

# MYTHOS OF THE NORTH POLE: THE TOP OF THE WORLD<sup>1</sup>

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## The History of World Civilization as a Shift Northward

Not a few early twentieth-century cultural histories conceive of the development of humanity in modern times as a northward shift of the civilizational centre. In this thinking, they transform into narrative and geography the static image of a cosmos constructed along one axis of the globe, based on the Christian story of salvation. In this notion of the cosmos, with its upward-oriented vertical axis understood as a sign of hierarchical order, these histories refer back to a global symbolic legacy with origins in the cosmologies of very different cultures: the idea of the world as a mountain, the world with a mountain and a summit at its centre.

Oswald Spengler, for example, equated the passion to master an unclimbed mountain with that of conquering the North Pole and characterized both as expressions of the “Faustian spirit” of the European modern era (Spengler 1963, 1:434). At about the same time, the Canadian-Icelandic polar scientist Vilhjalmur Stefansson (*Northward Course of Empire*, 1923) as well as the Russian exile and geopolitics expert Petr Savickij (*Die Migration der Kultur*, 1921) described the history of the world as an on-going shift of the centre northward, as an ascension toward the top of the world. These works, although marginal, still testify to the extensive orientation of their authors to the modern discourse about the North and the North Pole. They also reflect the strong contemporary reception of Nietzsche’s heroic anthropology, which provided material for the Germanic ideology of the decades to follow. Along with the mythopoetics of the North and the narrative of Northern migration resonating in both Stefansson and Savickij, man’s struggles against the limitations of climatic and environmental conditions (e.g. the cold) for liberation and self-empowerment were understood as driving historical forces.

One can, like Helmut Lethen, recognize in this mythopoetics of the North a spatial, geographic concretization of the image of modern man. Man masters nature and makes himself so superior over it that he, himself, can create nature. In doing so, he spatially expands his territory of mastery ever outward – from horizon to horizon (cf. Lethen 1987). And after conquering the Pole, the cosmos and the stars emerge as the new “summits” visible on the horizon. Following Bruno Latour, modernity’s trajectory of spatial (imperial) expansion can be interpreted as a consequence of the fundamental opposition between human culture and nature (Latour 1993).

The cultural semantics of the Soviet Arctic appears to represent an extreme position within the semanticization of the North and the North Pole in the modern era. Stalinism understood the Arctic as the front line of Soviet civilization, which would be realized in its purest form in the ice. Fantastic literary visions staged the ultimate defeat of ice and cold: cities in the ice with all the comforts thinkable in

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modern centres of world civilization, modern technology that could force back the ice so far that it would be necessary in the long-term to create ice museums and zoos, in order to keep alive the memory of a long-past Arctic. In reality, this project was the GULAG.

To a certain degree, the mythological legacy of the North Pole semantics even found expression on the Soviet flag. In 1923, an image of the globe replaced the imperial two-headed eagle, which had still been visible in 1917. In the context of the modern era, the globe as a new emblem offered 1930s Soviet culture the opportunity to envision the Soviet Union as the conqueror of the cosmos and as perfecter/completer of world history. In this context, the world-mountain and the North Pole no longer symbolized the border between the earthly world and transcendence, but rather the border between the present, current empire of man and the future. This mythological legacy of the world-mountain manifests itself especially clearly and in no way disparagingly in a caricature from 1938 that depicts the leader of the most important Arctic expedition of the 1930s, Otto Yulyevich Schmidt, head of the Soviet Directorate of the Northern Sea Route “Glavsevmorput’,” climbing the globe like a mountain, striving towards the North Pole as towards its peak (fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Fedor Reshetnikov, sketch of Otto Yulevich Schmidt. In Fedor Reshetnikov, *Otto Yulevich Schmidt: Zhizn' i dejatel'nost'* (Moskva, 1959).



Fig. 2: Ancient Thangka depicting Mt. Kailash/Meru.

### **The World-Mountain and the Garden of Eden**

The world-mountain is central to the cosmology of Chinese Taoism, Hinduism, the Old Testament conception of the world and the ideas of ancient and medieval Christianity. The mountain Kunlun Shan (崑崙山(脈)) for Chinese Taoism, like the mountain Meru (मेरु) in Hinduism and Buddhism, were deemed places positioned directly at the centre of the world (fig. 2). It was assumed that these mountains were connected to the North Star and heaven via the axis that ran through them. Both summits were considered, in their respective cultures, to be places where earth and heaven came together.

While other cultures defined mountain peaks themselves as the seat of the gods, Biblical mythology cast them as the place for the pure beginning of God's creation of the world, the Garden of Eden. Thus, the prophet Ezekiel says that the "garden of God" where man was originally placed "as a guardian cherub", as "the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty," was located on the "holy mount of God" (cf. Ezekiel: 28, 13–16). Ephrem (ca. 306–373), the Syrian church father, also knew quite well that the Garden of Eden lay atop a mountain: "With spirit eyes I saw the Garden, and at its foot lay the peaks of all (other) mountains. The Flood rose only to the foot of this mountain, although it covered the peaks of other mountains" (Beck 1951, 36–37). In Late Antiquity, the Alexandrian travel author Cosmas Indicopleustes had plausible explanations for the conception of the world as a disc with a holy mountain at its centre (fig. 4). In his *Topographia Christiana* (550), which polemicized against the Ptolemaic worldview, he explained natural phenomena like, for example, the shortness of summer nights thus: the sun is higher in the sky in the summer and the world-mountain is tapered towards its top, allowing for more sun. Later, Dante's *Divina Commedia* (1307–1321) took up the mountain mythology in the image of the Mountain of Purgatory, at the top of which lies paradise. While Cosmas positions his holy mountain in the North, and in that laid a cornerstone for the mythological subtext of the Arctic, Dante chose the other pole. Because Dante had already reserved (the inside of) the Northern Hemisphere for Hell, he situated the Mountain of Purgatory at and above the South Pole (fig. 3).



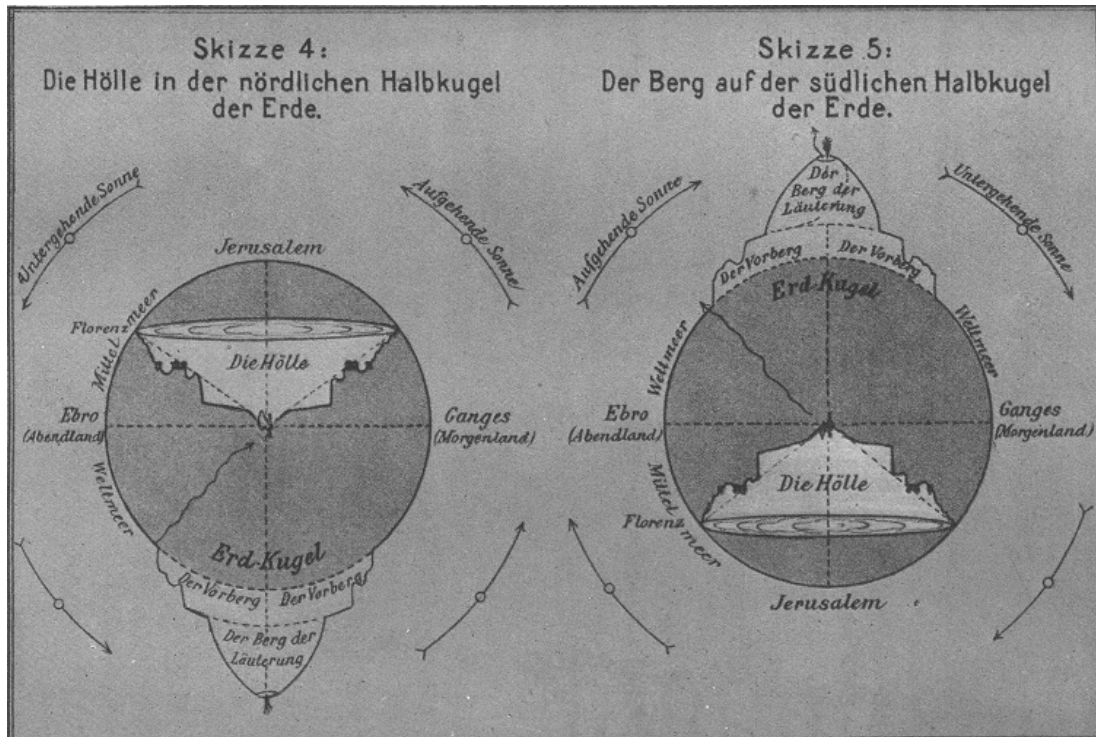


Fig. 3: Dante Alighieri, Mountain of Purgatory. From *Dante Werke*, edited by Albert Ritter (Berlin, 1922).

### Mythology and Cartography

Interestingly, it was not Dante, but rather Cosmas Indicopleustes whose localization of the holy mountain in the north made him godfather to the visionary cartography (not yet based on topographically empirical knowledge) of the Polar Region at the turn to the Early Modern era. The conception of a vertical order to the cosmos, of an axis mundi, is expressed in the Early Modern orientation of cartography as well as in the positioning of the globe. In this period, Nuremberger Martin Behaim's newly invented "Erdapfel" ("earth apple," an early globe, 1490–1493) as well as the orientation of maps suggested that the North Pole lies "at the very top" or is the peak of the world. No less a person than Gerardus Mercator transmitted the geographical mythology of paradise at the North Pole in his Arctic map, an addition to his so-called heart-shaped map of the world (1587). Mercator's map shows the pole as a mountain surrounded by water, from which four rivers flow in the four cardinal directions, exactly as Ephrem described it. When Abraham Ortelius (1527–1598) followed the visualization of Mercator, naming the Arctic Polar Region "Hyperborea" after the mythical people described by Herodot and others, he produced a mythological double encoding, naturally with the intention of disseminating secular knowledge (fig. 5). These decisive steps led to the symbolic significance of the North Pole in the later modern period. Myth-charged but trimmed of the dimension of transcendence, the North Pole as the top of the world was not only semantically loaded with the telos of human development. It also became the vanishing point of imperial world domination fantasies in the context of the so-called polar conquest of the early twentieth century.



Fig. 4: Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Topographia Christiana*. Sixth-century manuscript.





Fig. 5: Gerardus Mercator, Septentrionalium terrarium description.  
A map of the North Pole, 1623.

### Polar Conquest and World Domination

In the context of the polar expeditions of the late nineteenth century, caricatures above all imagined the Pole as the top or peak of the world, to be climbed, conquered, and possessed. Thus, for example, the contemporary press presented the Austro-Hungarian North Pole Expedition of 1872–1874 as an event of global historical significance. A caricature from 1873, transplants the Rotunda, the central pavilion of the World Exhibition held that year in Vienna, to the North Pole, to illustrate the imperial meaning of the Austrian polar expedition (fig. 6). It is precisely this symbolic gesture that we find once again in the 1937 caricature of the Soviet polar explorer Otto Y. Schmidt described above.

At the beginning of the twentieth century it became common to seal the attainment – “the conquering” – of the pole with a national flag driven into the ice, as had already been the case on mountaintops. Photographs of the American expedition of Peary (1909) as well as those of the Soviet expedition of Papanin (1937) show how important the form or, perhaps better stated, the illusion of the mountain summit was (fig. 7). What remains unclear is whether the visualization of the pole as a summit served to increase the authenticity effect or the lofty significance of the event. Particularly significant, however, is that hoisting the national flag manifested the international competition for a place of global symbolic meaning. The image of polar conquest as the mastering of the world’s summit suggested a vision of capturing world domination.



Fig. 6: Theodor Z. (Zajaczkowski), “Franz Josef’s Land.” Detail.  
From *Humoristische Blätter* 27 September 1874. Photo: Johan Schimanski/Ulrike Spring.





Fig. 7: Robert Edwin Peary, "Peary Sledge Party and at the North Pole, April 7, 1909." Left to right: Ooqueah, holding the Navy League Flag; Ootah, holding the D.K.E. fraternity flag; Matthew Henson, holding the polar flag; Egingwah, holding D.A.R. peace flag; Seeglo, holding the Red Cross flag. Owner: National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, US.



**And Today?**

Does the symbolic equation of the North Pole with the world's summit mean anything to us today? Just as the tall mountains of various world regions, once regarded as holy mountains, still often have a special symbolic significance as the "pinnacle" or "roof" of a region, the polar region too has not completely lost its symbolic meaning.

Yet the fact also remains that the mechanism of modernity has not come fully to a standstill: as in the Alps of the previous 150 years, the North Pole has long since experienced a second, post-heroic, tourist wave of "conquest," comparable to the athletic conquest that concerned itself with the highest mountains. Thanks to improved technical means and also probably to global warming, tourist journeys to the Pole are the latest rage, even if only a small group of the well-to-do can afford it, just as the highest mountain peaks can only be climbed by the elite among extreme athletes.

This second "conquest" is not only about taking possession or being "the first." The Alps make this clear: even the most heavily "patrolled" mountain range of the world has not lost its power of attraction. These mountains currently enjoy intense, renewed popularity, not only among hikers, but also among devotees of newer, trendy sports. When we consider mountaineers like Gerlinde Kaltenbrunner, who has climbed all fourteen eight-thousander peaks (that is, mountains taller than 8,000 metres or 26,247 feet), it becomes clear that these would-be "conquerors" are less moved by a notion of being "first" but rather by a feeling of euphoria gained via the gaze "from above" on the world, which, ultimately, does not depend on who was there before them.

Long ago, Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspensky proposed the thesis that the topography of sacred places remains the same, regardless of changes of belief in their essay on the role of dualistic models in the dynamics of Russian culture (Lotman and Uspenskij 1977). I contend that this thesis can also be applied to mountains as summits of the world and gates to transcendence, even without a particular religion as a frame of reference. That they were regarded as holy is not arguable. But rather the reasons for this regard have changed again and again: if it was initially just their indomitability and height that made them appear to be the seat of the gods, later it was the aesthetic enjoyment afforded to climbers by the view from above and the opportunity this gave them to reflect on themselves as people, as creations, in a way completely different from anywhere else. Mountain peaks have been able to retain this quality to this day – despite the mechanism of modernity described above. Whether the North Pole can match them in this is not yet clear – today, at least, everyone knows that 90°00'N is nothing more than a point on a vast ocean-covering ice sheet, offering no grand view onto a landscape at its feet.

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### About the Author

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### Summary

Not a few early twentieth-century cultural histories conceive of the development of humanity in modern times as a northward shift of the civilizational centre. In this thinking, they transform into narrative and geography the static image of a cosmos constructed along one axis of the globe, based on the Christian story of salvation. In this notion of the cosmos, with its upward-oriented vertical axis understood as a sign of hierarchical order, these histories refer back to a global symbolic legacy with origins in the cosmologies of very different cultures: the idea of the world as a mountain, the world with a mountain and a summit at its centre. In my article I trace the history of this image and its visualization from European antiquity onto the peak of heroic modernism in the first half of the twentieth century. In conclusion I ask what kind of transformation this image underwent to survive in our (still) post-heroic times.

### Keywords

Mythopoetics, Soviet Arctic, top of the world, theories of the northward course of civilization.