

Above: R. Huish: Recent Expeditions to the Polar Regions, 1855, 515; below: D.M. Kelsey: Stanley and the White Heroes in Africa, 1891, 597.



'EPISTEMIC FRONTIERS'?

GEOSCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE, AUTHORITY, AND POLITICS OF PARTICIPATION IN ARCTIC AND AFRICAN EXPLORATION

Oslo, 22-24 April 2025

Venue: Tøyen Manor House, Botanical Garden

Conference organized by

Department of Archaeology, Conservation & History (IAKH), University of Oslo

in cooperation with

Commission History of Geography (IGU)

Fridtjof Nansen Institute (FNI)

International Commission on the History of Geological Sciences (IUGS)

Natural History Museum, UiO

Roald Amundsen's home, Uranienborg

CONFERENCE PROGRAM



W. E. F. Newton: *Laterna Magica*, ca. 1875, Wien Museum, Inv.-Nr. 176287 & 176278.

'EPISTEMIC FRONTIERS'? GEOSCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE, AUTHORITY, AND POLITICS OF PARTICIPATION IN ARCTIC AND AFRICAN EXPLORATION

Conference Organizers: Johannes Mattes and Ulrike Spring

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the High Arctic and Africa's 'interior' emerged as major poles of Western geoscientific inquiry, offering untapped resources and routes to prestige and authority. Despite their diverse ecosystems and Indigenous populations, similarities can be found in how European scholars studied, documented, and discussed these regions, both in the field and at their working desks. Once labelled as 'white spots' on maps, these areas were framed as 'epistemic frontiers' — perceived as outside Western scientific knowledge, exoticised, and used to mirror Europe's ideas of a 'civilized' world. This geographical imagination not only captivated public interest but also fostered international cooperation while advancing nation- and empire-building agendas. Furthermore, these areas were seen as 'testing grounds' for phenomena best observable under extreme conditions, enabling researchers to tackle global scientific questions.

This conference will explore the production and dissemination of geoscientific knowledge around the Arctic and Africa from a comparative perspective. It will examine how scholarly authority and politics of inclusion and exclusion contributed to frame these areas as uncharted scientific domains. Discussions will focus on how authority was established through publication practices, institutional affiliations, and fieldwork narratives, and will consider the role of scientific, intermediary, and Indigenous participants working at local, national, and international levels. The conference will also assess how framing these regions as 'epistemic frontiers' shaped both geoscientific concepts and geopolitical agendas.

This event is generously funded by:



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CONFERENCE PROGRAM

Presentations

Time	Tuesday, 22 April
9:00	Conference Opening (Natural History Museum, Botanical Garden)
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10:15	WELCOME ADDRESSES Guided Tour Through the Museum Collections
	<i>Break</i>
	Imagining the World: Spatial Perceptions and Geopolitical Visions (Tøyen Manor House, Botanical Garden) CHAIR: EZIO VACCARI
10:20	JOANN CONRAD: Mapping Northern Imaginaries: Is There Always a 'White Space'?
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11:50	NORMAN HENNIGES & JOHANNES MATTES: "Epistemic Frontiers"? Perspectives, Practices, Potentials
	XIN YANG: Climbing the Poles: Reconstructing China's Geographical Imagination of the World
	<i>Lunch</i>
	Shaping Perceptions: Narratives, Publications, and Public Engagement CHAIR: JOANNA KODZIK
12:30	JOHAN SCHIMANSKI & ULRIKE SPRING: Vertical Bordering in the Narrative Arctic
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14:00	EZIO VACCARI: Jules Verne's Literary Representations of Geoscientific Knowledge in Arctic and African Explorations in the Late 19th Century
	FERENC GYURIS: "Epistemic Frontiers" and the Global Semi-Periphery: Perceptions of Africa and the Arctic in Fin-de-Siècle Hungarian Geography
	<i>Break</i>
	Authority and Agency: Figures, Knowledge, and Power CHAIR: PEDER ROBERTS
14:20	ANDERS BACHE: Curating Amundsen
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16:20	ALEXANDRE SIMON-EKELAND: Indigenous Peoples in Late 19th-Century African and Arctic French Exploration Accounts: A Distant-Reading Comparison
	RAPHAËL PELLETIER: Louis-Edmond Hamelin's Politics of Nordicity: From a Nationalistic Rhetoric to a Philosophy of Coexistence
	SHARAD MASTER: Filling the "White Spots" in Africa and the Arctic in the Late 1880s: Henry Morton Stanley's Emin Pasha Expedition in Equatorial Africa and Fridtjof Nansen's Crossing of Greenland

19:00 Conference Dinner: Café Tekehtopa, St. Olavs Plass 2 (only for presenters and chairs)



CONFERENCE PROGRAM

Time	Wednesday, 23 April
8:30 - 10:00	<p align="center">Constructing Space: Colonialism, Infrastructure, and Control (Tøyen Manor House) CHAIR: MARGRET HAMILTON</p>
	<p align="center">ANA RAYA-COLLADO: Framing the Desert as a Blank Space to Render It Colonizable: The Case of Western Sahara (1940–1950)</p>
	<p align="center">MIKE HEFFERNAN: Frontiers of Human Settlement: An Interwar Debate</p>
	<p align="center">ANDERS ESE: Into the Fold: Epistemic Frontiers in East African Housing, Water, and Sanitation Projects</p>
	<i>Break</i>
10:20 - 11:50	<p align="center">Mapping and Measuring: Fieldwork, Environment, and Knowledge Production I CHAIR: VERONIQUE ISABELLE CLAIRE POUILLARD</p>
	<p align="center">KATHLEEN HISTON: The Italian Geologist Arturo Issel (1842–1922) and His Contributions to Scientific Knowledge of Northeastern Africa and the Red Sea Area</p>
	<p align="center">LAWRENCE DRITSAS: The Tacit Epistemology of Fraser Darling’s ‘Ecological Reconnaissance’</p>
	<p align="center">MAXIMILIAN GEORG: Archaeologists and the Egyptian Deserts, ca. 1800–1914</p>
	<i>Lunch</i>
12:30 - 14:00	<p align="center">Mapping and Measuring: Fieldwork, Environment, and Knowledge Production II CHAIR: PÅL WILTER SKEDSMO</p>
	<p align="center">JOANNA KODZIK: Changing Arctic Epistemic Frontiers: Moravian Knowledge Production in Greenland, Labrador, and Alaska</p>
	<p align="center">ADESOJI ADEDIPE: Power Asymmetry in Geoscientific Knowledge Production and Publication: Africa in Historical Perspective</p>
	<p align="center">JANIKE KAMPEVOLD LARSEN: Island at Work: The Promise of ‘Tropical Forestry’ at Bear Island, 1910–1925</p>
	<i>Break</i>
14:20 - 15:50	<p align="center">Extracting Value: Economies of Exploration and Resources CHAIR: MIKE HEFFERNAN</p>
	<p align="center">CLAUDINE COHEN: Gold Rushes in the Arctic and South Africa, and Their Scientific Implications</p>
	<p align="center">VERONIQUE ISABELLE CLAIRE POUILLARD: Early Prospection for Diamonds in the Kasai: A View Through the Correspondence of Roman Kostka (1910–1911)</p>
	<p align="center">KATEŘINA FANTOVÁ: The First International Polar Year (1882–1883) in the Narratives of Science and Society</p>
	<i>Short Break</i>
16:00 - 16:20	<p align="center">Concluding Discussion CHAIR: ROBERT MARC FRIEDMAN</p>

CONFERENCE PROGRAM

Time	Thursday, 24 April
	Excursion Day MEETING POINT: BLINDERN SUBWAY STATION AT 8:15 DEPARTURE BY BUS AT 8:30 SHARP (FROM PROBLEMVEIEN)
	<i>Bus ride from Oslo center to Polhøgda (ca. 25 min)</i>
9:00 - 10:45	Visit of the Fridjof-Nansen-Institute (FNI), Polhøgda PÅL WILTER SKEDSMO
	<i>Bus ride from Polhøgda to Uranienborg (ca. 45 min)</i>
11:30 - 13:15	Visit of the Roald Amundsen's home, Uranienborg ANDERS BACHE
	<i>Bus ride from Uranienborg back to Oslo center (ca. 45 min)</i> Return around 14:00

Relicts of the Franklin Expedition, The Illustrated London News, 1859. Wien Museum, Inv.-Nr. W 1849.

