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Correcting Arctic Knowledge. Uncertain Islands and Animals in Far North

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Throughout history, the Far North has been a place of myths, fables, and adventures. This sounds attractive, but we have to realize that what we think mythical creatures or ghost islands, were once accepted knowledge. But not all stories were believed by all.

In this talk I follow western-European (mostly Dutch and English) scholarly knowledge, or proclaimed knowledge, from the 15th to the 18th century. My focus will be on zoological and cartographical knowledge. Which animals allegedly lived in the North, what was known about their appearance and behaviour, and how did they relate to humans? Moreover, where did they live? What was known about the islands in the frozen (or perhaps navigable) sea?

By sorting out the instances where earlier ideas and assumptions were explicitly doubted and corrected, this talk yields new insights in the production of new knowledge. How did scholars try to refute what they thought false? From the 16th century onwards, first the English and later the Dutch started to sail the Arctic seas. What was the relationship between received, classical, bookish knowledge and traveller's exploration and observation? And what can we learn from these knowledge making processes?

Short Biography

Djoeke van Netten is Associate Professor Early Modern History at the University of Amsterdam (UvA). Her research is at the crossroads of the history of knowledge, maritime history, and the history of books and maps, with a focus on the Dutch Republic in the wider world. She studied history in Groningen and Rome, and received her PhD from the University of Groningen in 2012. Her dissertation is about the Amsterdam publisher Willem Blaeu. Djoeke received competitive Veni- and Aspasia-grants from the Dutch Research Organization (NWO). She published on pilot guides, university printers, Copernicanism, practices of secrecy in the Dutch East India Company, world maps, women on board (special issue Yearbook of Women's history 'gender at sea' 2022), maps on ships, and late 16th century Dutch imagination of China. In 2024 she edited a special issue of the Journal for the History of Knowledge themed 'Mapping Uncertain Knowledge'. Her most recent work concentrates on the mapping of the Arctic and on animal history, in particularly polar bears.

At the UvA she teaches early modern history, global history, military history, and the history of cartography, next to supervising MA-students and PhD's. From September 2025 she will be head of the history department. She is also affiliated with the National Maritime Museum in Amsterdam, where she worked as research fellow, tour guide, and guest curator. Djoeke visited several Scientiae conferences and organized Scientiae 2020 (cancelled) and 2021 (online) in Amsterdam.

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