

# Polar exploration

## Arctic

Humans have resided in the Arctic – the regions of Asia and North America north of the Arctic Circle – for only about 5,000 years. The harsh climate prevents any kind of agriculture and therefore people survived by hunting the abundant marine life. It was not until the early modern period that Europeans began to take an interest in the Arctic in earnest, and this was entirely driven by commercial ambition. European explorers wished to establish sea routes between China and Europe that would facilitate trade, and theorised that it should be possible to sail during the summer either along the Arctic coast of Russia (the Northeast Passage) or between the Arctic islands of Canada (the Northwest Passage) to reach the Pacific Ocean and China.

From the late fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, numerous European expeditions tried and failed to find a navigable passage through the Arctic Ocean. The rewards would have been substantial, establishing a sea route between Europe and Asia that is about 30% shorter than the modern route that passes through the Suez Canal. But sea ice always blocked the route, even in summer with 24 hours of daylight, and numerous explorers were lost in the attempts, including the famous Franklin expedition of 1845.

## Antarctica

Antarctica has no indigenous inhabitants and was unknown to humans until the late eighteenth century. English explorer James Cook encountered the ice shelf surrounding the continent in 1773, and early-nineteenth-century whaling ships confirmed the existence of land, though it was not until 1895 that the first humans set foot on the continent.

## Reaching the poles

The poles themselves were not reached until the start of the twentieth century. American explorer Robert Peary led several expeditions to the North Pole, eventually reaching it in April 1909. In Antarctica, Ernest Shackleton reached the southern magnetic pole in 1907, and 4 years later Norwegian Roald Amundsen raced to be the first to reach the South Pole, ahead of Englishman Robert Scott, who perished in the attempt.

As Antarctica had no indigenous population, several nations attempted to assert a territorial claim there, including those geographically close (New Zealand, Chile and Argentina) and those much further away but with a history of colonialism (Britain and France). In 1959 the Antarctic Treaty was signed, suspending all territorial claims and permitting the establishment of research stations.

There are now over 4,000 research scientists resident on the continent during the Antarctic summer studying geology, space and climate change. In the 1980s it was these scientists who alerted the world to the hole in the ozone layer caused by the use of chlorofluorocarbons. A rapid global agreement was reached in 1987 to eliminate their use and the ozone layer is gradually repairing itself.

## Changes

In 1999 the indigenous peoples of the Arctic finally secured a large degree of self-government with the creation of the Canadian territory of Nunavut, which includes all of the islands of the High Arctic. The Arctic is warming twice as fast as the rest of the world, and this has increased the likelihood of a fully navigable Arctic Ocean during the twenty-first century.

At the same time, less ice has made the ocean floor more accessible, and nations surrounding the pole (Russia, Canada, USA, Denmark and Norway) have begun to assert claims over the oil and gas they hope might be buried deep beneath the ocean floor. The Arctic will continue to grow in political and economic significance over the coming decades.

**1497**  
John Cabot explores the coast of Atlantic Canada

**1594–97**  
Willem Barents discovers Svalbard and Novaya Zemlya

**1773**  
James Cook encounters the ice shelf surrounding Antarctica

**1878–89**  
Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld makes first complete passage from Europe to Asia via the Northeast Passage

**1903–6**  
Roald Amundsen completes the first successful navigation of the Northwest Passage by ship

**1909**  
Robert Peary leads the first expedition to the North Pole

**1959**  
Antarctic Treaty signed

**1576–78**  
Martin Frobisher explores Baffin Island

**1733–43**  
Russian Great Northern Expedition led by Vitus Bering maps northeast Asian and Alaskan coast and islands between

**1845**  
John Franklin's expedition disappears in Canada's Arctic islands

**1895**  
The first humans set foot on the Antarctic continent

**1907**  
Ernest Shackleton reaches the southern magnetic pole

**1911**  
Roald Amundsen reaches the South Pole

**1999**  
Nunavut territory created

Scott Base, Ross Island, Antarctica

Tim Lockley is a professor of history at the University of Warwick.

ModernHistoryReviewExtras

Go online for a printable pdf of this poster  
[www.hoddereducation.com/modernhistoryreviewextras](http://www.hoddereducation.com/modernhistoryreviewextras)