

***“The Bear!”***  
**Hunger, Cold, and Terror**  
**during the 1596 Barentsz**  
**Expedition in Search of the**  
**Northeast Passage**



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Images in this poster are from the collection of rare, early modern Arctic travel narratives and maps held by the James Ford Bell Library at the University of Minnesota.

DIARIVM NAVTICVM,  
feu  
VERA DESCRIPTIO  
Trium Navigationum admirandarum, & nun-  
quam auditarum, tribus continuis annis factarum, à Hollandicis & Zelandicis navibus,  
ad Septentrionem, supra Norvagian, Moscoviam & Tartariam, versus Catthay & Sina-  
rum regna: tum ut detecta fuerint VVeygatz fretum, Nova Zembla, & Regio sub 80.  
gradu sita, quam Groenladiam esse censent, quam nullus unquam adjit: Deinde de feris  
& trucibus vrsis, alijsque monstris marinis, & intolerabili frigore quod pertulerunt.  
Quemadmodum præterea in postrema Navigatione navis in glacie fuerit concreta, &  
ipli nautæ in Nova Zembla sub 76. gradu sita, domum fabricarint, atque in ea per 10.  
mensium spatium habitarint, & tandem, relicta navi in glacie, plura quam 380. millia-  
ria per mare in apertis parvis lintribus navigarint, cum summis periculis, immentis la-  
boribus, & incredibilibus difficultatibus.

Auctore GERARDO DE VERA Amstelrodamenſe.



AMSTELREDAMI,  
Ex Officina Cornelij Nicolaij, Typographi ad symbolum Diarij, adaquam.  
Anno M. D. XCVIII.

In 1594, 1595,  
and 1596,  
Willem Barentsz  
led 3 Dutch  
expeditions to  
the far North in  
search of a  
Northeast  
passage to  
China. These  
voyages went  
farther north  
than any others  
that had been  
recorded to that  
point.

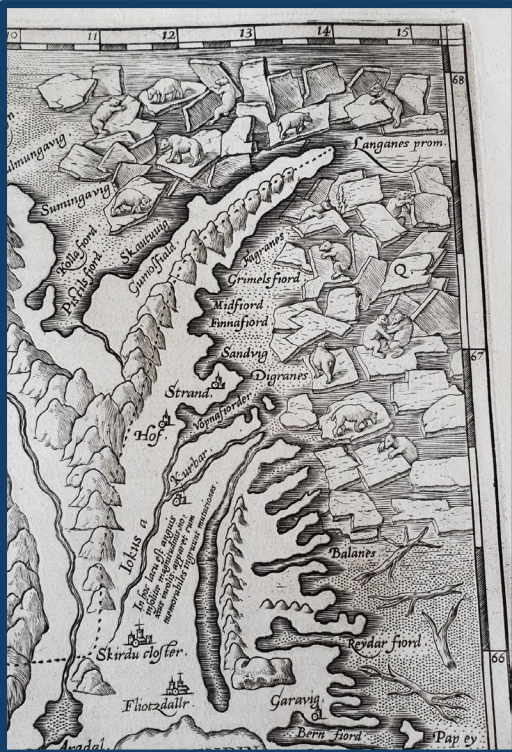




A popular 16<sup>th</sup>-century theory held that, at the North Pole, the seas became warm again and formed a huge whirlpool that sucked the oceans of the world into the abyss, from which they issued again as the world's rivers. Barentsz sought this warm sea.



Called the  
white bear,  
ice bear, or  
sea bear,  
Western  
Europeans  
learned  
about



polar bears through the books of Olaus Magnus (d. 1557), who wrote a popular account of the northern (Scandinavian) peoples.

Abraham Ortelius's famous  
16<sup>th</sup>-century map of Iceland  
showed these bears  
romping on the ice flows.





The Dutch sailors' first encounter with a white bear was in far northern waters in July 1594. They tried to lasso it and capture it alive. Enraged, the bear charged the boat but was choked backward when the rope became entangled in the rudder. Even after a musket shot, spearing, and clubbing, it took hours to die.



During the 1595 expedition, a bear attacked and tore apart two sailors who were on shore as part of a

reconnaissance party. The bear showed no fear of humans. The scene was repeated in depictions of the Arctic for decades.





In September 1596 (the 3<sup>rd</sup> voyage), in the aptly named Ice Harbor, off the northeastern tip of Nova Zembla, Barentsz's ship became fully entrapped in ice. Even as the 17-man crew contemplated what to do next, 3 polar bears approached, drawn by the scent of the ship's remaining supplies.





One of the bears reared up on its hindlegs as it charged. It was shot in the belly and died as it turned to flee. This bear was gutted and posed upright to freeze, as the sailors hoped they might be able to carry it back to Amsterdam as a curiosity.





The crew built a small house using planks from the ship and scavenged wood. They were woefully underdressed for the Arctic

winter and they had to ration food from the start. They discovered that polar bear meat made them violently ill, but they trapped Arctic foxes, whose flesh contained small amounts of vitamin C. This meat mitigated the effects of scurvy, even as the men faced starvation.



Prowling white bears were a nearly constant menace. At least 11 of the 31 images in the published accounts of the expedition show confrontations between bears and men. The images are violent, frightening, and disturbing – like this one depicting the bears as cannibalistic.



The idea of the white bear as an uncanny, lurking monster starts with accounts of the Arctic from the Barentsz expeditions.





Just two men died of illness and hunger at Ice Harbor. But after 10 months of suffering, the remaining crew feared that their strength would be gone before the ice would thaw enough to free their ship. They repaired two small boats and set to sea during one of the minor June thaws.



**Sind sind diß die Namen der  
zwölff Männer / so zu Amsterdam wider  
ankommen.**

Jacob Heemskirk / Schiffmann vnd Com-  
missarius.

Gerhard de Beer.

Jacob Jans Sternburg.

Laurens Wilhelms.

Jacob Jans Hochwout.

Johann von Bynsen.

Peter Petersen.

M. Hans Fuchß Barbierer.

Henhard Heinrichs.

Johann Hildebrands.

Peter Cornelius.

Jacob Everts.

E N D E



Three more men died on the perilous journey home, including Willem Barentsz himself. Since they had all been given up for dead, their return to Amsterdam was met with great fanfare. Less than a year later, one of the sailors, Gerrit de Veer, published an account of their voyage which became an instant sensation. The names of the 12 survivors appeared at the end of every edition.

## Recommended Reading

- Robert Bauernfeind, “ ‘Verscheurende Beyren’: Fighting polar bears in early modern Netherlandish art,” in *Humans and Other Animals*, ed. E. Jorink, et al. (Leiden, 2021).
- J.H.G Gawronski, P.V. Boyarsky, et al., *Northbound with Barents: Russian-Dutch Integrated Archaeological Research on the Archipelago of Novaya Zemlya in 1995* (Amsterdam, 1997).
- Andrea Pitzer, *Icebound: Shipwrecked at the Edge of the World* (New York, 2021).
- Diederick Wildeman, “Wie was Willem Barentsz? De rol van Barentsz tijdens de reizen naar het hoge noorden in 1594-1597,” in *Koersvast: Vijf eeuwen navigatie op zee*, ed. L. Akveld, et al. (Zaltbommel, 2005).

## Translations of Gerrit de Veer’s account of the Barentsz Expeditions at the James Ford Bell Library [note the rapid translation of this account into the major European languages]

- *Diarium navticum, seu Vera descriptio trium navigationum admirandarum, ...* Translated by Carolus Clusius (Amsterdam, 1598).
- *Waerachtighe beschrijvinghe van drie seylagien, ter werelt noyt soo vreemt ghehoort, drie jaeren achter malcanderen...(Amsterdam, 1599).*
- *Trois nauigations admirables faictes par les Hollandois & Zelandois au Septentrion* (Paris, 1599).
- *Beschreibung der Hollendischen und Seelendischen dreyen schiffahrten ...anno 1594, 1595 und 1596 geschehen*, illus. Johann Theodor de Bry (Frankfurt am Main, 1599).
- *Tre navigationi fatte dagli Olandesi, e Zelandesi al Settentrione nella Norvegia, Moscovia, e Tartaria verso il Catai, e regno de’Sini* (Venetia, 1599).
- *The True and Perfect Description of Three Voyages, so Strange and Woonderfull, That the like Hath Neuer Been Heard of before: Done and Performed Three Yeares, One after the Other, by the Ships of Holland and Zeland, on the North Sides of Norway, Muscouia, and Tartaria, towards the Kingdomes of Cathaia & China; Shewing the Discoverie of the Straights of Weigates, Noua Zembla, and the Countrie Lying Vnder 80. Degrees; Which Is Thought to Be Greenland: Where Neuer Any Man Had Bin before: With the Cruell Beares, and Other Monsters of the Sea, and the Vnsupportable and Extreame Cold That Is Found to Be in Those Places ...* Trans. William Phillip (London, 1609).