Making Sense of the Aurora
The Northern Lights in Scientific and Cultural-political Contexts
The University of Oslo & UiT The Arctic University of Norway Campus Tromsø

The aurora borealis has status as one of the “great enigmas” in the history of science. From the eighteenth century and well into the twentieth century, scholars strove to explain the nature and cause of the aurora. Why and how investigators attempted to make sense of this perplexing natural phenomenon entails a number of historiographic perspectives involving observational field practices, laboratory simulations, artistic and textual resources, and movement of ideas. Circulation of knowledge occurred not only among different national and disciplinary communities, but also between professionals and amateurs as well as between native Arctic peoples and ‘civilised’ travellers to the far north.

The history of studying the aurora also offers insight into cultural-political processes of transforming nature into a resource for regional or national science. The aurora initially enabled investigators in the Nordic countries to compete internationally for national honour based on their privileged geographic proximity to the phenomenon. In more recent times, Cold War strategic interest in the aurora as well as the rise of an economically lucrative northern-lights tourism undermined Norway’s once dominant position in matters of the aurora while bringing further interest in the question: where is the best location for studying/viewing the aurora?

Project participants & titles of subprojects

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Terje Brundtland, Nordnorsk vitensenter Tromsø (Science Centre of Northern Norway), “Of Men and Instruments: The Norwegian Aurora Expedition to the Arctic, 1902-03”
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Stein Roar Mathisen, UiT Arctic University of Norway Campus Alta, “Auroræ, Magic and Tourism”
Michael Schmidt, UiT Arctic University of Norway Campus Tromsø
Ulrike Spring, Sogn og Fjordane University College, “Materializing the Aurora: Carl Weyprecht and Scientific Documentation in the 1870s”
Urban Wråkberg, UiT Arctic University of Norway Campus Kirkenes, “The All-Sky Auroral Camera and the Formation of Knowledge on the Ionosphere during the International Geophysical Year”