

Belgica in the Arctic

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ABSTRACT. *Belgica*, which Adrien de Gerlache used on the first expedition to winter in the Antarctic, was originally a bottlenose whaler named *Patria*, built in Norway in 1884. She was designed and constructed by Johan Chr. Jakobsen, renowned for his design of polar ships. *Patria* was sold to Adrien de Gerlache and renamed *Belgica* in 1896. In 1896–97 she was refitted and equipped in Sandefjord, Norway, for an Antarctic expedition. Nansen and Amundsen met for the first time on *Belgica*'s deck. Late in 1899 *Belgica* returned to Antwerp after more than two years on an Antarctic expedition. From 1901 to 1904 *Belgica* returned to bottlenose whaling and, in addition, made a voyage to northeast Greenland to establish depots and build houses for the Baldwin-Ziegler Polar Expedition. In 1905 the Duc d'Orléans chartered her to survey the coast of northeast Greenland, and on her return he bought her. In 1907 and 1909 she sailed on Arctic expeditions led by the Duc d'Orléans and captained by de Gerlache. In 1916 she was sold to Det Norske Kulsyndikat and renamed *Isfjord*. She became a freighter carrying coal from Longyearbyen to ports in northern Norway. In 1918 she was sold and her new owner converted her into a floating cod-liver oil refinery and fish-processing plant. In 1940 she was impounded by British forces and used as a floating ammunition depot. On 19 May 1940 she was sunk during a German air raid. Her wreck was re-discovered in 1990.

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Introduction

Belgica was the first ship that wintered in the Antarctic. Both the voyage and the wintering are well known. This article is about the activities of the same ship in the Arctic. *Belgica* (originally *Patria*, later named *Isfjord*, and then renamed *Belgica* again) sailed for more than 50 years in Arctic waters and passed through several periods of Arctic maritime history, including the rise and the decline of the bottlenose whaling industry, Arctic exploration and expeditions, transportation of coal and provisions between Svalbard and northern Norway during World War I, and fish-processing in the great cod fishery at Lofoten.

The bottlenose whaler *Patria*

Patria was built in 1884 in Svelvik, not far from Oslo. She was designed and constructed by Johan Chr. Jakobsen, renowned for his design of polar ships, including *Hekla* (renamed *Scotia* by W.S. Bruce); *Balenea* (formerly *Mjølner*), a well-known Dundee whaler and exploration ship; *Antarctic* (formerly *Cape Nor*); and the latter's sister ship *Diana*, another well-known Dundee whaler and exploration ship. Later in life Jakobsen supervised the building of *Godthaab* and *Polaris*, the former a KGH

(Royal Greenland Trade Company) vessel in Arctic waters for 60 years, and the latter to become famous as Ernest Shackleton's *Endurance*.

Patria's dimensions were 118 × 25 × 13.5 feet. She was built from pine and pitchpine on oak ribs. Her stern and bow were protected by four-inch planks of greenheart, while the midship ice sheathings were made of oak. Her stern wall was five feet thick. Her bow was extra-strengthened with solid iron ribs both above and below the waterline. The curved bow profile below the waterline enabled her to slide up onto ice and break it with her weight and motive force. An ornament of cast iron just below the jib-boom decorated her bow.

Patria was three-masted and barque-rigged (Fig. 1). She was 263 tons and equipped with a 35 hp steam engine. She was built for bottlenose whaling, and four whaleboats hung from her davits. *Patria* was managed by H. Heitmann & Son, Christiania (present-day Oslo), but she was contracted by Aktieselskabet *Patria*, Christiania, a company of businessmen who had invested money in bottlenose whaling, which was then booming in Norway. In 1883 the newly launched bottlenose whaler, *Eskimo*, had caught 33 whales. The next year eight whalers caught 800 whales. Norwegian whaling masters and ship-owners saw the potential in bottlenose whaling, and several sealers were equipped for this purpose. In addition several new bottlenose whalers were launched during the following years. In 1885, when *Patria*, captained by E. Olsen, made her maiden voyage to the whaling grounds, 22 ships sailed for the bottlenose whaling ground from ports in southern Norway. The next year, M.S. Pedersen signed on as *Patria*'s master. They had little success, however. In 1896, when bottlenose whaling in Norway reached its zenith with a catch of 2864 bottlenoses by 61 whalers (Risting 1922), Aktieselskabet *Patria* was dissolved, but Pedersen had right of pre-emption when the ship was put on sale.

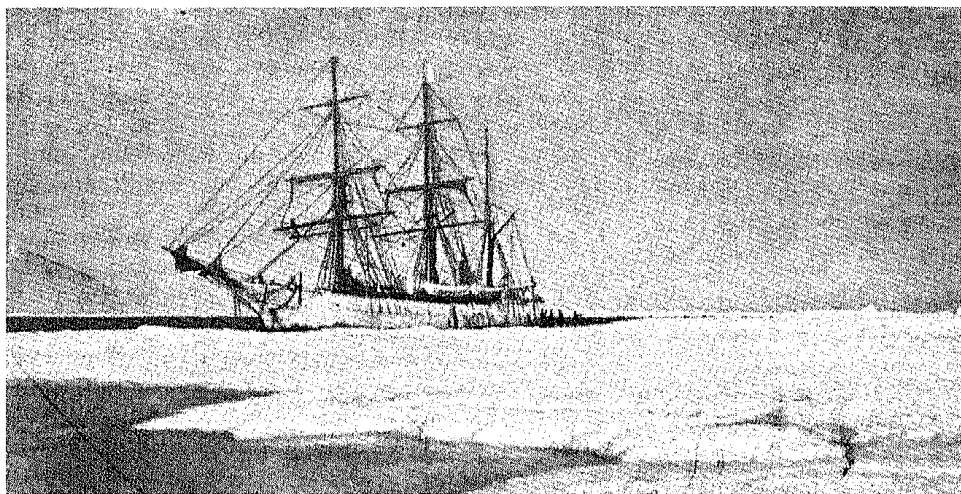


Fig. 1. *Patria/Belgica* in the Arctic ice.

Refitted and renamed for an Antarctic expedition

In 1895 Adrien de Gerlache sailed with the Norwegian sealer *Castor* to Jan Mayen and Greenland. De Gerlache's intention was to raise money from sealing to purchase *Castor* for his Antarctic expedition. The previous year, *Castor* had returned from another expedition, led by Captain C. A. Larsen, on which she joined two other ships, *Jason* and *Hertha*, exploring the possibility of Norwegian whaling in the Antarctic.

In 1896, however, *Castor* was sold to KGH, which needed a replacement vessel for *Hvidebjørn*, which had been lost. De Gerlache learned that *Patria* was for sale and opened negotiations with her owner, Captain Pedersen. He succeeded in purchasing her for NOK50,000 (70,000 francs). Meanwhile, Chr. Christensen, who had financed Larsen's two Antarctic expeditions, offered to refit and equip *Patria* for an Antarctic expedition at his shipyard in Sandefjord. *Patria* arrived in Sandefjord on 4 June 1896, when, on entering the harbour, she was saluted from Christensen's own battery. The next day the Belgian flag was hoisted, the cannons saluted again, and she was renamed *Belgica*.

The contract between the shipyard and de Gerlache stated that the work should be finished by 1 May 1897. Johan Chr. Jakobsen, who had designed and constructed the vessel, was hired by the yard and moved to Sandefjord to lead the rebuilding and repairs (Bogen 1948). Roald Amundsen signed on as second mate. He was completely unknown, but had been recommended by de Gerlache's agent in Norway, Johan Bryde, who became manager of *Belgica* for several years after her return from the Antarctic.

In 1897 a series of casual meetings took place aboard *Belgica*, meetings that would have an important influence on the exploration of polar regions. In May the barque *Ino* (renamed *Laura*) arrived at the shipyard to be rebuilt for Henry J. Pearson's expedition to the Russian Arctic. The second mate of *Ino* was Helmer Hansen. Hansen wanted

to visit *Belgica* but de Gerlache had put up a sign reading 'No entry.' Hansen ignored this, jumped onto *Belgica*'s deck and asked for the second mate, whereupon a smiling Amundsen shook hands with him. Later the two men developed a loyal friendship. In 1903–06 Hansen sailed with Amundsen's *Gjøa* through the Northwest Passage, in 1911 he was a member of Amundsen's South Pole party, and he subsequently became the master of Amundsen's *Maud*. Years later he wrote a book about his 18 years with Amundsen (Hansen 1941).

De Gerlache became acquainted with Lars Christensen, the shipyard owner's 14-year-old son. Later in life, based on de Gerlache's experience with *Belgica*, these two men built the ship *Polaris*, which was launched on 17 December 1912. She was well equipped and designed for charter by very rich people for exotic hunting expeditions in the Arctic. She was designed by Lars Christensen's close friend, Ole A. Larsen, and Johan Chr. Jackobsen, the designer of *Belgica*, supervised her building. De Gerlache was not able to pay his half-share of the price, and Christensen therefore sold the vessel to Ernest Shackleton, who renamed her *Endurance* (Bogen 1955).

In June Fridtjof Nansen, his wife, and daughter, came to Sandefjord in his yacht *Veslemøy* to visit de Gerlache and *Belgica*. Nine months earlier Nansen had returned from his voyage in *Fram* (1893–96). He had become a national hero in Norway. Nansen and Amundsen met for the first time on *Belgica*'s deck (Winsnes 1942).

In 1897 the ownership of *Belgica* was transferred to a group of investors who formed the Société anonyme du Steamer Belgica. The rebuilding and refitting for the Antarctic expedition was delayed, but by the middle of June she was ready to sail. Painted white with a yellow funnel, she looked like a yacht. She was equipped with a new boiler and a propeller that could be raised out of the water if the ice conditions required it to permit free sailing or, if damaged, to replace it. A laboratory 15 feet

long by 12 feet wide was fitted behind the main mast. Her ice-sheathing of greenheart and oak was relaid and renewed (Det Norske Veritas 1917). The rebuilding cost the Société anonyme NOK40,000 (60,000 francs).

Departure was planned for 24 June 1897. Hundreds of people gathered at the waterfront, including a choir that had been invited to give a concert. Fireworks were set up on both sides of the entrance to the harbour, but *Belgica* did not sail because of fog. Instead, she left quietly early the following morning (Bogen 1955) with a crew of eight, bound for Antwerp, from where her famous voyage and wintering in the Antarctic began. Two years and two months later, in late 1899, she was enthusiastically welcomed there upon her return.

An Arctic ship again

Between 1901 and 1904 *Belgica* returned to hunting seals and bottlenose whales (Isachsen and Isachsen 1932). During this period, her master was Christian Halvorsen and her crew was Norwegian, but she flew the Belgian flag (Carl Sæther's Arkiv). She was stationed in Sandefjord, and managed by Johan Bryde, de Gerlache's agent in Norway.

In 1901 *Belgica* was chartered by the Baldwin-Ziegler Polar Expedition, which was led by Evelyn Baldwin and financed by the wealthy American William Ziegler. In the summer of 1901 the expedition had three Arctic ships at its disposal: *America* (Captain Johnson), *Frithjof* (Captain Kjeldsen), and *Belgica* (Captain Halvorsen).

America and *Frithjof* sailed to Franz Josef Land with the expedition's members, dogs, horses, equipment, and provisions, but *Belgica* sailed to Bass Rock, northeast Greenland, where the crew built two houses and laid out depots for the North Pole party to use on their return. In fact, the depots were never used by the expedition, but provided, instead, succour for explorers, trappers, and sealers for years to come.

When *Belgica* returned to whaling in 1901, the industry was already in decline. The number of ships was almost the same but the catches were poor. In 1902 *Belgica* sailed out of Sandefjord on 4 March and met the ice two weeks later at 73°30'N, 1°40'W. The sealing in the Western Ice was poor, and on 19 May she sailed to south Greenland, the first time that bottlenose whales were hunted there (Risting 1922). In 1903 a fleet of 59 whalers sailed from ports in Norway. They returned with an average catch of 28 bottlenose whales. *Belgica* caught 30 whales and 1570 seals. The price for Arctic spermaceti oil was good and the voyage was profitable. The following year, however, the price fell and most whalers suffered heavy losses (Risting 1922). Catches were poor, too, owing to storms and fog in May and June. *Belgica* was more successful than most, and on 27 July she returned from Greenland with 24 bottlenoses, 1 blue whale, 3725 seals, and 1 polar bear (Hjort and Knipowitch 1907). Nevertheless, she was withdrawn from bottlenose whaling and commercial sealing.

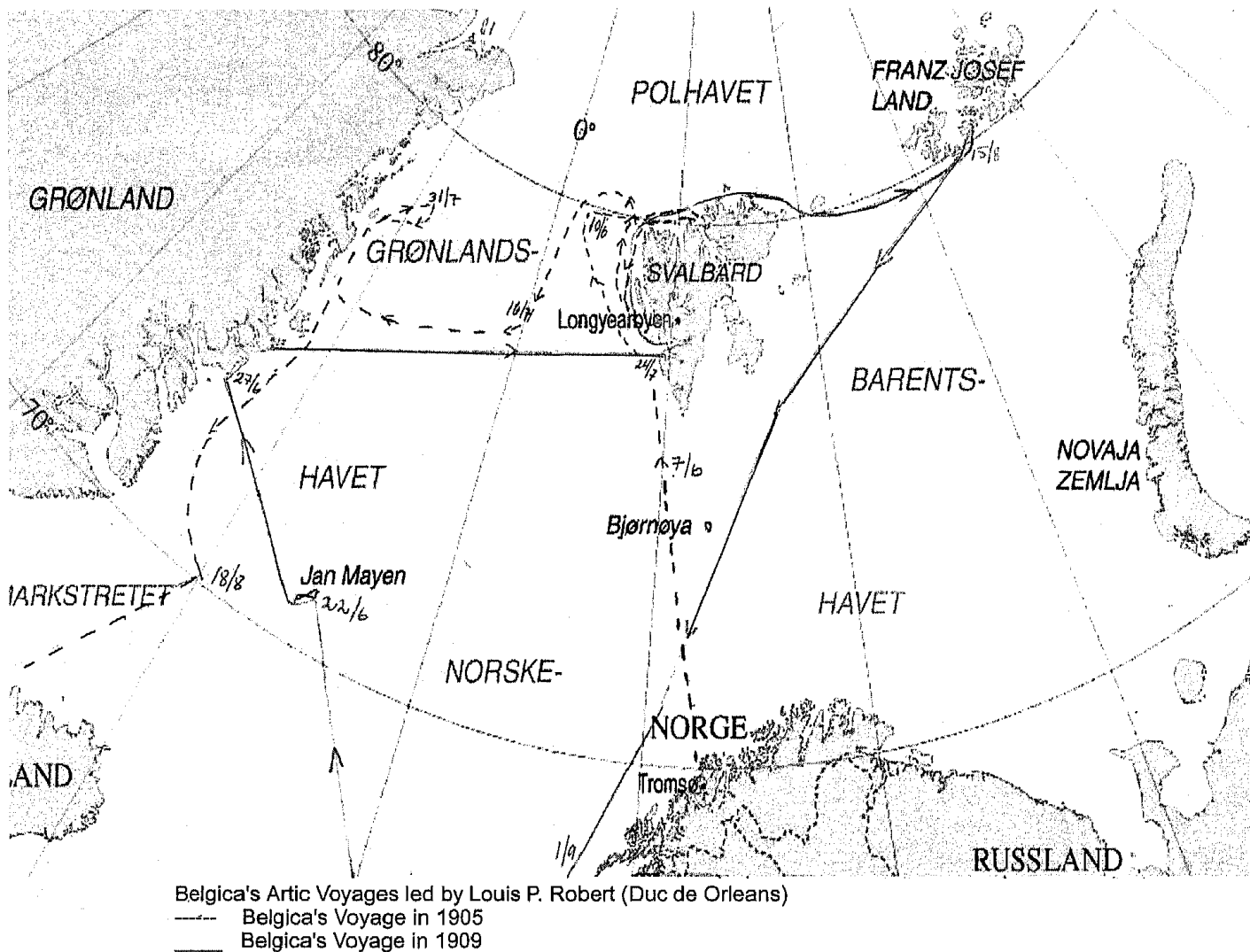
Sealing and science

In 1905 Louis-Philippe-Robert, Duc d'Orléans, chartered *Belgica* for a summer expedition to Svalbard and northeast Greenland. In 1896 and again in 1904, he had visited Svalbard in his yacht *Maroussia*, mostly hunting reindeer (Holland 1994: 450). On these earlier voyages he had Norwegian sealing masters, but in 1905 de Gerlache returned as master of *Belgica*. F.L. Andreassen (first mate of *Antarctic* on Otto Nordenskjöld's Antarctic expedition) signed on as first mate in a crew of 12 Norwegians. The Duc d'Orléans was the expedition leader and Lieutenant Bergendahl of the Swedish Navy was the deputy leader. In 1903 Bergendahl had been a member of the Swedish Navy's relief expedition for Nordenskjöld (Lewander 2003). Louis Michgotte, the cook of the *Belgica* expedition, had been the Duc's butler since his return from the Antarctic, and served as the 1905 expedition's purser (Andreassen 1905). In addition a French doctor and artist sailed with her.

Belgica departed Sandeford on 6 May, and three days later she anchored in Bergen, where Einar Koefoed, a Norwegian marine zoologist from Bergen Zoological Museum, came aboard. Provisions and Koefoed's scientific equipment (trawls, bottom scrapers, bottles for water samples, Lucas soundings, wires, etc) were also taken aboard. 'She was painted for the 3rd time from the waterline to the top' (Andreassen 1905). *Belgica* proceeded north along the coast until the evening of 29 May, when she arrived in Tromsø. *Terra Nova* (which would serve as the ship on Robert Falcon Scott's last expedition) was anchored there at the same time. 'She is on her way to Franz Josef Land to investigate whether Ziegler's Polar Expedition has returned,' wrote Andreassen (1905). In the harbour was yet another Arctic exploring vessel flying the Russian flag, *Geysir*, later famous as *Sv. Foca*.

On 3 June *Belgica* sailed out of Tromsø; Bjørnøya was sighted four days later (Fig. 2). The Duc wanted to stop for a few days at Bellsund where some Norwegian whaling ships and the floating refinery *Admiralen* were operating, but the fjord was blocked with ice and *Belgica* continued north.

On 14 June *Belgica* anchored at Smeerenburgfjorden because of a heavy storm that lasted for two days. On the third day a rowboat with two men was spotted. It was Captain Jonas from the sealer *Svanen* of Hammerfest, which had been wrecked during the storm when both anchor chains had broken and the sealer had drifted ashore. The Duc and the expedition members visited the wreck and a decision was made that Captain Jonas should sign on *Belgica* as ice pilot and guide the ship to the best hunting places while the rest of the crew of eight should remain at the wreck until *Belgica* returned two weeks later. In the interim, *Belgica* cruised at roughly 79°55' from 10 to 16°E, while Kofoed and de Gerlache carried out a scientific programme of collecting samples from the sea bottom with trawl and scrapers. On 29 June they



In 1907 Belgica sailed into the Kara Sea, trapped in the ice, and finally reached Hammerfest 23rd Sept.

Fig. 2. The voyages of the Duc d'Orléans in *Belgica*, 1905 and 1909.

returned to the wreck of *Svanen*, and her crew, barrels of pelts and walrus skins, and three walrus boats were taken aboard.

Belgica next sailed south along west coast of Spitsbergen to Grønfjorden, where the Duc hoped to meet a sealer or a tourist ship that could take the crew of *Svanen* to Hammerfest. On 5 July they met the whaler *Hvidfisken* of Tromsø, which was about to start homeward. Captain Ingvald Svendsen — who would later serve as ice pilot aboard *Belgica* — agreed to take the crew to Hammerfest for NOK200.

On 7 July *Belgica* departed from the area northwest of Spitsbergen toward northeast Greenland, with Koefoed and Gerlache continuing their scientific programme throughout. Depth soundings were taken every half-hour. Captain Jonas from *Svanen* served as ice pilot. Two weeks later, on 22 July, they reached the icebelt at 75°30'N, and five days after that the coast south of Cape Bismarck. On 28 July, at 77°36'N, they discovered a previously unknown island, which the Duc named Ile

de France. The expedition made a landing at the headland the following day, where the French flag was hoisted and champagne served. 'The place was named Cape Philippe and the landscape Terra de France' (Andreassen 1905). Ruins from Eskimo huts were found on the island.

In the evening, at 77°44'N, they met the sealer *Søstrene* of Tromsø (Captain Grødahl), which was hunting walrus. On 31 July they reached 78°16'N, which was farther north than any previous scientific expedition had ever reached off the northeast Greenland coast. They considered continuing farther. 'It is possible to advance further north but considering the risk at high latitude with provisions for 6 weeks only and the Duke being satisfied with the outcome of the north voyage we sail ESE' Andreassen wrote in his diary (1905). Sketches were made of the coast as far as 79°N, and a sea bank was discovered between Cape Bismarck and Cape Philippe some 12 miles from the coast at 34–50 fathoms depth. The underwater plateau, named 'Belgica-bank'

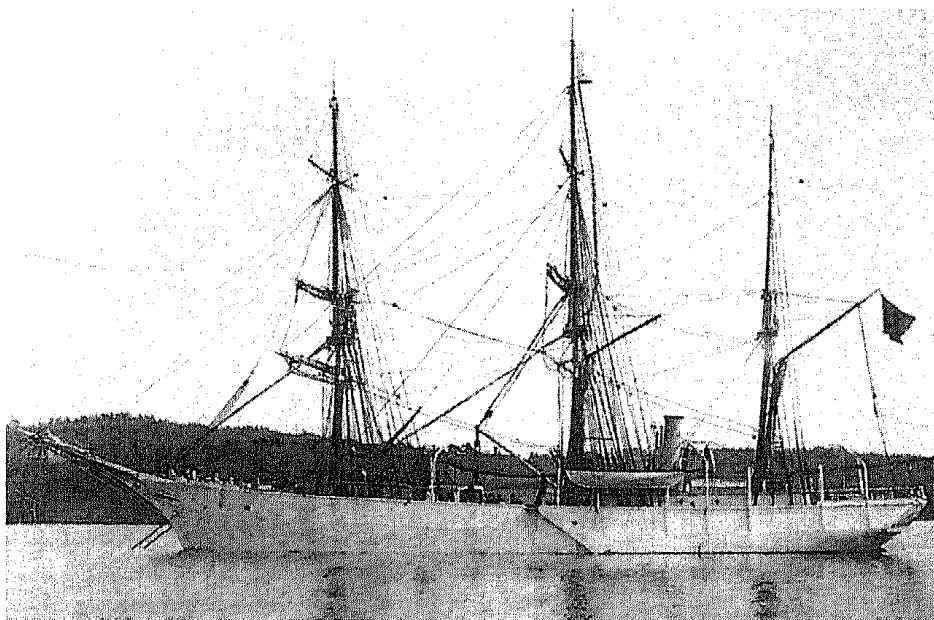


Fig. 3. *Belgica* in Duc d'Orléans' ownership – an Arctic yacht.

(Duc d'Orléans 1911a) reached far out to the sea between Greenland and Svalbard.

Belgica continued southeast along the coast of Greenland, where landings were made. A dozen polar bears, some seals, and a few walrus were shot and two live bears were taken aboard. On 20 August the expedition reached 67°35'N, 19°35'W and *Belgica* sailed to Reykjavik where on 27 August the Arctic explorer Amstrup came aboard on a short visit. The voyage continued to Peterhead where the Duc took the train to London while *Belgica* sailed to Dunkirk. Her ice sheathing was taken off, her hull examined, and some planks were replaced midships. Her ice sheathing was then relaid. On 21 October she returned to Sandefjord. Koefed handed over a collection of 23 kinds of echinoderms and other species that can be seen at Bergen Zoological Museum today (Gunnar Langhelle, Bergen Zoological Museum, personal communication). These data confirmed observations made during the *Antarctic* expedition in 1900, that seals were able to find food at a depth of 200 m (Grieg 1907).

Following this voyage, the Duc purchased *Belgica* from Société anonyme du Steamer Belgica for 130,000 francs (Bogen 1948), but on 13 November he proposed to sell her with all her equipment and scientific instruments to Mylius-Erichsen's Danmark Expedition. Mylius-Erichsen needed a strongly built ship for an expedition to northeast Greenland, and Thor Tulinius, a Danish businessman, learned from Johan Bryde that it might be possible to buy *Belgica*. Mylius-Erichsen urged Tulinius to secure *Belgica*, as she was not only strongly built but had been tested in both Antarctic and Arctic waters. A contract was drawn up between Tulinius and Bryde, which stated that *Belgica* should be handed over to the Danmark Expedition as soon as she had

docked and her hull examined. Members of the Danish expedition came to Sandefjord, and began to make preparations for the expedition onboard *Belgica*. However, Mylius-Erichsen had difficulties in raising funds, and the negotiations became progressively more complicated until the sale was cancelled (Ventegodt 2000). Mylius-Erichsen subsequently purchased the Norwegian sealer *Magdalena*, which was much bigger and cheaper, and renamed her *Danmark* (Kjær and Foxworthy 2004).

In 1907 *Belgica* was caulked, painted, and refitted at the Framnes wharf before sailing to Svalbard and into the Kara Sea (Fig. 3). The Duc d'Orléans was expedition leader, her master was de Gerlache, and Andreassen was first mate. They were joined by most of the crew from 1905, but the expedition — the main purpose of which was to survey the depth of the Kara Sea (*Finnmarksposten* 5 July 1907) — was not a success. It was a terrible ice year and, having sailed into the Kara Sea, *Belgica* became imprisoned in the ice. The hunting was completely unsuccessful. Fortunately, the floe against which the ship lay protected her from moving masses of ice and she escaped damage. Finally, 'a thaw opened a hole in the ice for the ship' (Duc d'Orléans 1911b) and *Belgica* was manoeuvred free. Several ships had returned to their harbours because of the severe ice conditions, and on 14 September the following notice appeared in the local news: 'From "Laura" and "Belgica" nothing has been heard and people are getting seriously worried' (*Tromsø* 14 September 1907). A search expedition was about to be organised when, on 21 September, *Belgica* arrived in Hammerfest, where the Duc went ashore before sailing home with the coastal ferry (Ytreberg 1962).

In 1909 *Belgica* sailed north again under command of the Duc, with de Gerlache as captain, Ingvald Svendsen as her ice pilot, and a Norwegian crew (Carl Sæthers

Arkiv). Ice conditions were good and *Belgica's* voyage was most successful. She was docked, caulked, and painted at Sandefjord and then sailed to Jan Mayen, northeast Greenland, Svalbard, Franz Josef Land, and, finally, Hopen (Barr 1991). On 22 June *Belgica* came upon a group of trappers who had wintered on Jan Mayen. They mistook her for the ship that was to be sent to bring them back to Norway. They were disappointed, frustrated, and angry when they learned that *Belgica* was merely paying the island a visit before continuing to East Greenland. A trapper had died from scurvy during the winter and another man was ill. The latter was brought onboard, examined by the doctor, and given medical treatment (Lønø 1974).

Belgica continued her voyage to East Greenland, and on 27 June arrived at Hold with Hope, thence sailing north along the coast, although 'no landings were made. It was too early in the season' (Svendsen 1923). On 1 July she anchored in Grippers Roads, the inlet between Sabine Ø and the mainland. The expedition made contact with the *Floren* expedition, the first hunting expedition to winter at northeast Greenland, at Cape Wynn.

On 22 July *Belgica* sailed east to Svalbard arriving at Bellsund two days later. At Recherche Bay the expedition made contact with Norwegian whaling ships and a floating refinery that constituted one of the two whaling stations at Svalbard, and took the opportunity to watch the various operations. One hundred and fourteen whales were caught at Svalbard that year (Risting 1922). *Belgica* returned to Bellsund and anchored in Braganza Bay, where the expedition went ashore looking for reindeer 'to replenish the store of fresh food before proceeding to Franz Josef Land' (Duke d'Orléans 1911b).

In the middle of August *Belgica* made a landing in Franz Josef Land. They found a depot from the Baldwin-Ziegler Expedition and a letter from Evelyn Baldwin dated 10 October 1901. The letter contained geographical information of the region and an account of his unsuccessful attempt to return to Norway that year. At the end of August they sailed southwest to Northbrook Island, where the expedition hoped to make landing at Cape Flora. However, ice prevented them from reaching the shore and *Belgica* sailed to Hopen instead. After a short stop, they proceeded south, finally reaching Sandefjord at the beginning of September. It was *Belgica's* last Arctic voyage under the Duc d'Orléans.

Renamed *Isfjord*

In the summer of 1906 the Arctic Coal Company (ACC), which had been established in Boston, commenced coal-mining at Longyear City, the principal settlement in Svalbard, named after J. Longyear, the ACC's founder.

Before World War I Norway imported almost all of its coal from the UK, but other sources were urgently needed due to the War. In 1915 the Arctic Coal Company closed the mines. The Norwegian Prime Minister, Gunnar Knudsen, involved himself in the process of transferring these mines to Norwegian ownership, mainly because

NSB — Norwegian Railways — needed coal (Gjesdal 1976).

In 1916 the newly established Det Norske Spitsbergensyndikat (DNS), later Store Norske Spitsbergen Kullkompani A/S (SNSK), sought a ship to serve the route between Svalbard and northern Norway. During a meeting on 28 April 1916, the syndicate decided to purchase *Belgica*, a decision approved by the Norwegian Foreign Office in a letter dated 2 May on condition that *Belgica* should not be used for other purposes than transporting coal from Svalbard to northern Norway during the war, in which Norway remained neutral, without the Foreign Office's permission. In addition the Foreign Office informed DNS that the purchase amount, NOK130,000, would be available for the seller as soon as *Belgica* was in Norway and transferred to a Norwegian shipping register. The famous ship was renamed *Isfjord*. Captain Carl Julius Evensen, a respected polar veteran, signed on as her master. He had been the master of *Stella Polare* (previously *Jason*), the Duke of the Abruzzi's ship when that expedition had established a farthest north. He had also been master of *Hertha* on Larsen's second Antarctic expedition. When Evensen signed on *Isfjord*, he had just returned from the Russian Arctic as the master of *Kit*.

There was an urgent need for coal, and *Isfjord* was sent to Longyearbyen before the negotiations with the Arctic Coal Company had been completed. A telegram from the Norwegian syndicate announcing the arrival of *Isfjord* on 17 July made the Norwegians at Longyearbyen believe that the mines were in Norwegian hands. The American flag was taken down and the Norwegian flag hoisted, but the celebration took place a month too early (Arlov 1991).

After *Belgica* arrived in Norway in 1916, she underwent a refit at Framnæs Mek, Sandefjord, where she had been rebuilt for the Antarctic expedition and refitted several times when she was in the Duc d'Orléans' ownership. Cabins were added as well as accommodation for women, and a large number of hammocks were placed in the hold (Framnæs Mek 1916). On her first voyage to Longyearbyen, 100 passengers sailed in *Isfjord*, including the SNSK manager Karl Bay (Hoel 1966). *Isfjord* discharged her cargo and immediately started loading coal from the 20,000 tons that ACC had left behind. On 9 August the miners went on strike, following which Bay promised to start a dialogue with them providing they went back to work. All but six men went back to the mines: these were sent home with *Isfjord* on 20 August (Hoel 1966).

SNSK had calculated that *Isfjord* ought to manage seven return voyages between Norway and Svalbard each year (Bay 1916). However, her fifth voyage — which began in Tromsø on 20 September 1916 — was also to be her last to Svalbard. On 11 October she approached Adventfjorden, which was blocked by ice, and, unable to reach Longyearbyen, the cargo was unloaded from the ice edge at Grønfjord. The passengers had to walk on skis or on foot approximately 30 km to Longyearbyen, while



Fig. 4. Late in 1916 *Isfjord* had problems getting into Longyearbyen. The passengers had to walk either on skis or on foot and the provisions were moved by horse, while *Isfjord* was moored at the edge of the ice.

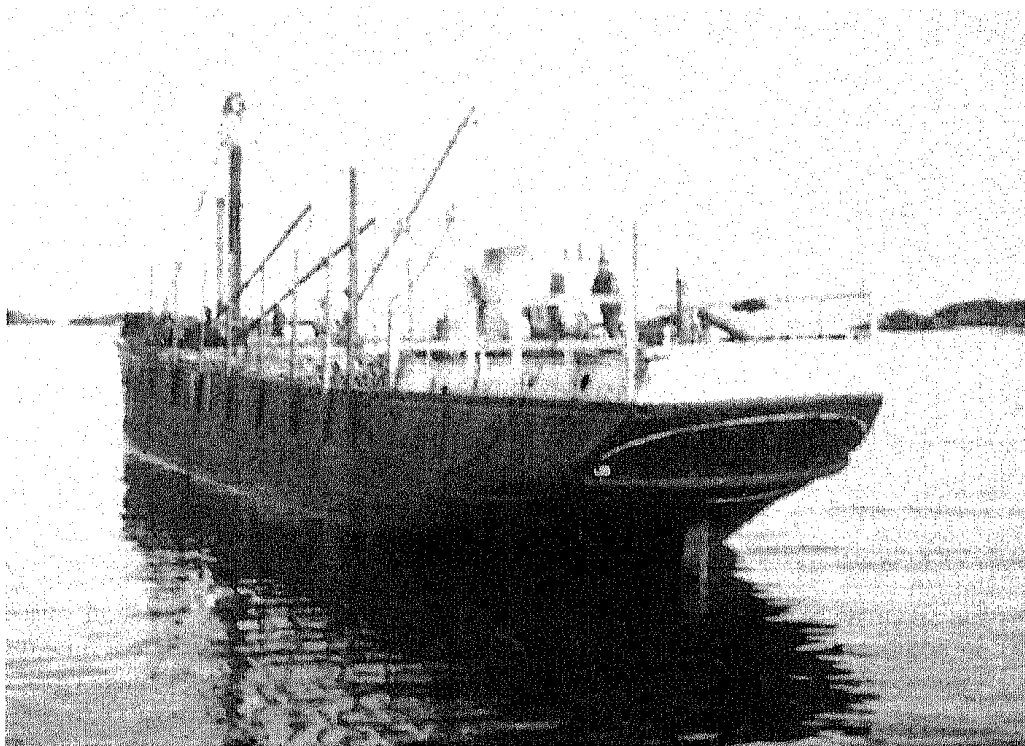


Fig. 5. *Belgica* in the 1930s.

the provisions were carried by horses (Fig. 4). Trouble also occurred on departure. On 15 October, when *Isfjord* was due to sail, the ice was three feet thick (*Isfjord* 1916). From 15 to 21 October, dynamite was used to clear a passage.

Finally, on 22 October, *Isfjord* started her last voyage from Svalbard with a cargo of 100 tons of coal and a number of passengers. That night they passed the shipwrecked crew of the Norwegian freighter *Moholmen* (Captain Isaksen), but failed to spot them in the dark. This

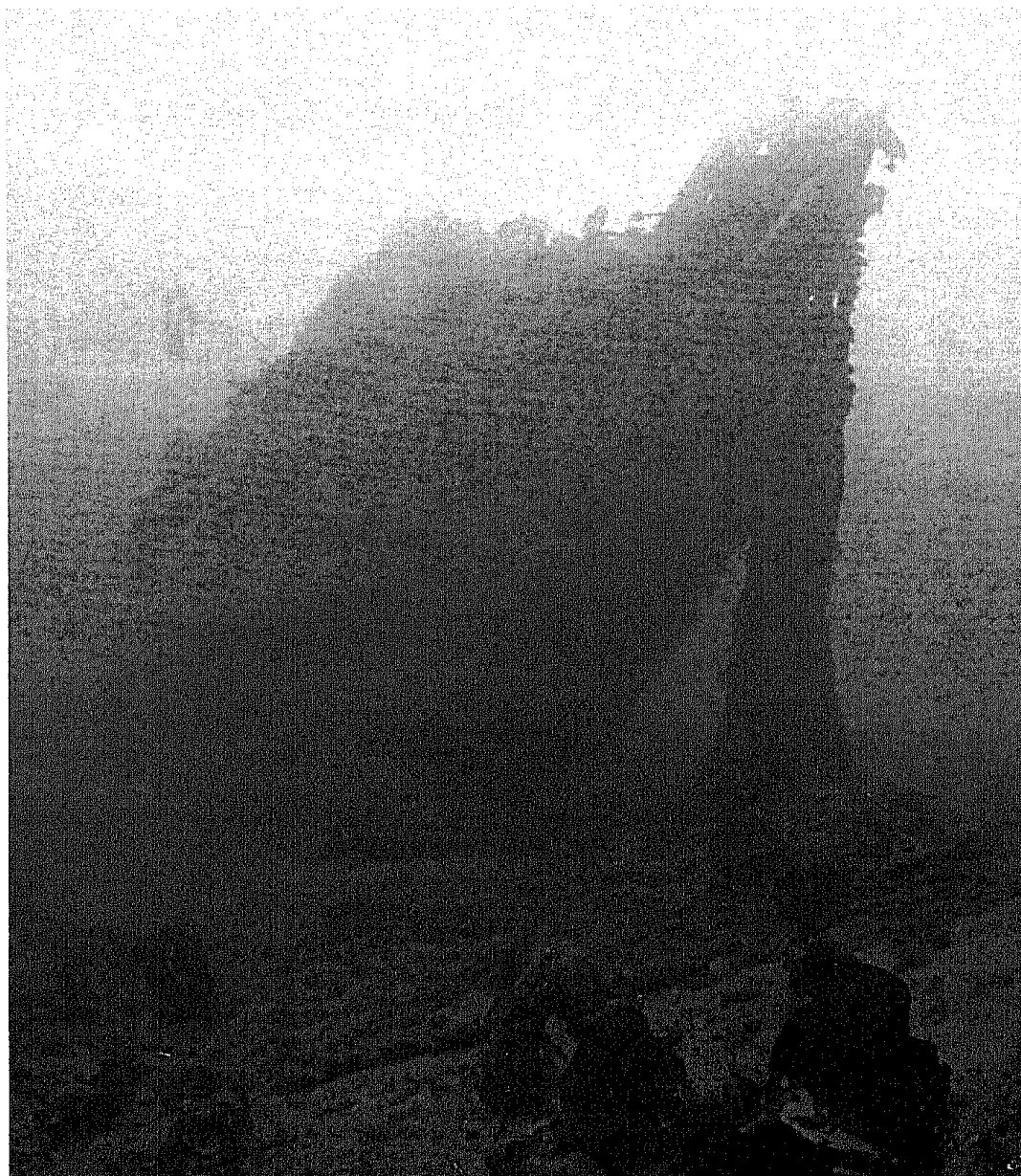


Fig. 6. *Belgica* in 2004 at 22 m depth. Photo: Erik Dürselen, Harstad.

crew of nine men managed to row ashore and wintered at the Russian coalmine in Grønfjorden (Ytreberg 1957). When the syndicate had bought the ship in June, they had realised she needed an overhaul, but they had decided to delay it until after the first season because of the urgent demand for coal. Now, in October 1916, *Isfjord* was docked at Tromsø Skibsverft. Her repairs cost NOK140,000, in addition to which *Norske Veritas* stated that before *Isfjord* could be classified for ice she needed further repairs estimated at NOK60,000. SNSK concluded that they needed a modern ship (SNSK Archiv 1910–87). They purchased the steamer *Forsete* and chartered the recently launched *Foca I* (later famous as Shackleton's *Quest*). SNSK calculated that they would get a better price for *Isfjord* if they offered her masts, sails, bridge, ice-sheathing, boats, crockery, and other equipment separately. In late 1918 her hull, steam engine, and moorings was sold to Kristian Holst, a coal importer in Norway (Hoel 1966). Despite this short career in the

service of SNSK, the voyages of *Isfjord* were important. They were a part of the successful start of SNSK, which led the way for Norwegian sovereignty of Svalbard a few years later (Gjesdal 1976).

A floating fishmonger

The ship's new owner, Kristian Holst, renamed her *Belgica*, and converted her into a floating fish-processing plant (*Harstad Tidende*). She made voyages to the Lofoten islands during the cod-fishing season (January–March). Fishermen gutted their catch on *Belgica's* deck, and labourers salted split cod in her hold. Cod roes were salted in barrels on board and sold as bait for the Spanish sardine-fishing industry. The ship's boiler produced steam for a cod-liver oil refinery installed on the deck above her engine-room (Kristian Holst, grandson of Kristian Holst, personal communication, 2003). Fishing vessels came alongside and sold their catch. Outside the fishing season, *Belgica* was moored at Harstad and used as a storehouse

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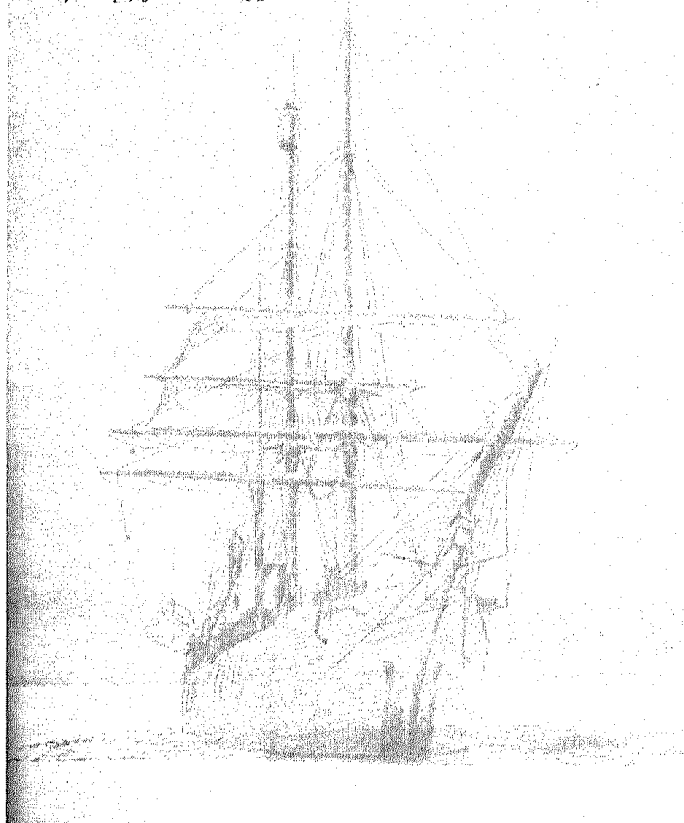


Fig. 7. The cover of *Polar Record* in 1951, featuring a photo of *Belgica*.

for fish products (salted or dried fish, and cod-liver oil). Photos show her loaded with barrels. She was dismasted, had no bowsprit, nor a proper bridge, but only a pilot house (Fig. 5) (Trondenes Historiske Senter). After she was sold to Kristian Holst, she does not appear in any shipping register, probably because she had been dismasted.

Amundsen visited Harstad while on his lecture circuit after his South Pole expedition. On these visits, he stayed with the Holst family (Kristian Holst, personal communication, 2003). *Belgica* was anchored in the harbour, outside the Holst home, and Amundsen therefore saw his old expedition ship again (Kristian Holst, personal communication, 2004). In the late 1930s her main engine was taken out and she was turned into a coal hulk, with only a small steam engine to run the winches and take up the anchor.

Ammunition depot, spring 1940

On 9 April 1940, German forces invaded Norway. Norwegian forces in southern Norway surrendered after a few weeks, but in May an allied force of Norwegians, British, Polish, and French at Narvik pushed the Germans towards the Swedish border. The British forces that had landed in Harstad impounded *Belgica* and loaded her with ammunition, mostly gun cotton, for the Narvik front. She became a floating ammunition depot for the allied forces. She was towed to Brurvik, a good distance from Harstad, where she anchored. On 19 May, at 6:00 AM, six

German bombers attacked Standard Oil's depot at Harstad (*Harstad Tidende* 22 May 1940). The oil depot caught fire and some ships sank. A Heinkel 111 spotted *Belgica* and dropped its bombs. She was never hit but developed a serious leak because of the shock waves and quickly sank. It is not known whether she was an intentional second target of the raid on the oil depot or a victim of a chance attack.

In 1990 divers from the local diving club re-discovered *Belgica* at a depth of 22 m (Fig. 6). They did not know what ship they had found, although 'We knew that this was a grand old lady, an exhausted old lady' (Erik Dürselen, Harstad Dykkerklubb, personal communication, 2004). *Belgica* was soon identified by the solid iron strips and cast-iron decoration on her bow, the 'diadem' she had carried all her life. Her last owner, Kristian Holst A/S, gave her original anchor to the Polarmuseet in Tromsø, where it can be seen today at the museum entrance. She will remain in her watery grave because of her explosive cargo.

Long-time readers of *Polar Record* will be aware that *Belgica* featured on the front cover of the journal for three years, starting in 1951 (Fig. 7). The photograph was reproduced by courtesy of Baron de Gerlache de Gomery, the son of the explorer.

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