



The Nordenskiöld game

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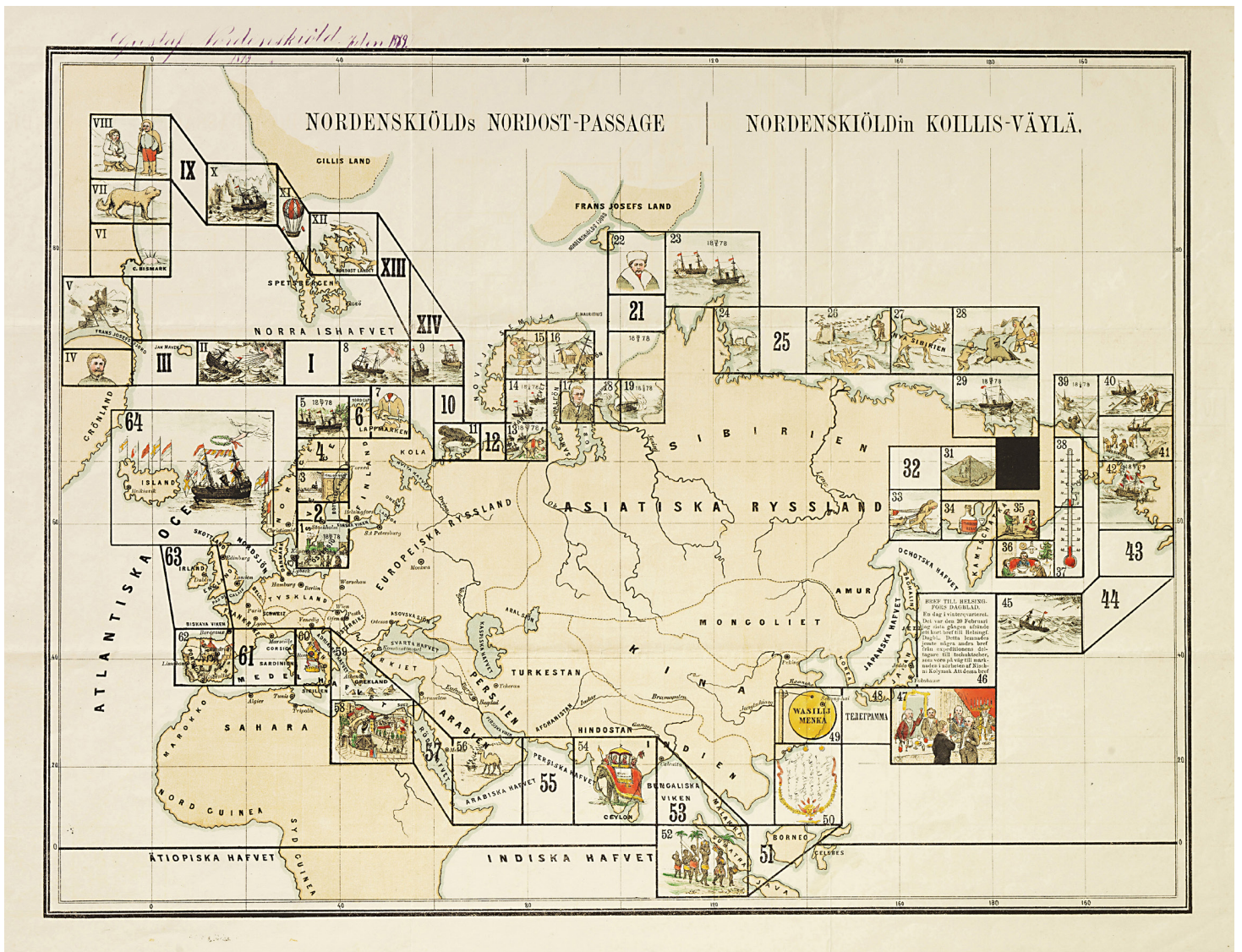
◀ THE ORDER OF
THE POLAR STAR
awarded to Adolf Erik
Nordenskiöld
in 1880.

Players start by throwing the die to decide who will be Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld, or at least who gets to play using the “tin figure” that “represents Nordenskiöld”. Only the player who first gets “7 eyes” becomes the “polar voyage’s leader” who, in the game, will be addressed as “Herr Commander”. If “the title is forgotten or a wrong committed, the guilty party pays 2 marks”. The other participants’ titles are also decided by throwing the die, in descending order: “Herr Captain”, “Herr Inspector”, “Herr Doctor”, “Herr Professor” and “Herr Lieutenant”. The game begins with all the participants paying 20 marks to the kitty and placing their playing pieces on “No 1” – those who are not playing with the Nordenskiöld figure each use a small steamboat.

In December 1879, a newspaper, the *Östra Finland: Tidning för medborgerliga intressen och lokalblad för Wiborg* [East Finland: Newspaper for citizenly interests and local news in Wiborg] wrote about *Nordenskiölds Nordostpassage* [Nordenskiöld’s Northeast Passage] as a

new dice game, which will surely win over many buyers and friends. Its intention is not only to bring amusement, but also to make youngsters aware, in a charming way, of our renowned countryman’s voyage of discovery and the regions it covered. Moreover, if one is fortunate, one can solve a problem at which not even Nordenskiöld succeeded – arriving at the North Pole.

A few months after the *Nordenskiölds Nordostpassage* board game had come onto the market, the real Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld returned from his Vega expedition, named after Nordenskiöld’s boat, *Vega*. He returned to Stockholm on 24 April 1880, and thousands of people were at the capital’s docks. They had gathered to celebrate the successful attempt to find the Northeast



BOARD for *Nordenskiölds Nordostpassage* [Nordenskiöld's Northeast Passage] from 1879.

Passage, the shipping route north of Europe and Asia between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld was a professor affiliated to the Academy of Sciences and a curator at the Swedish Museum of Natural History. He participated in several of the Swedish polar expeditions that were launched after the early 1860s. The Academy of Sciences had an important role in organising and supporting these “scientific Viking raids”. Nordenskiöld was a member of the Academy and its archive contains masses of memorabilia, such as this board game.

A small rules booklet explains the various squares in *Nordenskiölds Nordostpassage*. For example, square four represents the Port of Gothenburg, where one loses five marks acquiring the provisions necessary for the expedition; in square 11 (Cape Chelyuskin) the player wins ten marks after selling captured seals. Throughout the game, the player who is Nordenskiöld receives double payment. A player can move straight from square 19 to square 25, but the steamboat is trapped in ice on square 21: back to square 15. In square 31, one pays five marks to visit an “ice and snow cabin” and in square 34 the same amount is paid for the “hire of a sledge”. In square 36, the player finds “the body of an older North Pole voyager and treasures to a value of 10 marks”. Square 41 is the worst; it represents the period in which *Vega* “in good condition, was frozen in off the Bering Strait”. The vessel remained for “264 days, surrounded by the ice”. A player who lands on square 41 has to watch the “[d]ie go past three times”.

The first player to arrive at square 42 “has come to the Bering Strait and receive the contents of the kitty for a longer stay in Yokohama”. Strangely, the rules booklet (at least the copy in the National Library of Sweden) has no information about the rest of the game (squares 43 to 64).

However, the booklet does have something to say about Nordenskiöld’s expedition: along with the rules, there is an educational description of both the polar explorer himself and his successful attempt to discover the North-east Passage. The ambition of sailing through “the Siberian Sea” is described as a “problem over three hundred years old” and an overview of this history is summarised, including the attempts made in the 18th century, by James Cook among others. The booklet also describes Nordenskiöld’s “interesting journey” from his departure from Tromsö in July 1878, via “Asia’s northernmost point, Cape Chelyuskin” and the winter in Irkutsk.

On the *Vega* expedition’s return to Stockholm the city celebrated, the expedition members received the Order of the Polar Star from the hand of King Oscar II and their names became famous: “honours, orders and financial rewards rained down on those responsible”. Perhaps there were many people among the thousands at the docks who, along with friends and relatives, had sat around *Nordenskiölds Nordostpassage*, cheered over their winnings and sworn about cheating and losses. We don’t know much about that. What we do know, however, is that *Nordenskiölds Nordostpassage* was produced in 1879 in Swedish, Finnish and German by Helsingfors litteratursällskap [the Literary Society of Helsinki].

The fact is that *Nordenskiölds Nordostpassage* was not the only one of its kind. A board game was produced in association with Salomon August Andrée’s expedition two decades later (1896). It came from a publisher in Stockholm, Gustaf Ljunggren, and the board was framed by the (well-motivated) question: “How will Andrée be able to pass the North Pole with a

southerly wind?” Indeed, the function of board games as entertainment and a way of passing time is easily understood, but they also produce messages that carry meaning or morality. There are several examples of games that convey war or trade propaganda as tales of a happy life. Again, other board games have focused on introducing “the joy of science”. One example is the game *Science in Sport, or the Pleasures of Astronomy: A New and Instructive Pastime* from 1804.

Nordenskiölds Nordostpassage allowed the players to travel the same route as Nordenskiöld and his men, and to become acquainted with the animals, people and environments that the voyagers experienced – though on a small and simple scale. The game was available before the expedition had returned. The Finnish newspaper *Morgonbladet* wrote that its intention was “during the game, to allow young people, in thought, to accompany the renowned Arctic adventurer on his latest world-famous voyage”. Playing while the expedition was still underway was perhaps supposed to be a way of increasing a sense of participation.

The history of board games is an important context for understanding the Vega game but, alongside this, is the 19th-century context in which we can interpret the game. The expedition was part of a larger narrative about the expansion of the sciences and the mapping of a nation’s potentially valuable territories, trading routes and commodities. In this regard, Nordenskiöld, the Vega expedition and their celebration is a clear example of the links between politics, economics and science. However, the game was also part of a wider trend in which the sciences made a mark on the growth of popular culture. They became increasingly medialisised and audiences were invited to witness – indeed, even participate in – scientific activities. Quite simply, in the medialisisation of the sciences, there was a desire to involve and welcome the public.

When fireworks exploded and cheers rose to the Stockholm sky in April 1880, the Vega expedition became one of the first examples of a public celebratory culture associated with the sciences. Due to the praise and presentations in the media, the network between the sciences and other societal power bases – the royal court, politicians, corporate elites – was strengthened. There are many examples from the latter half of the 19th century: inaugurations, burials, and later the Nobel Prize. The words of praise also formulated national pride, especially in the case of the polar expeditions, reinforcing the imperialistic image of Sweden as one of knowledge’s great powers in the region. At the same time, the scientist was celebrated as a public person and public persona.

Since at least the 19th century, public science has entailed a mutual exchange between the media and the scientific community. Public relations were part of incorporating the sciences in national celebrity culture and in

the nation's political ambitions. *Nordenskiölds Nordostpassage* is one example of a greater trend in the history of the sciences for building devices that create public participation. In this regard, the public have been a resource for the sciences just as much as vice-versa. Scientific work, the dissemination of results and their public reception mutually coincide and create each other.

Many questions remain: Was the game popular? The short detour west towards Greenland, marked in Roman numerals, appears to show the research journeys made by Nordenskiöld prior to the Vega expedition, but what is its function in the game? Why is square 30 completely black? Meanwhile, we know a great deal about the major questions in the media history of the sciences. The sciences were woven into modern society using many different means for opening them up to a broader public. The game was part of a historically specific knowledge culture shaped during the second half of the 19th century, one that appears as faded as the image is patinaed; the media content of the sciences has moved and transformed, even if their bearing institutions, such as the Academy of Sciences, remain.

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The rules of the game and a short description of Nordenskiöld's voyage are found in the booklet "Nordenskiölds nordostpassage" (Stockholm, 1880), preserved at the National Library of Sweden (uncatalogued ephemera, under "Ludi"). The quote from *Östra Finland: Tidning för medborgerliga intressen och lokalblad för Wiborg* dates from 22 December 1879. The reasoning on Nordenskiöld and "scientific Viking raids" is partly from *Nationalencyklopedin*, entry for Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld, partly from Urban Wråkberg's *Vetenskapens vikingatåg: Perspektiv på svensk polarforskning* (Stockholm, 1999). The description of the celebrations of *Vega's* return to Stockholm is in Tore Frängsmyr's *Svensk idéhistoria: Bildning och vetenskap under tusen år*, vol. II (Stockholm, 2000). The quote from *Morgonbladet: Tidning för Politik, Ekonomi och Litteratur* dates from 11 December 1879. Swedish research has studied how science is presented in the media and the links between the sciences and other societal elites, as well as science as part of national identity and the significance of scientists' public roles. See for example Sven Widmalm, *Det öppna laboratoriet: Uppsalafysiken och dess nätverk 1853–1910* (Stockholm, 2001); Magnus Rodell, "Nationen och ingenjören: John Ericsson, medierna och publiken", Anders Ekström (ed.), *Den mediala vetenskapen* (Nora, 2004); Staffan Bergwik, "Ljus över mörka vatten: Gustaf Dalén, ingenjörskonsten och etableringen av det moderna Sverige", Staffan Bergwik, Michael Godhe, Anders Houltz & Magnus Rodell (eds.), *Svensk snillrikhet? Nationella föreställningar om entreprenörer och teknisk begåvning 1800–2000* (Lund, 2014); Tore Frängsmyr, *Vetenskapsmannen som hjälte: Aspekter på vetenskapshistorien* (Stockholm, 1984).