



ASPECTS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON SVALBARD

PREFACE

At the „Conference on Svalbard Archaeology” held in Tromsø on 7-9 March 1989 I presented some thoughts and conclusions concerning theoretical and practical aspects of the research being carried out by archaeologists from several countries in the high arctic archipelago of Svalbard (Spitsbergen — Fig. 1). The concepts presented there developed from the article concerning the aims and strategy of the archaeological project „Russian hunting stations on Svalbard” (Jasinski 1990 a).

Much time has passed since this conference, which marked a breakthrough in the way archaeological research on Svalbard is organized. The new data acquired during the succeeding excavation seasons has called for a substantial extension of the concepts. Moreover, several of the papers presented at the conference have been published by *Acta Borealia* in the mean time. These developments make it possible to begin critical discussion of the scientific research being carried out in the archipelago.

INTRODUCTION

Archaeologists not directly connected with Svalbard research may find some aspects of the topic and discussion at the conference difficult to understand. The conference was concerned with the far too extensive „consumption of the monuments of the past” (i.e. archaeological sites which are endangered by the growing archaeological activity — cf. Jørgensen and Bertelsen 1989); the conflict, or rather lack of understanding, between the Norwegian administration and archaeological expeditions coming to Svalbard from various countries; conflicts between these expeditions; the problem of evaluating methods (existence of good and better methodological schools); and the lack of generally available publications about fieldwork results, making access to empirical data impossible.

All this could mean that Svalbard archaeology found itself in the specific situation where research problems are linked to other questions which are not directly connected with the research goals, or where non-research problems play a more important role than on the continent. Analysis of at least some of these

problems may, in my view, contribute to a better understanding of the factors creating the situation itself. It should also help to find a solution to the problems. I will also discuss aspects connected with the objectives of the archaeological research on Svalbard. The simple questions, *what is Svalbard archaeology and what is its position in cultural research*, should be answered.

The cultural changes that have taken place on Svalbard are a result of both natural environmental and culturo-political factors (cf. Jasinski 1990 a: 1-2). In post-Medieval time, groups of people originating further south in Europe had to deal with the High Arctic conditions of Svalbard on an everyday basis and were therefore frequently balancing on the edge of their ability to adapt. The demands of the natural environment in this region could only be partially met by the processes of cultural change. The situation therefore developed where it was possible to organize expedition-like enterprises aimed at exploiting the natural resources (mainly the fauna). These lasted from a single summer season to, in some cases, a few years, but did not amount to permanent colonisation of the archipelago. Hence, only certain aspects of social practice found in the homelands were present on Svalbard, and those which were present were often determined by the requirements for achieving the goals of the expedition — surviving, hunting and returning to the homeland with acquired goods. Another factor is the lack, at least in historical times, of a native population and the consequent lack of indigenous cultural elements. Yet another is that Svalbard, prior to the 1920's, did not belong to a specific country; it was a No Man's Land (Conway 1906), open and accessible to people from any nation provided they had the means to survive and be active in the area. As a result, *a sui generis* cultural mosaic emerged in Svalbard, displaying features not observed elsewhere in Europe.

In view of what has been said above, the history of the archipelago identified so far suggests random events created by various groups in different periods rather than the continuous process of cultural change that is typical of permanently occupied areas.

The natural resources of this arctic archipelago have been of interest to people from further south in Europe for a long time. Written sources show that, considering the latitude, there was relatively intensive exploitation of these resources in the 17-19th centuries in the form of western European whaling (Fig. 2) and Russian hunting (Fig. 3). Some authors have suggested that cultural development started in the archipelago much earlier (Jasinski 1988 references therein).

ARCHAEOLOGY OF SVALBARD — STATE OF RESEARCH

In many ways, the present state of the research itself reflects the main interests of research workers engaged in Svalbard archaeology.

Most research concerning Svalbard is concentrated around surveying and archaeological exploration of sites connected with two phases of its history, western European whaling and Russian hunting. The two exceptions are Scandinavian and Soviet expeditions in 1955 and 1978 which searched for traces of Stone Age settlement and Medieval activity. Today, archaeology in Svalbard is concerned with studying the archaeology of historical sites connected with hunting activity in the archipelago.

Archaeological research in the archipelago is already 120 years old. It may be subdivided into three main periods:

PERIOD I — 1861-1913. As has often been the case in archaeology, eminent representatives of other disciplines carried out amateur research. Their results, because of the non-professional methods used, are of rather limited value today. During this period, several Russian hunting stations were investigated in various parts of Svalbard (e.g. De Geer's work in Adventbukta and Ekmanfjord, Gyllenskold's on Depotøya, and Nordberg's in Recherchefjord). Gyllenskold also studied the graves from the whaling period in Virgohamn.

PERIOD II — 1955-1968. The first professional archaeological research on Svalbard. There were also amateur excavations, but these were characterised by the use of much better methods. Research in this period was initiated by the joint Scandinavian expedition under the direction of Hans Christiansson and Povl Simonsen (Simonsen 1957). The main goal of this expedition, apart from searching for Stone Age sites, as mentioned above, was the exploration of a large Russian hunting station in Russekeila in Isfjord. The site was frequently referred to as the ruins of „Starostin's house”.

In 1958, a Norwegian-Finnish expedition led by Tegengren excavated a site in Midthuken, Bellsund. In 1960, a Norwegian-Finnish expedition explored the remains of the Russian station in Trygghamna (Tegengren 1962), and the Norwegian-Swedish expedition directed by Christiansson continued research in Russekeila (Christiansson 1970). In 1968, Dalland conducted amateur excavation of a Russian station at Kapp Lee on Edgeøya (Dalland 1969). The same year, Svein Molaug excavated a blubber oven and made an underwater survey in Sorgfjord (Molaug 1968).

PERIOD III — 1978 to the present day. This period was initiated by the expedition from the Institute of Archaeology at the USSR Academy of Sciences led by Vadim F. Starkov which excavated a site named Russekeila 2. The group has continued intensive research on Svalbard since then, including mapping and excavation of many sites connected with Russian hunting activities (Starkov 1989).

In 1979, a multidisciplinary project named „Smeerenburg”, under the leadership of Louwrens Hacquebord, started research on Dutch whaling in Svalbard. A whaling station at Smeerenburg was excavated in the 1979-81 seasons (Hacquebord 1981, 1984).

In 1980, a Polish expedition from the Jagiellonian University in Krakow started research in the Hornsund district, excavating whaling and Russian hunting stations (Chochorowski 1989). In 1984, a Danish-Norwegian expedition led by Svend E. Albrethsen (1986) excavated the graves of whalers on Danskøya and an expedition from the University of Tromsø directed by Roger Jørgensen carried out a rescue excavation of a Russian house in Gipsvika (Jørgensen 1985). The University of Tromsø (Kulturvernet for Svalbard og Jan Mayen) has been excavating in Svalbard every year since 1984. In the period 1987-1990, this work has been extended by the archaeological project „Russian hunting stations on Svalbard” directed by the author of this paper and funded by NAVF, RHF and Tromsø University. The project was carried on in the co-operation with Polish archaeologists from the Jagiellonian University, Krakow. Until 1990, the work partly involved extensive surveying of southeastern Svalbard and the western coast of Edgeøya to locate and map sites. Three Pomor hunting stations in the Hornsund district were also excavated (Jasinski 1988, 1990b, Chochorowski and Jasinski 1988a, b, 1990).

In 1991, a joint Polish-Norwegian-Russian geomorphological/archaeological expedition initiated research in the Bellsund area under the leadership of Kazimierz Pękala (Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin), Marek E. Jasinski (University of Trondheim) and Vadim F. Starkov (Russian Academy of Science, Moscow). The research is concentrated around geomorphological processes and their influence on archaeological sites in the area.

This short review of the state of research allows us to draw the following conclusions:

1. Research in Svalbard run by expeditions from various countries concentrates almost exclusively on studying the past activities of their own country.

2. Norwegian expeditions have a broader scope of interest. The reason for this is not only purely scientific, but also has to do with Norwegian administrative sovereignty over the archipelago and a consequent obligation to protect all cultural monuments. However, no research on the earliest phase of Norwegian hunting activity in the archipelago is taking place, even though this would undoubtedly provide extremely valuable comparative material.

3. The activity of archaeologists from countries which did not participate in past activities in the archipelago also shows some broader research perspectives. This results partly from a lack of national priorities and partly from the field methods being concentrated around the study of all cultural phenomena in a specific, delimited area.

4. So far, no comparative study has been made considering the specific cultural phenomena as elements of the complex history of Svalbard rather than merely episodic, isolated elements of the history of the continental country concerned.

One of the main topics of the „Svalbard Archaeology” conference was the problem of overconsumption of archaeological sites in the archipelago. Some participants asked when the last site would be excavated. They believed that the number of sites on Svalbard is rather limited, whereas the number of archaeological expeditions has been growing. In such a situation, most if not all the sites would be fully excavated in a couple of decades if the present rate of excavation continued (Jørgensen and Berthelsen 1989:7), even if surveying discovered new sites each season. Starkov (1989:46) represents contrary opinion, maintaining that as archaeological studies proceed, the number of known sites increases instead of decreases, and it seems that even in the remote future the historical monuments of Svalbard are not in danger of completely disappearing.

This illustrates the contradiction between the scientific interests of archaeologists and the duties of the Norwegian administration which is obliged to protect the historical monuments in the archipelago. I will try to show that this contradiction is artificial.

In the case of archaeological studies, the line joining us with the man of the past (the object of our research) is what is generally referred to as an archaeological site or archaeological object, a cultural monument. The main question to be answered here is whether monuments exist for themselves, independently of our consideration. In my opinion, the main creative factor is our accumulated knowledge of the past which transforms these features into new categories. A wooden post under the surface is itself only a wooden post. It is our knowledge that enables it to be interpreted as the remains of a Russian Orthodox cross. The moment of interpretation places this post in the category of a cultural monument which, for the archaeologist, is both a source of data and an object to be protected. An object must have a cultural context if it is to become a monument and a source of information for the archaeologist. At the same time, information is needed to interpret the object and include it in the category of cultural monuments. There is only one way out of this logical loop: research.

Accumulation of knowledge leads to the situation where interpretation of the next object is based on information gleaned while investigating the previous one in the same category. In this way, we can avoid escalating archaeological excavation. The quicker we reach the stage of understanding the historical process that respects the temporary social need for information, the more sites will (for a period of time) „escape” archaeological investigation. This is the only way of combining scientific needs and the duty to preserve the monuments.

This problem is connected with another question. What process is used when archaeological objects are being investigated? Many archaeologists, and others, maintain that an archaeological excavation is a „controlled catastrophe” leading

to the destruction of a site (cf. for example, Jørgensen and Bertelsen 1989:7). Based on personal experience, I cannot agree with such an opinion. The process of archaeological investigation is not devastative, but only causes a sort of temporary disintegration into single elements. The aim of this disintegration is to re-integrate the elements into new values. The resulting new layer is nothing less than the informative system where all the elements are again integrated by the intellectual work of the researcher. The original (primary) layer is recorded in the detailed documentation of the site. The surface of the site is reconstructed and again becomes informative to visitors, tourists, etc. The cultural layers beneath the surface cannot be reconstructed, but there is no need for them because we have the records (documentation), finds and artifacts. These will allow new generations of researchers to conduct their own analyses and write new syntheses (cf. the opposite view of Jørgensen and Berthelsen (1989:7).

Another problem exists, namely the hope that new and better methods will develop in the future; as many sites as possible should therefore escape our spades and remain at the disposal of future generations of archaeologists who will use these miraculous methods. This hope sounds rather lyrical to me, and I can say no more than agree with Cernosvitov (1989:56) who states that:

„...new methods are developed only in the course of the studies themselves and do not spring to life on their own as a result of some passive waiting for 'divine enlightenment' to visit the heads of idle archaeologists”.

I cannot, however, agree completely with Cernosvitov's statement that every site studied should be totally excavated.

Cernosvitov continues:

„We shall not obtain any whole historical picture of a certain community, i. e. of a *socium*, by studding only one of its elements... The methodological thesis still popular among archaeologists that the study of a drop of water can provide us with an idea about all the properties of the ocean has become haplessly obsolete today. In the era of the widest development of systematic approach as the methodological principle it is absolutely clear that the whole is much more than the sum total of its parts. Consequently, the correct understanding of the functioning of a system is only possible if all of its structure and not only its separate elements have been studied”.

From the viewpoint of a systematic approach, this opinion cannot be refuted. We cannot, however, mix methodology with being methodic — i. e. excavation strategy. Part of a system cannot be compared directly with part of an archaeological site. Studying a site does not automatically mean studying a system. A whole site totally excavated is usually only an element of a system anyway. If Cernosvitov's logic were to be followed, archaeologists would never be able to say anything about a social reality within a system or an element of a system before finishing the excavation of all sites. And there is always something more to dig.

Another view is presented by Albrethsen in the part of his paper concerned with protection of sites on Svalbard an excavation strategy in the future (1989: 49-50). Albrethsen writes:

„The amounts of cultural sites from the whaling period as well as from other periods in the short history of Svalbard is very limited... In my opinion the archaeological research efforts for many years to come will have to concentrate as much as possible on cultural remains which are threatened.

Such a strategy may, of course, seem restrictive to people working on certain projects, but since it is supposed that it is in the interest of all the scholars involved to get as much information as possible from the cultural remains at hand, such a strategy — to my mind — is the only responsible one. The remains which are not threatened should be protected and should consequently not be the subject of archaeological excavation...

...It should not, however, be forgotten in this connection that many of the most threatened sites make out a body of a very high scientific value... I may therefore ask — is it at all to be accepted that all this cultural heritage is lost just because we would rather promote our own personal research projects?..

Firstly, it must be stressed that whether there is a limited number of archaeological sites on Svalbard is a somewhat academic question. The limit exists only artificially and we will never be able to state the number of sites in the archipelago. It is even impossible to agree a priori with the conclusion that because of geographical location, human activity on Svalbard was limited in every way. The very nature of human behaviour is quite complicated and is not only dependent upon the environment.

Secondly, it is widely held that because of the environment there are only three categories of archaeological sites on Svalbard — shelters, production ovens and graves. However, everybody (i. e. Svalbard archaeologists) knows of the existence of Russian Orthodox crosses, remains of which have been recorded all over the islands. If we agree that they are complex in nature, being both functional and symbolical, it is clear that they represent another category — related to the ideological sphere of populations present on Svalbard in the past. Such categories of sites do not necessarily have to be close to the shore, which is so far the only zone covered by archaeological surveys in the archipelago. It is also possible that other categories of sites exist on Svalbard which archaeologists simply do not register because of the inconvenient epistemological apparatus at their disposal — *sites which we simply do not know are sites at all*.

All these arguments lead, in my opinion, to the conclusion that there is no way of proving the validity of the assertion that the number of archaeological sites on Svalbard is limited. We can only state that such a mathematical measurement simply does not exist, and that in Svalbard, as in any other area of the world, the numbers are impossible to establish.

Thirdly, there is the problem concerning the choice of sites for excavations. In a way, any archaeologist must agree with the claim that all sites which are

threatened deserve investigation. Unfortunately, our desires cannot be realised because of lack of available manpower, financial means, etc. I am, however, absolutely, convinced that limiting research strictly to rescue excavations does not solve the problem. Firstly, even then there will be too few people to investigate every site of this kind. Secondly, it would create situations where our research goals depend upon other criteria than epistemological ones. The data collected in this way would be quite accidental, and the main result of such a policy would be that more and more artifacts would be obtained without any plan — just one step away from archaeology becoming just a tool to fill museum storerooms. It seems to me that the way to go is to be more flexible than Albrethsen and evaluate every factor before choosing sites for excavation.

METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

As mentioned above, Svalbard has never had a native population (at least in historical times). Research practice here lacks elements which archaeologists are used to dealing with, i. e. we cannot study the development of „Svalbard culture” in the long-term perspective, nor can we put the results of our studies directly into the continuous process of the historical development of the region. Such a process simply does not exist. The history of the archipelago (according to the present level of research) is a collection of episodes from different periods, created by representatives of different foreign cultures, rather than a process of cultural development. Thus, what is still missing in our research is the inclusion of Svalbard in comparative studies with a circumpolar perspective, both in relation to particular aspects of the utilisation of natural resources (i.e. whaling, hunting, trapping, etc.), and in general — the position of the archipelago in the cultural tissue of the Arctic. This task seems so uncomplicated when one is thinking or even reading about it (cf. Storå 1989: 10), but it is still awaiting serious treatment.

The length of stay and the goals of different groups were seriously limited by the ability of the members to adapt to living conditions in the Arctic. This makes the definition of the research objectives rather complicated. An archaeologist carrying out research in Svalbard and attempting to go beyond the basic investigative and descriptive stages of his work faces a complex of problems already when he is defining the goal of his research. We should ask whether the aim of our research is to study a new cultural element or the adaptation of western European or northern Russian culture to arctic conditions. The short duration of Svalbard expeditions must have limited the range and dynamics of the formal changes which could take place within various cultural elements. However, the specific character of the natural environment, the organisation of people into groups with specific goals, and the way people existed in the

archipelago introduced new dimensions. It is especially interesting to study the impact of these new elements on the areas from which the people came. However, to do this it would be necessary to define the role which arctic hunting played within the social practice of these regions of Europe.

Western European whaling in the Svalbard region developed as a response to the market situation. The general prosperity and demand for animal oil stimulated the dynamic development of whaling. The choice of waters depended mostly on ecological factors. The whales were hunted where they were sufficiently numerous to support an effective production cycle. The whaling stations studied on Svalbard are from the period when whales were abundant near the coasts and in the fiords of Spitsbergen. When whales disappeared from Svalbard, the islands were no longer of interest to 17th century western Europe; it was not Svalbard itself which was the aim of the whaling expeditions.

Infrequent attempts to winter on Svalbard were not planned beforehand or caused by the need to protect production equipment until the next whaling season. Such experiments were quickly abandoned (Conway 1906). The entire period of western European whaling on Svalbard (when huts, ovens and other constructions for oil production were built) did not even last one century. And the next period, when whales were hunted on the open sea and blubber was processed at home or on board ship, left no remains that are attainable by the archaeologist. It would, therefore, seem that archaeological research on whaling will be limited to the technical organisation of particular groups. There will be very little opportunity for looking into socio-symbolic problems and aspects of acculturation.

The biological cycle of the whales caused the seasonality of hunting, because this was related to the time when the whales arrived at, and left, Svalbard. The whalers only came in summer. Therefore, adapting to life under arctic conditions was not a fundamentally important factor. The number of graves found near whaling stations on Svalbard (Hacquebord 1984 a, Albrethsen 1986, Chochorowski 1989 b) suggests that developing safe working methods was not a task that interested the organisers of expeditions. This was probably connected with easy access to manpower, but this aspect of Svalbard whaling can only be traced in connection with the socio-economic situation in the homeland and requires data from the continent. Most deaths were caused by accidents while working (the destruction of boats used when harpooning whales), because the relatively mild summer climate of Spitsbergen could not pose a direct danger unless scurvy was a kind of professional disease among whalers and they were already attacked by it when they came to Svalbard. This is only one simple example of the link that is necessary between studies on Svalbard and on the continent, without which our knowledge has no opportunity of increasing significantly.

The situation is more complicated when Russian hunting is considered. Firstly, Arctic hunting had played a very significant role in the economy of

northern Russia for centuries, not only on the level of state and merchant markets, but also because the average peasant family was often totally dependent upon this extra „energy inflow”. Consequently, Svalbard hunting become more of an everyday element in the life of the greater part of the population of northern Russia. These expedition-like enterprises demanded a great and complex effort, which in turn had to find its expression in the social practice of the region.

Because of ice conditions in the White Sea, Pomor hunters were unable to leave for Svalbard in early spring. They therefore had a very short period at their disposal on the hunting grounds if they wanted to get back to Pomorie in the autumn (Fig. 4). That is why many of their expeditions included wintering in their plans. Wintering in the High Arctic increases the demands made by the natural environment and social interaction. In addition to technical aspects regarding the equipment, the means of transport, food and the selection of hunters to form the group were of great importance. Apart from having hunting skills, the people had to be adaptable to living communally under extreme conditions. Survival under these conditions probably led them to create new elements in their interactions (such as communication systems, symbolism, etc.).

The long tradition of hunting on the Arctic seas had the positive result of evolving a kind of sub-population — the Grumanters — tough men making their living by hunting and trapping in the archipelago. These people were granted a kind of superior position in the framework of the peasant population, not necessarily economically but rather in terms of admiration. Once again, these elements had to find their expression in the social practice of their native region. The most interesting question here is to what degree the Svalbard elements were included in the cultural structure of Pomorie. To answer this, archaeologists will have to carry on comparative research on the material culture of Russia.

CONCLUSION

The main points in my opinion about the state of archaeology on Svalbard are presented above. I would like, however, to stress again the most important ones. Clearly, there are still many unanswered questions concerning human activity in the archipelago, and our understanding of these processes is far from satisfactory. The main reason for this situation is the state of research, both field work and as regards formulating concepts on archaeology on Svalbard.

To improve on this situation we chiefly need to understand that:

1. Archaeological research in Svalbard requires international co-operation.
2. No real contradiction exists between archaeological research and the protection of cultural monuments; consequently, there is no real conflict between the interests of the Norwegian administration and archaeological expeditions;
3. It is unacceptable to demand that archaeological research in the archipelago be limited to rescue excavations;

4. Theoretical concepts need developing for archaeology on Svalbard just as much as for archaeology generally; Svalbard research must become closely linked to research in specific homeland areas.

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Address of the author: dr Marek E. Jasinski, Faculty of Archaeology and Cultural History, University of Trondheim, 7004 Trondheim, Norway

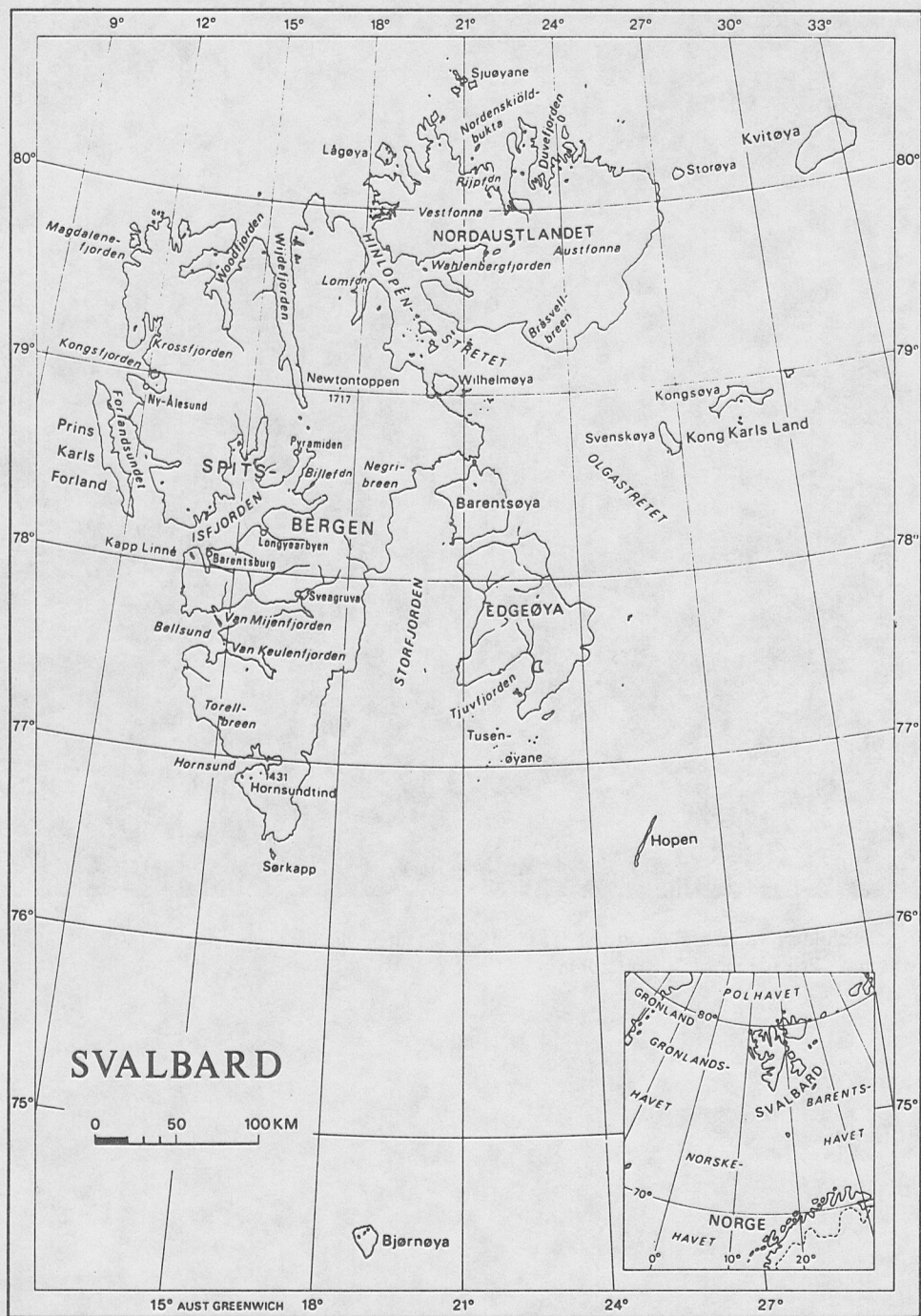


Fig. 1. Svalbard

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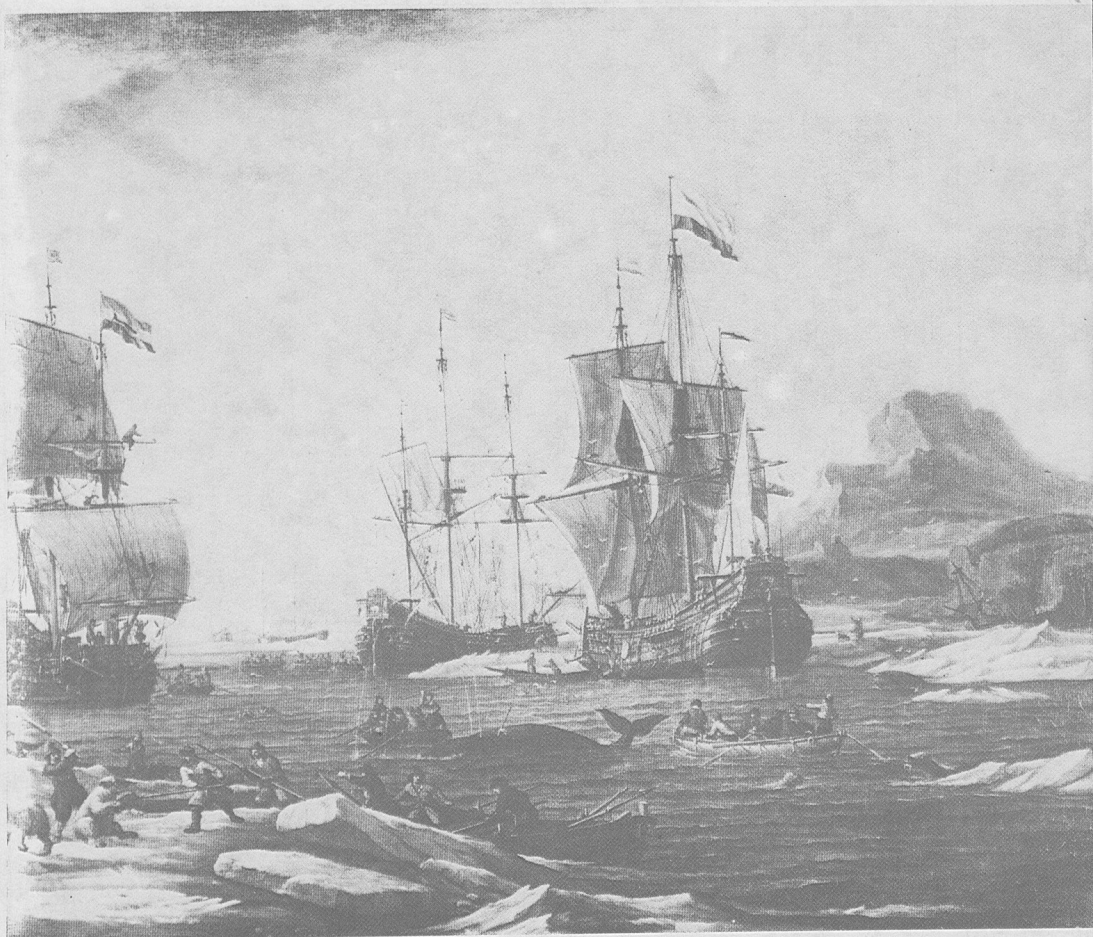
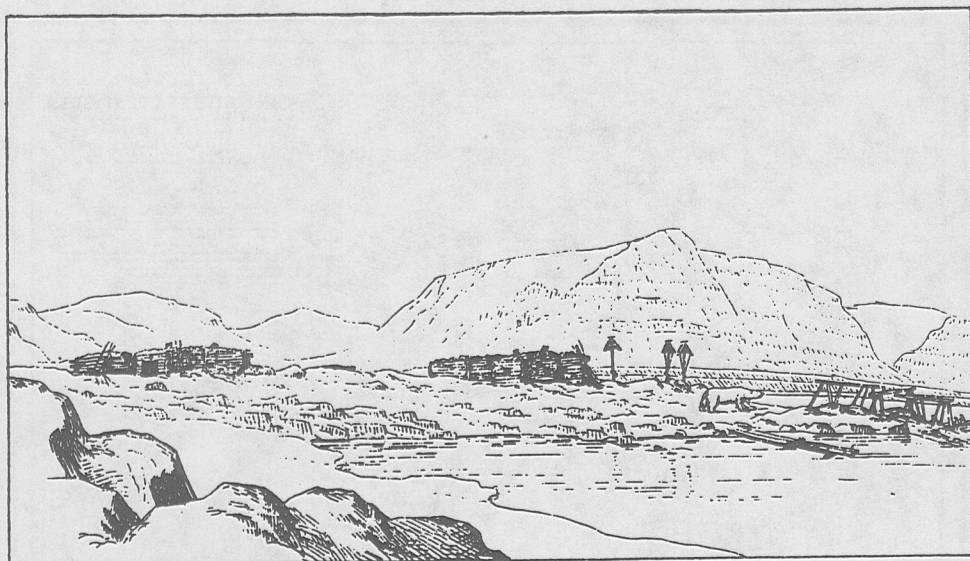


Fig. 2. Schilderij van Abraham Storck (1635-ca 1700). Dutch whaling on Spitsbergen 1690. Maritiem Museum „Prins Hendrik”, Rotterdam



Russisk Etablissement paa Öst-Spitsbergen.

Fig. 3. Russian hunting station at Edgeøya. After Keilhau 1831

