

The role of the polar explorer in the Norwegian identity

Norway is a rather young nation and has had two spells under the rule of foreign empires: the first was under Denmark with the definite beginning in 1536, then ending in 1814. The second spell under foreign rule was under the Kingdom of Sweden from 1814 to 1905. Despite the late rebirth of Norway as an independent nation state, the young modern Norwegian kingdom established a polar empire with significant possessions in both the Arctic and the Antarctic by 1940. In the modern-day history of science, Norway is a stronghold for polar research, and the rise of polar exploration, polar research, and nation-state building went hand-in-hand from the last part of 19th and first half of the 20th century, and until today. This article aims to connect the understanding of the explorer as part of the rise of the modern nation-state Norway. Consequently, it demands a certain attentiveness to the context of nation-state building. This article reflects on the nation-state building and aims to envisage the role of the polar explorer in Norwegian culture, identity, and historiography.

The explorer as part of Norwegian history

The history of Norway has its own “poetics”, its own “national narrative”. This article aims to show how polar exploration is vital to understand this narrative, this poetics. The Norwegian historiography about the process of the country’s independence from the Swedish empire is often linked with some key narratives that require explanation. The polar explorer is part of this process of emancipation from Sweden and early nation building as an independent country. The process of the dissolution of the Swedish Norwegian union was an ongoing conflict during the 19th century, and resulted in the dissolution in 1905, after a period of almost 100 years. The union was rather loose; Norway, could for instance establish its own government, an own prime minister, a parliament and departmental structure, a national bank with Norwegian currency, and a modern constitution different from that of Sweden and based on the principles of the then-modern French revolution and constitution when it was established by the new Norwegian Constituent Assembly in 1814 (Myhre, 2012, pp. 27-40).

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There were still two fundamental problems with the union with Sweden. Norway could neither have a foreign policy with foreign stations nor make decisions in the parliament without the risk of the Swedish king interfering with or vetoing them (Ivi, pp. 42-45). The freedom seeking Norwegians, trying to aim towards independence from the vetoing king of Sweden, was also part of the rhetoric and national narrative of the Norwegians during the 19th and 20th century. The freedom seeking people of Norway sought its independence and co-determination, like suppressed people in other countries without self-governance (Ivi, p. 58).

Nevertheless, Norwegian nation-state building was underway and was fuelled by the Norwegian Constituent Assembly, taking place in May 1814 after the Treaty of Kiel made Denmark cede Norway to the Swedish king. The consequences of this new independence movement based on Norwegian interests also implied a newfound scientific approach in the Norwegian regime of science and higher education. Now the aim was to strengthen the University of Oslo, newly established as the only university in Norway in 1811. Consequently, the content of higher education and advanced science were to be part of the nation-state building. The focus of the Norwegian policy for research and higher education was on the objective of preparing civil servants to build a Norwegian-oriented public administration based on merit, but another aim for national research and education centred on strengthening science as a means for the exploration and mapping of the national territory. For instance, geographers aimed to build institutions for mapping the physical geography of the country and its people. Biologists and botanists aimed to register the fauna and flora of the nation. Cultural researchers and ethnologists were designated to make surveys of the national culture, its character, and its societal features as distinct from those perceived as foreign or not Norwegian. The purpose was to build national identity and pride while completing the systematic mapping of the territory (Ivi, pp. 50-60; Hestmark, 2004).

This national “renaissance”, or rebirth, stood in stark contrast to the previous period of national decline under the Danish rule. The poetics of decline was borrowed from the Norwegian poet Henrik Ibsen, who introduced the concept “the 400-year night” in the novel *Peer Gynt* in 1867. The term referred to the period from 1537 to 1814 when the Norwegian demographic, political, and economic decline resulted in a union with Denmark, with Norway ruled as a colony by Danish kings from Copenhagen (Ibsen, 1892, 191).

In later Norwegian historiography, the concept of the 400-year decline became a common concept, although it has come under scrutiny by historians in later years. However, the whole point with the narrative of the “dark” years, was to use the darkness to contrast it with the renewed nation-building process of 19th century, by this nationalists could establish a former period of decline and oppression in contrast to the new, more promising process of a national renaissance (Ole Moseng, 2004, NRK).

The 19th century thus developed as an arena for Norwegian researchers – like historians and culturalists – to re-establish and chart the old Norwegian culture, music, and language during the post-1814 period. To achieve the aim of a new golden age, researchers sought knowledge from the golden years before the decline of Norway in 1537, the period before the 400 year night, and the zenith of the Norwegian realm, when the kingdom encompassed Iceland; Greenland; parts of Scotland and England such as Man, the Hebrides, Shetland, and the Orkneys; the Faeroe Islands; and parts of today's southwestern Sweden (Imsen, 2014, pp. 13-31).

Beginning in 1536, there were no Norwegian cabinet or administration – at that point, Norway was under Denmark's rule. Norway became a province under the Danish state. This year marked a vital day in Norwegian history as it was to be the downfall of the Norse Viking days with the fall of the independent Norwegian nation state. During the years to come, and during this period the Norway lost almost all its North Atlantic insular possessions to Denmark, the United Kingdom, and Sweden (Ersland, Sandvik, 1999, pp. 16-17).

By the time Norway gained independence from Sweden in 1905, most populated areas of the world were colonised to some degree. In addition, the exploration of remote Arctic and Antarctic areas became simultaneous as expeditions were launched in new, undiscovered areas of land, known as “no man's land” or *terra nullius*; this was not so different from the great explorations of earlier centuries wherein the “civilised” world explored “unknown continents” in the “undiscovered” areas of Asia, Africa, and the Americas. This fact changed the terms for imperialist countries. The quest for expansion and international competition between states moved into the Arctic and Antarctic (Fure, 1996, pp. 109-112 and 123). In 1920, the Arctic was *terra nullius* – land that was not considered to be anyone's property. However, during the subsequent 20 years, this matter of “ownership” was settled. In the Arctic for instance, five Arctic states were established by 1940: Denmark, Canada, Norway, the Soviet Union, and the USA (Ivi, pp. 114-115). Denmark was the sovereign over Greenland, while Canada, the USA, and the Soviet Union controlled the Arctic areas north of their territories respectively (Ivi, p. 114; Berg, 2016, pp. 60-64).

The foreign political aim of the new Norwegian nation-state in the age of imperialism was to form a new foreign policy which, combined with the policy of research, could pave the way for imperial Norwegian claims and help Norway regain the role as a North Atlantic empire, though on a smaller scale than in the Viking age.

Norway's foreign political imperialist ambitions were directed toward both the Arctic and the Antarctic. In line with national sentiments in the interwar period, Norwegian politicians meant that possessing the polar regions gave the ruling nation political prestige (Fure, 1996, p. 116). Nevertheless, the imperialism towards the polar regions was not of the same content as the traditional imperialism. The polar regions were considered as peripheral, marginal areas that

were difficult to domicile permanently. However, they were potentially important due to the previously mentioned international prestige connected with them, as well as possible oil and mineral recourses and economically promising resources in connection with hunting, sealing, and whaling (Ivi, pp. 109 and 116).

The Norwegian foreign policy implied substantial offensive considerations during the interwar period. Firstly, there were considerations regarding the inclusion of territories from neighbouring states under Norwegian sovereignty (e.g., those in Finland and the Soviet Union). Secondly, Norway launched campaigns toward areas with disputed sovereignty such as East Greenland. Thirdly, Norway absorbed polar islands and areas with *terra nullius* status into Norwegian sovereignty, like Jan Mayen (1930), Bear Island (1920), and Svalbard (specific treaty 1920; Ivi, pp. 18-20).

The role of science was substantial in the quest for new polar territories. An example of the willingness to support and fund polar research as a part of national aim for prestige and honour, as well as new land, is the funding of the research ship *Fram* – used by Nansen in his expedition to Greenland in 1888-1889. The public costs invested by the national budget was at the same level as the annual budget of the University of Oslo the same year. The science historian Geir Hestmark claims that the national prestige connected with the polar sciences in Norway was of great significance, but the Norwegian polar imperialism was rather innocent compared to other sorts of imperialist campaigns in the last part of the 19th century (Hestmark, 2004, p. 10). He explains this by explaining that the Norwegian polar imperialism did not result military activity or end in warfare. The annexation of the territories did not end in any occupation or suppression of indigenous people or other nation's population, either.

Nevertheless, the exploration and science used as a means of mapping, studying, and conquering the new, unexplored white areas paid off. Norway's "polar ocean imperialism" resulted in territorial gains, such as gaining jurisdiction over not only the Svalbard Islands in the Arctic Ocean by 1925, but also by expanding in the Antarctic during the 1920s and 30s. This expansion led to the annexation of the Bouvet Island in 1928, Peter I Island in 1931, and Queen Maud Land in 1939 (Fure, 1996, p 18). These dependent territories are all under Norwegian administration, although they have been put under international treaties regulating the use of the territory (*The Antarctic Treaty*).

The unsound rivalry of polar exploration

Thus far, we have discussed how Norway, as a rather young, peaceful nation, used scientific expeditions as part of territorial expansion and how science can play a role in the nation-building process. One example is the meteorological expeditions of the Norwegian Meteorological Institute in the 1920s to Jan Mayen. During the purely scientific expeditions to the isle, there were put up

commemorations by the meteorologist that they had “occupied” the isle between 1922 and 1929 (Fure, 1996, pp. 132-135). These examples of Norwegian expansion in to the polar regions illustrates how science has the potential as spearhead for territorial gains. On one hand a significantly international affair as science often based on international cooperation can be a tool for nationalists. Consequently, this division between international rivalry and cooperation has a potential to trigger unsound rivalry between nations. There are many examples of this rivalry – for instance, the race for the South Pole between Robert Falcon Scott and Roald Amundsen in 1911-1912. Another more recent example, which ended in misery, was the Amundsen-Ellsworth-Nobile transpolar flight in 1926, wherein Roald Amundsen fell out with the other participants – in particular with the Italian participant Umberto Nobile – due to the disparate aims of the two nations cooperating in setting a polar record together. National honour was not easy to share under such conditions, and the motifs behind the scientific approaches have lately been part of the historical studies (Aas, 2001, pp. 45-53; Aas, 2003, pp. 170-173). Such rivalry, as in the case of Nobile versus Amundsen, resulted in commonly unfavourable views among Amundsen’s fellow Norwegians towards Nobile and the Italian people. However, Norway as a collective also experienced critique due to the rivalry between polar antagonists. One example is the attitudes towards Amundsen’s lack of sportsmanship from the British press after the race for the South Pole between Amundsen and Scott’s British crew in 1911-1912 (Bomann-Larsen, 1998, pp. 221 and 490).

The potentially suspicious role of science during the polar expeditions, where the feats became connected with personal rivalry as well as prestige entangled with nationalism and rivalry between nations, made polar explorations problematic for some. Some Norwegian politicians contested its legitimacy and refused to fund it. The decline of the funding of Norwegian polar research occurred after political debates in the parliament addressed political criticism about the legitimacy of the research. “Conspicuous consumption” – the use of public money for bragging or for personal or national prestige – was not considered morally acceptable by some politicians in a research system funded largely by public budgets. It thus became more difficult to use public money to fund research projects of this kind (Fulsås, 2004, p. 222). Norwegian politicians became less tolerant of the use of national budgets for personal bragging and rivalry.

The polar explorer and the creation of a Norwegian national character

In the Norwegian polar history, *Into the Ice*, the editors Einar-Arne Drivenes and Harald Dag Jølle conclude that Norway’s polar history is closely tied to “culture and politics”; they introduce “Norwegian polar imperialism” as a concept describing the Norwegian polar nation during the last part of the 19th

and the first half of the 20th century. They also acknowledge that it is «difficult to write about Amundsen and his conquest of the South Pole without examining its effect on Norway's self-image» (Drivenes, Jølle, 2006, p. 9).

As previously discussed, the legendary stereotypical polar hero became strongly attached to the development of a specific “national character”. During the early phases of nation state building in Norway, these certain types, the polar heroes were used as examples of abilities ideal for the future generations of Norwegians. The idols were to idolize certain distinctive narratives and identity marks, connected to goals to achieve. The narrative was partly built on the perception of Norwegian abilities shown by the polar explorer and that their capacities as explorers were seen in a historical perspective, as if there was a direct line between the Vikings and the modern explorer. Hestmark illustrated how history was used as a motivation for the modern Norwegian explorer (Hestmark, 2004, pp. 10 and 13). He also proved how Nansen found inspiration and support in the fact that a specific national character had developed throughout the years in Norway. One aspect was the knowhow connected with ship building after centuries of craftsmanship. This knowledge was a good help to make him reach his goals when developing a scientific vessel suitable for the harsh conditions in the ice. Another aspect was the Norwegian tradition with sailing and navigation. From the Viking age to the era of modern steam navigation, Norwegians had developed competence as sailors, learning navigation skills and seamanship on the high seas. In addition, the experienced Norwegian whalers and sealers had learnt how to manoeuvre in and around drift ice, in cold climates, and under extreme polar conditions far away from their national shores (Ibidem).

Thus, Norwegian polar explorer in particular became a gendered figure. It was the masculinity of the Norwegianness which was promoted through the polar hero. The national expansion into the polar regions was associated with masculinity and masculine ideals. The triumphs and quest for national honour and international reputation provided status among equals in the international competition between male polar adventures doing daring expeditions into the far off places, as illustrated over. Nations of the late 19th and 20th century were all part of an European imperialist atmosphere, and polar explorers like Fridtjof Nansen and Roald Amundsen afforded Norway an international reputation as the home of polar research and exploration. They literary put Norway on the map. The Norwegian trade connected with experiences with polar exploration, like sealing, whaling, and hunting earned Norway a reputation as a polar nation, as well as the records made by the polar heros. The documentation of these records contributed to strengthen territorial Norwegian claims in the Arctic regions (Ivi, p. 10). The connection between trade, industry and the polar explorer was the common aim of connecting them both to the national knowledge of Norway as a nation of seafarers.

In the modern narrative of the Norwegian nation with an obvious link between the Viking age and the modern Norwegian. They were both brave and

fearless Viking settlers and colonisers which under the awakening nation state became ideals for the new generations of the Norwegian coastal population. The Viking desire for knowledge and their curiosity about daring expeditions fit hand-in-glove with what was perceived as a typical national characteristic of the modern Norwegian.

Modern-day Scandinavian explorers aim to establish a narrative with a clear-cut continuation from the Norse Viking-age explorers like Eirik Raude (950-1003) and Leiv Eriksson (973-ca. 1020), who allegedly were the first Europeans on Greenland and Newfoundland/Labrador (Canada) respectively. The medieval explorers also situated the northern polar regions as a central place in the consciousness of modern Norwegians (Fure, 1996, p. 112).

Even though Nansen and his fellow countrymen tried to show the connection between their contemporary attempts to build the new nation state, and the Viking heritage, there were similar processes advancing in Sweden as well. There were a Swedish tendency to connect their polar exploration with the Viking inheritance, too. The Swedish science historian Urban Wråkberg characterises Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld's (1832-1901) expeditions into the Arctic regions as «Viking raids of science» (Wråkberg, 2019, p. 172). It is Nordenskiöld who established «a Nordic polar tradition», which paved the way for later scientific activities in the same regions that were «significant in defining national identities and shaping scientific profiles» (Ivi, p. 166).

These polar explorations became quests for manliness in both Sweden and Norway as well. For Norwegian fisheries, sealing, and whaling; as part of scientific quests in the polar regions; and for record-breaking sailors and skiers exploring unknown territories (Ivi, p. 168; Berg, 2004, pp. 265-269); Wråkberg states that the Arctic wilderness offered «a worthy field on which to harvest glory». He adds that:

«Mental and social strain during extended periods away from home added to a protracted erosion of discipline and cultural values. This all had to be counteracted by the manliness, skill and co-operation of all members of the expedition and the knowledge, planning and leadership of its commander. These were not traits that scientists had previously been known for, but represented new opportunities for heroism and fame, which some of them at mid-nineteenth century saw benefits to seize before a wide public and a growing set of colonially minded private sponsors of polar exploration» (Wråkberg, 2019, p. 168).

This tradition of male “Viking raids”, introduced by Nordenskiöld, was the start of a new era for the Nordic nations. By the dissolution of the union with Sweden, the Norwegians had adopted and had essentially taken over the concept of “Viking raids” of science. Both Fridtjof Nansen crossing Greenland in 1888 and the Nansen expedition with the ship *Fram* in 1893-1896 were a continuation of this “Nordenskiöld tradition”. In the polar history of Norway, the period from 1887 to 1928 has been characterised as “the era of the heroes” by the editors

Drivenes and Jølle (*Norsk Polarhistorie* / The History of Norway in the Polar Regions). The value of the polar hero “as a role model” in the 19th and early-20th century schools of Norway should not be underestimated, according to Wråkberg (Wråkberg, 2019, p. 170). He adds that the «cult of athletic and self-supportive manliness was first combined with Christian values; later it became imbued by sociobiological ideas [sic]» (Ibidem).

For another author, Atle Næss the perspective of heroism and manliness is vital in the Norwegian idolisation of the polar explorer (Næss, 2004, p. 100). *Norsk Polarhistorie* also names Nansen, Otto Sverdrup (1854-1930), and Roald Amundsen (1872-1928) as the “three greatest” explorers in Norwegian polar history. Otto Sverdrup took part in Nansen’s crossing of Greenland in 1888 and was also a member of the *Fram* expedition together with Nansen again in 1893-1896 (Barr, 2004, p. 397). He furthered his exploration ambitions by borrowing the polar vessel *Fram* for an expedition into the Baffin/Qikiqtaaluk Region of Canada in 1898-1902 (Ivi, p. 399). Here he, in traditional European colonial style, named isles, inlets, bays, and the archipelagic waters after the Swedish-Norwegian royalty, expedition sponsors, and famous Norwegian explorers or gave them traditional Norwegian place names, disregarding the names used by the Innuits living there (Næss, 2004, pp. 100-110). The aim of the *Fram* II expedition was mainly to reach the North Pole by sailing in though the territories west of Greenland in a race against other international expeditions, but this goal was not achieved. However, the presence of the Norwegians in the Canadian Arctic is still identifiable by the shape of regional semiotically Norwegian names for certain locations (Ivi, p. 110).

Roald Amundsen took up the gauntlet after Nansen and Sverdrup, first by placing Norway on the Antarctic map in 1910-1912; there, he – in competition with Robert Falcon Scott’s expedition – became the leader of the first expedition to reach the South Pole in December 1912 (Ivi, pp. 136-163). Although the main reason for the expedition was to set this record, there were elements of research in Amundsen’s expedition and even more so during his attempt to go through the Northeast Passage (1918-1920) and the Chucki and East Siberian seas (1921-1925) with the ship *Maud*.

Losing the results of research out of sight?

Are we about to forget about the research efforts achieved by the polar explorers in all these critical reflections on the masculine nationalism? Arnoldus Schytte Blix has recently demonstrated the significant amount of scientific material on meteorology, terrestrial magnetism, geology, palaeontology, oceanography, ethnography, zoology, and botany that was published as a result of the expedition through the Northeast Passage, under Amundsen’s firm leadership (Schytte Blix, 2016, p. 1). Schytte Blix asks the fundamental question,

“Was Roald Amundsen a scientist?”. The reason was the recent criticism from historians dissecting Amundsen’s whereabouts and actions, which resulted in a narrow perspective only conserving Amundsen as part of the nation state building. Schytte Blix claimed there was a tendency of forgetting the science when writing about the life of polar explorers. The conclusion of Schytte Blix seemed to be that Amundsen “certainly was” a polar researcher, although perhaps not a scientist. The example of the polar exploration of Roald Amundsen illustrates the Janus face of Norwegian polar research. The polar explorer was on one hand collecting material for scientific use, but on the other hand giving ammunition to nationalism and national expansion into the polar regions. In recent research on the historiography of polar research, there has been underlying criticism about the role of research as part of a somewhat chauvinist nationalism. This criticism was part of the motivation behind Schytte Blix’s article. Amundsen’s scientific achievements were overshadowed by issues of his personal qualities; though his scientific feats were «celebrated at the time», he has since »received scant recognition in more recent assessments» of his accomplishments (Ivi, p. 1).

In Norwegian historiography, the Janus face of Norwegian polar records, the role of the masculine Norwegian is central in during and after the eventful crossing across Greenland on skis in 1888 by Fridtjof Nansen. The reception of this particular expedition was first and foremost seen as a Norwegian record attempt by a Norwegian hero, therefor a vital part of the creation of the Norwegian identity (Aas, 2003, p. 172). By the accomplishment, the skier came into the spotlight and became a significant role model for the coming generation. The country of Norway and generations of Norwegians were encouraged and influenced by the nation’s polar history, which became an exercise in manhood and manliness (Fulsås, 2004, pp. 189-192 and 196-200). The polar explorations related to research, but this research was entangled with a mix of national pride and the struggle for independence from the union with Sweden. One Norwegian narrative is that Nansen and his men, through the expedition of 1888-1889, tread their ski tracks straight into the path of the dissolution of the union with Sweden (Ivi, pp. 174-180 and 184-189). By this Fulsås saw a direct connection between Nansen’s achievements and its consequences for the Norwegian self-esteem, which again triggered off the confidence needed for a political confrontation with the Swedes.

The Norwegian polar explorers Fridtjof Nansen and Roald Amundsen were both firmly placed in a tradition of European exploitation and conquest of the New World, which started centuries earlier with the voyages of discovery in the 15th and 16th century (Merriman, 2010, pp. 35-43). In addition the development of the two Norwegian and their expeditions were marked by the same concepts and ideas like in the previous years both when it comes to the necessity of developing a modern system of concepts vital in classifying and systematising white spots on the western world’s map. The rhetoric and semiotic

were part of the same system of new modern explorations, too. Expressions like “imperialism”, “conquest”, “scientific expeditions”, “exploration”, and “nation-building” was basically a continuation of former explorers of the European hemisphere.

The end of the polar hero – welcome entertainment and realpolitik

Although the Norwegian explorers arrived late, their role has been of huge significance in the history of explorers. This paper has placed Norwegian exploration within a European imperialist perspective and has examined its nationalist approach and development as well as the underlying tensions between nationalism and anti-nationalist critique during the 20th century. This critique has contributed to ending the old-fashioned chauvinism associated with exploration and the explorers themselves.

The main focus of this paper has also been to view explorers and explorations in connection with the growth of empires or nation-states and, in the Norwegian case, with laying the foundation for a national identity and self-understanding, the explorers really have been part of the modern invention of nationalism, which historians like Eric Hobsbawm have highlighted lately. Nationalism has given significant fuel to the modern world the last two decades, as shown in the Norwegian case (Hobsbawm, 2013, pp. 1-2).

Even though the polar hero still was a significant hero in the Norwegian public for years after World War II, there is a tendency to tone down the heroism and national sentiments related to their achievements. The reflections from Schytte Blix seems to illustrate that there is a stronger awareness directed towards science, and that the nationalist and political spheres is toned down as sectors of lesser importance and that Norwegian polar explorers in the post-war period lessened their nationalist sentiments. In later years Norwegian exploration have been part of the individual adventures of some, or used for infotainment, edutainment, or entertainment purposes afterwards. Other expeditions are strictly research based. The Swedish scholar within the history of science, Sverker Sörlin, found “some deep-seated contrasts” in the ways that Sweden, Norway, and Denmark have developed their national traditions of science regarding the Arctic and North Atlantic in the post war period; he states that, for Norway, the “geopolitics of science” have been at the forefront of Arctic research in the post-war period (Sörlin, 2014, pp. 288-294). Circumpolar science was part of the Norwegian “realpolitik”, playing a vital role. By this the role of the Arctic regions has been to fulfil Norwegian obligations within the foreign policy and security policy. The consequences of the realpolitik was to direct the efforts of polar research within a NATO-sphere in a Cold War context (Ivi, p. 288).

Nevertheless, Norwegians like Thor Heyerdahl (1914-2002), Helge Ingstad (1899-2001), and Anne Stine Ingstad (1918-1997) represented a new

development wherein explorers became part of an exploration and entertainment industry. The same occurred for skiers such as Stein P. Aasheim, Liv Arnesen, Monica Kristensen, Børge Ousland, and Erling Kagge, who made encounters into the polar regions in part for research purposes but mainly in the name of adventure, self-realisation, commerce, or a combination of these aspects (Goksøyr, 2004, pp. 295-342).

Norway has developed its polar research in a less nationalistic direction and international cooperation is more explicit than earlier. The emphasis is consequently on science as a means of getting more knowledge about the global challenges, like climate change and the state of the earth. Still national aims are still vital, as when the Norwegian research vessels are doing research or mapping and surveying the vast ocean around Norway as well as around the Norwegian annexations in the Arctic and Antarctic waters. Although exploration and scientific research are the main targets, there are aspects of economic, political and national interests involved in the activities. Norway as a polar nation is in good standing with other modern-day polar nations, with research stations on Jan Mayen, Svalbard, and Queen Maud Land in the Antarctic. In 2013, the Norwegian Research Council concluded that Norway was the fifth biggest contributor to global polar research (NFR, 2013, p. 4). Today, Norwegian polar research has become part of an international cooperation addressing current scientific challenges related to the planet's cold areas. Nonetheless, one of the visions for and aims of polar research is still to compete «on a high level in the international competition» through “high activity and production [...] high quality [...] visibility and influence» (NFR, p. 2013, p. 9). Thus, Norwegian polar research remains ambitious and competitive.

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The role of the polar explorer in the Norwegian identity – Norway is today a considerable power when it comes to international research in the Arctic and Antarctic region, with research stations and research ships, providing knowledge in a vast area of science. The background of this position partly is based on a polar exploration and research walking hand in hand with the nation state building and nationalism in the 19th and 20th century state formation of the dawning Norwegian nation state. The article aims to give more information about this connection. It also aims to see 19th and 20th century exploration as part of the enlightenment and discovery of the new world, and as part of a more nationalist nation state formation process, where explorers were to find inspiration for former glorious times in the Middle Ages.

Keywords: Nationalism; Polar exploration; Norway; Roald Amundsen; Fridtjof Nansen.

Il ruolo delle esplorazioni polari nell'identità norvegese – La Norvegia è attualmente una delle maggiori potenze nel campo della ricerca internazionale nella regione artica e antartica. Le stazioni di ricerca e le navi norvegesi forniscono conoscenze che coprono vaste aree scientifiche. Il background di questa posizione sullo scenario internazionale si fonda sia sull'esplorazione polare che sulla ricerca, elementi base che sono andati di pari passo con la costruzione e la formazione dello stato nel 19° e nel 20° secolo. In Norvegia, la scienza ha sempre ricoperto un ruolo centrale nello sviluppo dello stato nazionale e del nazionalismo. Questo articolo si propone di fornire maggiori informazioni su questo legame, oltre a evidenziare come l'esplorazione del XIX e del XX secolo faccia parte dell'individuazione e della scoperta del nuovo mondo, oltre che di un processo di formazione dello stato nazione in chiave più nazionalista; stato nazione per il quale gli esploratori dovevano trovare ispirazione nei tempi gloriosi del Medioevo.

Parole-chiave: Nazionalismo; Esplorazione polare; Norvegia; Roald Amundsen; Fridtjof Nansen.