

# HEROES IN MINIATURE: WANDERING IMAGES OF THULE BETWEEN GREENLAND AND DENMARK (1935-36)

ANNE HEMKENDREIS

## Abstract


*This paper examines five different Thule postal stamps which circulated from 1935 to 1936 between the trading post of Thule (the Danish name for the settlement of Uumman-naq in Northwest Greenland, today Thule Air Base) and Copenhagen. The images on the stamps do not only concentrate on, and visualize, the complex colonial history between Greenland and Denmark – they also dynamize and preserve historical power relations by making them physically and visually tangible to this day. The stamps bear witness to infra-structures of cultural exchange, which were strongly controlled by the Danes. They are overlooked testimonies of everyday communication and mark colonial relations as ongoing and ever powerful forces. What is more, the stamps provide their own agency as cultural-creating entities and shed a new light on the history of Western modernization, polar heroic narrations, and their heritage.*

**Keywords:** Thule, Knud Rasmussen, Stamps, Greenland, Image Vehicles, Ice



Knud Khyn: Stamps for the Thule Region (District Stamps). T1-T5 (moving clockwise from top left to bottom right), August 1935, photographed by the author.

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## Introduction

Five historic stamps bear visual witness to the Danish perspective on its relationship with Greenland at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Thule stamp set is a little-noticed and short-lived series issued in Copenhagen to mark the anniversary of the Thule settlement, founded by the Danish polar explorer Knud Rasmussen (1879-1933).<sup>1</sup> Its very name refers to the early days of polar voyages, their myths, and their colonial approach to the most remote regions of Greenland. This becomes clear in the individual motifs of the stamps, each headed with the name «Thule» in capital letters. T1 shows Knud Rasmussen in profile wearing his fur coat. T2 opens up the view on a red-and-white coastal scene, with an (expedition) ship and the Danish flag at the shore in front of a Table Mountain. In T3, two walruses on an ice floe stand for the Greenlandic fauna, whereas in T4 a missionary church opens its doors to its guests. The cultural change the Danes brought to Greenland is marked by the icescape in T5, indicating a view on Greenland's Cape York, *discovered* (from a Danish perspective) by John Ross in 1818. The motivic details of the images illustrate an imperial perspective as they were designed by the Danish artist Knud Khyn for the Cape York Station Thule (Lindskog 1959, 11-12). The official notification regarding the mandatory use of the stamps for mail and goods traffic between Thule and Copenhagen dates back to August 10, 1935. Only two years later, in 1937, Denmark took over the trading station, thus manifesting Danish control in Western Greenland.

This article contributes to the field of visual cultural studies by regarding the stamps as inconspicuous everyday objects which provide an understanding of the dynamic forces of colonialism. I examine the survival of mythical Thule as an ideological topos of 19<sup>th</sup> century heroic polar explorations and its deep entanglement with actual locations. In doing so, I grant the stamps their own agency in their mobility and practical use. As active and culture-creating entities, these stamps show individual episodes of the Greenlandic and Danish colonial relationship, while also communicating a complex constellation of views in which a hidden political power structure is intertwined. As I will show, a closer examination of the image program of the stamps and its connection to polar travel descriptions unravels visual testimonies to the hidden dynamics of colonial perspectives in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, how they were spread, and the ways they continue to influence the relationship between Greenland and Denmark.

I argue in the tradition of Aby Warburg's research – a pioneer in the field of visual cultural studies – by examining image memory of Western culture shaped by everyday travelling objects. To Warburg, images and the imaginaries they evoke have the power to change cultural relations, especially when they move between various social contexts (Sütterlin). J. W. T. Mitchell shares Warburg's interest in the power of moving everyday objects and regards the idea of migration as a central feature of heroism (Mitchell, 60). Images and heroes alike are border-crossers who can invade foreign contexts, and have the ability to change, or at least to alter the way in which we perceive, them. Through their mobility, images create cultural imaginaries that outlast time and are impossible or

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<sup>1</sup> The FACIT 2007 Spezial, 2007 (a Catalogue of Stamps for Scandinavia) briefly contextualizes the Thule stamps and lists them as T1-T5. My gratitude belongs to the Danish Arctic Institute for supporting my research.

very difficult to eradicate. This essay is dedicated to the persistence of a heroic perspective on Greenland – inscribed in stamps as visual everyday media – based on Knud Rasmussen’s travelogues, his self-understanding, and the myth of Thule.

### **Letters from Thule: From Myth to Settlement**

Knud Rasmussen is considered *the* preeminent Danish polar hero and is best known today for his close relationship with the indigenous inhabitants of Northwest-Greenland as well as their ‘exploration’. However, there is an inherent tension in his travel descriptions: On the one hand, he emphasizes his own biographical account as well as inner connection to the Inughuit (as a term for the Northwestern Polar Inuit), and on the other hand, he uses the image of an untouched snow-covered expanse, of which he wanted to be considered a pioneer (Rasmussen 1919, 45). As I will show, Rasmussen’s self-staging as a polar hero, his views on the Greenlandic icescapes – as frequently mentioned in his highly popular travel descriptions – and his self-affirmation of being both a founder and conqueror of Thule, form the historic and literary background of the stamps’ image program.

The idea of a still untouched Arctic paradise is not Rasmussen's invention. Instead, it formed a «very Ancient element of the Greeks’ Belief System» and can be found in poems of Hesiod and Homer (Ghee 2004, 23). Ever since the 330 BC records of astronomer and geographer Pytheas, it has been a conglomerate of fact and fiction, given the name Thule and applied to various regions (Kavenna 2006).<sup>2</sup> The myth of Thule proves its special mobility as an imaginary topos that was inscribed as a foil for the ultimate conquest (Ultima Thule) in the polar travel narratives of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It provided a sublime purposefulness that increased the inner determination for those who tried to reach the North Pole (Nansen 2019, 5).<sup>3</sup> By naming the settlement Thule, Rasmussen reinforced his own pioneering deed as an explorer of Northwestern Greenland, while at the same time taking ideological advantage of the unity of origin and end, which is inherent to every vision of paradise. From his most northerly place, the Thule settlement, he undertook his Thule research expeditions. These followed the paradoxical mode of surpassing a superlative (as the ultimate heroic deed) – even the most northerly place of longing could apparently still be transgressed (Menke 2003, 311-337).<sup>4</sup>

In the description of the first of his seven Thule expeditions (of which the fifth is the most famous), Rasmussen was already calling his travel through the icy landscape a journey through the Danish colonial territories (Rasmussen 1919, 237). His expedition to Northern Greenland on April 6, 1912 was undertaken with 350 sled dogs and 35 sleds – a travel mode adopted from the Inughuit. The Thule expedition of 1912-13 was the first polar expedition launched under direct command by Rasmussen (Lubowicka 2017, 151).

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<sup>2</sup> In her novel *The Ice Museum*, the author Joanna Kavenna visits the manifold regions connected with Thule and examines their mythological dimension. She describes what those who live there still associate with this cultural heritage.

<sup>3</sup> One example (of many) is the quotation of Seneca in Fridtjof Nansen’s description of the voyage through the North-West-Passage.

<sup>4</sup> The necessity of crossing the footsteps of the predecessors and its impossibility became a literary topos.

The team consisted of Rasmussen, Peter Freuchen, and two Inughuit hunters of Thule: Inukitsoq and Uvdloriaq. It was set up to map the North coast to Greenland up to Peary Land and «aimed to explore unpeopled areas» (151). Agata Lubowicka stresses that Rasmussen's literary descriptions of his travel «actually addresses and breeds expectations of narratives about discoveries, in which the protagonists, real males as they are, engage in a victorious fight against hostile arctic nature» (155).

The arctic ice even gains a transcendental effect based on a strong Nationalization and Christianization of the supposedly-untouched expanse, through biblical formulas and a symbolic metaphor of light; «And behold! The red of the evening clouds and the white of the snow spread the Danish colors over the Greenlandic rocks» (Rasmussen 1919, 15).<sup>5</sup>

According to Rasmussen, a dazzling light announces the «springtime victory» of modern progress during his travels, which, paradoxically, the explorer is about to bring to Northern Greenland on a dog sled, while the walruses sitting on the ice floes, compared to the «daily bread» are symbolizing the divine guidance of the expedition (Rasmussen 1919, 12-15). The journey through the unknown, the so-called *white nothing*, literally follows the footsteps of the polar heroes Fridtjof Nansen and Robert Peary – in fact, old testimonies were found by the team (Rasmussen 1919, 17). Their reference perpetrates a male dominated polar heroic tradition and inscribes Rasmussen within it (Rasmussen 1919, 17). As with the other expeditions, Thule is both the beginning and the end: following the pattern of a self-fulfilling prophecy, the voyages legitimize themselves in their circular structure.

Historically, the founding of Thule has also indirectly been interpreted as a consequence of the Inughuits' contact with modernity and, explicitly, associated with Peary (Düngel-Gilles 1964, 40). For example, Rasmussen's biographers claim that Peary liberated the Inughuit in West Greenland from the Stone Age by providing them with firearms. However, if Peary reached the North Pole (as it was fearfully anticipated), no more supply ships would pass through West Greenland, so the Polar Inuit themselves were said to have asked for «care» and «administration» (40). Although supplying Northwest Greenland was very expensive, Rasmussen had taken on this responsibility by founding the Thule settlement (as the story goes). Thus, ideologically Rasmussen wanted to be understood in a heroic tradition with Peary, but with a permanent engagement in Greenland characterized by the virtue of Christian care.

In his travelogues, Rasmussen was particularly interested in evoking an «entanglement of real and mythical mappings of the North» (Hastrup 2009, 103). Rasmussen's initiative in founding Thule goes back to Denmark's embattled influence in Greenland vis-à-vis Norway and America (110). He founded a private company called Thule Committee and bought the Cape York Station Thule in 1910. Rasmussen's commitment followed three aims: 1) open North Greenland to Danish colonization, 2) support research on the Inughuit culture inside and outside Greenland, and 3) facilitate trade in goods (111). It is of no surprise that the trading base became a national and economic success model that made new research expeditions logistically and financially possible. In the

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<sup>5</sup> Translated by the author.

naming of Thule, Rasmussen took inspiration from Pytheas and from Goethe's Faust, the tragic hero driven to his doom by the thirst for knowledge.

In his descriptions, the polar heroism and the imperialism of Rasmussen's explorations are regularly confronted with an interest in the Inughuits' way of life. The immediate style of Rasmussen's language evokes the feeling of witnessing the polar hero's adventures and is frequently supported by the emphasized subjectivity of the description (Lubowicka 2017, 157). This literary strategy serves to relate a more personal approach to Rasmussen's view on Greenland, and might be rooted in Rasmussen background: The explorer was regarded by the Polar Inuit as a relative in body and spirit, he spent his childhood in Greenland, and his mother had Inuit ancestors. This tension between inner connection and identity construction is also indicated in the miniature images. In their contemplation, the viewer participates in the polar explorer's view on the vast icy landscape, his entanglement with it, his self-image as a caring hero, and the staging of his journey as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Significant with regard to the stamps is the pattern of a heroic mindset that is caught in the tension between conquest and care. This pattern reappears on the red (and white!) stamp with the Danish flag in front of the Table Mountain (T2) as one of Thule's landmarks, and the small Mission Church in front of the same scenic backdrop (T4). The radiant polar sun in the background of stamp T2 symbolizes the progress that the Danes will bring to the still *untouched* landscape of stamp T3. This is the object of Rasmussen's faraway gaze (T1), whose actions – like the nurturing presence of the walruses, understood as heavenly bread, indicates – are supported and legitimized by invisible forces. Hence, Rasmussen is staged as «a great ethnologist and (...) national hero», as well as a «father» who had taken the Greenlanders by the hand and accompanied them on their «first difficult steps into civilization» (Düngel-Gilles 1964, 217).

The problematic paternalistic dimension of this colonial self-image is still felt today. It draws on another meaning of Thule as the theme of the stamp series; namely, the visualization of subjective and collective understanding of heroes and their cultural anchoring. In this sense, a few years after the stamp series was issued, the traveler Joachim Gerstenberg, who drove through Greenland in 1939, reported during a visit to Thule:

Nevertheless, Thule (...) is a reality. At about the intersection of the seventy-sixth degree of northern latitude and the sixty-ninth degree of western longitude, it lies at a distance of about 1500 kilometers, only a few hours' flight from the pole. In 1910, Greenland's greatest son, Knud Rasmussen, gathered here the two hundred and fifty last purebred Eskimo of northern Greenland, who had been nomadic until then. With its own radio station, its own stamps, its own money and a doctor, the only European in its midst, Eskimo-Thule is probably the most unique community in the world. Only once a year, a Danish ship sails for a few days to the northernmost realm of the earth, bringing the most necessary food, wood, coals and medicine as well as taking Thule's yearly harvest of narwhal teeth and sealskins back to Europe. Here stands the last

Eskimo bulwark on Greenland against the onrushing culture of Europe, - the paradise of the Eskimos, - but for how much longer? (Gerstenberg 1939, 12)<sup>6</sup>

Gerstenberg's description, showing a racial rhetoric in the advent of World War II, attests to the superlative of the *Northernmost place* attributed to both the real and mythical Thule, as well as to the civilizational achievements of (medical) care owed to Rasmussen. In addition, it mentions the importance of Thule's connection with the rest of the world based on radio and postal communication. While this appears as necessary, it is also described as a risk to the Northern paradise, which might lose its identity through diverse influences. As the founder of Inuit research, Rasmussen is also seen here as a historical preserver, present even after his death in the form of a statue.

As an independent and distant outpost of civilization, Thule had its own money (based on the Danish model, coins with a hole in the middle), but was dependent on outside supplies, which Gerstenberg considered problematic (41). In this context, the stamps can be understood as hybrid media which form an identity construction via exchange, as they moved back and forth between Greenland and Denmark, thus loosely resuming the systematic circular form that underlies Rasmussen's Thule expeditions. A closer look, however, reveals that the stamps undertake an identity construction from the outside, namely from a Danish colonial perspective. This, however, appears as if shaped from within – in one respect through Rasmussen's Inuit heritage, but also by letting the viewer participate in the explorer's initial gaze upon the Arctic landscapes, with its Danish headline Thule.

The complex interweaving of the inside and the outside is inherent in the perception of Rasmussen as a Danish national hero with Greenlandic roots, but also in the specific view of the icy landscape that is demonstratively set in motion due to the stamps' function. This is a sign of a complicated power structure that continues to shape relations between Greenland and Denmark.

### **The Explorer's Gaze on Icy Landscapes**

Kirsten Harstrup has named the Thule region a «frontier zone» (Harstrup 2020, 1). Similar to the Arctic, the author regards Thule settlement as a place of colonial encounters and a meeting ground between human and non-human agents. In doing so, Harstrup refers to the highly influential concept of cultural contact zones. As she makes clear on the colonization of the Thule region, the idea of a first encounter is actually based on continuous repetitions. Contact – especially in a colonial context – automatically leads to multiple changes within a (cultural) region and thus can never provide the pureness that the image of a vast and untouched icescape may suggest (3).

Harstrup generally refers to the highly-influential concept of Mary Louise Pratt, who coined the term «contact zones» to describe the «often highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism» which are at work when cultures meet on a geographical and social level (Pratt 2007, 30-31). At the moment of encountering a (seemingly) still

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<sup>6</sup> Translated by the author.

disordered or unmarked landscape, the necessity of a masculine ordering gaze is asserted. The significance of Pratt's concept lies in the challenging of Eurocentric narratives, which view the inhabitants of Europe's colonies as passive objects of cultural transformations, who need to be civilized according to European ideals and practices.

In postcolonial thinking, gestures of occupation rely on a rejection of independent agency of the object of the gaze (in case of the stamps, the Greenlandic landscape) which happen in the moment of encounter. Considering the explorer's view on the landscape, Pratt used the term «imperial eyes» to refer to a tradition of perception deeply rooted in «hegemonic Eurocentrism» (15). In particular, the view from above, by the conqueror or cartographer, represents a form of visual occupation that signifies the male hero's seizure of the landscape. Visual perception consequently means the exercise of power, especially when it is generated from an elevated perspective onto a supposedly-still-untouched landscape.

It is precisely this formation of the gaze that can be found in the Thule stamps T2-5. They stage a moment of encounter while becoming contact zones themselves – albeit they are dominated from a clear (heroic) perspective. The viewer follows Rasmussen's perspective, whose gaze is depicted from an elevated vantage point onto an icescape which has either already been acquired by graphic representation (T2) or is still seemingly wild (T3), one that has been missionized (T4) or appears untouched (T5). In addition, the stamp with Rasmussen's portrait (T1) shows the polar hero in profile at eye level with the viewer in front of the arctic landscape, thus inviting identification. Following Rasmussen's gaze, the viewer's eyes wander over a partially civilized area, testifying to the heroic pioneering deed as well as the necessity of its continuation. This is not an unmoving gaze, but a wandering glance, which mirrors the adventurous journeys of polar heroes in general.

In their orientation to a European landscape tradition (of paintings), the stamps provide a clear direction of vision, i.e., one that is predetermined by Denmark. In his research W. J. T. Mitchell has shown the close connection between landscape painting and European imperialism (Mitchell 2002, 8). Especially in vast views the «gazing eyes» of the colonial conquerors assure themselves: «Like imperialism itself, landscape is an object of nostalgia in a postcolonial and postmodern era, reflecting a time when metropolitan cultures could imagine their destiny in an unbound 'prospect' of endless appropriation and conquest» (20).

### **The Thule stamps as *Image Vehicles***

In a nostalgic manner, the Thule stamps revive the eternal myth of the polar explorers in general, and Rasmussen's in particular, by updating it for the years 1935-36, when critical discussions of colonialism in Denmark were beginning to surface (Thisted 2002, 318). Like the myth of Thule, the stamps move between West Greenland and Copenhagen and refer ideologically to finding one's own beginning in the unfamiliar, as it was also the goal of Danish Eskimology.

As already mentioned, in Rasmussen's expeditions, a specific form of movement was used, uninfluenced by modern progress: the dog sled ride, typical of the Inughuit culture.

Hanna Eglinger has defined this form of movement as specific to Arctic discourses and classified it as (in Western perception) an «outdated and distant mode of travelling» through which «the pre-modern is staged as part of modern achievement» (Eglinger 2021, 2). The journey in the dog sled – under the guiding principle of a dissemination of European progress – reveals a typical state of mind of Scandinavian modernity, which sought to integrate colonial territories in their dual form; that is not in opposition, but rather in their partiality to modernity (12). According to Eglinger, this can be observed especially in moving media such as films inspired by polar narratives, in which the encounter of the familiar with the foreign is apparent (15-16). Moreover, the nomadic principle also allows for medial reflections on the transmission of culture, which Eskimology also stands for. Explorers like Rasmussen, regarded as a pioneer of Eskimology, saw themselves as collectors of artifacts and knowledge. Similarly, stamps can be collected, sorted, and classified. They stand in a tradition of rationalist organizational principles that are fundamental to imperialist modes of perception. Eskimology was important to Denmark because it allowed the country to create its own unique anthropological profile.

To explore the tension between colonial appropriation and reciprocal communication as it is dynamized in the voyages of the Thule stamps, it is worth taking a closer look at the aforementioned art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1926). He was one of the first scholars to devote himself to objects of everyday culture, such as advertisements, postcards, and stamps. The term automobile image vehicle (*Bilderfahrzeuge*) is found, among other places, in his introduction to his unfinished «Mnemosyne Atlas» – a project of visually tracing transhistorical and geographical motif migration – and initially means the exchange of images via movable objects (in this case, Flanders carpets, but also woodcuts and copper engravings, Warburg 2010, 636).<sup>7</sup> According to Warburg, motifs migrate into foreign contexts through their actual mobility, and in doing so they participate in a unification of formerly different cultural areas.

However, Warburg's concept should be understood not as a sophisticated theory, but rather as a «pre-theoretical metaphor» that has made it connectable to various research projects, including those on the dissemination of immaterial images (Beyer, Bredekamp, Fleckner Wolf 2019, 10). In this context, the term image vehicle describes the material side of the medium. One could also classify stamps (in general) as objects of medial exchange, and thus clarify the difference between the medium itself and the independent power of the cultural imaginaries that travel with it. Two of Warburg's considerations are central to this context: on the one hand, the interconnectedness between motifs and image carriers, from which the occasion for movement arises in the first place; and on the other hand, the automobility of the image carriers, meaning the *inherent* dynamics from which their agency results.

The Thule stamps were used for postal traffic between Northwest Greenland and Copenhagen between 1935 and 1936 in order to update Rasmussen's Thule expeditions. The revival of the polar expeditions occurs in the reenactment of the hero's gaze, which on the one hand falls on the vastness of the untouched polar region and its fauna, but on the other hand also communicates the basic characteristics of Danish modernization plans. In

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<sup>7</sup> The term first appears in Warburg's 1909 writings.



this regard, the seemingly untouched landscape in stamp T3 – in dialogue with stamp T2 and T4 – illustrates a kind of *before and after effect*, hinting that there is still much to be civilized.

This perspective determines the inherent self-movement of the images, but not as a clear colonialist intentionality. Rather, it becomes reciprocal and relational, mirroring the importance of postal traffic as an infrastructure for communication. The design and sending of the stamps are thus contrasted with the relationship of the images to one another, the possibility of their different and/or isolated use on a carrier medium, and their return to Copenhagen. Therefore, colonial relationships appear to be permeated by cultural exchange: modernization occurs in the moment of encounter (Thisted, Gremaud 2020, 62).

The double form of mobility deprives the artifacts of a clear mission structure by emphasizing their own agency, reflecting the complex nature of colonial relations between Greenland and Denmark. According to Uwe Fleckner, following the «theory» of image vehicles, it is possible to not only ask about the intention with which certain image carriers were sent on journeys, but also to understand them as a «mechanical model» (rather than a teleological one, Fleckner, Tolstichin 2020, 1-27). With regard to the Thule stamps, the mechanical can be understood as an ongoing recourse to the topos of the untouched whiteness, firmly anchored in the cultural self-image of Rasmussen's Thule expeditions in Denmark (and beyond). This resulted in an iconography of the explorer's Arctic landscape, created from polar travelogues, their marketing, and artistic realization, on which stamps could consolidate a colonial relationship between Greenland and Copenhagen. In their mobility, the stamps are a visual testimony to colonial practice and processuality, which eludes any clear perspectivization through mutual exchange (6).<sup>8</sup>

However, these intermingling effects should not obscure the fact that communication and exchange of power systems take place in the stamps' actual movement. Significantly, the Thule stamps – as moving objects from official sources – bear traces of their travels (Darley 2019, 145). The most conspicuous features are the markings which attest to Greenland and the date of minting, thus contributing to the actualization of the pictorial program by fixing it in time. According to Rebecca Darley, images sent on journeys from the public domain are always based on power-political structures; they are «components of those historical narratives that constitute every state structure» (145). This is particularly due to the mechanized production and broad dissemination, also seen in Thule money. Ultimately, the stamps extend Rasmussen's heroic gesture through their material legacy of 1935-36 to the present, as they became popular objects of philately.

Similarly, Darley notes:

Once the link [between images and projected realities] is severed, symbols of authority become either remains and mysteries or relics and signs to which a new reading and meaning are ascribed as indicators of agency. In this way, new connections can be formed and meanings, which fit the notion of the past, can be reattributed to them. In this function, such images have a powerful inherent self-fulfillment. They infiltrate

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<sup>8</sup> Fleckner refers to coins, but stamps (as trivial objects of exchange) fall into the same category.

the imagination on behalf of long-dead or distant creators, establishing empires of the mind whose subjects become both, colonists and colonizers. (Darley 2019, 148)

The Thule stamps also take on a form of prophetic self-fulfillment, found in the metaphors of light and the heroic rhetoric of Rasmussen's published travel descriptions. Instead of ignoring the Inughuit world, the stamps integrate it into a system of cultural exchange that is, in turn, guided by Denmark's colonization efforts. Therefore, I interpret the motivation of the image program as a Danish reaction to the intensifying pressure on the government to justify problematic effects of colonial structures. Today, the Thule stamps are relics of a historical concept of a so-called *humanitarian colonization* which intends to reconcile guardianship and sponsorship by invasive means. Thus, in their qualification as wandering objects of cultural heritage, the Thule stamps are both gestures of occupation and relational objects in motion.

### **Conclusion: Shared Histories under Danish Colonialist Policies**

To sum up, the stamps are active elements; they are border-crossers of time and space. They have the power to create communities by advertising social change as a historical event and ongoing process. At the same time, the stamps extend and consolidate Denmark's influence northward, not through the exercise of military force, but through a reciprocal and invasive cultural exchange. This represents a peculiarity in Greenlandic colonial history with a hidden darker side, as Lill-Ann Körber points out:

(...) Danish colonialism in Greenland has been perceived to be exceptionally humane. However, (...) the Dannebrog has waved on the shores of Greenland for centuries: Danish institutions and administration were established, re-naming took place, and with respect to rhetoric, practices and symbolism the Danish empire followed the example of all expanding European powers. Moreover, there is a long history of military presence in Greenland. While Denmark was occupied by Germany during World War II, the United States took over the supply of Greenland and during the Cold War erected radar stations and airbases in Greenland, making use of its strategically relevant geographical position. (Körber 2014, 379)

Rasmussen's Thule settlement had to make way for the American Air Force Base «Ultima Thule» in 1941, after the USA gave up its claim on Greenland. The history of Thule after the post service, and especially after World War II, does not fit into the self-image of Denmark as a so-called Welfare-State (Nuttal 1992, 18). It shall receive only brief attention here, as it forms the heritage of the Thule stamps, but also marks a crucial tipping point, from which the problematic relation between invasion and care found a tragic end.

As Lars Jensen has pointed out in his questioning of postcolonial Danish-Greenlandic relations, Denmark allowed the construction of the «Thule Air Base» in 1951 without Greenlandic participation. Denmark even permitted the storage of nuclear weapons at the

air base, although it forbade this on its own land (Jensen 2018, 91).<sup>9</sup> The Inughuit were confronted with an ultimatum to resettle, which they had to give in to because the noise of the military base made hunting impossible. They were forced to move to the area of Qaanaaq, where the hunting grounds were even worse. Jensen interprets this reaction as the Danish government's continued active colonial traits when its guardianship was actually at stake. This includes the Home Rule and Self-Government Acts of 1978. Since then, Greenland has been self-governing, but is still regarded as part of the Danish state and thus unable to determine its own defense and foreign policy.

Although far more could be said about current developments, this may suffice to locate the Thule stamps in the context of colonial relations between Denmark and Greenland in the advent of World War II and beyond. The stamps bear witness to (infra-)structures of cultural exchange, which were strongly controlled by the Danish side. However, they are cultural testimonies of everyday communication, and function as active cultural creating forces. In their connection to polar heroism and ability to cross borders, they mark colonial relations as dynamic in nature.

Cultural imaginings of the icescapes of the so-called far north are shaped by the travel accounts of the 'polar heroes' and the visual culture associated with them. Thule lives on as an ideological topos of longing in *Western* culture and threatens to obscure the memory of the history of the relationship between Denmark and Greenland – a problematic entanglement of colonial imprint, emphatically demonstrated by the Thule settlement its legacy. The persistence of polar hero narratives is, to this day, most effective in the images and imaginaries of Arctic ice fields as an object of the heroic gaze, which invites participation in the experience of conquest and generates an attitude of superiority. Images and heroes are border-crossers that invade other cultures and have the power to alter them. In their visualization and practical use heroic narratives spread and archive colonial attitudes, as the Thule stamps make abundantly clear.

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<sup>9</sup> Following Jensen, the North cannot be regarded as postcolonial strictly speaking, because Greenland remains within the Danish state. In addition, the discourse on the topic is not transparent.

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Dr. Anne Hemkendreis er lektor ved Freiburg Universitet, Tyskland. Hun har publisert bl.a. «Faces of Climate Change: The Age of the Million Heroes and Heroines» i *E-Journal – helden. heroes. héros. Special Issue* (2022), «Ice (St)Ages: Science and Communication in Arts and Popular Culture» (Palgrave, med Dr. Anna-Sophie Jürgens, 2022), «Can one estimate aerosol optical depths from colour paintings?» (med Christian von Savigny, Anna Lange and Alexei Rozanov) i *Past Climates* (2022) og «Icy Hieroglyphs: Wilson Bentley's Snow Crystals» i *Between Science and Art* (2021). E-post: [anne.hemkendreis@sfb948.uni-freiburg.de](mailto:anne.hemkendreis@sfb948.uni-freiburg.de)