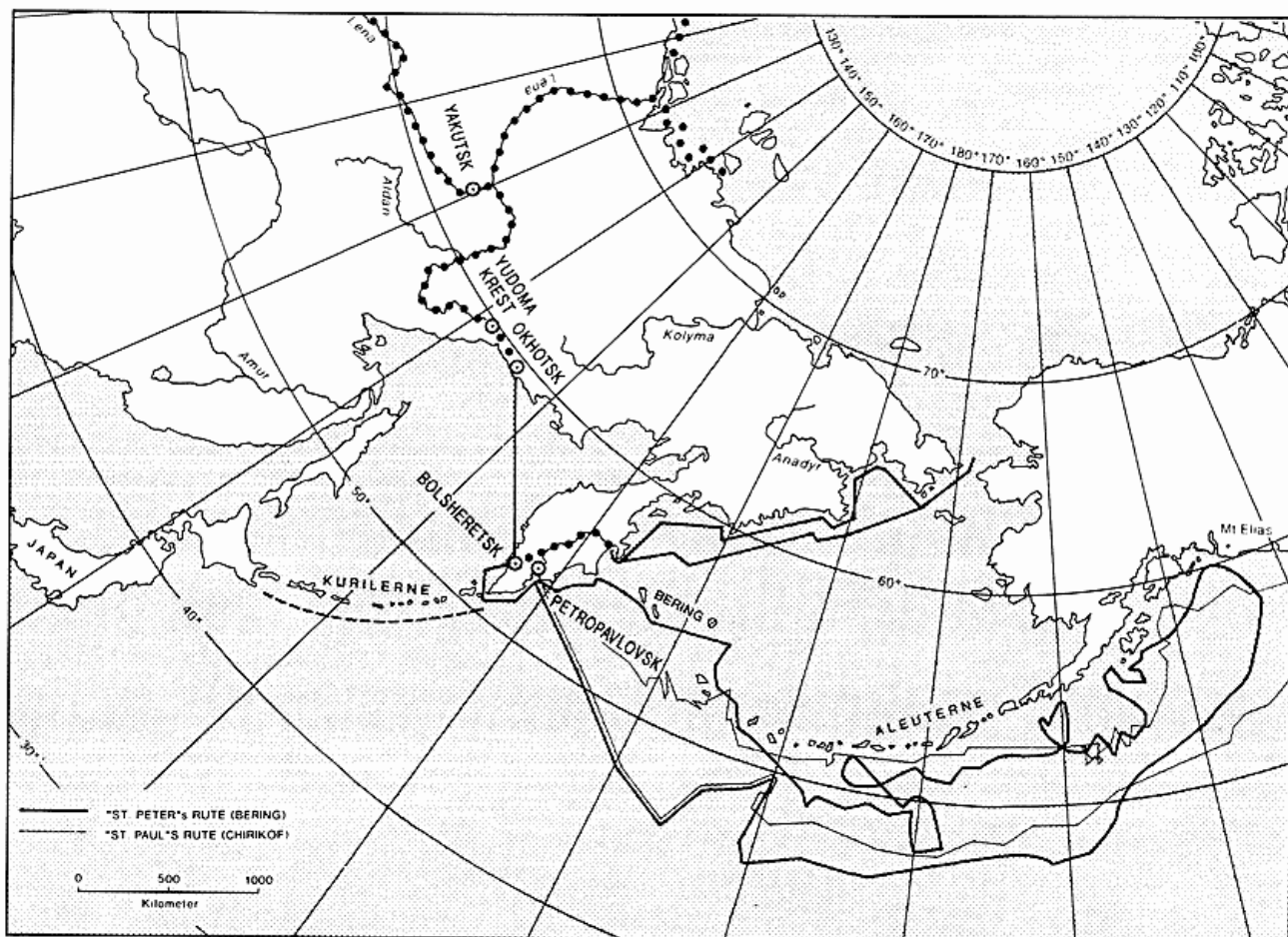


Fig. 4. The sea routes from Avacha Bay (Petrapavlovsk). The first shows the sea route of the First Kamchatka Expedition made by Vitus Bering on 'The Gabriel' as far as the Bering Straits. The second shows two sea routes of the Second Kamchatka Expedi-

tion (The Great Northern Expedition) 1. The route made by Captain Vitus Bering on 'St. Peter' 2. The route made by Captain Chirikov on 'St. Paul'. The former ship was wrecked on Bering Island and the latter in Petropavlovsk.

Chirikov continued east north-east, and more than three weeks later, on 15th July 1741, he reached the Alexander archipelago (Juneau, Alaska). Chirikov lost 15 men. The Indian natives were hostile and the life-boats sank in the breakers near to the shore, and several crew members drowned. As he had no fresh water left on board, Chirikov decided to turn back. On his return to Petropavlovsk in October 1741, 21 of his crew had died.

Having failed to find Chirikov, Bering sailed south-eastward until 25th June 1741, reaching $45^{\circ} 40' N$. He confirmed that Gama Land did not exist. Thereafter, he sailed east north-east, arriving on 17th July within sight of an impressive volcano on the Alaskan mainland just east of the current-day town of Anchorage. They named the volcano St. Elias, and the mountain range to which it

belongs, the St. Elias Mountains. The biologist, Steller was put ashore for ten hours on Kayak Island to make observations. (The sea-cow species which Bering's crew discovered on Bering Island some months later, was named after him - 'The Steller Sea-cow' - now extinct). However, Steller was not given enough time to gather edible plants that may have saved the crew at a later stage from scurvy. The return journey, following the Aleutian Islands westward, was hampered by storms and scurvy. Under the false impression that they had reached the Kamchatka coast, it was decided to put ashore on the first island they saw. Bering's ship, the 'St. Peter', was finally destroyed in storms as it lay at anchor in a coastal lagoon. Weary and tired, the crew knew that they would have to remain over winter and, if possible, build a new ship the

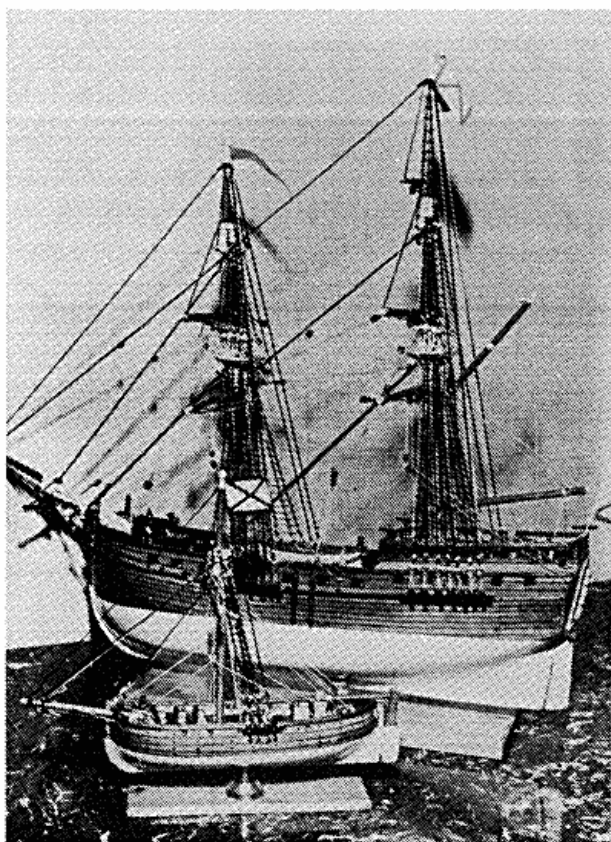


Fig. 5. Bering's ship, 'St. Peter'. A reconstruction by A.D. Jensen. Shown in miniature, is the hollowed-out life-boat which Sv. Waxell, who was Bering's Second in Command, managed to construct out of the sea wreck timbers so that the survivors could continue their voyage from Bering Island to Petropavlovsk, where they arrived in 1742.

next spring, Bering, suffering from scurvy and related illnesses, died on 8th December 1741. The following spring, the survivors managed to sail home to Avacha Bay. Out of Bering's crew of 76 men, 30 had died.

Vitus Bering's Achievements

Bering was an efficient leader. He managed to continue his administrative role even when he was dying at his winter camp on Bering Island. Steller, who was very much the opposite in character, praised Bering's commitment, and his treatment of the men under his command. Steller's diary records Bering's calmness and rational behavior on discovering America, and his resilience in times of adversity and illness.

Without doubt, Vitus Bering deserves 'immortality' as a tribute to his excellent navigator skills and his scientific and cultural achievements. Furthermore, this rich heri-

tage belongs to Russia just as much as to Denmark. To Russia, Bering represents one of the most important pioneers who opened up its far eastern territory which, by the end of the 18th century, included Alaska. To Denmark, Bering is a naval hero and discoverer, being a fine example of seamanship, bravery, cleverness, trustworthiness and international diplomacy.

Inspired by Vitus Bering, another great Danish Arctic explorer, Knud Rasmussen, undertook an expedition on dog-sleighs, earlier this century, from Thule to Alaska and then on to Cape Dezhnev in East Siberia. This was Rasmussen's fifth Thule expedition. Already following his first Thule expedition, Rasmussen indirectly referred to Bering when he wrote, 'Years will come and go. New ages will dawn. Yet, as long as human beings are born and die, this saga, begun among these desolate stony wastes, will continue to talk to us, filling us with wonder, evoking the majesty and grandeur that characterizes these vast, awe-inspiring, sombre northern reaches.'

In 1930, Knud Rasmussen made a speech, at the annual Danish-American Reunion at Rebild in Jutland, where he underlined the importance of Denmark's duty to continually extol the name of Vitus Bering. A select committee was appointed later that year by the Prince Regent, Frederik (later King Frederik IX) who presided over the Royal Danish Geographical Society. However, the untimely death of Knud Rasmussen, the proponent of the idea, in 1933, delayed the decision-making process.

In 1941, international acclaim in connection with the 200th anniversary of Vitus Bering's death was unfortunately much muted due to the Second World War. All the same, a fitting memorial service was held in the Danish town of Horsens, Bering's birth-place, on 19th December 1941. To mark the anniversary, the Vitus Bering Memorial Foundation was set up, whose noblest aim was to award the 'Order of Vitus Bering' to individuals who would accomplish great feats in the name of geographical science. Those who have so far been honored include; Professor N. E. Nørlund, Professor Niels Nielsen, Professor Torsten Hägerstrand, Professor Sigurdur Thorarinson, Professor Valter Schytt, Vice Admiral A. H. Vedel and Vice Admiral S. Thostrup. The intention of creating a park in Horsens as a tribute to the great man was also voiced, although it was not realized until 1957, when the Russians presented the town with two of Bering's own cannons from the shipwrecked 'St. Peter', on Bering Island. The Vitus Bering monument that decorates the park displays the cannons.

Generally speaking, it can be said that Bering suffered by being either dismissed by sceptics or harassed by over-optimistic task-masters. His accurate, highly-detailed maps and reports were distrusted by some, while others simply tried to overburden him with responsibilities. As

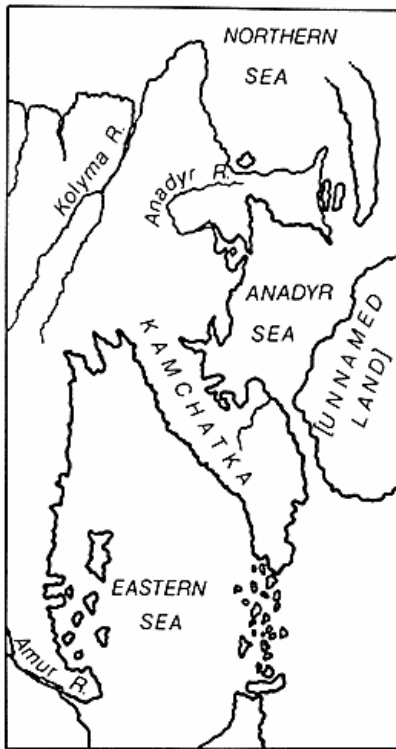


Fig. 6. Homann's map of Kamchatka from 1725.

with all great men, opinions of him have ranged from great admiration (Captain James Cook) to bitter contempt (Dall). The latter, an American historian, described Bering as a being timid, indecisive and indolent.

There is no question of doubt, that Vitus Bering belongs to the worlds greatest discoverer, and his cartographic genius can never be denied. Yet, discussions still rage as to the greatness of his achievements. The most recent criticism of Bering's achievements is to be found in the book written by the American historian, Raymond H. Fisher in 1977, entitled 'Bering's Voyages, Whither and Why'. Fisher interprets Czar Peter the Great's instruction to Bering in 1724, 'to sail along the land which goes to the north', as indicating the Czar's wish to find America, more than a desire to see whether Asia and America were physically joined.

Fisher's book tends to be rather negative about Bering's achievements. There is no appraisal of what Bering produced. Instead it seems as if Fisher wishes to imply that Bering had misinterpreted the Czar's instructions to go in search of the unknown lands to the east, such as Bolshoya Zemlya, on Homann's map. Fisher's criticism is supported by the young Soviet researchers, Polevoi and Prokovskii. This is in total disregard of Captain Cook's records or the traditional description of Czar Peter the Great's

instructions to Vitus Bering as recorded by Nartov and interpreted by L. S. Berg. Fisher insists on the importance of finding the map given to Bering by Admiral Apraxin in 1724 by order of the Czar. He claims that it was probably Homann's map (fig.6), in which case Bering ought to have sailed east and followed the unknown land, Bolshaya Zemlya's coast, in order to discover where it joined North America.

It is only natural to wonder about the many aspects implied in Czar Peter the Great's instructions to Vitus Bering in 1724. Many questions were to be answered. Was there a North-East Passage, dubbed the Anian Strait at that time? Were Asia and America connected? What unknown lands lay to the east of the Kamchatka Peninsula, Company Land? Da Gama Land? How were the sea routes southward to Japan and Amur Land (China)?

However, Fisher's criticism does not seem to be reasonable. Furthermore, Bering's own map-work was of excellent quality. He was unlikely to have misinterpreted the Czar's wishes, nor received the wrong map. A Danish reply standing up for Bering points to reports on the history of the Pechora Trading Company. One might suggest that critics would do well to heed the words and wisdom of the Danish scientist and poet, Piet Hein in the following grook:

*Problems worthy of attack,
Show their worth by hitting back.
As things so very often are,
Intelligence will not go far.
So be glad you've got more sense,
Than you have intelligence.*

Long before Bering's death, in June 1646, the Russian cossack, Semen Deshnev, sailed in 7 skin boats, 'kochi', along the Arctic Ocean coast eastward from the mouth of the Kolyma River to the mouth of the Anadyr River, passing around the most northeastern cape of Asia on the Chukot Peninsula. It is highly likely that Bering had been informed of this and similar Cossack journeys that had taken place along the same coast in earlier times. These journeys, such as that of the Kosyrevsky expedition, may well have been reported to him by the administrator Voevodens at Yakutsk on the Lena River on his very first expedition to Kamchatka.

Else Vedel, in her book on Vitus Bering, adds that Vitus Bering would most certainly have conversed with Ignatius, who was Kosyrevsky's son, and who served as a monk at Yakutsk monastery. Else Vedel's book represents a lyrical account of Vitus Bering's expeditions. As preliminary reading, Josef Petersen's 'Søfareren Vitus Bering' (Seafarer, Vitus Bering) from 1941, or P. Lauridsen's 'Vitus Bering - De Russiske Opdagelsesrejser fra 1725-43'

(Vitus Bering - The Russian Expeditions of 1725-43) from 1885, can be fully recommended.

The historian Efimov Lebedev is rather of the opinion that it was political and economic reasons that motivated the Czar rather than geographical and scientific ones. The Czar was more inclined to be interested in extending trade with the Far East and defending the eastern side of his empire, or indeed extending it to America, as the beneficial result of the discovery of any North-East Passage. This of course cannot be denied. The tense situation existing between the Russian Czars and the likes of King Christian IV of Denmark would have made this account very plausible.

The famous adventurer, Martin Spangsborg, who accompanied Bering on the Great Northern Expedition, originated from the town of Esbjerg, on the west coast of Jutland. In memory, it would be in order to cite the following Danish ode etched on a monument in the Royal Memorial Park, of the Alheden Nature Reserve near Karup in Jutland.

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Klit og sand, samt marsk og geest,
Gammel muld og nybrudt hede,
Det er Vesterboens vrede.*

*Du ser mod vest - du ser mod øst,
Du har kun hav for øje,
Og ulke fødes på den kyst,
Og det er dem en hjertens lyst
At vove deres trøje.*

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