

Smeerenburg Gravneset

By Kristin Prestvold



Europes first oil adventure



The Governor of Svalbard is the Norwegian government's supreme representative in Svalbard. One of the Governor's most important tasks is the management of Svalbard's natural and cultural environments.

North-West Spitsbergen National Park

was established in 1973. Its purpose is to preserve environmental assets in a high Arctic region with magnificent nature, landscapes, geological formations, flora, fauna and cultural landmarks. The national park will help maintain Svalbard's wilderness character, maintain the balance of native animal species and ecological relationships, provide opportunities for outdoor life, experience and insight into a living environment and its history. Smeerenburg and Gravneseet are located in the centre of the national park and are among the most well-known and visited cultural monument in Svalbard.

Cultural monuments in Svalbard

Cultural monuments are tangible, original and unique visible traces of the everyday life, work and recreation of people in the past. As the physical framework around the lives that once were lived, they are good storytellers and monuments to earlier human activity but also witnesses to decline, the passing of all things and the transitoriness of greatness. In the Arctic wilderness in Svalbard the permafrost, climate and soil create good preservation conditions for cultural monuments and show how the landscape and the monuments are inextricably tied together. Cultural monuments give us an understanding of how people of each period have influenced their environment but also how the landscape has affected human activities. Smeerenburg and Gravneseet are important monuments from the whaling period in Svalbard in the 17th and 18th centuries, but they are vulnerable and easily suffer damage and wear and tear when the tourist traffic is too heavy. The loose objects that lie round about on the ground can also be tempting to place in your pocket as a small souvenir from the trip. We wish that the monuments remain as undisturbed as possible, as a part of the landscape, so that as many as possible, both today and in the future, will be able to experience Svalbard`s cultural monuments. This places great responsibilities on you as a visitor. So tread lightly, walk carefully. Show respect for the monuments so others in a long time to come also can experience rich encounters with the past through Svalbard`s almost untouched cultural heritage.

The document "Regulations concerning the cultural heritage in Svalbard" states that all cultural remains originating from 1945 or before are automatically protected and must not be disturbed. This applies to all types of buildings and remains of houses, installations, and hunting devices in different stages of decay. Remains of human graves, crosses, bones and fragments of bone above or below ground as well as skeletal remains that lie outside of the original grave are protected independent of age. The same applies to skeletal remains and hunting equipment at the slaughtering places for walrus and beluga and in connection with traps for polar bear. The large number of objects that lie spread along the coasts of Svalbard are also protected and may not be removed or picked up. These can be things that may seem like foreign objects and refuse in an otherwise unspoilt wilderness, but more than just building remains, they tell us about daily life, tasks and work methods, about where folk came from and the conditions under which they lived.

Destruction, removal or defacing of movable or fixed cultural remains is punishable. The area of protection stretches 100 metres in all directions around the cultural artefact. Within the protection zone it is forbidden to set up camp, light a fire, or leave any traces of one's visit. Non-compliance with this regulation will result in fines or imprisonment of up to one year.

Western European whaling in Svalbard...



"But, if the body becomes hardened by hardships and hard work, and if, to have faced danger and avoided it, gives courage and bravery, there can be no question, that whaling is the school, where the heroes of the seas are formed"

(Pontoppidan 1785).

...Europes first adventure in oil

The story of Western European whaling in Svalbard is a story about boiling of train oil from whale blubber for use in Europe in the manufacture of soap, as illuminants, in rope-making, in the preparation of cloth and textiles, skins and leather and as a mixing agent in pigments and paints. Gradually uses were found for the baleen, amongst others in the stays of the corsets of contemporary women's fashion.

The beginning of the oil adventure started with Barentsz' discovery of Svalbard in 1596. In the years that followed, constant mention was made of the large numbers of whales and walrus in the fjords and waters around the archipelago. However, it took several years before the first ships sailed north from Europe with whaling as their sole intention. None of the European sea powers, such as England and The Netherlands, had the



Work at the whaling station. Everybody had their prescribed tasks. The work of boiling the quickly become a busy affair if the hunt at sea was very successful. It was important to



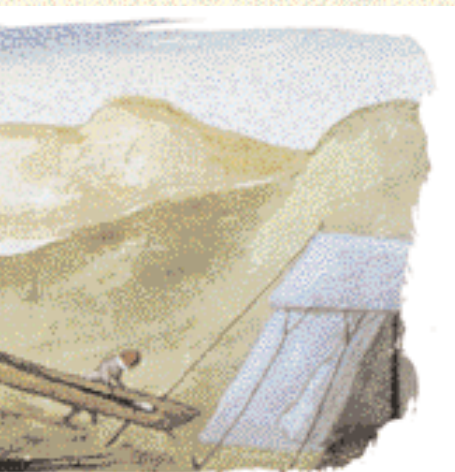
Map of North-West Spitsbergen National Park with Smeerenburg and Gravneseet marked in red.

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expertise or organisation to carry out whaling in the ice-filled waters of the north. They also knew very little about whaling itself. Whaling had to be learnt from the bottom up and was consequently in the beginning quite a small-scale operation. The attempts to learn the craft were a case of trial and error.

In reality it was only the Basques who mastered whaling and could be thought of as true experts. For hundreds of years

they had hunted whales in the Bay of Biscay and off the coast of Labrador. Here were sailors with long experience in the many, and for others, unknown, techniques of whaling, men who knew their craft. If the possibilities of whaling in the north where to be explored, the Basques and their skills were essential. In the beginning, therefore, they sailed as specialists and crew on the northbound whaling expeditions. For a short period the Basques dominated the hunt,



the blubber and extracting the oil on land could be prepared.
From Fotherbys "Journal" 1613

but an ever watchful eye was kept on them, and they were soon robbed of their knowledge with the consequence that dependence on them gradually declined. The sailors of the expanding European sea powers had themselves learnt the techniques of whaling.

Battle for hunting grounds

Svalbard became, in the space of a short time, a magnet that attracted ships northwards to practise whaling. The hunt did not pass without friction,

competition and rivalry between the whaling expeditions from the different European countries. In particular the hostility between the Dutch and the English over whaling rights and the best hunting grounds sets its mark on the earliest history of Svalbard. Other nations, such as, Denmark-Norway, France, Spain and Germany were also involved in the quarrelling, but the main fight was between England and The Netherlands. The fight over the prey was also directed towards internal competition, and whaling was soon monopolised by trade-companies that were granted privileges to exploit the hunting grounds and waters around Svalbard. The Netherlands established the Noordsche Compagnie in 1614 whilst England's Muscovy Company had already been operating for many decades with a monopoly on trade with the northern parts of Russia.

The competition led to repeated confrontations in the years before 1620, and on several occasions it came to actual warfare on the hunting grounds. One year it could be English whaling ships that would board several ships from The Netherlands, steal the entire season's catch as well as any equipment on board and send the empty ships homeward. The next year there could be reprisals from the Dutch and English ships would have to return home without catch or equipment. During these years

it was normal to send navy ships with the whaling fleet as deterrent and protection. Gradually, however, the quarrelling calmed considerably. The hunting areas were divided between the Dutch and English under an agreement whereby they would operate in separate areas without disturbing one another too much. The English hunted south of Magdalene-fjorden, whilst the Dutch controlled the area north of Magdalene-fjorden in the north west corner of Spitsbergen. Here the Dutch built the legendary whaling station of Smeerenburg.

The earliest Arctic whaling

In the summer months the large and heavy Greenland right whale concentrated, in large numbers, in the waters around Svalbard. Until the middle of the 17th century the hunt for the Greenland right whale was carried out along the coast and in the fjords of the archipelago. The Greenland right whale is a cumbersome, slow-moving species with poor swimming skills. It was easy to catch. It has a thick layer of blubber and many baleens.



*Ships on their way north to take part in the hunt.
Detail from a map from the 17th century.*

It floats when dead and all these qualities made it a particularly ideal and attractive prey. The right whale to kill.

The Basque whaling technology was based on land stations where the blubber was taken ashore after flensing and boiled to oil in large copper boilers. The earliest known cultural heritage monuments in Svalbard come from this first phase of Western European whaling, characterised by try-works built on land as near to the shore as possible. At the beginning the stations had a temporary look where one or two loose copper boilers would be placed on top of primitive furnaces. The land crew lived in tents and had their workshops in tents. At the end of the season equipment and materials were dismantled and taken home. Gradually several of the stations took on a more permanent look with solid accommodation and workshops and stone or brick-built try-works that could be reused year after year. The tools and materials were left at the station on the return home, and at some of the whaling stations attempts were made at voluntary winterings in order to keep the station in order and in readiness for the beginning of the following season. The death rate among the winterers, however, proved to be too high and the attempts were soon abandoned.

Throughout the 1630s competition with the trade companies that held the monopolies to practise whaling on Svalbard increased. Independent whalers had for many years been forced to

catch whales wherever it was possible, such as in the area around Edgeøya and eastwards along the northern coast of Svalbard. They were pressing to have the monopolies lifted. It is probably these harbourless interlopers that first began to catch whales in the open seas and developed the technique of flensing the whale alongside the ship. In the 1640s the monopolies on whaling came to an end

their land stations. The Greenland right whale, at the same time, disappeared from the fjords and concentrated in the open waters along the edge of the drift ice. The connection with land began to lose its importance, the land stations gradually went out of use, and the whaling techniques changed. A new period of whaling, where the hunt took place in the ice and in the open seas, was arriving.



Painting of the work on the land while the hunt took place in the fjords in Svalbard in the first half of the 17th century. The blubber was cut into smaller and smaller pieces before it was placed in the copper boilers. After the oil was cooled it was filled into barrels and vats and taken to the ships for storing.

and there was free and open competition for all who were willing to take their chances on the hunt.

From the middle of the 17th century a long cold period meant that the fjords were covered in ice for longer periods in the summer, which shortened the working season. Sometimes the ice also prevented the whalers from reaching and making use of

Out in the ice

Whaling increased dramatically after the middle of the 17th century and gradually came to cover large areas of the Arctic sea and include ships from most of the seafaring nations in Europe. After 1670 all hunting took place out in the ocean along the edge of the drift ice. Many more took part in the whaling than previously and by the end of the 17th century

there were probably 2-300 whaling ships and sealers out in the ice east of Greenland during the summer. There was no longer a fight for the best harbours and the question of sovereignty and special privileges no longer had any relevance. Svalbard as a land area had lost its importance. The hunt in the open seas brought about changes and adaptations in the equipment, boats and crew. The whale was

Whaling out at sea brought the Europeans experience in sailing in ice-filled waters and created a particularly competent group of sailors. This was very important to the navies of the sea powers. At the same time the waters around the belt of drift ice are dangerous where weather and wind conditions can make the journey unsafe. More ships were lost during this hunt than was usual during the land-based hunt.

The end of an era

At the beginning of the 17th century large numbers of whales were reported in the waters around Svalbard, and on his journey to Svalbard in 1612 Poole describes the seas being filled with whales around the sides of the ship. By the end of the 18th century it was over. The populations of Greenland right whale east and west of Greenland had reached crisis point and the Western European whaling adventure in the Arctic was over. The whale was practically extinct, the market for whale products had changed, and it was no longer profitable to practise whaling.



st half of the 17th century. The vignette shows whalers over the furnaces and boiled to oil.

From Fotherbys "Journal" 1613

now flensed alongside the ship, and the blubber was barrelled and taken back to the home port to be boiled into oil there. There was no longer a need for specialists on land, and the crew of the ships hunting out in the ice was therefore halved in relation to the land-based hunt. The extraction of oil in the home country created a new type of business that employed many people.



In the picture the coopers are in full swing with their work. They were indispensable specialists and the hope every year was to return home in ships fully laden with barrels of oil.

Smeerenburg -steeped in myths and legends

"On this side of the sound these piles of sand...like the only reminder of the golden age of Holland"
(Nansen 1920)

In the beginning of June the ships head under full sail into Smeerenburgfjorden in the northwest corner of Spitsbergen. Over three weeks have passed since ships and crew left harbour back home in Europe and the goal of the voyage is now in sight. There is little ice in the fjord this year, and in a short time the ships cast anchor in front of the flat promontory on the south of Amsterdamøya. With shouted commands and much noise and din the small boats are lowered and set on the sea, tools and materials are loaded on board and the boats are rowed ashore. The crew have their appointed duties, and it only takes a short while before the materials and tools are safely placed on the beach. Afterwards they begin with the work of repairing the damage that the winter has caused the whaling station. Everywhere is a hive of activity. The loose copper boilers to extract oil from the whale blubber are placed on solid-walled ovens and people are sent to the observation posts to keep an eye out for whales on their way into the fjord. All are prepared for the hunt that shall soon begin.



Remains of a double try-work on the edge of the beach in Smeerenburg. Today only the black concreted blubber formed by the oil that ran into the sand is visible above ground.
Photo: Ben Bekooij and Lourens Hacquebord

Smeerenburg - Blubbertown

The name Smeerenburg literally means Blubbertown and the whaling station was the headquarters of Dutch whaling whilst the hunt took place along the coast and in the fjords of Svalbard in the first half of the 17th century. The whaling station was probably founded in the years before 1620 and was deserted around 1660. The station lies in picturesque surroundings on Amsterdamøya, right up in the northwest corner of Spitsbergen, surrounded by fjords, high glacier faces and steep mountains. The area around Smeerenburg was early chosen as a suitable place to hunt. The waters were calm with good anchorage for the whaling ships and the whales concentrated in the fjords in

the area in large numbers. Smeerenburg shows how a whaling station developed from basic working conditions to more permanent structures. Today the ruins of the whaling station are the most important monument to organized Western European whaling.

The story of Smeerenburg is also the story of a tiny and careful start at the beginning of the 17th century, as is the story



Boiling of blubber to train oil.

From Fotherby's "Journ





Some of the try-works are so well preserved that should someone place a suitable copper boiler over the hole it could probably be set in operation immediately. *Photo: Kristin Prestvold*

of many of the other whaling stations in Svalbard. At the beginning the land station had a temporary look with simple and provisional try-works on the beach. As soon as the ships had cast anchor a couple of tents were raised for the workers on the land. The work was carried out under the open skies and the purposely brought copper boilers for boiling the blubber were placed on temporary and primitive furnaces that lay in rows one after the other along the beach.

As the years passed the land station grew in size and took on a more permanent look. The try-works became solid constructions of stone and brick where the loose copper boilers, often with a diameter of up to 2-3m rested. Sometimes the furnaces had a brick chimney. These more permanent stations also had platforms for cutting up the strips of blubber and for placing the cooling vessels. The tents were replaced with buildings of wood and brick where the equipment used for boiling the blubber could be stored when the ships sailed home at the end of a season. The buildings functioned as accommodation, storehouses and workshops and throughout the season the craftsmen, blubber-cutters and boilers had there temporary residence here.



View over Smeerenburgneset in 1980. Smeerenburg was the main station for the Dutch while the whaling took place in the fjords in Svalbard in the first half of the 17th century. The whaling station lay near the rich hunting grounds for whales in the fjord, had a good harbour with suitable anchorage and good escape routes for the ships should the drift ice enter in the fjord. The latter was particularly important for the slowly manoeuvrable ships of the 17th century. In the picture you catch a glimpse of the camp and work cabins of the archaeological investigation in 1980.

Photo: Dag Nørvestad



Map of Smeerenburg on Amsterdamøya. The map shows the placing of the individual trading chambers whaling stations on the promontory. When the Norwegian Thorolf Vogt visited Smeerenburg in 1928, he found 8 try-works, but the easternmost already lay on the beach and was flooded at high tide. Today try-work

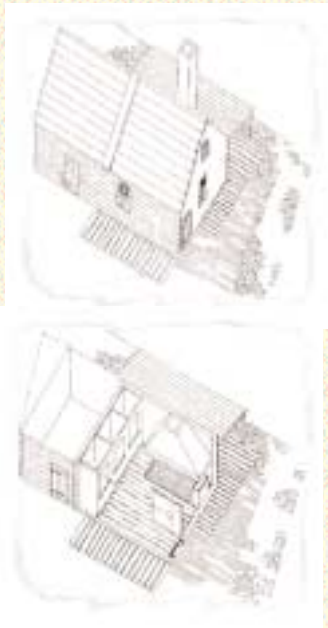
8 has vanished into the sea and try-work 7 is about to follow. The same fate has also befallen the buildings that lay behind try-works 7 and 8. According to the order given on old maps of Smeerenburg, it is the try-works from Amsterdam that have vanished, with the exception of 7.

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A complex system of drainage gullies carried away the surface water so that one was able to walk dryshod along the cobbled alleys of Smeerenburg. Exposed during the excavations at Smeerenburg in 1979-80.

Photo: Ben Bekooy and Louwrens Hacquebord



Reconstruction of the houses in Smeerenburg during the heyday of the station. Based on the results of the archaeological excavations in 1979-80.

Drawing: H. J. Zantkuil

In its heyday the land station contained 16-17 buildings that were situated near the beach. The spaces between the houses were cobbled and drainage gullies were constructed to carry off the surface water. Most of the houses were floored and the living conditions must have been reasonably good. Outside at the try-works, shelters shielded the workplace from wind and weather, helping to make the working conditions relatively comfortable. At most there were seven double and one single try-work in operation at the same time. The try-works belonged to several independent trading chambers that together formed one trading company. These trading chambers co-operated only if it was absolutely necessary.

The founder of Smeerenburg was the Amsterdam Trading Chamber that in the heyday of Smeerenburg had the largest try-works with two double ovens and four buildings situated behind them. The Amsterdam whalers established themselves at the eastern end of the promontory where the conditions at that time were most suitable for anchorage and the landing of people, equipment and not least blubber after the flensing of the whale. The other trading chambers that were active at Smeerenburg during the whaling station's busiest period were Middelburg, Vlissingen, Enkhuizen and Hoorn, Veere, Delft and Rotterdam. The Danish had, for a short period in the 1620s, a try-work at Smeerenburg, but after a few years this was taken over by a Dutch trading chamber. In the middle of the whaling station there was a small fortification or a simple cannon emplacement

built on a small plateau to defend the site against competition and possible interlopers.

Land-based whaling - adventure and trade

The large whaling ships that every year sailed up to Svalbard, with a crew to man the land stations and sailors to carry out the actual hunt at sea, were little more than cargo ships. After the ships had cast anchor in the harbour by the whaling station and were unloaded of tools and equipment, they lay at anchor for the rest of the season. Along with them on the journey the whaling ships brought four to six small shallops or whaleboats that were used in the actual hunt.

These were open rowing boats manned by six men.

There was a clearly defined division of labour on the hunt at sea. The whaleboats were crewed by specialists in their fields, and co-operation between the crew was a pre-requisite for a successful hunt, preferably without accident in any shape or form. Whaling was a dangerous job and the smallest mistake could have dire consequences. The method of hunting demanded great skill and was therefore a job for experienced and skilled men. Even long experience was not necessarily a good enough guarantee for success. Many things could go wrong and the hunt demanded both courage and skill.

In the front of the whaleboat sat the harpooner who was the most important specialist on



board. Aft sat the mate and between these two operated four rowers. When the whale was sighted, it was imperative to row up as close as possible. The harpooner had to strike cleanly so that the harpoon would embed itself deep enough in the animal. To the harpoon were fastened long lines which reeled out when the whale dived at great speed under the water after being hit. "The whale swims like the wind so that it howls in the ears" (Martens 1671) and it was therefore important that the line was able to run free whilst this happened. If the rope were to snag, the whaleboat could quickly be dragged under and this has according to Martens (1671)

breath, it was a case of being in the right place at the right time in order to throw more harpoons into the animal. This was simply a trial of strength. When, finally, the whale was exhausted from dragging along all the whaleboats that were fastened to it by line and harpoon, it slowed down, the boats could be rowed in close to the animal, and it could be put to death with lances.



On land the strips of blubber were cut into smaller and smaller pieces on permanent cutting benches before it was finally placed in the copper boilers at the try-works and boiled to train oil. The boiled oil was transported to a system of large water filled cooling vessels both to cool the oil and filter out impurities. Afterwards the oil was poured into casks and barrels and taken out to the ship where it was stored in anticipation of the the season's end and the homeward journey. The residue of blubber remains, called fritters, were reused as fuel to fire the furnaces to continue the extraction of oil.



From Fotherbys "Journal" 1613

cost the life of many a good man. The whaleboat had to be aligned correctly in relation to both the line and the direction of the fleeing whale. If it were not, it could capsize in an instant and the crew end up in the sea. If other boats were not quickly on hand to rescue the shipwrecked, there was little chance of surviving for long in the ice-cold waters.

There were several whaleboats engaged in the hunt, and when the whale surfaced again to

The whale's final convulsions, when it trashed around with its tail fin, were dangerous moments for the crews of the whaleboats. The boats could be crushed or overturned, often with fatal consequences for those on board.

The dead whale was then towed either to the side of the ship or towards land where, through the use of ingenious contraptions, it was rotated in the water whilst the flensers removed long strips of blubber with flensing knives.



Harpoon heads

Photo: Ben Bekooy and Louwrens Hacquebord



The myth of Smeerenburg and other whaling stations in the Arctic

Smeerenburg - myth and reality

Smeerenburg has a magical power of attraction. None of the land stations from the earliest whaling period in Svalbard have been so famous or so talked about as this legendary blubber town. The former whaling station has lived its own life in peoples imagination ever since it was abandoned, and numerous myths and fabulous stories have been spun about its life and size. The picture has been of a lively town with a teeming street life and with shops, bakers, storehouses, churches, fortifications and not least bars and brothels. Around the town walked a population numbering thousands. Even Nansen (1920) describes hundreds of ships at anchor in the fjord and life, excitement and prosperity on all sides. He tells of a complete town with stalls and streets where ten thousand people could gather

in the summer in connection with the whaling. Here could be found warehouses and try-works, gambling dens, smithies and workshops, the flat beach teeming with sailors back from the whalehunt and women in gay colours on the hunt for men. *"And all this in order to provide Europe with train oil, but even more to provide the women with whalebone to disfigure their bodies with corsets and whalebone skirts"*.

The stories about the size and population of Smeerenburg in the space of the short and hectic summer season were myths that have been hard to shake off. It is only through the large archaeological excavations at the end of the 1970s that we first began to see a more balanced and realistic picture of the real Smeerenburg. The myth of a lively town in its heyday with a population of up to 20,000 in the high season, has been modified to a number

of over 200 men working ashore at the land station. Even though reality seems a lot duller than myth, Smeerenburg must still have been a lively and crowded workplace when the work was in full swing and all the try-works were in operation at the same time.



Pottery found during the excavations at Smeerenburg

Pho

Specialists and general workers

Land-based whaling was characterised by division of labour. The workers on land had their given duties and the same applied to the sailors on board the whaleboats. Every year specialist craftsmen such as smiths and coopers sailed with the whaling fleet. These men had their own special duties that were necessary in order to operate the hunt. On board the ships were other experts such as harpooners and flensers. The specialists were better paid than the ordinary members of the crew, and they were a necessary and sought-after workforce who demanded, and often received, good terms when seen from a contemporary viewpoint.

Most of the whaling nations suffered from a chronic lack of sailors and seamen and between nations there was a mutual passage of people. Both the specialists and the ordinary sailors were well off and could chop and change jobs. The crew of a whaling ship on its way north for the summer hunt must have been a motley collection of men with origins from all over western Europe. In Smeerenburg the conversations must have been in several languages.

What was on the bill of fare?

From written sources, such as the inventories and supply lists of the whaling ships, we get a detailed picture of the equipment on board the ships. The largest part of food, that was to keep the crew alive during a season of whaling, was taken along from The Netherlands. It was the same case with fuel. The diet consisted mainly of peas, beans, salted meat and fish, bacon, cheese, butter and hard bread as well as a considerable quantity of wine, spirits, beer and tobacco. Even if the quantity of food was enough to feed the crew and feed them well throughout an entire season, the diet was deficient in vitamins, especially vitamin C. This could have tragic consequences in the space of a short time, and many who lie buried in Svalbard from this period show traces of scurvy. In order to spice up the diet there was sometimes a little hunting and fishing, but it seems as if this was the exception rather than the rule.



in 1979-81
Photo: Ben Bekooy and Louwrens Hacquebord



Knitted hat



Woollen glove with many mendings



Photos: Ben Bekooy and Louwrens Hacquebord

An existence amidst blubber, fat and oil

In many ways it is difficult to imagine an existence and way of life that is quite different to our own. The workers at Smeerenburg worked in all types of weather and kept going as long as was necessary to finish the job of extracting the oil from the blubber. The daily business and existence, moreover, took place amongst the remains of whale carcasses, other waste, dirt and mud from rain and surface-water that did not drain into the ground because of the permafrost. The smell of the oil in the casks and barrels, from the cadavres of whales rotting on the beach and from the try-works must have been penetrating. The smoke from the blubber ovens lay thick over the site and clothes and even the skin would after a short time be impregnated by whale oil. Everyday life in Smeerenburg must in truth be called a life in blubber, fat and oil.

The whalers, however, were used to the smells of open gutters, rubbish, dirt and waste from the mediæval towns in Europe. Most of them came from the poorer classes and it seems unlikely that their noses would be turned by the smells of Smeerenburg. Adventure awaited in the north and tempted men to Svalbard, especially with the thought of a quick profit to be made from the rich hunting grounds, but



The last try-work of the founders of Smeerenburg, the Amsterdam trading chamber, about to be taken by the sea. Only the hard concreted blubber remains.

Photo: Kristin Prestoold

also with the thought of prestige, honour and fame amongst family and friends back home. Up here one receive pay, a roof over the head, food and drink, and if the hunt went well, one could be lucky enough to get a small share of the profit. The existence of a whaler must have seemed good from a contemporary viewpoint. The many objects that are dug out of the ground at Smeerenburg paint a picture of clay pipe smoking, wine drinking men that understood the art of relaxing and enjoying themselves in the midst of the smells, smoke, fat and oil, and who were intensely keen on different games in their spare time.

The ruins of Smeerenburg - fragments of a past

"So little by little they exterminated the whale, until all were gone - and the winter regained hold of its land in undisturbed ownership"

(Nansen 1920).

Smeerenburg was gradually abandoned as a whaling station in the second half of the 17th century. The whales withdrew from the fjords and waters in the immediate vicinity of Svalbard, and the land station lost its importance and began to decay. Though long after the station was abandoned Smeerenburg continued to be used as an emergency harbour, a storage

place for whaling equipment and as a meeting point for the whaling ships in the spring and autumn. Smeerenburg had a good harbour and here one could collect fresh water and spice up the menu with fresh meat when the hunt took place out in the ice. The many sea lanes into Smeerenburg meant that the ships could safely reach the open seas even if the ice closed one of the branches of the fjord. On land they could bury their dead. On Amsterdamøya, in the area around Smeerenburg, lie 101 graves of men who lost their lives during the whaling in Svalbard in the 17th and 18th centuries.

The decay of Smeerenburg began immediately after the station was abandoned for good. The try-works were torn down, the tools removed and the useful materials taken home. Smeerenburg, therefore, quickly began its journey towards an existence as a ruin. Already when Friedrich Martens visited the land station in 1671 the site was visibly affected by decay. Several of the buildings were burnt to the ground. He, however, describes buildings still standing, even if year after year the materials in the buildings were removed and used as fuel or to repair ships. Thus it did not take a very long time before the land station more or less resembled a pile of debris.

When the last materials useful to man had been removed, the forces of nature took over the process of breakdown up through the centuries. In 1878 a Dutch frigate sailed into Smeerenburg to set up a memorial to the seven winterers who died during their stay at the whaling station in the winter of 1634-35. The once lively

whaling station was by then lifeless and returning to nature, the ground was covered in red, broken bricks, large whale-bones, rowing boat oars, rotting rope and what the crew of the Dutch frigate described as other rubbish and junk. The ruins of Smeerenburg were now the only visible physical remnants that could tell of its former pride.

In 1928 the remains of all the try-works at Smeerenburg could still be seen on the beach, even if the easternmost oven was at the mercy of the sea and the waves. The next time a proper report was made on the ruins of Smeerenburg, in 1952, this try-work had been taken by the waters and had disappeared out to sea. Today the seventh of Smeerenburg's one time eight try-works is on the verge of falling into the sea. The biggest part of the try-work is already gone and only the concreted blubber remains. The houses that were situated behind try-works 7 and 8 are also gone. Thus natural decay has caused the remains of Smeerenburg's founders, the Amsterdam Trading Chamber, to be lost.

The whalers packed together their equipment and tools and left the site, set sail and travelled south at the end of August as they had done at the end of the season for many years. The land station was left to the winter storms as on so many previous occasions. The year after, however, no whalers returned. Enduring storm and silence Smeerenburg has lived its own life after the site was abandoned some time around the middle of the 17th century. The try-works and houses decayed and gradually became ruins, remains of busy activity during the course of the few short but hectic summer months of several years. Nature is reclaiming the land and the traces of the men who hunted the whales here and boiled the train oil out of the blubber of the whales gradually become fainter and harder to discern. If, however, you raise your ear to the wind and listen, you might hear the distant sound of hammering against copper boilers, the beating from the cooper's workshop, the creaking of the ropes on the ships in the harbour, the distant voices and laughter of the workers, bent over the ovens as they boil the oil, and the weak echo of a cry warning that whales are on their way into the fjord.



Remains of try-works on the beach at Smeerenburg. Today these are the only traces of former pride.

Photo: Kristin Prestvold

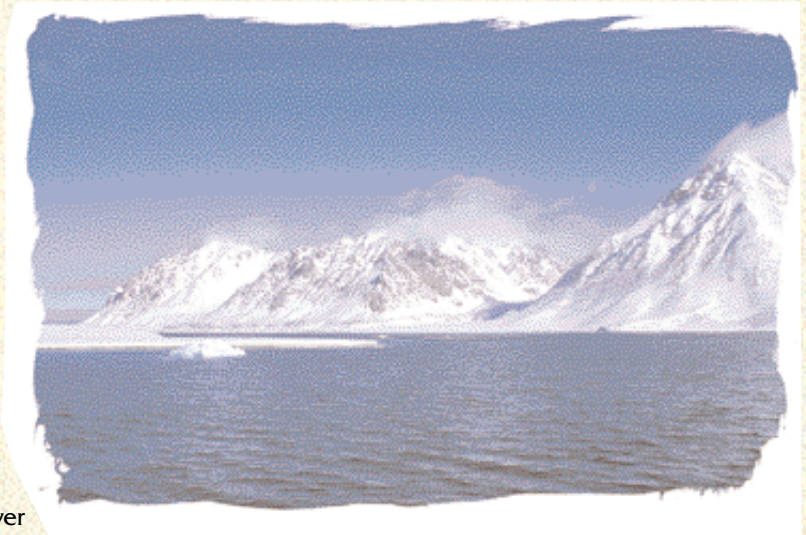
Gravneset in Magdalenefjorden - a final resting place...

"...but there was no sign of who they were, whence they came or when they died"
(d' Aunet 1968)

Surrounded by majestic mountains, high glacier faces and magnificent scenery in one of the most beautiful fjords on Svalbard lies Gravneset - an old whaling station and the final resting place for many whalers who never returned home at the end of the season.

Gravneset is one of the larger graveyards from the whaling period on Svalbard and contains around 130 graves. The burials stretch over a period of almost 200 years, from the early 17th until the late 18th century. Four poorly preserved try-works are also situated in the sand on the beach just inside the graveyard. According to historical sources the area was used by the English early in the whaling period. They set up a land station here and called the area Trinity Harbour. The station was abandoned as early as 1623, but the graveyard continued to be used for a long time after. The excellent harbour must have played an important role throughout the entire whaling period, something that the graves bear silent witness to.

Few places have been visited as much as Gravneset during the history of Svalbard, indeed, the woman who gave the promontory its name visited the area as early as 1838. Through the descriptions of the Frenchwoman Leonie d' Aunet, we are given a vivid picture of



Gravneset in Magdalenefjorden surrounded by majestic mountains - an old whaling station from the early 17th century and a graveyard from the whaling period lies on the promontory to the left in the picture.

Photo: Kristin Prestvold

the graveyard in what she saw as a sombre landscape where the bones of hunted whale and walrus lay strewn everywhere like white, monstrous remnants of an extinct race of giants in a desolate land. At the graveyard she finds several of the graves partly out of the snow, forced up by the permafrost below, half open and empty as a result of the ravages of polar bears. Other coffins lie still untouched with a cairn on top as a memorial. She carefully gathers together some of the bones that lie spread around on the ground and places them in an empty coffin. She wonders who has found their final resting place here and lies buried in "...coffins without memorial stone, without monument, without a wreath

or a flower, without anyone to shed a tear or say a prayer, without a friend to mourn the departed and visit their barren, frozen resting place where the wild howls of polar bears and storms are all that break the eternal silence"

(En pariserinnes reise gjennom Norge til Spitsbergen anno 1838 (1968)).

The grave - silent witness

Situated around Svalbard are many large and small graveyards, silent monuments, bearing witness to the whaling period. They tell of a dangerous work where one small mistake could have fateful consequences and where that eternal scourge of sailors, scurvy, hung like a spectre over their very existence.

On the northbound whaling expeditions the sailors were prepared for death. Death was a common guest and was met with an unsentimental glance. Despite a hard life on board the whaling boats and at the land stations, reliable sources suggest that few died during the actual hunt. The greatest enemy was disease.

The whalers were probably predisposed to scurvy. Most were men from the poorer classes who left for Svalbard in the spring after a winter lacking in fresh meat, fruit and vegetables at home. Scurvy easily develops if the diet is poor. If one does not get the correct foods and eats a diet

deficient in vitamins, death often lies in wait. From archaeological investigations at the graveyard at Likneset north of Smeerenburg nine out of twelve showed traces of scurvy.

" A lonesome grave in a barren, cold and beautiful land "

The graves at Gravneset have not been the subject of archaeological investigation, but through investigations of graves from other sites in Svalbard we have attained an insight into the lives of the whalers and a unique understanding of the man in the grave.

Photos: Kristin Presthold



There are many graveyards from the whaling period in Svalbard. Archaeological investigations of some of these graves show that the dead received an honourable burial. In this grave from Likneset in Smeerenburgfjorden the dead is buried dressed in a fine navy blue jacket, with wide arms, richly adorned with buttons.

Photo: Dag Nævestad

The coffins were buried as deep as the permafrost allowed, and were covered with a small stone cairn. At the head it was usual to place a wooden cross as a memorial to the dead with his name and home town as well as the year. Through early travel descriptions, such as, amongst others, Leonie d'Aunet's portrayal of Gravneset in the early 19th century, we discover that already by that time most of the graves were nameless, but that there still stood a few wooden crosses where one could just make out the inscription carved with a knife in some of them:

Dortrecht Holland 1783, Bremen 1697.

Today the crosses are gone.



The triple grave from Jensenvannet. Three people, probably from the same crew, are buried together. They are dressed in different clothes. The man on the left is dressed in a flax shirt, has a knitted hat on his head and long, above the knee stockings fastened with garters. The man in the middle is wearing a jacket of homespun wool, as well as long socks, but no headwear. To the right the body has been dressed in a knitted hat, probably a shirt, but no socks. He was a big man, about 1,90m high, and towers above his shipmates.

Photo: Dag Nævestad



Long knitted stockings with garters

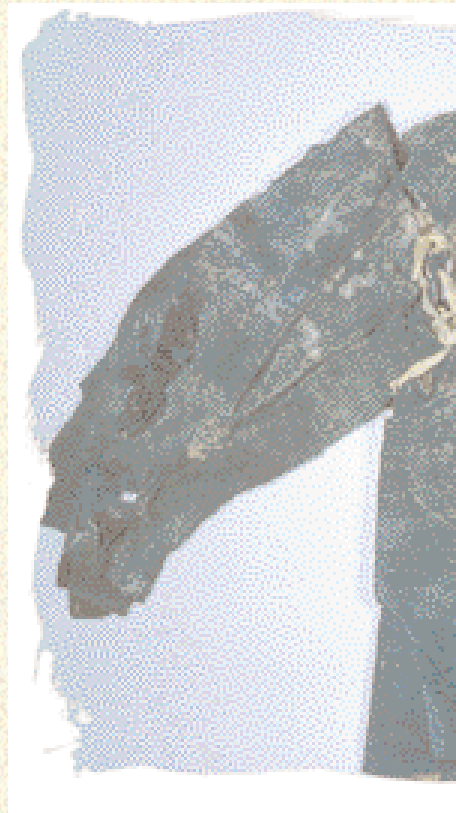
Photo: Arctic Centre, University of Groningen Holland

The textiles' story

The climatic conditions in Svalbard, with its cold dry climate, have, amongst other things, led to good preservation conditions for textiles. Previously we had little knowledge about the clothing of working people in the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe. Through the grave material from Svalbard we have an insight into how the whalers dressed. It appears that the clothes they wore were the same as those they would have worn on a winter day back home. The whalers simply left home in their winter clothes and not in any specially made clothes to hunt whales under totally different climatic conditions than those they were used to. The remains of the clothes that are found are brightly coloured and are

influenced by Spanish fashion with wide knee length trousers, long knitted woollen stockings, short jackets and low-cut leather shoes. Under the short jacket they wore a check or striped linen or flax shirt. There are not found any remains of thicker outer garments in the graves and it seems as if the whalers simply wore an extra layer of clothing if the cold and wind became too bitter. On their heads they wore knitted hats.

We can easily imagine how these clothes must have looked and how they must have felt after the end of a long season in Svalbard. Gradually they would have become covered in train oil and blubber and by the end of a season they could surely be described as being able to "stand by



Clothing, textiles as well as the colours of the clothing. Everyday clothing and textiles from the 17th and 18th centuries. Little knowledge about clothing of the common man at the time.

themselves" so disgusting and unfit for use they must have become. It is not so strange that many were thrown away during the stay. This material is unique today and tells of a style of clothing that was characteristic of the working man from Western Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries.



Jacket from the whaling period



Knee length trousers from the whaling period

Photos: Arctic Centre, University of Groningen Holland



They have kept remarkably well after over 300 years in Svalbard thanks to the permafrost. 19th century items are rare items. The Svalbard material is therefore an important source of information at this time, and brings us closer to the people in the past.

Photo: Arctic Centre, University of Groningen Holland.



Close up of the head of this man shows extensive wear on his teeth from clay pipes. The owner of this set of teeth has 3 or 4 round "channels" worn between his teeth where he could stick the pipe right into his mouth. Such damage is a common feature of the skeletal material from Svalbard, and shows widespread smoking among the whalers.

Photo: Dag Nørvestad

Even though we know a great deal about the clothing, the grave material from Svalbard is unable to tell us from which European country the whalers came. The grave material, however, does tell us that most of the whalers were robust men in the prime of life and that most of them were

habitual pipe smokers. We are left with a picture of common people who carried out their work on board the whaling ships and on land at the try-works in order to earn themselves and their loved ones their daily bread.

An honourable burial

Since death was a regular visitor, materials for coffins were always carried on the journey north. The grave material from Svalbard shows that when accident occurred, the dead received an honourable burial, everything being done to bury them in a respectful way. According to the practice and custom of the time the dead were buried on land and not at sea if this could be avoided. The old graveyards were sought out in order to bury the dead. Thus some of the graveyards assumed quite large dimensions as the years passed.

The deceased were laid to rest in the coffin, often on top of a layer of sawdust. The coffins are simple but are made of fine materials, often lined with thin cloth. The deceased were buried in their clothes, sometimes with a woollen blanket wrapped around the body. In some graves feather or down pillows are found lain under the head, and several are found with moss, brought from home, laid around the body as if someone wished to keep the dead warm and comfortable in an otherwise cold and inhospitable world.

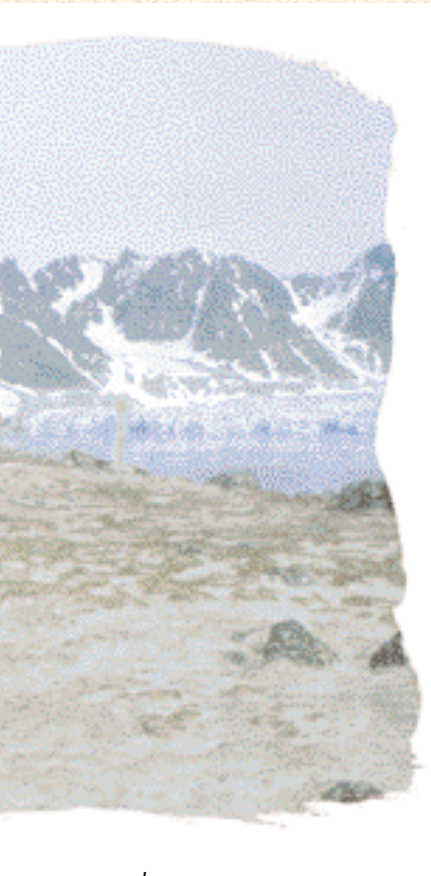


A part of Gravneset in Magdalenefjorden. Today much of the moss covering the peninsula is

A cultural heritage monument suffering problems

Gravneset is today one of the most visited cultural heritage monuments in Svalbard. The concentrated tourist traffic has eroded much of the vegetation from the site and in 1979 attention was drawn to the fact that the graveyard more resembled a camping site than its original intended purpose.

Several times the graves have been opened by curious tourists. As early as 1932, in an interview with Aftenposten, mine superintendent Mercoll says that tourists had ravaged appallingly in the graveyard and that in 1930 a great amount of bones found slung over the site had to be reburied.



worn away and gone.

Photo: Tromsø Museum

Today Gravneset shows considerable traces of wear and tear due to traffic. In areas there are marked paths and in several places the vegetation has been exposed to hard wear and is practically gone. The dark lichen is worn off rock and stone and the moss and sparse grass are disappearing. This is one of the reasons why the centrally situated area of the

gravestone was fenced in during 1996. You may not walk in this area. The vegetation inside of the fence is now recovering and it is therefore under constant consideration to close off larger areas to promote vegetation growth.

Gravneset has great experience value, where the graveyard is situated in an awe-inspiring natural landscape.

The deceased was once treated with great respect and deference. We ought to do the same today. So tread lightly, walk carefully and leave no trace of your visit. Let the dead continue to rest in peace when the last ship turns her bow homewards in the autumn after a visit to Svalbard and the wild howls of polar bears and storms are all that break the eternal silence.



Remains of a try-work on the beach at Gravneset. Footprints from visitors on the last cruise-ship are fresh in the sand and on the actual oven. The photo was taken in 1985 - what is the situation like today?

Photo: Dag Nævestad



From Fotherbys "Journal" 1613

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The person in the picture is buried in a wig. The wig lies partly on a down pillow that lies under the head. Round the neck were found traces of a silk scarf, probably yellow in colour.

Photo: Dag Nævestad

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Cover photo: Map from the 17th Century showing the by then known land area of Spitsbergen

Vignette photos front page:

Nr. 1 Grave from Jensenvannet on Danskøya, North-West-Spitsbergen National Park.

Photo: Dag Nævestad

Nr. 2 Last remains of a try-work on the beach in Smeerenburg.

Photo: Ben Bekooy and Louwrens Hacquebord

Nr. 3 Figurehead from the 17th Century found on Prins Karls Forland. Photo: Kristin Prestvold

Back cover photo: Copperplate from the Western European Whaling period in the 17th and 18th Century.

Vignette photos: Kristin Prestvold

Map of North-West Spitsbergen National Park: Copyright Norwegian Polar Institute

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SYSSELMANNEN PÅ SVALBARD

MILJØVERNAVDDELINGEN

N-9171 LONGYEARBYEN

The Western European whaling period in the 17th and 18th centuries has left behind many traces in Svalbard in the form of graves and remains of whaling stations on land. The traces tell stories of a dangerous workplace and of hard work, but also of the possibility of a good profit, strength, will and the lust for adventure. Smeerenburg was the main base for the Dutch whaling in Svalbard and at Gravneset lies one of the larger graveyards from the whaling period. What can fragments of a past tell us about the life and work of people living a long time ago?

Copperplate

