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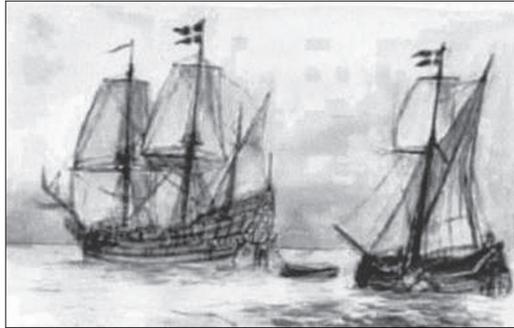
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# To the Edge of the World: Jens Munk and the Danish Search for the Northwest Passage, 1619-20

by  
Otto Christensen

On May 9, 1619, a worshipful dedication service was held in Christian IV's newly built church—Holmen's Kirke in Copenhagen. The service was arranged for a group of sixty-four sailors and their families to bless the crew and ships before they started on their expedition. Their goal was to find the route to China and India by sailing a northwestern route. The hope was to reach their destination by Christmastime. After the service, a procession took the participants down the canal to the two waiting ships. They were towed out of the harbor and set sail.



This took place nine years after Henry Hudson was commissioned by the Muscovy Company to find a northern route to China, with no luck. Hudson's crew mutinied and only a few of them made it back to England. Now Christian IV of Denmark-Norway was eager to try his luck in establishing a new trade route and perhaps a colony in North America. King Christian IV was a king with ambitions! For this expedition, he had chosen Jens Munk to be the admiral of his two ships—a frigate, *The Unicorn* (*Enhjørningen*), and a yacht, *The Lamprey* (*Lamprenen*). These two ships—the frigate with a crew of forty-eight and the yacht with sixteen crew members—were among the best of the king's ships and were stocked with trade goods for the journey

Captain Jens Munk was one of the best seamen in the kingdom. If anyone could navigate the northern waters, it would be him. He had

sailed several whaling expeditions north of Norway and successfully chased pirates in the North Atlantic. He spoke Portuguese, English, and Dutch, among other languages. He had time and again earned the respect of the crew that sailed with him. Christian IV also engaged two English pilots to assist Munk on the journey. Everything seemed promising.

A year and a month later—on June 4, 1620 in “Munck’s Winterhaven” (today’s Churchill, Manitoba, Canada)—Munk thought he was the last person of the expedition still alive. He wrote his testament:

Inasmuch as I no longer have any hope of living in this world I request for the sake of God if any Christian people should happen to come upon this place that they bury my poor body in the ground, along with the others who may be found here, receiving their reward from God in Heaven. And further that this my journal may be forwarded to my gracious Lord King (every word found herein is altogether truthful) in order that my poor wife and children may obtain some benefit from my great distress and miserable death. Herewith farewell to all the world and my soul into the hands of the Almighty etc. - Jens Munck

Certainly, things had not gone according to plan. The English pilots miscalculated the route. When they finally reached the “Big Sea” (now Hudson Bay), it was already September of 1619 and the approaching winter made further progress impossible. They did not have clothing to withstand the Canadian winter (the modern town there, Churchill, is at the same latitude as Bergen, Norway), their food supply ran short, and vitamin deficiency (scurvy) ravaged their physical bodies. Jens Munk wrote meticulously in his journal how his crew succumbed one by one to the cold and disease. At first, they were able to bury the dead. However, as the days again began to lengthen, their strength declined proportionately. No one had any strength left, least of all to bury their fellow crew members.

Four days after Munk wrote his last will and testament on June 8, 1620, he opened his eyes again and realized he was still alive. He left his berth to get outside in the sunshine since the stench of the dead

bodies around him was unbearable. The sun warmed his poor body and to his surprise he saw two people on land. They turned out to be crew members whom he had written off since they had left the ship and not returned to *The Unicorn*, which the crew had made into their winter survival shelter.

The three men got together, and the melt revealed berries and greens from the previous year. They collected them on all fours and ate whatever they could find. Within a few days they started to gain a bit of strength. They set nets in the river and made fish soup, the only thing they could manage to eat after losing almost all teeth in their mouths. Slowly they strengthened. By July 16, 1620 they managed to get *The Lamprey* afloat and stocked the boat with a few supplies. They commenced the journey home—three very weak men in a boat meant for a sixteen-man crew. There was not much hope for making it back alive. But they did!

After an epic sixty-eight days at sea, out of Hudson Bay and into Hudson Strait, east and south through Davis Strait, around the south of Greenland, past Iceland and through fierce North Atlantic gales that tore their sails and masts apart, they eyed land on September 20, 1620. It was the coast of Norway near Bergen. Munk reported his arrival to the local governor (Knud Gyldenstjerne), who happened to be an old nemesis of his. Three days later the governor had Munk thrown in jail. There had been a brawl in one of Bergen's parlors involving some of the crew and Munk, who was "responsible for his crew's behavior," had to pay with imprisonment. However, rumors reached Christian IV in Copenhagen, and the king himself demanded Munk's release, ordering he be sent to Copenhagen.

On December 20, 1620 Jens Munk was home. Life away had been hard. Coming home was even harder. His wife had found a new lover; the King demanded that Munk go back to "Munck's Winterhaven" to fetch *The Unicorn*. Further, the King ordered that a group of settlers should go with him and establish a Danish colony. However, it did not happen. The main reason probably was that no one wanted to crew with Munk after the first fiasco. Also, no settlers willing to endure the journey could be found in all of the kingdom—despite great rewards offered to lure them to the adventure.

