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Relics of Russian hunting stations on Dunöyane (West Spitsbergen)

ABSTRACT: The authors make a review of relics of Russian Hunting Stations on the Dunöyane (Down Islands), a group of small islets to the north of the mouth of the Hornsund fiord. They relate to the relics of the station from Store Dunöya and to the well known story about the groups of Russian hunters that were killed in 1819. Remnants of dwelling-houses, baths, monumental votive crosses, graves a.s.o. on Fjörholmen are relics of a large basic stations situated very close to a convenient anchorage. Undoubtedly, it was working mainly during the second half of the 18th century.

Key words: Arctic, Spitsbergen, archeology, history.

Not far from the South-West coast of Wedel Jarlsberg Land (West Spitsbergen), to the north of the mouth of the Hornsund fiord, there is a group of small, flat islands called the Dunöyane. The three islands, Store Dunöya, Nordre Dunöya and Fjörholmen, are surrounded by shallows and skerries, and are therefore very difficult of access, both on the side of the open sea and on the side of the mainland, which is 3–4 km away (Fig. 1). However, there is a fairly deep (7–24 m) stretch of water between Fjörholmen and the other islands, situated close to each other. About 3 km long and 1 km wide it forms a kind of narrow bay open towards the north-west. The bay offers a convenient anchorage, sheltered from storms coming from the open sea and strong fohn winds blowing from the land.

The name “Dunöyane” (Down Islands) comes from the numerous breeding grounds of eider ducks (*Somateria mollissima*) on the islands. Searched for and

collected from nests by Norwegian trappers the delicate eider-down found its way into geographical onomastics (Conway 1906, Krawczyk 1995). Many sources suggest that the islands at the mouth of Hornsund were spotted and mapped as early as 1607 during one of the first discovery expeditions to the area of Spitsbergen led by H. Hudson. Information gathered by Hudson's expedition was for the first time shown on a map drawn by Jodocus Hondius in 1611 (Schilder 1988). On the western side of the southern tip of Spitsbergen (= Nieu Land) the map shows the outline of an island and gives its name: Lammas Island (see also Conway 1906). On the other hand Sir M. Conway has questioned the possibility of identifying "Lammas Island" as the Dunöyane. Outlines of a larger island, situated at the mouth of now a more distinct and detailed "Horn Sund", can be seen on other maps from the first decades of the 17th century (e.g. maps of Hassel Gerritsch from 1613 and ca. 1625 — Schilder 1988). The early maps, however, picture the island on the southern side of the fiord's mouth. A single island to the north of Hornsund's mouth is for the first time found on the 1620 map of Cornelius Doedsz (Schilder 1988). But only in 1634 does a clearly drawn group of nameless islands appear there on the map of David Davitsz (Schilder 1988). The islands may represent either the Dunöyane or the Isöyane, a group of islands lying further north, near the front of the Torell glacier (Torellbreen).

It is rather doubtful whether the Dunöyane and their vicinity arose any greater interest in West European sailors and whalers. In view of their needs, neither the rocky shores of the islands surrounded with skerries and shallows nor the neighbouring coast of Wedel Jarslberg Land could have seriously attracted them. So far no evident traces of whaling and processing have been found on the island or in their close surroundings. The nearest archeological objects connected with the activity of West European whalers have been identified in Ariebukta (Marmornest) and on Wilczekodden (site 1) just at the mouth of Hornsund (Krawczyk 1989, Chochorowski and Jasiński 1990). The island's land and sea environment, the numerous beaches, the shallows, the rock refuges and skerries with rich bottom fauna, made the region of the Dunöyane an ideal habitat for the walrus (*Odoboenus rosmarus*) (Krawczyk and Węslawski 1987). The walrus was most probably the magnet which drew there the Russian hunters from the White Sea area (the Pomors). Their trade was the *morzovyyj promysl*, i.e. walrus hunting (see Ovsajnikov 1988). The presence of a convenient anchorage was an additional advantage which would allow the island to be used as a base for larger hunting undertakings. Therefore it is no surprise that the Dunöyane islands boast a relatively high number of archeological objects considered to be relics of Pomor hunting activity.

The best known of these relics is the common "grave" from Store Dunöya, containing eight human skulls (see a.o. Siedlecki 1964, Krawczyk 1989). It is located on the southernmost tip of the islands (Pl. 1, fig. 1), ca 5 m east of the remains of a wooden structure thickly overgrown with tundra. The skulls were

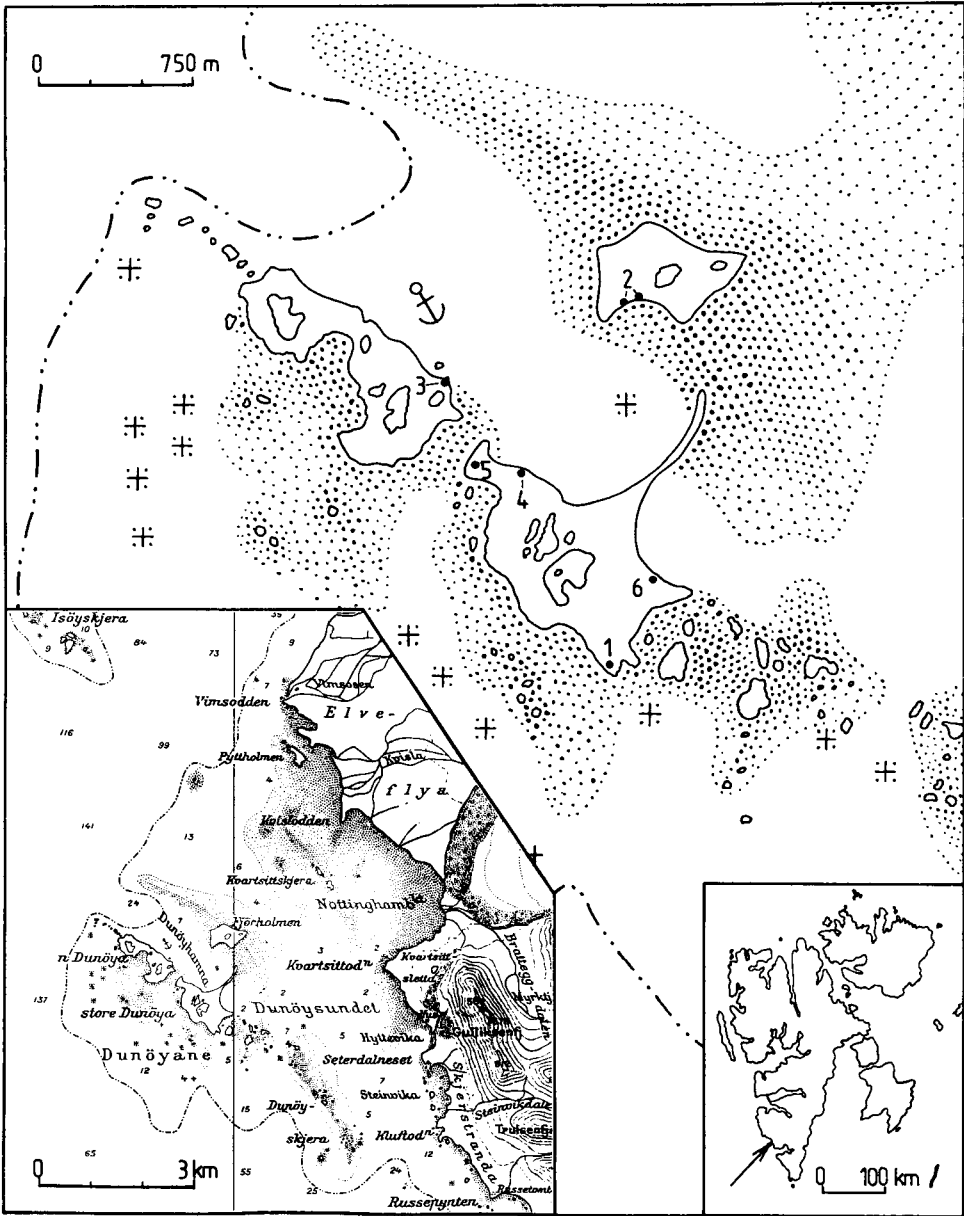


Fig. 1. Traces of Russian hunting activity on the Dunöyane Islands. 1 — Relics of the Store Dunöya station; 2 — Relics of the Fjörholmen station; 3 — Relics of monumental votive cross; 4 — Grave and cross plinth; 5 — Stone covering (grave?); 6 — Stone circle

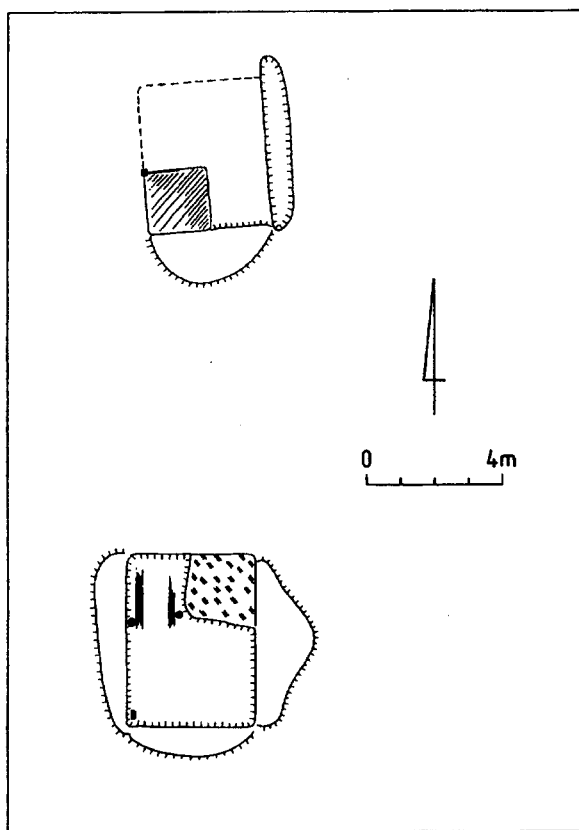


Fig. 2. Relics of Pomor buildings from the southern tip of Store Dunöya — situational sketch. Signatures as in Fig. 4

found lying in a small depression together with single stones, beams and planks bearing traces of burning (Pl. 1, fig. 2). Anthropological analysis carried out in this site in August 1984 has proved that the depression contained also mixed bones of 10 incomplete human skeletons (Krawczyk 1989, Głab and Krawczyk, *pers. commun.*).

Remains of the wooden construction mentioned above are the relics of a hut (5 × 3.5 m) of a north-south orientation. A mound of crumbled brick found in its north-east corner can be identified as remains of a brick stove. The presence of a stove suggests that the hut is a dwelling-house. Brick stoves were usually built in Pomor dwelling-rooms. The technique of wall construction is difficult to determine as all that remains above ground level are two posts facing the structure of the floor (in line with the plinth of the stove) and the relics of a post in the south-east corner of the hut. General features of the relics suggest that the hut followed the log cabin type of construction. The entrance door was probably in the north wall, next to the stove. Traces of burning were identified

on the surface remains of all of the surviving posts and of the peripheral planks of the floor, which extended from the door across the room.

Some 10 m north of the hut there are remains of another structure, 4×3.5 m large, it has a similar orientation approximating the north-south direction. A concentration of stones with a frame timber construction shuttering on one side can be seen in the south-west corner of the object. These are most probably the relics of a stone stove-fireplace often found in Pomor bathrooms. The nature of the timbering of the stove, as well as the location of the well-preserved post, suggest that the object was a light structure of the frame timber construction type. Its function was mostly probably that of a bath.

Some 10 m to the south-south-west of the ruins of the hut, at the edge of a cliff seriously damaged by abrasion, one can see a group of human bones lying 20–30 cm under surface of the ground (Pl. 2, fig. 1). These are the remnants of several (2, 3?) burials preserved *in situ*. As can be judged by the arrangement of the bones the burials followed the west-east orientation, with the head facing the west. Human remains found in the cliff are mostly bones of the lower limbs (Pl. 2, fig. 2) which proves that a large part of burial ground has been destroyed by abrasion. In the course of the inspection of the site in 1989 a bronze pendant, typical of the Orthodox religious tradition, was found on the surface of the ground not far from the bones. The pendant is in fact one half of an icon locket (3.2×3.0 cm) with the image of the Virgin Mary with Christ Child (Pl. 2, fig. 3). The icon locket is a special find, unique for Pomor graves in Spitsbergen (see e.g. Chochorowski and Parczewski 1984, Chochorowski 1989a). However, devotional jewellery of this type has a long-standing medieval tradition in Russian Orthodox art (Makarov 1989). No doubt the locket comes from one of the graves, which have been undergoing a very rapid degradation. The human remains seen in pictures taken during the prospection of the site in 1989 (J. Chochorowski, M.E. Jasiński) were not yet visible during its inspection in 1984 (H. Głąb, A. Krawczyk).

A complete characterization of the nature, origin and chronology of the site is possible thanks to existing historical sources. All evidence links the site with the report of a tragic episode of 1819, when a group of 13 Russian hunters were killed here (Conway 1906). The episode became a stock tale of the fate of Spitsbergen hunters as it was told and retold, not always with proper regard to historical fact, in numerous publications (Krawczyk 1995). The origins of the tale lie in B.M. Keilhau's (1831) reliable report based on evidence gathered by him in 1827. Nine human skulls which a Swedish expedition reported to have seen near the relics of the hut in 1864 (Conway 1906) are connected undoubtedly with a group "grave" of 10 incomplete human skeletons surviving until today.

The complex at the southern tip of Store Dunöya discussed above is not the only prove of the Russian hunters' activity in the area. Relics of an even larger hunting station were identified on Fjörholmen (Krawczyk 1989). The relics are located on a six-meter-high cliff overlooking a small bay in the southern part of

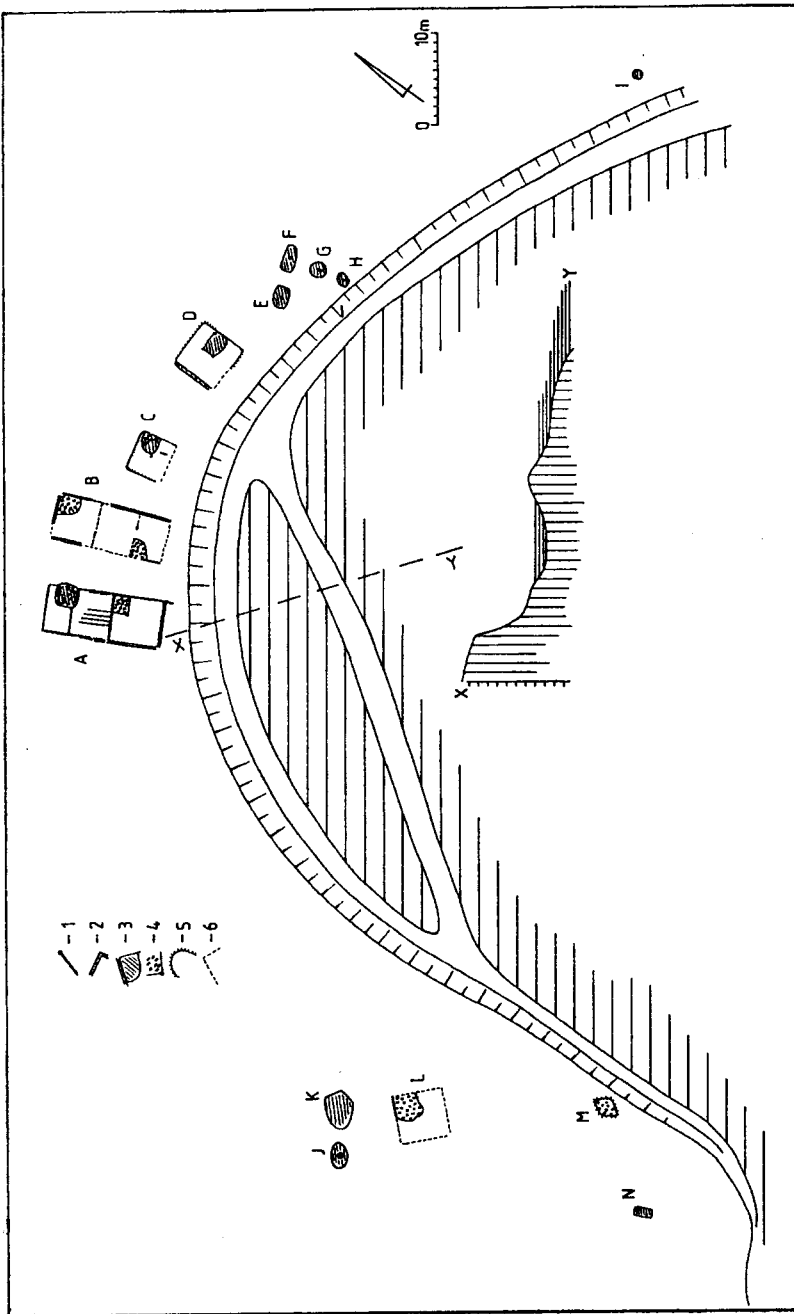


Fig. 3. Relics of Pomor Station on Fjörholmen — situational sketch. 1 — Beams and posts; 2 — Foundation trenches; 3 — Relics of stone structures; 4 — Ruins of brick structures and concentrations of brick rubble; 5 — Uplifted parts of objects; 6 — Supposed outline of buildings

the island. The rich tundra flora covering the area makes a thorough identification impossible, but the prospection of the site in 1989 (J. Chochorowski, M.E. Jasiński) showed the complex to be made up of over a dozen objects (Fig. 3). Most of them are located in the central part of the bay, where the sea cuts deep into the land. Outlines of two large buildings (A and B) of similar size (ca 5×12 m) and similar orientation (NNW – SSE) appear most prominently. They were built close to each other (4–5 m) and almost parallel, with their gable walls facing the bay. Each of the buildings had three rooms: a large hall in the middle and a room (one smaller, one bigger) on either side of it. The two rooms were heated with brick stoves. As can be judged on the basis of object A (Fig. 4), which is better preserved, the buildings had two entrance doors located in the facing walls of the hall. Doors leading from the hall into the side rooms were placed in the centre of the partition walls. A brick stove stood in the corner of each side room. The stove in the smaller room was built in such a way that it also heated the hall. The surviving relics of the foundations and beams of the lower curb-plate, the fragments of the doors and the elements of the stove plinth prove that the building was constructed with care and that the builders worked from a well-designed plan. Regular, well fitting beams (prefabricated?) were used in the construction.

To the east of the dwelling-houses there are relics of two smaller buildings (ca. 4×4 and 5×5 m) (objects C and D). As no elements of the wall structure have survived above the surface of the ground it is impossible to determine the type of construction they followed. Concentrations of stones found within the outlines of the objects are undoubtedly relics of stoves-fireplaces, typical of Pomor baths.

Still further east, to the east and south-east of object D, are four other objects, which can be identified as relics of monumental votive crosses (objects E, F, G, H). They are remnants of posts set vertically in the ground, each supported by a stone mound thickly overgrown with tundra. The proximity of the cliff admits of the hypothesis that originally there may have been more objects on the site. Fragments of frames from a wrecked Pomor ship were found in the vicinity under the cliff. Some 35–40 m from the site, on the east side of the bay, there is one more votive cross, or, which is equally probable, is steadied a mooring post similar to the one found in Törrflya (Chochorowski 1989a).

Objects identified in the south-west part of the site, on the west side of the bay, are more difficult to interpret (Fig. 5). One of them, object L, was most probably a dwelling-house heated with a brick stove. The condition of the object thickly overgrown with tundra makes it impossible to determine more closely even its size (ca. 5×5 m?). The two stone “mounds” located to the north-west of the building may be interpreted as support for a votive cross (object J) and a stone covering of a grave (object K), though just as well both of them may have been parts of some other structures (e.g. bath stoves). Another difficulty is offered by the large concentration of brick rubble (object M) found

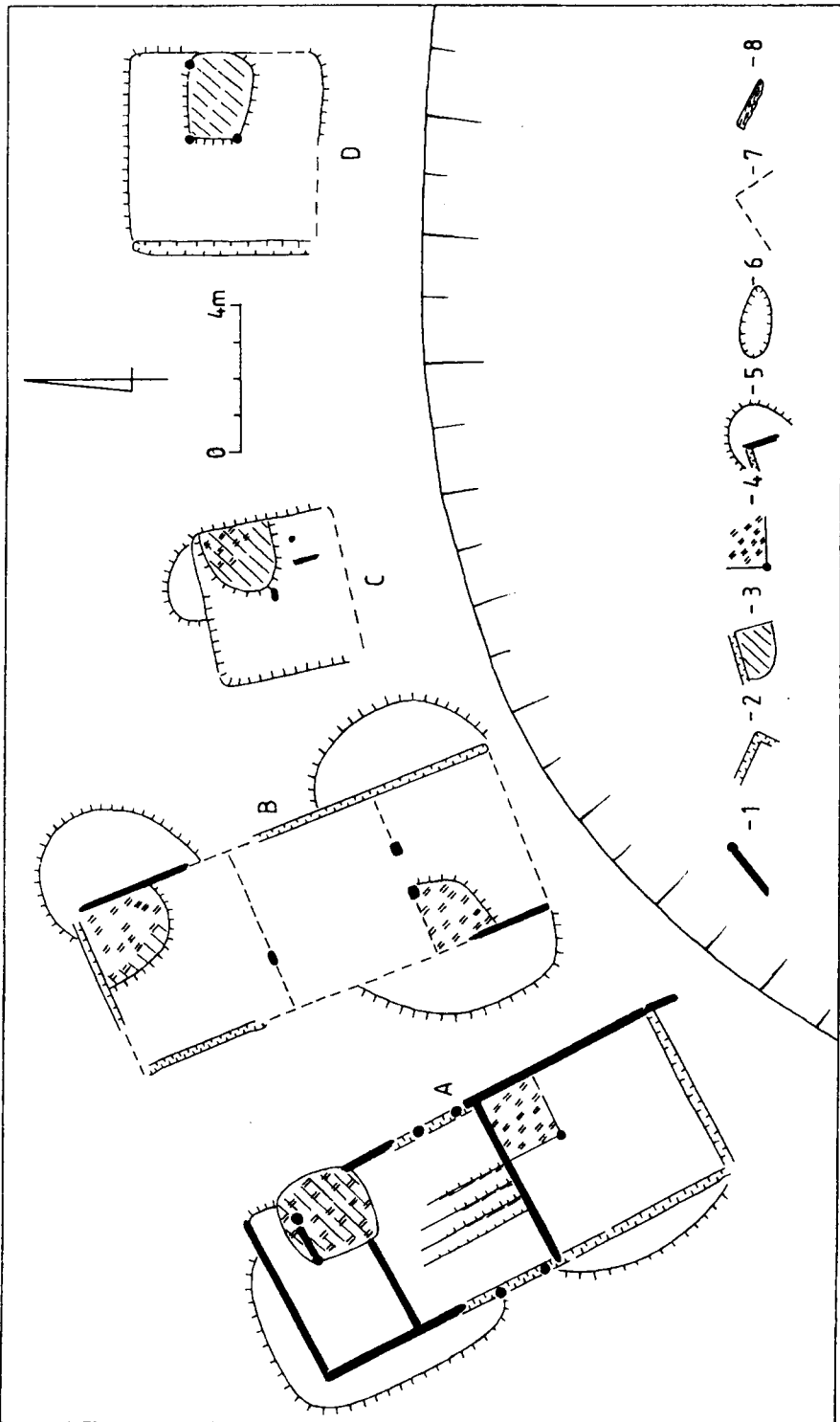


Fig. 4. Relics of buildings in the central part of Pomor station on Fjørholmen. 1 — Beams and posts; 2 — Foundation trenches (imprints of foundation beams); 3 — Relics of stone structures; 4 — Ruins of brick structures and concentrations of brick rubble; 5 — Mounds and uplifted parts of objects; 6 — Anthropogenic hollows in the ground; 7 — Supposed outlines of buildings; 8 — Whale bones

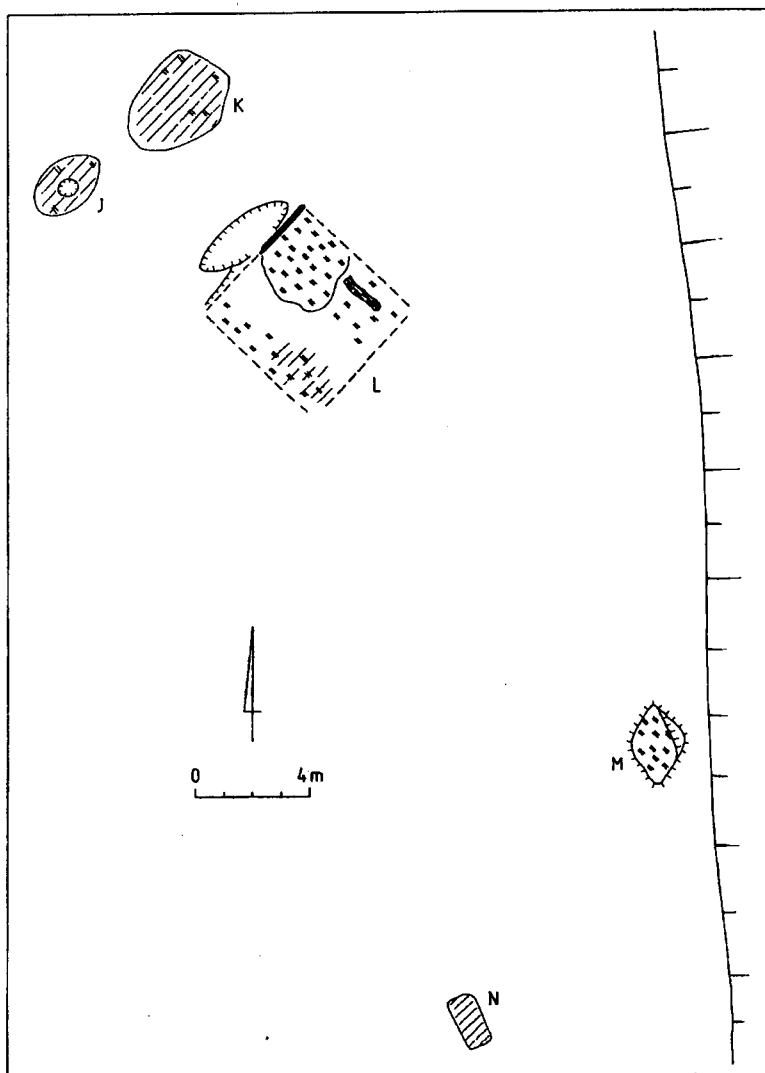


Fig. 5. Objects in the south-west part of Fjörholmen site. Signatures as in Fig. 4.

at the edge of the cliff, some 15 m south-east of the ruins of the dwelling-house. The rubble can be interpreted as either the relics of a stove (though no outline of a building was identified around it) or just as a pile of bricks unloaded from a ship. The rectangular stone mound (object N) located 12 m south-south-east of object M is most probably a stone covering of a grave. It is situated close to the highest point in the south-west part of the island.

The size of the settlement, the number of identified objects, and the volume of the cultural layer uncovered in the cliff, may suggest the scale of hunting activity in the area and the intensity with which the station was used. It must be

remembered that advancing abrasion has already destroyed part of the site: the current cliff line runs right next to the ruins of the dwelling-house. The intensity and scale of the destructive processes make it possible to imagine how fast the objects of the site could have been destroyed. But even the surviving relics supply enough evidence to see the Fjörholmen station as a large hunting complex, closely similar to the Russian settlement in Habenichtbukta on the Edgeöya island described by B.M. Keilhau (1831) and B. von Löwenigh (1989) (see also Chochorowski and Jasiński 1990). Their similarity is most evident in the design and the mutual arrangement of the two large buildings. As depicted in B.M. Keilhau's drawing in 1827 ("*Russisk Etablisement paa Öst-Spitsbergen*"), the Habenichtbukta settlement was then also made up of two large buildings with dwelling-rooms and of smaller subsidiary buildings such as the baths. Two groups of buildings situated at some distance from each other (34 m) were compact functional units. As B. v. Löwenigh writes, they may have been used by crews of two different ships, altogether "around fifty men". From B.M. Keilhau's (1831) description of the site we also learn that the station, which he calls one of the largest in Spitsbergen, was prepared to house "Forty to fifty men". During Keilhau's visit to Habenichtbukta the station was deserted so it is not known whether the two dwelling-houses were used at the same time or whether they represent two subsequent phases in the development of the station.

The Fjörholmen station presents an analogous situation. Each of the two large buildings may have been used by a different ship crew or *artel*, made up of hunters and sailors led by the skipper (*kormščik*). According to *Opisanije rybnych i zverinych morskich promyslov* (Description of fishing and hunting undertakings), a unique encyclopaedia of Pomor *promysl* (i.e. hunting undertakings) from the end of the 18th century (Ovsjannikov 1988), the *artels* of big ships (the *gukora*, the *galiota* and the *lod'ja*) sailing to Grumant (= Spitsbergen) and Novaya Zeml'ja may have counted from 16 to 22 men (Ovsjannikov 1988). As has been noted above the Fjörholmen dwelling-houses follow a clear, almost identical design (Fig. 4). It can be presumed that the smaller room with a stove was in each house occupied by the *kormščik* (and possibly the *podkormščik* — second skipper), whose privileged position in relation to the other members of the *artel* comes out clearly in all the available sources (e.g. Stavnicer 1948, Ovsjannikov 1988). The large room was then occupied by the remaining hunters. B.M. Keilhau's (1831) description of a similar room in Habenichtbukta shows that in addition to a stove and a narrow strip of floor through the middle, the room was furnished with "benches" or beds placed low ("ca. 1 alen" = 62.5 cm) above the dirt floor. The two quadrangular structures with stone stoves built next to the Fjörholmen dwelling-houses are their respective baths. However, just as in Habenichtbukta, it is difficult to determine whether the two complexes functioned at the same time or whether they were built and used at different periods of the station's active life. The mutual arrangement of the objects (both baths built on the same side of object B) speak

rather for the hypothesis of their consecutive use (object A+C? and object B+D?). Concurrent use of all the objects would have presented serious inconveniences. Descriptions of the Habenichtbukta station show additionally that the baths were located in the closest vicinity of the dwelling-houses. However, the location of the Fjörholmen baths may have been determined by some local conditions (e.g. direction of winds) or other functional considerations.

It is also difficult to define clearly the chronological relation of the dwelling-houses and their baths to the objects identified in the south-west part of the Fjörholmen station (Fig. 5). They seem to be relics of much smaller structures. Like in Habenichtbukta they may represent an earlier phase in the station's development (Chochorowski, *in press*). Such a hypothesis can be corroborated by the condition of the relics though, it must be remembered, vegetation, much richer in these parts of the island, makes a reliable assessment more difficult. Notwithstanding the difficulties, the objects can be identified as a long-term settlement (*stanovišče*) which experienced several phases of active life. At the time when the large dwelling-houses were used the objects must have served as a base or *stanovaja izba* for an *artel*. A convenient anchorage in the vicinity must have naturally prompted such a use of the place. As can be read in the *Opisanije...* mentioned above: "Having arrived at Grumant or Novaya Zeml'ja where they are planning to hunt, the hunters steer their ship into a bay sheltered from the waves, unload provisions in their old *stanovišča* (stations) and begin the *promysl* (hunt)" (Ovsjannikov 1988). Navigation in the difficult waters around the Dunöyane, especially on entering Dunöyhamna, was made easier by the monumental votive crosses which, apart from being religious symbols, served also as orientation signs (Starkov and Ovsjannikov 1980). On the Dunöyane, relics of such crosses were found not only near the buildings of the Fjörholmen station, but also on the eastern tip of Nordre Dunöya, as remnants of a wooden post embedded in a stone support, as well as at the base of the north-western tip of Store Dunöya (Pl. 3, fig. 1) on the side of Fjörholmen, almost directly across the station. The location of the crosses seems more than accidental for their line indicates the direction of the right boundary of the passage into Dunöyhamna. The crosses situated near the buildings of the station must have had a similar navigational function as their arrangement shows the line of safe entry into the anchorage from the direction of dangerous shallows surrounding Fjörholmen. It is also possible that the regular arrangement of the four (?) crosses grouped in the eastern section of the settlement had some navigational purpose.

A grave (Pl. 3, fig. 2) was also identified on the northern side of the north-west tip of Store Dunöya, near the stone mound interpreted as support of a cross. The body was buried in a wooden casing and covered with stones (Pl. 4, fig. 1). The location and the stone covering of the grave may suggest its Russian provenance, though its orientation (N–S) and the wooden coffin are not

typical of Pomor burials in the area (Chochorowski 1989b). Burials in wooden boxes (coffins) are more frequent in graveyards of Spitsbergen whalers (see e.g. Albrethsen 1985–1986, Hacquebord 1988, Mulder, Maat and Hoogland 1988). A rectangular stone casing (grave?) was also found at the end of the north-west tip of Store Dunöya, across from the cross relics identified on Nordre Dunöya (Pl. 4, fig. 2). Also a stone circle arranged of loose rocks, 2 m in diameter and ca. 30 cm high, was identified on the east coast of Store Dunöya (Krawczyk 1989). Its function and chronology are not clear.

The final question that must be asked in the present phase of the archeological examination of relics of Russian hunting activity on the Dunöyane islands is about the chronological relationship between the station on Store Dunöya and the entire complex on Fjörholmen. Defining the chronology of Store Dunöya is made easier by historical sources, which suggest that the station was used during the hunting season of 1818/1819, or somewhat earlier. B.M. Keilhau (1831) and Sir M. Conway (1906 — after Keilhau) mention the discovery of the bodies of murdered Pomors made by Norwegian hunters in the hunting season (summer) of 1820. It is not known, however, whether the tragedy had taken place right before the Norwegian's arrival on the Dunöyane (i.e. in 1820) or earlier (e.g. in 1819). The idea that the two events followed closely upon each other was first voiced much later, in 1896 (see Conway 1906). The notorious killing of the entire crew of Russian hunters on the Dunöyane may have discouraged further use of the station for there is no later mention of the station being in use. In view of all this, the station on Store Dunöya can be safely said to have operated at the beginning of the 19th century. The structure of the complex renders it rather a short-term station, though at that point in time it must have served as a base station (*stanovaja izba*) with subsidiaries, used by an independent *artel* of sailors and hunters (in the season of 1818/1819 by 13 men). The Norwegian hunters who in 1820 discovered the bodies of the murdered crew found also a Pomor *lod'ja* on the beach near the station (Keilhau 1831, Conway 1906).

Much less can be said about chronology of the entire hunting complex on Fjörholmen. It is certain, however, that the complex was used for a longer time. The buildings in the central part of station (the two large houses with bath-houses near them) must have been connected with planned, large-scale hunting undertakings. They are characteristic for Pomor *promysl* (hunting) of the second part of the 18th century, especially the end of that century (Ovsjannikov and Starkov 1982, Kurukin 1990, Chochorowski 1991 and *in press*). In view of all this, the objects identified in the south-west part of the station should probably be associated with some earlier hunting expeditions to the region. The growth of the station and its development into an intensively used base station were no doubt due to its particularly convenient geographical conditions (a convenient anchorage, numerous (?) colonies of the walrus). At the peak of its development the Fjörholmen station was certainly the main hunting centre in the region. Though the station must be recognized as relatively

older, its chronological (as well as functional) relation to the Store Dunöya complex cannot be decisively explained. This unsolved problem (and many other problems) can be clarified only by excavation works on both sites, though no plan of excavation will be easy to realize because of the special status of a bird reserve that the Dunöyane islands have been granted. Nevertheless, steps towards excavation must be undertaken, especially in view of the rapid and continuous destruction of the two sites by abrasion and other processes.

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Streszczenie

Dunöyane to grupa niewielkich wysepek położonych po północnej stronie wejścia do Hornsundu. Charakter środowiska lądowo-morskiego, obfitującego w liczne plaże, płycizny, refugia skalne i szkierowiska z bogatą fauną denną powodował, iż rejon ten był dogodnym siedliskiem dla morsów. To przyciągało na Dunöyane rosyjskich łowców morsa z rejonu Morza Białego (Pomorców), trudniących się tzw. *morzowym промыслом*, tj. polowaniami na morsy. Stąd też obecność licznych na wyspach obiektów archeologicznych, które można uznać za relikty działalności łowieckiej Pomorców.

Najbardziej z nich znany to zbiorowy „grób” z południowego cypla Store Dunöya, zawierający przemieszane kości (w tym 8 czaszek), 10 niekompletnych szkieletów. Znajduje się on obok resztek budowli mieszkalnej oraz słabo zachowanych relikwów łaźni. W pobliżu zidentyfikowano też widoczne w klifie resztki kilku (2–3?) niszczonej przez abrazję pochówków. W ich sąsiedztwie, w 1989 roku znaleziono medalion-ikonę, charakterystyczną dla prawosławnej sztuki wotywniej. Kres użytkowania tego zespołu łączy się ze znaną historią wymordowania w 1819 roku 13 (?)-osobowej grupy rosyjskich łowców.

Drugi, jeszcze bardziej okazały zespół obiektów znajduje się nad małą zatoczką w południowej części Fjörholmen, wysepki ograniczającej od północnego zachodu akwen Dunöyhamna, z jego znakomitym kotwicowiskiem. Wśród zidentyfikowanych tu relikwów wyróżniają się ruiny dwóch dużych domostw o trzech wnętrzach i towarzyszących im łaźni. Każdy z nich mógł być zajmowany przez łowiecki *artel*, tj. grupę około 20 łowców, stanowiącą równocześnie załogę statku. Liczba obiektów, w tym monumentalnych krzyży wotywnych, a także miąższość warstwy kulturowej wskazuje, iż są to pozostałości długotrwałej i intensywnie użytkowanej, pomorskiej stacji bazowej (tzw. *stanovoj izby*). Wiele cech zbliża ją do znanego, rosyjskiego „osiedla” łowieckiego w Habenichtbukta na Edgeöya, użytkowanego od pierwszej połowy XVIII do początku XIX wieku. Być może, na podobny okres, a zwłaszcza na drugą połowę XVIII wieku należy również datować stację łowiecką na Fjörholmen.

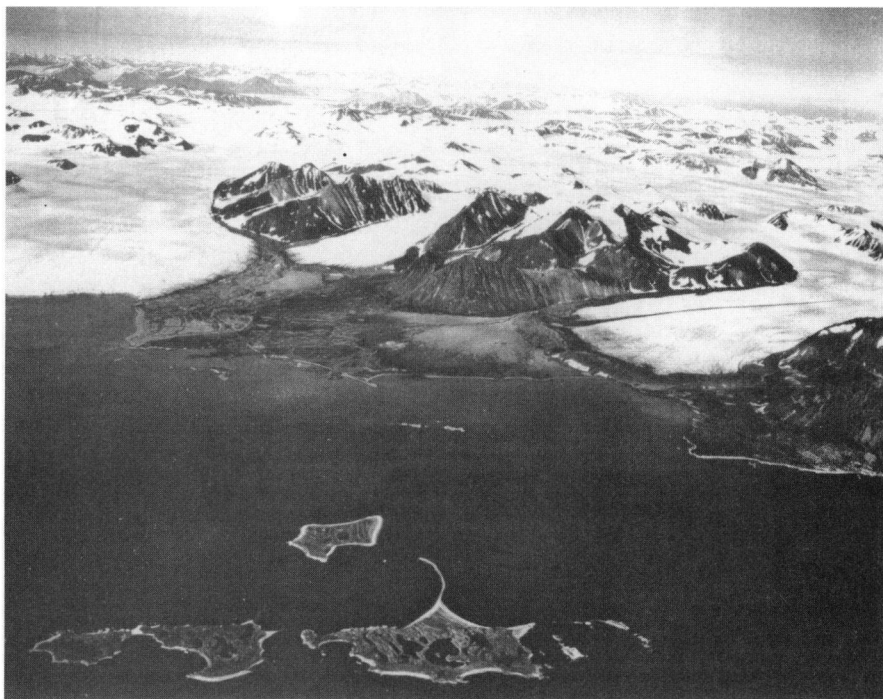


Fig. 1. Dunöyane. View from the south-west. Photo: Norsk Polarinstitutt (Norwegian Polar Institute).

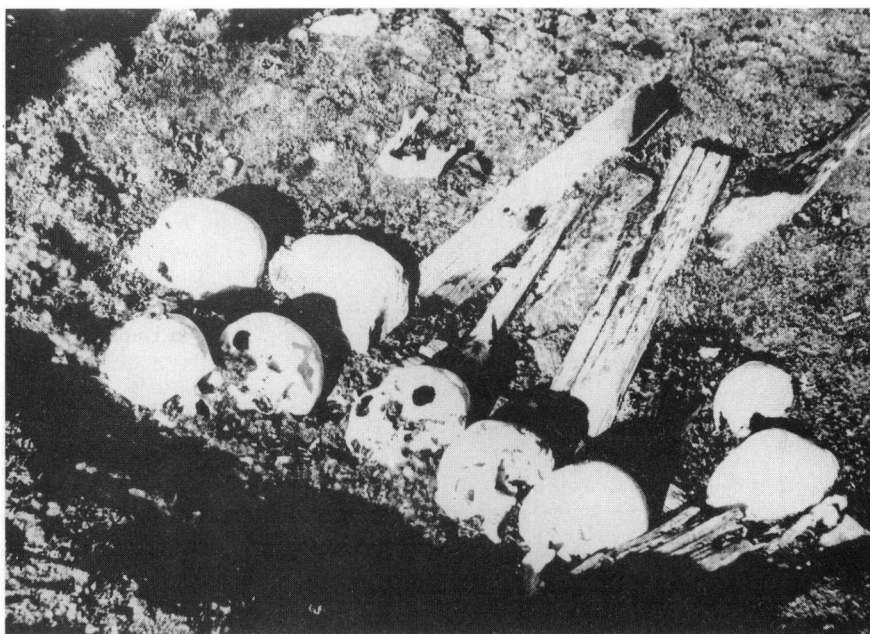


Fig. 2. Secondary „Grave” from Store Dunöya. Photo: S. Rakusa-Szuszczewski, 1960.



Fig. 1. Relics of grave uncovered in the cliff at the southern tip of Store Dunöya. Mound marked with post seen in the background is the place of the secondary „burial” of human remains. View from the south-south-west. Photo.: J. Chochorowski



Fig. 2. Bones of the lower limbs preserved *in situ* in the cliff. View from the west. Photo: J. Chochorowski



Fig 3. Icon locket from collective grave on Store Dunöya. Photo: K. Pollesch



Fig. 1. Stone plinth of monumental votive cross at the base of north-west tip of Store Dunöya. View from south-south-west. Photo: J. Chochorowski



Fig. 2. Culmination at the base of north-west of Store Dunöya. Stone mound on the left is a cross plinth. Mound on the left is a stone covering of a grave. View from the south. Photo: J. Chochorowski



Fig. 1. Grave at the base of north-west tip of Store Dunöya. View from south-south-east. Photo: J. Chochorowski



Fig. 2. Stone casing (grave?) on top of north-west tip of Store Dunöya. View from south-south-east. Photo: J. Chochorowski