

Friendly savages
Samoyeds and Lapps as described by Gerrit de Veer in 1598

In 1598 Gerrit de Veer wrote a report about three expeditions to the Arctic led by Willem Barentsz and Jacob van Heemskerck. They were searching for the so-called Northeast Passage, a sea road between Europe and Asia through the Arctic region. The book was published in Amsterdam and an instant success. The sea-passage was essential to the Dutch for multiple reasons. During this time, the Dutch fought a war against a powerful Spain. In the Eighty Years War (1568–1648) they fought for their independence. Trade by sea was one of the sources of income for both Spain and the Netherlands. On one hand, the Dutch wanted to prevent the Spanish and Portuguese from bringing goods to Europe from America and Asia, on the other hand they were looking for a safe passage to Asia for themselves, to earn money to finance, besides other things, the war against Spain. The Northern Passage was not only thought to be safer, but also more healthy than the Southern route along the Cape of Good Hope. Furthermore, it was thought that the northern passage would be much shorter than the southern one. Geographer Petrus Plancius believed that this safe, shorter (and cheaper) and healthy shipping lane was to be found in the North, where the seas were free from ice and easily travelled. Barentsz was a great follower of Plancius's theory and tried up to three times to reach Asia with an expedition, but he never got further than Nova Zembla (Novaja Zemlja) in Northern Russia. The ice stopped the Dutch time and time again, forcing them to return. On the third expedition they even froze in the ice and had to spend the winter in Nova Zembla. Willem Barentsz died on the way back to the Netherlands.

During these journeys the Dutch never found the Northeast Passage, but they met and described several Finno-Ugric peoples. On the second voyage De Veer described a meeting with the Samoyeds and wrote very laudatory about them. The meeting was, after the first fright, very friendly and peaceful. The clothing, habits, weapons, religion and animals of the Samoyeds were described extensively. On the third voyage the Dutch also met the Lapps. On their way from Nova Zembla to Kola the Dutch travelled in sloops, in the hope to find a Dutch ship in the harbour. At the coast, not far from Kola, they found the Lapps living in a small group of houses. In his book De Veer tells about this meeting, giving attention to the subordinate position of the Lapps

relative to the Russians, their honest characters and their admirable endurance. Both the Samoyeds and the Lapps were described with a lot of sympathy by De Veer.

In this article I will not only describe the passages concerning the Lapps and Samoyeds, but I will also discuss why the Dutch, from the end of the 16th century on, showed a particular interest in trade with Northern Russia and why they were seeking for the Northeast Passage.

Keywords: de Veer, Dutch explorers, Northeast passage, Nova Zembla, Lapps, Samoyeds.

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