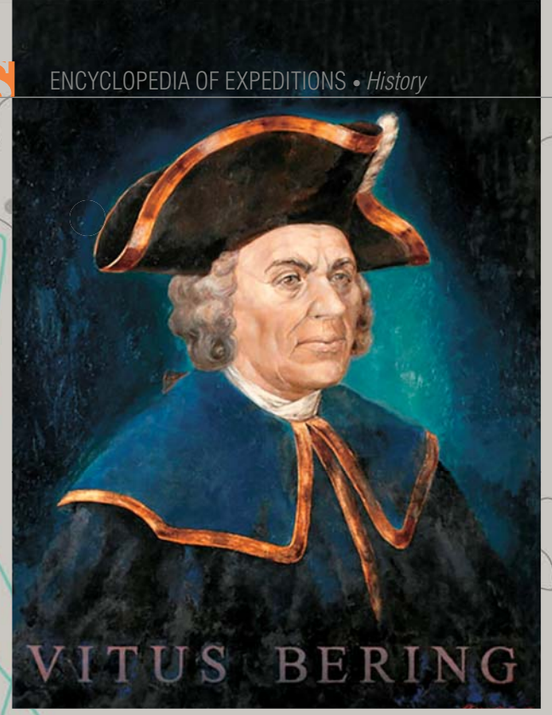
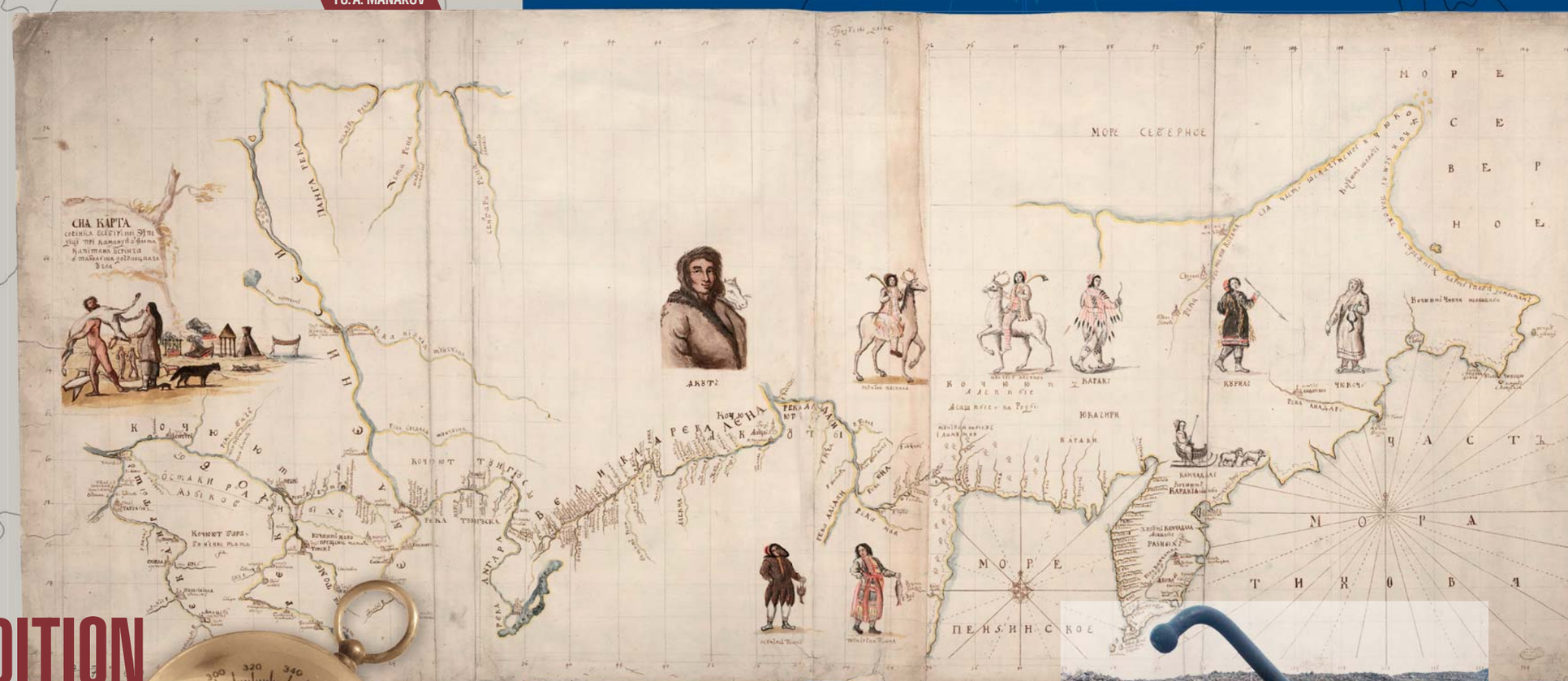
YU. A. MANAKOV



THE FIRST KAMCHATKA EXPEDITION BY COMMANDER BERING

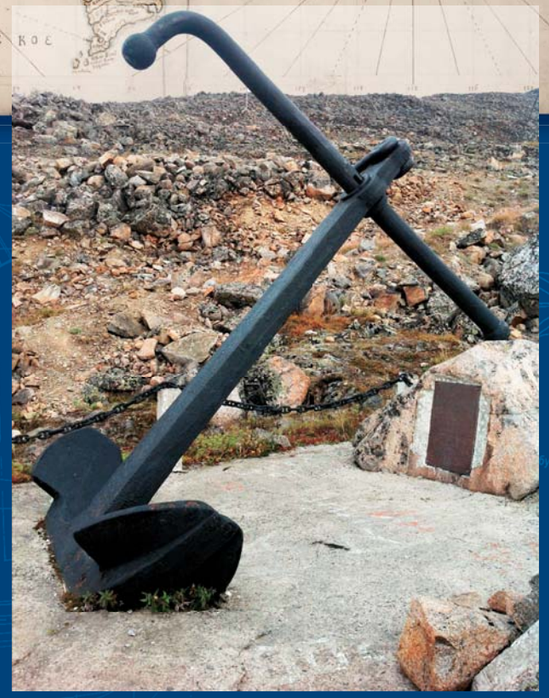
300 YEARS of the geographical discoveries under St. Andrew's flag



Postmortem facial reconstruction of Vitus Jonassen Bering. *© CC BY-SA 4.0/Institute of Archeology, Russian Academy of Sciences*

"This map was composed in the Siberian expedition by the crew under Captain Bering, from Tobolsk unto the Tsokotsky [Chukotsky] corner." A version of this map was sent by Vitus Bering to the Admiralty Board in St. Petersburg in attachment to his report in early 1730. *World Digital Library Collection. Public Domain*

After the victorious end of the Great Northern War (1700–1721) with the Kingdom of Sweden, which the Russian Tsardom fought in coalition with states of Northern Europe, Peter I expanded the borders of Russia from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean. Meanwhile, Siberia as well as the entire northeastern part of the newly formed Russian Empire remained terra incognita. *The expansion necessitated systematic geographical and naturalistic research over a vast area, mapping of the shores of the new empire, and laying down a marker of Russian presence at the convergence of Asia and North America. This task was entrusted to a geographical mission that was sent eastward to the ocean by order of Peter I under the commandership of Captain Vitus Bering. This mission was called the First Kamchatka Expedition*



Monument to Vitus Bering in the form of a ship's anchor on the ocean shore in the village of Nikolskoye (Aleut municipal district). *© CC BY-SA 4.0/ Abrikoss*

View of Neva's banks: downstream from the Imperial Palace to the building of the Academy of Sciences. Late 18th century. *Copper engraving by Cl. M. Fessard (under the direction of Fr.-D. Née) after a drawing by Ch. de Lespinasse. British Library. Public Domain.*

Having safeguarded our Fatherland from the enemy, we ought to seek glory for this state through art and science. Shall we not be more fortunate in exploring this path than the Dutch and the English, who have repeatedly attempted to search the shores of America

Peter I (1724)

Key words: Peter I, the First Kamchatka Expedition, Captain Vitus Bering, ship "Saint Gabriel", Siberia, Kamchatka Peninsula, North America, Bering Strait

The Russian Tsar Peter I, once he had chosen for Russia a path of pragmatic European development, attached great importance to creating a navy as well as establishing educational institutions in order to form a class of technically competent specialists. Stunning is the list of initiatives that he launched on the statewide scale.

Thus, as early as in 1704, St. Petersburg, the future new capital of the Russian Empire, saw the beginning of construction – according to the drawings signed by the tsar himself – of the Admiralty, which was originally a shipyard. In 1712, the first sailing ship of the line, *Poltava,* was set afloat, which was followed, three years later, by the 64-gun battleship *Ingermanland*. This ship, built according to Peter I's own design, was an embodiment of beauty and military power. The emergence of the Baltic Fleet made Russia one of the world's leading maritime powers.

The domestic cartography system, an independent and fairly advanced one for that time, was developing with the participation of specialists from Western Europe, who were enlisted in service and were to teach Russian students. In 1701, the School of Mathematical and Navigational Sciences was established in Moscow by order of Peter I. This school became one of Russia's first state educational institutions to accept representatives of all classes, except serfs. In 1715, the Naval Academy was founded in St. Petersburg, an educational institution intended exclusively for the training of young nobles.

The tsar's educational program culminated in 1724 with the establishment of the Academy of Sciences and Arts, which incorporated, by order of Peter I, a university and a gymnasium. The Academy was also given jurisdiction over Russia's first state library, which was founded ten years earlier.

The victory over the powerful Swedish army on land and at sea led to the conclusion of the Nystad Peace Treaty in 1721, according to which Russia gained the right of access to the Baltic Sea, which opened up new strategic and trade prospects. Russia acquired the status of an empire, and its ruler began to be called the Emperor of All Russia.

Throughout his reign, Peter the Great demonstrated a keen interest and curiosity in the geography of his vast country as well as in the contemporary maps. When the Great Northern War was over, he could turn his attention to the eastern outskirts of his empire, where he saw the need to map the outlines of the previously unknown shores and give Russian names to the so far nameless seas, islands, capes, and straits. From this point on, geographical expeditions became an instrument of state administration, hence their excellent organization and generous funding.

Yuri A. MANAKOV, Dr. Sci. (Biology); Leading Researcher, Soil Reclamation Laboratory, Institute of Soil Science and Agrochemistry, Siberian Branch, Russian Academy of Sciences (Novosibirsk); Head of the Interregional Competence Center for Postmining and Ecology, Kuzbass State Technical University (Kemerovo).
Author and coauthor of more than 150 scientific papers and 5 monographs as well as textbooks on botany and regional heritage studies

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Peter I, the last Russian tsar and the first Russian emperor. Painting by C. Guttenberg. Engraving by J. Houbraken after a drawing by C. de Moor, 1717. *Public Domain Dedication*

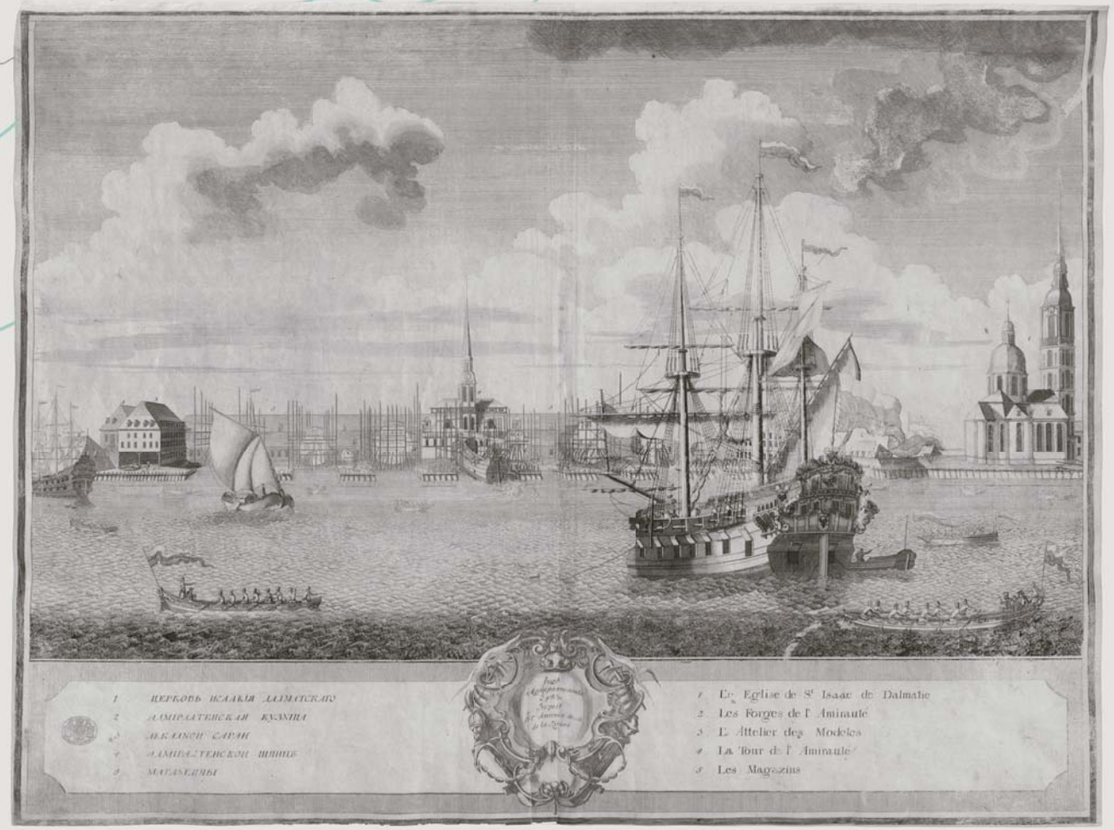
The emperor's last plan

As early as the beginning of 1719, two years before the Treaty of Nystad, Peter I personally instructed geodesists Ivan M. Evreinov and Fyodor F. Luzhin to sail incognito from Okhotsk to Kamchatka and then to the Kuril Islands and Japan, which was known back then by hearsay only. The envoys did their best to fulfill their duty. In 1721, traveling by the boat *Vostok*, they reached the central part of the Kuril Islands, drew up a map of Kamchatka from precise instrumental measurements, and obtained fresh information about Japan. Admittedly, it was Evreinov's report that had a decisive influence on the emperor's opinion when choosing options for further development of the eastern regions of the empire.

On December 23, 1724, Peter I signed a decree on outfitting an expedition to Kamchatka with a very broad range of tasks. Andrey K. Nartov, a scientist and engineer as well as member of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences, wrote in his memoirs: "...in that very month, when the Almighty set an end to the life of Peter the Great and when His Majesty already felt painful attacks in his body, his tireless spirit continued to work for the benefit and glory of our Fatherland – for he composed and wrote with his own hand the instructions for the Kamchatka expedition, which was to find out and search by sea whether Asia is connected with America in the northeast <...> Having handed over the instructions to the summoned general admiral, he said: 'Poor health forced me to stay at home; these days I remembered what I had long been thinking about and what other things prevented me from undertaking, that is, about a path through the Arctic Sea to China and India'" (Maikov, 1891, p. 111).

Evidently, the idea of finding a sea route from Arkhangelsk to the Pacific Ocean appeared in the emperor's mind a long time ago; he understood the importance of this route, which, back then, was not feasible in practice. In the 21st century, due to global warming, this idea no longer seems so utopian and efforts are underway to develop infrastructure for the Northern Sea Route along the coast of the Russian Arctic.

The instructions for the head of the expedition, which Peter I wrote with his own hand a few weeks before his



View of the Admiralty from River Neva. *Engraving by O. Elliger III after an original drawing by H. Marcellis. 1729 (after a drawing dated 1725). British Library. Public Domain*

death, consisted of three points: "One must build one or two boats with decks in Kamchatka or in another place. On these boats, one must [sail] past the land that goes northward by expectation, since no one knows where it ends; this land seems to be part of America. One must seek where it meets America and get to any town in European provinces, or, if one sees a European ship, one must find out from them what this sea coast is called and put it down in writing, and visit the coast in person, obtain an original report, and, having put it on the map, come back here" (Berkh, 1823, p. 3).

Preparing an expedition with such an important mission was entrusted to Count Fyodor M. Apraksin, the first president of the Admiralty Board. He supervised the recruitment of the team, the drawing up of the budget and *koshts* (funds) necessary for following the route and building new ships, and the sending of requests for assistance Prince Mikhail V. Dolgorukov, a new Siberian governor, who, in turn, sent orders to chieftains in Kazan and Tobolsk.

The expedition's route was to go through the entire unknown, uninhabited, cold Siberia as far as the Pacific Ocean, where Russia had not a single ship. Therefore, one had to deliver everything – "from the nail to the anchor" – to Okhotsk, the largest (11 houses) settlement on the northeastern coast, which had a shipyard.

The commandership of the expedition was entrusted to a Danish captain in Russian service, Vitus Jonassen (Ivan Ivanovich) Bering, commander of the 90-gun battleship Lesnoye, who had experience of long-distance voyages, commanded sea transport, and participated in battles. His assistants were two young lieutenants: Aleksey Ilyich Chirikov, a graduate of the Naval Academy, and Martyn Petrovich Shpanberg (Martin Spanberg), a Dane. Subordinate to them was Petr Avraamovich Chaplin, a graduate of the Naval Academy, who kept a journal of the voyage and knew cartography (subsequently, Bering would give credit to Chaplin "for his plentiful and diligent service" by promoting him to a midshipman).

According to the initial plan, the expedition party was to include scientists, but no one could be recruited at that time. The Academy of Sciences existed "on paper" only; one was still sending invitations to European scholars to come to Russia. The empire's only natural scientist with a university education, Daniel Gottlieb Messerschmidt, had been staying in Siberia for six years, doing research on the orders of Peter I. Therefore, the only trained specialists that set off on a long journey were about a dozen geodesists, cartographers, physicians, and midshipmen.

"Expedition of Lord Commander Bering"

On January 24, 1725, a convoy of 25 heavily loaded sleds left the gates of the Admiralty in St. Petersburg. All in all, the expedition party consisted of 69 people, mostly sailors, soldiers, and craftsmen.

In mid-March, the party arrived in Tobolsk, back then the capital of the vast Siberian province, which stretched from the Urals to the shores of the Pacific Ocean. The crew stayed there for three months until the ice broke up and then went, with all their assets, down the rivers Irtysh, Ob, and Ket to Makovsky Fortress. From there, they portaged their vessels across a roughly 100-km-wide watershed to the town of Yeniseisk. Here, Bering accidentally met Messerschmidt, who was returning to St. Petersburg with his own convoy, carrying over a ton of rarities and exhibits. Subsequently, all these riches went to the Academy of Sciences and greatly diversified the Kunstkamera collections.

From Yeniseisk, Bering and his crew went further eastward by two great Siberian rivers: first down River Yenisei and then upstream Upper Tunguska (so one called back then the lower reaches of River Angara). They reached the town of Ilimsk only by the end of September on small boats pulled by horses. From here began the so-called Lena portage between River Ilim, the right tributary of Angara, and River Lena, a path that was still used even in the 19th century.

Bering planned to set off to Yakutsk at once in several parties; it was only the shortage of carts to transport the increased expedition assets that stopped him from doing so. So the expedition decided to overwinter in Ilimsk, where they would complete preparations for the next phase.

A testimonial of Commander Bering, given by Georg Steller, a member of the academic party of the Second Kamchatka Expedition: "The late Captain Commander Vitus Bering was a Dane by birth, a righteous and pious Christian by faith, and a well-mannered, friendly personality of calm disposition, which is why he was adored by the entire crew, irrespective of rank <…> He always did his utmost to accomplish his mission in the best way possible although he himself admitted and often complained that he had not enough strength to bear such a burden. Be it known that this man was not born to make quick decisions and carry out daring ventures, but quaere, given his devotion, patience, and foresight, could another, more restless man, have done more?" (Steller, 1995, p. 111)

DANISH SEAMAN IN RUSSIAN SERVICE

Vitus Jonassen Bering was born in 1681 in the port city of Horsens (Denmark). On his mother's side, he belonged to a distinguished lineage, but the family lived modestly, for the father held the office of a customs inspector. As a young man, Bering came as a cabin boy to a ship heading to Danish colonies in the East Indies. Long sea voyages made him a good sailor. Subsequently, he graduated from a cadet corps in Amsterdam. Thanks to his acquaintance with Admiral Cornelius Cruys, commander of the Russian Baltic Fleet, in 1703, 22-year-old Bering entered service in the Russian Navy with the rank of second lieutenant. He sailed in the Sea of Azov, participated in the war with Turkey, and made a voyage from Arkhangelsk to Kronstadt around the Scandinavian Peninsula. By 1720, Bering had risen to a second-rank captain and later took command of the first Russian 90-gun battleship *Lesnoye*.
After the victory over the Swedes, intrigues at the Admiralty hindered Bering from receiving a promotion, unlike his younger, although less industrious, colleagues. In 1724, he submitted a petition for resignation, which the Admiralty did not oppose: "The captains of the Naval Fleet <…> and Vitus Bering, upon their petitions and based on extracts from their service record, shall be dismissed to return home, granted passports issued by the Admiralty Board, paid their deserved salary up until the day of dismissal, and additionally reimbursed travel expenses for the road" (Berkh, 1823, p. 11).

The materials about this period in Bering's life present contradictory accounts. Thus, there are many versions of the story of his resignation and return to the Navy. One way or another, five months after his resignation, Bering returned to service as a first-rank captain and soon, at the recommendation of the Admiralty Board, received the appointment as the head of the First Kamchatka Expedition

For a long time, a portrait thought to be a depiction of Vitus J. Bering was mistakenly identified as a painting of a nobleman from the Peter the Great era, discovered in the attic of a member of the Bering family in 1946 (*left*). *Public Domain*

After the exhumation of Bering's remains in 1991 and the subsequent forensic examination, researchers suggested that the portrait depicts a Danish writer V.P. Bering, an uncle of the captain commander. Based on a plaster cast of Bering's skull, Prof. V.N. Zvyagin reconstructed the actual appearance of the famed seafarer (*above*)

Former merchant's house on the Staroi Ratushi Square in Vyborg, the family home of Anna Ch. Bering, née Pülse. *© CC BY-SA 4.0/ Ludvig14*

Letter from Anna Ch. Bering to her father M. Pülse, written in Okhotsk on February 5, 1740. *Public Domain*

COMMANDER'S WIFE

In 1713, the 32-year-old Lieutenant Captain Vitus Bering in service with the Russian Baltic Fleet and Anna Christina Pülse, the eldest of four daughters of a wealthy Vyborg merchant of German origin, were recorded in the church register of the Swedish parish in Vyborg as legal spouses. During 28 years of marriage, they had eight children, of whom four survived.

It is from the letters of Bering's wife, which she wrote in German, thoroughly and truthfully, to her relatives and husband, that we know about the famous captain's private life. When he was appointed to lead the First Kamchatka Expedition, Anna Christina blessed her husband to go to the distant Siberia, on a most dangerous journey to the ends of the earth. She spent the five years of separation in Vyborg, virtually never stepping outside its confines. The only personal letter from Bering that remains extant is the one he wrote to his aunt in Horsens after returning from the expedition, in which he writes: "My wife, thank God, is alive. Of the eight children, three are alive, and soon we are expecting a fourth" (Beglov, 1965, pp. 49–50).

The second expedition to Kamchatka began as early as three years after the first, and Anna decided to go with her husband. The couple sent the older children to a boarding school in St. Petersburg and took the two younger ones with them. *Komandorsha* ('Commander's wife'), as the expedition members called Anna, loaded some household items into the carts: bed linen, porcelain and silverware, and even a clavichord for playing music.

Six months later, the family arrived in Yakutsk, the *de facto* capital of the entire northeast of Russia, where they had to stay for another three years due to difficulties in preparing for a dash to Kamchatka. Harsh nature, a long and freezing winter, household chores, boring talks, chronic drunkenness and rudeness of the local Cossacks… But the worst thing was the gossip and denunciations against the commander himself and his family.

In September 1737, Bering continued his journey alone, but was suddenly struck by a terrible cold in Okhotsk. Anna, who was supposed to return to St. Petersburg the following spring, set out on a risky journey with her young children to help her husband and stayed with him in Okhotsk until the end of the summer of 1740.

For her to go back to the west, one built a palanquin since wheeled transport proved highly impractical for travel in those places and at that time of year. Anna also took along all the possessions acquired by the Berings during the expedition, including furs, Chinese porcelain, textiles, and other "curiosities," which, in effect, turned out to be her "widow's pension" (Okhotina-Lind, 2003)

Back then the only way to get from the European Russia to the Pacific Ocean stretched via a multitude of land routes, waterways, and portages. The relatively direct Babinov Road, suitable for horse riding, reached only as far as Tobolsk. There were no roads beyond that town, except for routes along riverbeds that swirled through dense forests, bypassing swamps, rocks, and mountains. This way, explorers traversed vast areas of West and East Siberia right up to Ilimsk Fortress on Lake Baikal.

Further on, they reached Yakutsk downstream the Lena River. This combined water–land route ran along the Lena–Aldan–Maya–Yudoma river system, reaching the Yudoma Cross, from where they portaged to River Urak. Then they traversed, also by portage, to River Okhota, from where they floated downstream to Okhotsk

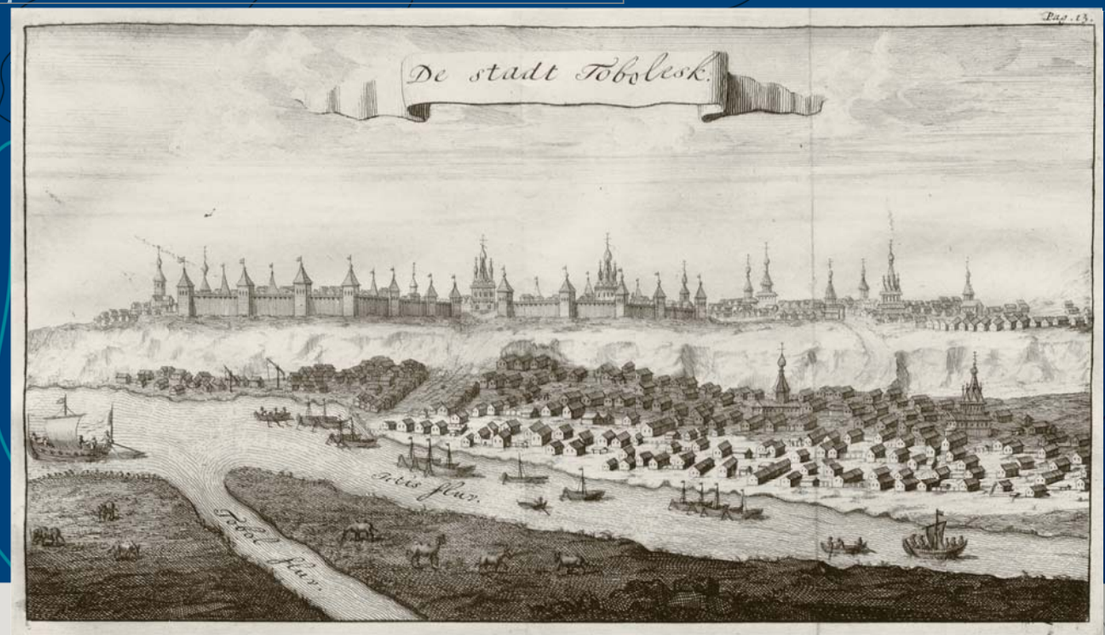
The expedition route across the territory of the Russian Empire passed through the following cities and towns: Vologda, Veliky Ustyug, Verkhoturye, Tyumen, Tobolsk, Yeniseisk, Ilimsk, Yakutsk, Okhotsk. The continental route was a total of 9000 km

By an order issued in Tobolsk, all chieftain offices were to supply Bering with everything he needed. Throughout the entire route, in the villages, towns, and forts of Siberia, the convoy was constantly replenished with provisions and equipment, prepared in advance for the "expedition of Lord Commander Bering." But nothing was ever enough for the commander, who kept sending complaint letters to the Admiralty Board.

Admittedly, he must have had reasons to complain since the arrival of a large expedition headed by nobles from the Russian capital would mostly annoy local governors and chieftains rather than arouse in them a desire to oblige and supply the expedition amply with all essentials. So they all gave "as much as they could"; nevertheless, up until Yakutsk, the expedition did not experience any major shortages.

Bering's party arrived at Yakutsk Fortress just shy of five months later, on June 16, 1726. During the campaign, its numbers increased to 400 people, mainly due to the need to hire carpenters, blacksmiths, and other craftsmen for building ships. For Yakutsk, which had as few as 300 households back then, these guests were way too many in number.

The most difficult part of the journey still lay ahead, namely, getting to Okhotsk. Approaching the sea proved difficult due to the lack of roads, trails, or clear landmarks. The mountainous terrain was covered completely with larch forests, swamps, and fast shallow rivers, along which there were a few settlements of local peoples: the Yakuts and the Tungus. And most importantly, there was no food in Okhotsk other than fish.



Tobolsk. *Drawing from the book* Driejaarige reize naar China… *by E. Y. Ides (1710). Maastricht University Library. Public Domain*

EXPEDITION'S HISTORIOGRAPHER

Petr Avraamovich Chaplin, one of the participants of the First Kamchatka Expedition, was the author of Travel Journal of the Expedition, a unique source on the history of this outstanding endeavor.

By the time the 26-year-old midshipman became part of the expedition led by Bering, he was an experienced seaman: "he knows navigator's art and constable duties, soldier exercises and sailor labor, masterfully handles turning the ship and other nautical practices." During the expedition, Chaplin mainly attended to Bering, carrying out his orders, and kept records of all financial expenses and cargo with utmost honesty and accuracy.

Over the next five years, from the very first day of the journey until his return to St. Petersburg on March 1, 1730, he kept The Journal of Life on the Kamchatka Expedition by Midshipman Chaplin, where he carefully and meticulously recorded every event that took place on the expedition, describing every settlement along the route – the name of the village or hamlet, what river it stood on, the number of houses and residents, and the distance between settlements – together with notes about remarkable natural phenomena and the condition of the atmosphere.

The works by Chaplin and Chirikov contributed greatly to creating the final map of the expedition, which largely surpassed the previous maps in accuracy and became the basis for depicting this part of the continent on all Western European maps. The original map was lost, but it was duplicated and preserved in copies

Therefore, Bering was faced with the task of stocking up on flour for several years ahead, but such amounts simply did exist in Yakutsk. Another challenge was the transportation of the freight needed for construction, which had increased incredibly.

Both in cold and hunger

Bering decided to make their way to Okhotsk in three expedition parties, each with a special assignment. The captain himself was to lead the horse-riding party with provisions and a light load. Spanberg was to deliver the heavy cargo by boat along the rivers as close as possible to the Sea of Okhotsk, and Chirikov was to prepare food supplies to be transported to Okhotsk in the spring of the following year.

From a letter by Vitus Bering: "Lieutenant Chirikov writes in his journal that in the town of Yakutsk there are three hundred Russian households, and close to the town dwell thirty thousand Yakuts. Over the town hung darkness from fires caused by drought; for always in Yakutsk falls but little rain, and therefore grass grows sparsely; thus, this summer no grass grew save in spots where the river overflowed its banks. Likewise, snowfall is meager, yet bitter cold prevails relentlessly" (Berkh, 1823)

At the end of the 17th century, Yeniseisk was a "double fortress," consisting of a "small town," i.e., the fortress as such, and a "big town," i.e., the fortified settlement. *Engraving from the book* Noord en Oost Tartarye (Northern and Eastern Tartaria) *by N. Witsen (1692). Public Domain*

Bering's party, which also included Chaplin (one of the future historiographers of the First Kamchatka Expedition), set out from Yakutsk at the end of August on 663 horses by the shortest yet in no way easy route. Hillsides, passes, windfalls, burnt areas, and numerous swampy fords exhausted both the people and the heavily-laden animals. Two hundred and sixty-seven horses died on the way. Bering wrote in his report to the Admiralty about the hardships of the journey as follows: "I truly cannot put it into words how arduously I traversed this road. Had it not been for God's grace in providing cold weather and a light snow cover, not a single horse would have survived. As for the number of horses lost or fallen behind within our entire party, that remains unknown" (*Kamchatskie ekspeditsii*..., 2015, p. 45).

Nevertheless, seven weeks later, at the end of October, the commander's party became the first to reach Okhotsk. By that time, more than twenty months had passed since Bering left St. Petersburg.

The greatest trials befell to Lieutenant Spanberg's party, which set off down River Lena on July 7 on 13 flat-bottomed riverboats. The main mission of the party, numbering more than 200 soldiers and servants, was to reach, before the frosts set in, the Yudoma cross, erected at the confluence of the rivers Yudoma and Krestovka, and to transport the freight from there on horses. But, despite the lieutenant's resolve and tenacity, success eluded him.

According to Shpangberg, Yudoma turned out to be "very shallow, swift-flowing, and strewn with stony shoals" and "loaded vessels made only one *versta* per day" (*Ibid.*, p. 49). In November, the boats froze into the ice, 350 km short of the destination. However, Spanberg did not want to wait until the summer ice drift and firmly decided to drag the freight to the sea on dogs, which he ordered to take away together with sleds from the local Yakuts and Tunguses, who lived on Yudoma's banks.

"From Tobolsk we proceeded aboard four flat-bottomed vessels upstream Rivers Irtysh and Ob to Narym. From Narym we ascended River Ket upstream up to Makovsky Fortress, arriving there on July 19th. Along these rivers, starting from Narym, no peoples live whatsoever.

"River Tunguska has numerous big and small rapids; it is fast-flowing and rocky, rendering navigation impossible without pilots. The river spans roughly four verstas in width; scattered along its course stand sparse Russian villages, whilst its banks tower steeply above" (Berkh, 1823, p. 14)

Ilim Fortress. *From* Drawing Book of Siberia, Compiled by Semen Remezov, a Tobolsk Boyar's Son, in 1701. *Public Domain*

This became a real calamity for the local people, but the Dane was merciless. Not speaking Russian, even on the ship he would suppress any disobedience among the sailors with two arguments: a whip and a gallows. What could the poor natives oppose to the brutal force... The soldiers grabbed away a hundred dog sleds, which they loaded with cannons, anchors, sails, and rigging.

The long dog caravan set off by the riverbed to the east. Along with the Russians went the Tunguses mobilized by Spanberg. The heavy

View of the town of Yakutsk. *Engraving from the book* Noord en Oost Tartarye (Northern and Eastern Tartaria) *by N. Witsen (1692). Public Domain*

load prevented the party from moving quickly; the food ran out and starvation set in. According to Bering's memoirs, they "ate rawhide bags and all kinds of raw skins, leather clothes and shoes" (Berg, 1935, p. 96). The Tunguses fled along with their dogs, but Spanberg's men were too exhausted to catch them. By the end of the journey from Yakutsk to Okhotsk, the party diminished to 60 people. The rest either fled or died of hunger, cold, and disease, including the geodesist Luzhin.

At last, two months later, 40 sled teams out of 100 reached Okhotsk. Men pulled those sleds that had no dog teams. A seasoned sailor, Spanberg himself barely survived. As stated in his report, they "progressed through considerable adversity, facing severe frosts and a dearth of provisions <...> to Okhotsk Fortress I marched ceaselessly, day and night" (Berkh, 1823).

Things were not going well for Bering either. When he arrived in Okhotsk, it turned out there was no food for the horses, so they were dying one after another. People had to carry logs, stones, and clay upon themselves in the unbearably cold wind in order to build shelters. Some members of the expedition showed signs of nervous breakdown.

The scribe Semen Turchaninov declared Bering subject to investigation by the Word and Deed Department. The specific reason is unclear but this charge meant treason against the ruler and carried the threat of harsh penalty.

"Okhotsk Fortress, says Chaplin, stands upon the bank of River Okhota; eleven houses reside within its walls; inhabitants thereof are Russians, who live off fish rather than bread. There are enough yasak-paying natives under the fortress governance" (*Kamchatskie ekspeditsii*..., 2015, p. 45)

Martin Spanberg, a Dane, entered Russian service with the rank of lieutenant in 1720. Together with his compatriot Vitus Bering, he took part in the expeditions to Kamchatka as second in command.
In 1727, commanding the ship Fortuna, he made two trips from Okhotsk to Bolsheretsk, and the following year he sailed under Bering's command on the boat St. Gabriel.
During the Second Kamchatka Expedition, in 1737, he supervised the construction of the brigantine Archangel Michael and the double-hulled boat Nadezhda in Okhotsk. Later, as the commander of Archangel Michael, Spanberg led a party of three ships, which was sent from Okhotsk to inspect the coast of Japan and to describe the Kuril Islands. He counted 31 unknown islands, named them, and put them on the map. In 1743, as the senior in rank, he formally replaced the deceased Bering as the head of the Second Kamchatka Expedition. In 1745, for his unauthorized return to St. Petersburg, he was tried and sentenced to death but was pardoned and continued serving in the navy

"When Bering gave the order for part of the detachment to set out for Kamchatka, the people said with bitterness: 'The captain is sending us naked, barefoot, and unpaid to certain death.' Having learned of that, Bering said: 'They should get their pay from Yakutsk, not from me. Myself am none too happy: On our journey, five hundred horses fell dead; I alone must answer for them'" (Lyalina, 1898, p. 7)

Tungus at hunt (*right*). *Illustration from* A Description of All the Nationalities That Inhabit the Russian State *(1799). Public Domain*

Bering instantly ordered to put the scribe under guard and sent him with the first convoy to Yakutsk and then to the Siberian Chancellery in Tobolsk for investigation.

The only good thing was that Spanberg survived, although he left more than half of the valuable assets in the taiga. Bering had to send a large party back to River Yudoma, and since there were no horses or dogs left, his only hope was the people. This time one had to catch Russians, who fled from the backbreaking work... Many a man disappeared. But by the spring of 1727, the mission to save the expedition's things and freight was accomplished. With incredible efforts, 10,000 *poods* (160 tons!) of freight were transported from Yakutsk to the sea.

They started by finishing the building of a single-masted ship that Bering had discovered in Okhotsk. In addition, they found on the shore, in good condition, the old boat *Vostok*, on which Kozma Sokolov from Yakutsk and Nikifor Treska, a Pomor from Arkhangelsk, discovered ten years earlier the shortest route from Okhotsk to the Kamchatka Peninsula.

In mid-June, Chirikov delivered uneventfully 2300 *poods* of flour from Yakutsk. This stock became an important part of Bering and his crew's provisions, which would

From the report of Lieutenant Spanberg to Bering about the route from Yakutsk to Okhotsk:
"On October 1st, Ivan Beloy reported to me on behalf of the sublieutenant that service people of Yakutsk refuse to go to labor, so I ordered to send them forth under guard for urgent tasks; moreover, I ordered the instigators of this mischief to be clapped in irons and kept thereby at said labor.
"On the 4th, for the aforementioned insolence, lest further harm ensue, I commanded reading aloud the regulations and imposing penalty: five men be moderately lashed with cat-o'-nine-tails to serve as an example to the others henceforth, and therewith ordered to remove fetters from those five. <...> As for the service people, I ordered to give them provisions for November and December months, as instructed, at a rate of one and half poods per man; as concerns the Yakut service people, they were given provisions, according to the instruction, for October month only, at a rate of one pood per man, and none for the other months. Seeing their dire straits, lest famine claim their souls, I commanded to give them provisions for November and December months at half-third pood per man and therewith ordered to remove the fetters from three men. At winter quarters, I appointed for the purposes of guard duty: one steersman, six soldiers, and one cooper for the fabrication of small wine casks and oil barrels <...>
"From the aforementioned 1st to December 12th, we marched unto Krivaya Luka, wherein we experienced a need for provisions so dire that people had nothing left; any provisions of my own – flour, groats, meat, peas – I gave it all equally amongst them, sharing likewise their penury" (Berkh, 1823)

have been very meager without bread. As bibliographers noted, "fish oil was his butter, and dried fish was his beef and pork. He had to obtain salt from the sea; alcohol was distilled from straw."

Once Bering had secured a supply of provisions for a whole year, he could proceed to implementing the main points of Peter I's instructions. On August 22, 1727, the expedition left Okhotsk on the ship *Fortuna* under the command of Captain Bering and on the boat *Vostok* under the command of Lieutenant Chirikov. Thus began the first ocean voyage under St. Andrew's flag.

Truth lies buried in the fog...

It is not entirely clear why Bering decided to build a ship in Kamchatka. Perhaps, he considered the presence of rickety vessels a sign for him to leave the raw and bitterly cold Okhotsk. On the other hand, the captain

"LEARNED SAILOR"

Aleksey Ilyich Chirikov was born in 1703 to a gentry family with a small estate in the Tula uezd (district). At the age of 12, he entered Moscow School of Navigation and was later transferred to St. Petersburg Naval Academy. At the "inspection of the accumulated knowledge," attended by Peter I himself, the cadet midshipman demonstrated such brilliant abilities that he was immediately granted the rank of under-lieutenant in the Baltic Fleet (in the Admiralty circles, he was nicknamed the "learned sailor"), and a year later he became a navigation teacher at the Naval Academy. In 1725, Chirikov, promoted to lieutenant, was appointed assistant to Vitus Bering, the leader of the First Kamchatka Expedition.

On the way to Kamchatka, Chirikov made determinations for 28 astronomical points, which allowed one to correctly estimate, for the first time, the latitudinal extent of Siberia and the northern part of Eurasia. During the voyage with Bering on *St. Gabriel*, he kept the ship's log, collected information about the Chukchi, and compiled a detailed map of the western coast of the strait.

Subsequently, Chirikov served as Bering's assistant on the Second Kamchatka Expedition; when the commander died, he headed the expedition together with Martin Spanberg. In collaboration with other famous cartographers, he created *A General Map of the Russian Empire, the Northern and Eastern Shores Adjacent to the Arctic and Eastern Oceans with a Part of the Newly Discovered through Sea Voyages Western American Shores and the Island of Japan*.

Captain Commander Chirikov died at the age of 45 "due to profound weakness of his health, severely impaired by consumption and scurvy." In the history of geographical discoveries, his name remains in the shadow of Commander Bering. While Bering enjoys universal fame, Captain Chirikov remains almost forgotten, and his name is little-known, as noted by Jules Verne in his book *La Conquête de la Terre* (*The Conquest of Earth*). Today, you can find on the world map several geographical features named after the Russian pioneering navigator, including islands in the Gulf of Alaska and an underwater mountain in the Pacific Ocean

Russian seafarer Aleksey I. Chirikov, assistant to Vitus Bering in the two expeditions to Kamchatka.
Work by an unknown artist. Public Domain

did not risk sailing them in the Pacific Ocean along the Kamchatka coast but decided to transport the freight to River Kamchatka across the entire peninsula by land.

One way or another, on September 3, 1727, Bering landed on the Kamchatka coast at the mouth of River Bolshaya, which flows into the Sea of Okhotsk. The lands here were not as godforsaken as in Yakutia. The local peoples had already come "under the sovereign's hand," i.e., they were subject to paying *yasak* (tax). Along a route of 800 *verstas*, there were three fortresses, each with 15 to 17 households and up to 40 servicemen led by a senior Cossack. Here the expedition could obtain additional provisions and people to help with the delivery of goods by boat, dogs, and reindeer.

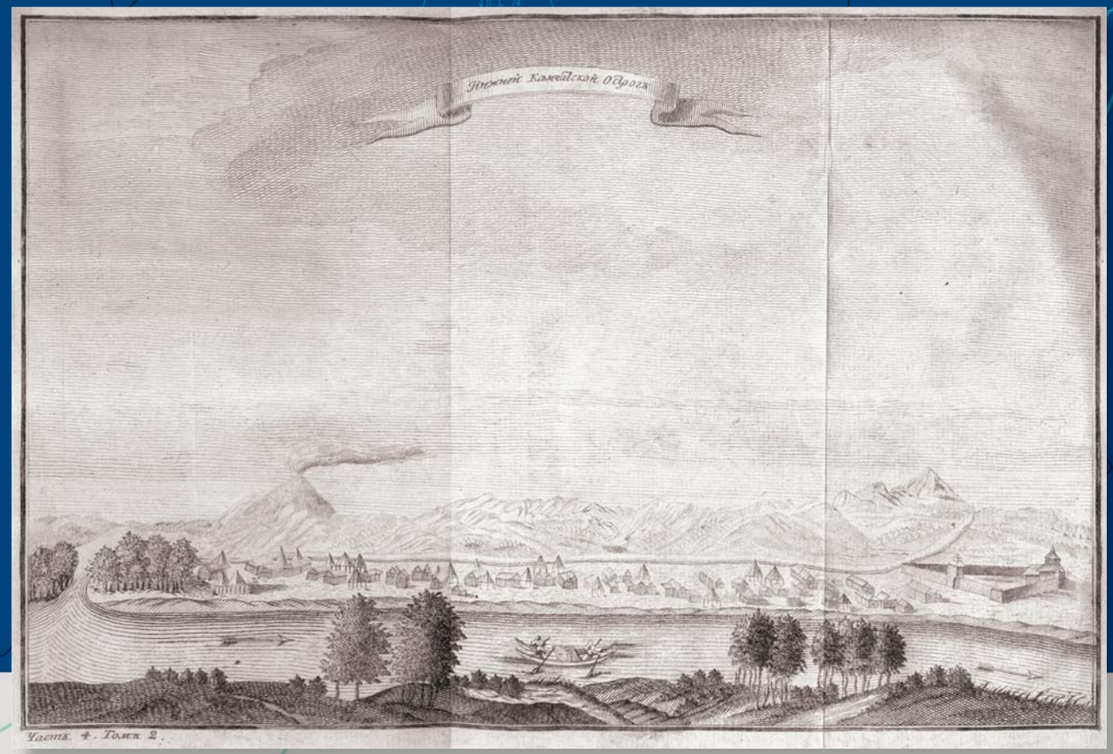
At the place where the expedition ships moored, in the midst of a treeless swampy area, there stood the Russian Bolsheretsky Fortress. Further on, the expedition's route lay through a huge watershed ridge to the Nizhnekamchatsky Fortress, where they planned to build a single-masted sailboat and try their fortune by sailing it.

The travelers were lucky that October and November happened to be warm, and the river did not freeze until December. The goods were transported by boat to Verkhnekamchatsky Fortress, located on the other side of the watershed on River Kamchatka, and then to Nizhnekamchatsk on sleds through the snow. Everything went relatively well, except for sinking the anchor in the river. In March 1728, all the things were delivered, the crew was all present, and so it was possible to prepare for the ocean voyage.

Finally, after three years of grave trials, Bering began building a deck ship. Three months later, by the beginning of June, the construction of an 18-meter sailboat was completed. It was named St. Gabriel in honor of the Archangel Gabriel, a harbinger of joyful good news. The party had neither the strength nor time to build a second ship as everyone was impatient to set off on a sea voyage to the long-awaited unnamed shores. Finally, on July 9, 1728, the ship, with 7 cannons and 44 crew members on board, left the mouth of River Kamchatka and headed northeast. Clear warm weather promised a pleasant voyage; there sea was full of whales, walruses, and sea lions.

Over a whole month, the ship was sailing northward along the Asian coast. Along the way, the crew was mapping the locations of the islands and refining the coastline, which had already been known from the maps drawn by the Russian Cossack seafarers and first geodesists.

Having rounded yet another cape, St. Gabriel entered the Gulf of Anadyr. The future leader of the academic party of the Second Kamchatka Expedition, Academician Georg Miller, believed that Bering did not know where he was otherwise he would not have missed the opportunity to visit Anadyr Fortress, only 58 miles from the seashore, in order to stock up on provisions and water and to refine the map. Having passed along the coast up to Kresta Bay, the expedition reached a geographical feature that Bering called Chukchi Peninsula because there they met the Chukchi people. Midshipman Chaplin made a detailed entry about this event in the ship's log.



Nizhnekamchatsky Fortress, one of the largest fortresses in Kamchatka, served as a transfer hub for expeditions heading towards the Pacific Ocean and Alaska.
Engraving from the first edition of Description of the Land of Kamchatka *by S.P. Krasheninnikov (1755). Public Domain*

On August 11, St. Lawrence's Day, the expedition spotted in the southeast a large island, which Bering named in honor of this holy martyr. And at midday, *St. Gabriel* crossed the strait separating Asia from North America. Here Bering's luck failed him: because of the thick fog, the coast of the American continent remained unnoticed. For three more days, the captain was steering the ship north through the strait through "fog with great wetness," navigating only by compass.

According to the ship's log entry of August 13, Bering held a meeting with his assistants to decide what to do next: continue sailing or return? Chirikov, citing the tsar's instruction, believed that the expedition's goals remained unaccomplished: it was still unclear where the strait was and the distance to America remained unmeasured; therefore, they had to go further along the coast to the mouth of River Kolyma, where they would spend the winter. Spanberg held the opposite opinion and advocated

View of Bolsheretsk, the capital of Kamchatka in the 18th century. When Vitus Bering visited Bolsheretsk, he counted there 14 households of Russian settlers. *Public Domain*

"The wind was moderate; the weather was cloudy. At midday, Captain Bering weighed anchor and sailed close to the shore <…> which looked like stone walls. At 7 o'clock in the morning, we saw a boat rowing from the land towards us, with about 8 people on it. And they rowed close to us, to our ship, asking where we came from and what for. And they said that they were the Chukchi people. The man sent by the Chukchi to the boat "for talking" said that many Chukchi people lived on the shoreline, and as to how far the land extends eastward, they did not know, and they had long heard about the Russian people…

"Captain Bering ordered the interpreters to call them to the ship; but after long hesitation, they finally put one man on the water, who swam to the ship on inflated bladders and boarded it. This Chukchi man said that many of his fellow countrymen lived along the shoreline and that they had long heard of the Russians.

"When asked the question 'Where does your land go and how far?' the Chukchi said: 'Our land turns to the left almost from here and goes far away, and those who live on it are all our Chukchi'" (Pasetsky, 1982, pp. 27–28)

"The Fire-Breathing Mountain of Kamchatka." *Engraving from the first edition of* Description of the Land of Kamchatka *by S.P. Krasheninnikov (1755). Public Domain*

The route of *St. Gabriel*'s voyage in 1728–1729. *Above*: a silver coin of 25 rubles with an image of the legendary ship, issued in 2003 by St. Petersburg Mint. *Public Domain*

St. Gabriel, a sailboat built at the shipyard in Okhotsk, participated in the First and Second Kamchatka Expeditions. *Drawing by M. Spanberg. Public Domain*

returning; he argued that in northern latitudes, the cold sets in earlier and the sailboat could get stuck in the ice.

Bering agreed with Spanberg. They had very little chance of surviving the winter on the bare shore in the neighborhood of the bellicose Chukchi people. Moreover, Bering's ship had poor rigging, so it was dangerous to sail in the Arctic Ocean, even near the shore.

On August 15, the ship passed Cape Dezhnev, the easternmost point of Asia, and sailed into the open Arctic Ocean, up to coordinates 67°18' N and 30°19' E east of the Kamchatka fort. Bering was sure that he had accomplished his mission, namely, rounded the northeastern edge of Asia, especially since he could no longer see the coastline extending to the north, which meant that the two large continents were not connected. In the afternoon of August 16, the captain declared that "it was incumbent upon him to return in compliance with the instruction" and gave the order to return to Nizhnekamchatsk along the same route, which, of course, greatly reduced the chances of seeing the coast of America.

All's well that ends well

While overwintering at Nizhnekamchatsky Fortress, Bering made observations to conclude that fairly nearby, in the east, lay a vast forested country. A large body of evidence supported this conclusion. The waves were more akin to the sea than the ocean; driftwood thrown ashore revealed no signs of East Asian flora; the sea grew shallower when going northward; the eastern wind brought floating ice to the river mouth in three days, and the northern one, on the contrary, in five days; and migratory birds came to Kamchatka from the east.

Bering's conclusions were also confirmed by what natives said. A man once came ashore here, who said that his native country lay far away to the east and had large rivers and forests with very tall trees.

Every clue led to the belief that the American coast was not far away. But the following year, too, Bering failed to succeed. As soon as it got warmer, *St. Gabriel* again sailed out into the Pacific Ocean and headed east, where, by hearsay, in clear weather, one could see land "across the sea." But it was not America, as it

Avacha Bay. *Engraving by J.-N. Bellin from* Histoire générale des voyages... *by A.-F. Prévost (1746). Public Domain*

seems, but one of the islands that would later be called the Commander Islands.

In June 1729, having traveled about 200 km, the ship found itself again engulfed in heavy fog and then battered by a storm. Again, Bering decided to return but this time straight to Okhotsk. Along the way, they made a geodetic survey of Avacha Bay and *Lopatka*, the southern cape of the peninsula.

A trick of fate: if Bering had taken the ship straight to the place where he had stopped earlier, he would have certainly seen land on the starboard side. The width of the strait, later named after him, is only 86 km. Had it so happened, the captain would not have had to vindicate himself subsequently at the Admiralty, and the significance of his geographical discoveries would have increased manifold because he would have made another "discovery of America," this time from the Asian east. But it turned out that Bering stopped trying to discover new lands and terminated the First Kamchatka Expedition, not being entirely confident in its results.

On March 1, 1730, Commander Bering and Lieutenants Spanberg and Chirikov returned to St. Petersburg after a five-year voyage. Upon arrival, Bering submitted only the maps and a brief report, which was received at the Senate unenthusiastically. After all, the captain could not give a clear and unambiguous answer about the very existence of the strait, let alone its parameters and coordinates. No new information was obtained about the American continent either.

However, Empress Anna Ioannovna, who ruled after the death of Peter I; Russian government officials; and members of the Academy of Sciences welcomed the results of the Kamchatka expedition, as reported in the official newspaper *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti* on March 16, 1730. The article about the epochal discovery of the northeastern passage said, "...you can arrive by ship in Kamchatka and sail from there to China, Japan, and the East Indies."

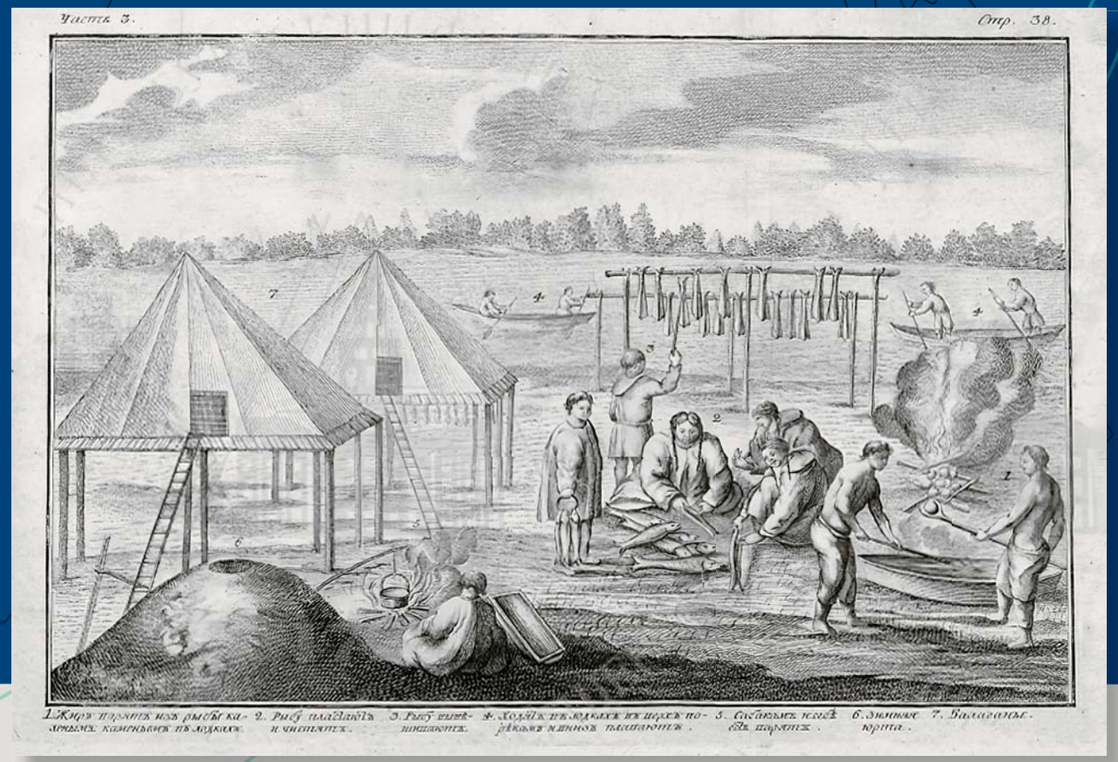
11 years after: the discovery of America

Bering's geographical discoveries were recognized in European countries, including by renowned seafarers. The great British explorer James Cook, who later named the strait between Asia and America after Bering, noted that his predecessor delineated the coastlines excellently, fixing their positions with an exactitude which under his circumstances was little short of remarkable.

Although Bering failed to discover America across the Asian route, it is worth noting the achievements and merits of the First Kamchatka Expedition, which certainly became a crucial and timely endeavor. Bering's party made particularly notable discoveries in the fields of geography, cartography, and ethnography.

Thus, the expedition became the first to conduct precise measurements and astronomical observations in Siberia and northeastern Russia. They determined the coordinates of 28 settlements along the expedition route, which were included in *Catalogue of Townships and Prominent Places in Siberia Depicted on Maps, Through Which Routes Were Established, Indicating Their Width and Length Thereof*, presented by Bering to the Admiralty. The longitude determinations made in East Siberia proved that the country extended to the east by 30° further than previously assumed.

Valuable information was also obtained on oceanography and navigation conditions in the Okhotsk, Bering, Anadyr, and Chukchi Seas and in the northern part of the Pacific Ocean; the western and eastern coasts of Kamchatka were described and mapped; a map was drawn up for the northeastern part of the Bering Strait and the Chukchi Peninsula; the southern border of Kamchatka was delineated and a sea route from the Pacific Ocean to the Sea of Okhotsk was discovered. All these maps proved essential for subsequent explorations in this part of the Pacific Ocean by Russian seafarers.



Kamchadals. *Engraving from the first edition of* Description of the Land of Kamchatka *by S.P. Krasheninnikov (1755). Adapted from: (Kopaneva, 2012)*

Altogether, Bering's party made 154 territorial and 18 oceanographic discoveries; determined, for the first time, the location of 220 geographical objects and put them on the map. Bering's brief report contains vivid and detailed ethnographic descriptions, which provide insight into the lifestyle and authentic customs of the Kamchadals and Chukchi.

At the recommendation of the Admiralty Board, Bering received the rank of captain commander and a reward of 1000 rubles. His constant companion Chirikov was promoted to captain lieutenant, with the Admiralty Board noting that he "displayed thoroughness and rectitude, as becomes an accomplished sea officer."

And yet Bering harbored feelings of guilt toward the deceased emperor. America from the Russian side remained a blank spot on the world map. The Pacific Ocean lured with its uncharted mysteries and promised new great discoveries. The American coast lay there, close by, and he had to comb through this part of the ocean on reliable ships and map the outlines of the new continent in order to worthily complete his path as captain commander of the Russian fleet.

Perhaps, these thoughts crossed the mind of the 50-year-old Bering when he began, with unwavering determination and enormous energy, to push through high offices a project for a new large expedition to the East to explore the Asian and American coast.

Only three years had passed since the end of the First Kamchatka Expedition when the second one began, again under the leadership of Bering. It is also rightfully called the Great Northern Expedition, since it was and still is the most ambitious one in terms of territorial coverage, duration, and the number of participants as well as in the quality and quantity of collected materials on the botany, zoology, mineralogy, meteorology, geography, ethnography, and history of Siberia, the Far East, and America.

For Bering, this voyage was his last: in 1741, his ship St. Peter suffered a wreck on the way back from the now-discovered America. The seafarer found eternal peace on an unnamed and uninhabited island near Kamchatka, which was later named after him.

COMMANDER'S LAST ANCHORAGE

While sailing from the coast of North America in the course of the Second Kamchatka Expedition, the exhausted crew of *St. Peter* made a landing in the hope that they had reached Kamchatka. However, it turned out to be a deserted, treeless island not yet marked on maps. A storm that arose during the anchorage tore the ship from its anchor and wrecked it on the rocks.

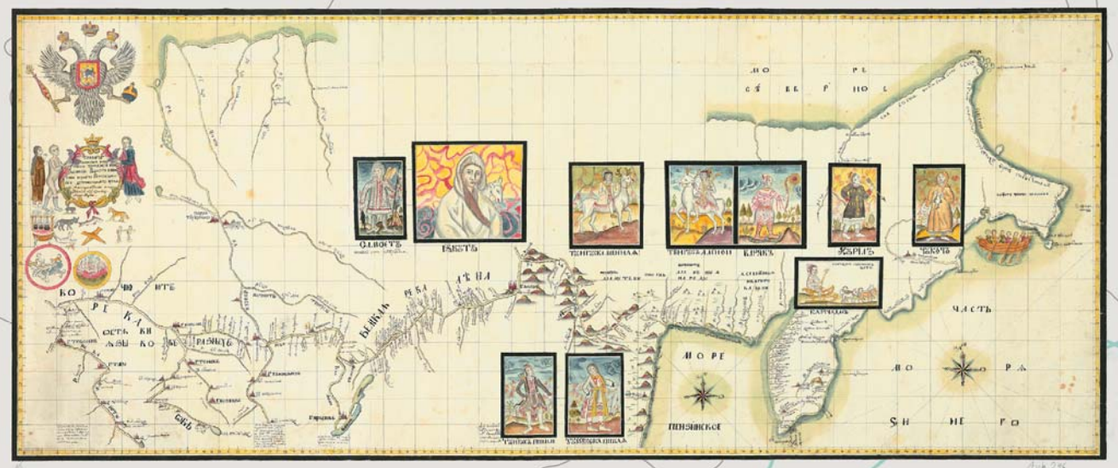
During the forced winter stay, 14 people (a third of the crew) died of scurvy and disease, and on December 8, 1741, the captain commander himself passed away. Academician G.F. Miller wrote that Bering "was almost buried while he was still alive; for in the pit in which he lay sick, the sand always fell from the sides, covering his feet, which he finally ordered not to shove away anymore, saying that it kept him warm, but he added that he could not warm up anyway <…> and when he died, he had to be dug out of the sand so that his body could be decently buried in the earth" (Miller, 1996, p. 103).

The following year, the crew built a new vessel from the remains of the ship and managed to reach Petropavlovsk. On the island they left the seamen's graves, six dugouts, utility buildings, and marine supplies storage.

For 250 years, Russian researchers showed no interest in the place where *St. Peter* suffered a wreck, apart from unsystematic excavations carried out in the 20th century by enthusiasts. The first Russian academic expedition visited the eastern part of the island, which was named after Bering, in 1979 to assemble a rich collection of weapons, instruments, and household items.

In 1991, an international group of archaeologists from Russia and Denmark, using magnetic exploration methods and a new technique for determining phosphorus pentoxide concentrations, found the remains of the commander and his five companions, buried in shallow pits. Bering's remains were preserved better than the others because he was buried in a coffin made of thick larch shipboards. This find allowed researchers to reconstruct from the skull of the legendary navigator's real appearance, which was confirmed by the results of a forensic study of portrait material on 150 people from Bering's family tree, compiled with the help of his great-great-granddaughter. In September 1992, after a funeral service, the remains of six seamen from St. Peter's crew were buried with military honors at Commander Bay

Commander Bay on Bering Island: the original burial place of Captain Commander Bering and five members of his crew. *© CC BY-SA 4.0/Dmitry Utkin*



A copy of the map of the territory through which the First Kamchatka Expedition traveled from Tobolsk to Kamchatka, which was made in 1729 by Petr A. Chaplin. The drawings in the frames depict representatives of the indigenous peoples with whom the expedition members came into contact. This sample map was sent in 1777 to Göttingen by G.T. von Aschen, a German physician in Russian service, who lectured at the University of Göttingen. Watercolor, ink. *Public Domain*

Thanks to the efforts of Bering and his assistants in the First Kamchatka Expedition, the competence of the geodesists and cartographers, and the experience and endurance of the ordinary crew members as well as the skillful hands of the carpenters and blacksmiths, the first eastern sea voyage of Russian sailors became a great success.

Russia ultimately established itself as a maritime power capable of organizing large-scale geographical research missions, as evidenced by the eastern coast of our country, marked by the names of Orthodox saints and Russian Cossack pioneers, sailors, and explorers of the Pacific Ocean. The name of Captain Commander Bering became as recognizable as those of renowned European navigators: Magellan, Columbus, Vasco da Gama, Cook, La Perouse, and he will forever be remembered in history as a man who fulfilled his duty to his new homeland, sparing no effort, health, or even life.

Translated by Alla Kobkova

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