

Understanding North

This volume is the outcome of the Understanding North international symposium held at Umeå University, Sweden, on 25–26 April 2013. The aim was to illuminate knowledge of the North.

For most of us, the North is connected with the notions of cold and snow and, etymologically, the word *north* is related to the Old High German *nord*, both descending from the Proto-Indo-European unit *ner-*, meaning ‘down’ or ‘under.’ A natural primitive description of its concept is presumably ‘to the left of the rising sun.’

The Latin word *borealis* comes from the Greek *boreas*, ‘north wind, north,’ in mythology (according to Ovid) personified as the son of the river-god Strymon, and the father of Calais and Zetes; *septentrionalis* is from *septentriones*, ‘the seven plough oxen,’ a name for *Ursa Major*. The Greek *arktikos*, ‘northern,’ is used for the same constellation (cf. *Arctic*).

Umeå University is strongly connected to the conception of the North. It was inaugurated in 1965. Three years later, in 1968, another northerly university, the University of Tromsø in Norway—the northernmost university in the world—was inaugurated.

When these two universities were established in the 1960s, the Northern Dimension was not a matter of great interest for scientists. But, along with political actions, the establishment of these two universities helped draw attention to the Northern Dimension, not least scientifically.

Everything is incorporated in a context, which also applies to this symposium. In 1978 a forerunner was held at Umeå University. It had at least two purposes; first and foremost to collect the knowledge gained during the decade in which research had been conducted at Umeå University as well as in other places, especially in the Nordic countries. The result was a conference volume that future research could lean upon and a solid foun-

dation for further discoveries as well as new issues and methods within the research field. The title of the volume was *Nord-Skandinaviens historia i tvärvetenskaplig belysning/The History of Northern Scandinavia. An Interdisciplinary Symposium* (Umeå 1980). The second purpose was to form the basis for further scientific exploration of the North.

Internally, and in the light of what we know now, research within the field of the Northern Dimension was developed in different ways at Umeå University, both scientifically and structurally. One of the more high-profile projects is the Lule River project, while between 1996–2005 another such project was Cultural Boundaries in the North. Altogether, the result of these two big projects was about 10 theses, 60 monographs and some 100 published articles in different national and international journals.

As an outcome of these scientific achievements, the structures of these research activities also evolved to form a centre, namely the Centre for Sami Research (CeSam), which was established on 1 April 2000 and is administratively a part of the Faculty of Arts at Umeå University. CeSam is an important cornerstone of the “The Northern Dimension” profile programme and a resource for research and education, thereby serving as a forum and meeting place for the departments and units at Umeå University together with other universities and university colleges in Sweden engaged in research activities relating to the Sami language and other relevant aspects of Sami culture.

In this context, I also want to mention our journal, *The Journal of Northern Studies*, which is a peer-reviewed academic publication issued twice a year. It has a specific focus on human activities in northern spaces, with articles concentrating on people as cultural beings, people in society and the interaction between people and the northern environment. Apart from scholarly articles, the journal contains a review section, and a section with reports and information on issues relevant to Northern Studies. The journal is published by Umeå University and Sweden’s northernmost Royal Academy, the Royal Skyttean Society.

At the end of 2012, an Arctic Research Centre (Arcum) was established at Umeå University. Its establishment means that research assumes greater responsibility for meeting the challenges of a vision of sustainable development in the Arctic. The Understanding North symposium is included in this context and we regard it as a continuation of all the work conducted in the past few decades. However, at this time and with this symposium the perspective has been widened, which our invited speakers are an outward sign of. This symposium represents a shift from a more national and Nordic perspective to a more international perspective.

Accordingly, we can note that since 1965 and the establishment of Umeå University the North and the Arctic have become an area of great interest,

not least due to climate change, the environment, oil and gas exploitation, security policies, ecological systems, and the changing social conditions of people, in particular the indigenous population of this part of the planet. In this new world we have the ambition to establish a whole knowledge cycle by bringing knowledge back from this symposium to the community and its representatives. It will be a stepping-stone into the future. In doing so, we continue to explore the North and the related concepts. For a brave new world.

Per-Olof Erixon
Dean, Faculty of Arts
Umeå University
Sweden
per-olof.erixon@estet.umu.se