

## THE COLUMBUS OF THE EAST

The Vitus Bering Stamps and First Day Covers from Denmark

By Toke Nørby



*Bust of Vitus Bering, reconstructed by Medico-legal Institute of Moscow from Bering's cranium. Shown here with the permission of Ole Schiørring, Horsens Museum.*

If you do a search on the name Vitus Bering on the World Wide Web, you will find several hundred pages that describe this famous Danish seaman and explorer. You will find that what Christopher Columbus was for the western part of the world, Vitus Bering was for the eastern part.

Exactly when Vitus Jonassen Bering was born seems to be unknown. He was baptized on August 21, 1681<sup>i</sup> so he probably was born at the beginning of August 1681, as children at that time in Denmark normally were baptized on the Sunday following the day they were born. Most sources only mention that he was born in the summer of 1681 in Horsens, located on the east coast of the Jutland (Jylland) Peninsula.

### **Important Dates in the Life of Vitus Bering** <sup>ii</sup>

1681 (August): Vitus Bering was born and baptized in Horsens, Denmark as a son of Jonas Svendsen Halmstad and Anne Pedersdatter Bering.

1703: Bering joined the Russian navy.

1715: Bering visited Copenhagen and never saw Denmark again.

1728: Sent out by Peter the Great of Russia, Bering sailed round the northeast corner of Asia, thus proving that there was water between Asia and America.<sup>iii</sup>

1741: Appointed as the leader of Russia's Great Nordic Expedition, Bering landed in Alaska as the first European man. The sea and the strait between Alaska and Siberia are named after him.

1741 (December 8): Bering died on the island named after him – Bering Island – off the coast of Kamchatka.<sup>iv</sup>

## The Danish Vitus Bering Stamps from 1941

Denmark issued three commemoratives on November 27, 1941 to honor one of the world's most famous explorers on the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death in 1741. The move for the stamps began in December 1940 when the newspaper, *Horsens Avis*, suggested making a Vitus Bering stamp and a Vitus Bering committee from Horsens supported the idea. A group of citizens of Horsens submitted a sketch for a stamp made by a local draftsman, Knud Møller, to the GPO (Generaldirektoratet for Post-og Telegrafvæsenet). Since the GPO did not like his sketch, they suggested Møller make some changes and especially urged him to find the correct type of ship to depict.<sup>v</sup>



Møller made the suggested changes and the GPO consulted the “Academy for the Beautiful Arts,” which rejected his sketch, saying that it was a “dilettante work.” After that, the GPO and the Horsens Council decided to hold a public contest to find a stamp, but the GPO soon decided to ask draftsman Viggo Bang to design a Bering stamp. Bang made several sketches and, although the GPO accepted one sketch, the “Academy for the Beautiful Arts” could not

recommend it. Nevertheless, Bang’s sketch was used – depicting Bering’s ship “Swiatoj Pietr” (“St. Peter”). This was the very first of many Danish stamps made by Viggo Bang. The Danish engraver Johannes Britze engraved the Bering stamps.

On November 12, 1941, we could read in “The Official Announcements from The GPO,” called “OM.”<sup>vi</sup>

“As it is, in 1941, 200 years since Vitus Bering died, stamps in his memory have been produced. The values are 10, 20 and 40 Øre and the colors are violet, red and blue...The stamps are produced in sheets of 50 stamps per sheet. They are to be sold from the 27<sup>th</sup> this month and because of the first day cancellation it must be taken care of that the stamps are not sold before that day.”

## The Printing of the Stamps

At that time, all of Denmark’s steel engraved stamps were printed in the stamp-printing house in Copenhagen. The stamp-printing machine was a German Goebel machine type SS number 87 with a printing section, a perforating section, and a cutting section. The machine was named M.1 in Denmark and was in use until 1967.<sup>vii</sup>

At the stamp-printing house, Bang’s work was transferred to the printing cylinders via the engraving made by Johannes Britze. Three printing cylinders – one for each stamp value and each with 200 impressions of the stamp – were

produced. On October 25, 1941, the first cylinder with the internal number #5 with the 10 Øre stamp was placed in the printing machine and the production began.

The printing number was #505, which was printed on sheets in the upper right corner and in the lower left corner. The table lists information from the so-called “Machine Counter Journal” which shows the reading of the counter on the printing machine. The shown number of sheets printed should be the same as was found when the sheets were controlled for errors.

10 Øre Vitus Bering - Cylinder #5				
Date in 1941	Print Number	Machine Counter Showing	Sheets Printed	Total
10.25 Sa	P015	183441-184163	722	
10.27 Mo	-	184163-185023	<del>860</del>	
10.27 Mo	504	185023-185039	16	
10.28 Tu	-	185039-185180	141	
10.29 We	-	185180-187550	2,370	
10.30 Th	-	187550-209394	21,844	
10.31 Fr	-	209394-231239	21,845	
11.01 Sa	-	231239-243948	12,709	
11.03 Mo	-	243948-266254	22,306	
11.04 Tu	-	266254-288052	21,798	
11.05 We	-	288052-308174	20,122	123,151
11.05 We	P016	308174-308612	<del>438</del>	
11.06 Th	504	308612-330629	22,017	
11.07 Fr	-	330629-349578	18,949	40,966
11.08 Sa	Cylinder re-chromium-plated			
11.10 Mo	504	349578-349596	18	18
11.27 Th	504	617248-637374	20,126	
11.28 Fr	-	637374-659032	21,658	
12.01 Mo	-	659032-679294	20,262	
12.02 Tu	-	679294-701349	22,055	84,101
Total number of sheets printed				248,236
Number of discarded sheets (13.58 %)				-33,720
Total number of sheets issued				214,516

As you see, the 10 Øre violet stamp was printed from October 25, 1941 - December 2, 1941. The printing numbers with a “P” (P015 and P016) were test prints that did not count in the production. All test prints were discarded apart from the small part that was given to the Postal Museum for future study.

As the first day of issue was on November 27, 1941 the stamps used for the First Day Covers must be from the printing before the cylinder was re-chromed. The figures are based on “The Machine Counter Journal,” “The Stamp Control Book,” showing exactly when and how many sheets were discarded, and a book I call “Sundgaard’s Private Book”<sup>viii</sup> from which I fortunately took some notes in the late 1970s.

From “Sundgaard’s Private Book,” we can see that the 18 sheets printed on November 10, 1941 were printed after the re-chromium-plating of the cylinder. This means that all stamps used for FDCs on the day of issue are from the earlier part of use of cylinder #5.



According to the next table, the 20 Øre red stamp was printed from November 15, 1941 – December 5, 1941.

20 Øre Vitus Bering - Cylinder #23				
Date in 1941	Print Number	Machine Counter Showing	Sheets Printed	Total
11.15 Sa	506	426676-445578	18,902	
11.17 Mo	-	445578-468281	22,703	
11.18 Tu	-	468281-492341	24,060	
11.19 We	-	492341-515912	23,571	
11.20 Th	-	515912-537250	21,338	
11.21 Fr	-	537250-557795	20,545	
11.24 Mo	-	557795-578639	20,844	
11.25 Tu	-	578639-599713	21,074	173,037
12.03 We	506	701349-722753	21,404	
12.04 Th	-	722753-743424	20,671	
12.05 Fr	-	743424-753436	10,012	52,087
Total number of sheets printed				225,124
Number of discarded sheets (14.98 %)				-33,713
Total number of sheets issued				191,411

Finally, the 40 Øre blue Bering stamp was printed from November 11, 1941 - November 27, 1941.

40 Øre Vitus Bering - Cylinder #71				
Date in 1941	Print Number	Machine Counter Showing	Sheets Printed	Total
11.11 Tu	505	349596-367944	18,348	18,348
11.12 We	P017	367944-368273	329	
11.12 We	505	368273-385032	16,759	
11.13 Th	-	385032-404397	19,365	
11.14 Fr	-	404397-426676	22,279	58,403
11.26 We	P018	599713-600090	377	
11.26 We	505	600090-617230	17,140	
11.27 Th	-	617230-617248	18	17,158
Total number of sheets printed				93,909
Number of discarded sheets (22.1 %)				-20,755
Total number of sheets issued				73,154

### The First Danish First Day Covers

This issue was also a milestone in Danish philately as Denmark for the first time used a special postmark on the first day of issue of the Vitus Bering stamps. Actually two different postmarks were in use – one in Copenhagen and one in Bering's hometown of Horsens in Jutland. So, when the stamps were issued on November 27, 1941, 15,055 FDCs were postmarked in Copenhagen and 36,098 FDCs in Horsens.<sup>ix</sup> This was a Scandinavian record at that time. The old record was 22,000 FDCs, but no further detail is known.

The reason for this huge interest was of course the first Danish First Day Postmarks, which were announced by the GPO on September 10, 1941.<sup>x</sup>

“A special postmark with the text “København V. Frimærkets Udgivelsesdag - First day cover” (Copenhagen V. The Stamp’s Day of issue - First day cover) was produced for use on stamps sold from the post office on the first day of sale at the post offices. The postmark will be used at Postvæsenets Oplysningskontor to which all requests for first day postmarkings must be sent.”

And from a GPO announcement of November 12, 1941:<sup>xi</sup>

“A first day postmark will be sent to the Post Office in Horsens. The text will be: “Horsens - The town of Birth of Vitus Bering - First Day Cover” for use when the public asks for a special cancellation of the Vitus Bering stamps on their first day of issue, that is, the first day these stamps will be sold from the Post Offices.”

The draftsman Knud Møller from Horsens, whose previous sketches for the Bering stamp were rejected by the GPO, was now asked to make an illustration for the local First Day Cover in Horsens. Aa. Kabell discusses in his excellent pamphlet<sup>xii</sup> the various covers produced in connection with the issue of the Bering stamps. The Horsens Filatelistklub produced most of these FDCs.

One type of FDC produced was the “flagship,” only issued in 200 numbered copies. Number one was given to the king, Christian X, no. 2 to the crown prince, Frederik, no. 3 to the postmaster of Horsens, J. Stokholm, and no. 4 to the General Director in Denmark, K. J. Jensen. Cover no. 46 is shown.



*The copy shown is no. 46 of 200*



In some of the FDCs, there were greetings from the sender if these were firms. One confused the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bering's death with his birth and wrote in his greeting: "Horsens, 27 November 1941. In the memory of the 200 anniversary day of Vitus Bering's birth we hereby send you a cover with the Vitus Bering stamps cancelled with a First-Day-Cancel. Sincerely yours. K. Madsen Trikotagefabrik."

**Commercial FDCs**

The well-known Danish stamp dealer Harry Poulsen from Aarhus Frimærkehandel, AFA, also was aware that the FDC was an item on which he could base some of his business. He issued his first FDC with the Vitus Bering stamps, postmarked with the FDC cancel from Copenhagen.



*This is the first commercial FDC from AFA*



**Bering's Exact Look**

We don't really know what Bering looked like. A few portraits exist but there are doubts as to their authenticity, according to officials at the Horsens Museum. One of the portraits apparently was used to depict Bering on a 1957 Russian stamp commemorating "The 275 Anniversary of Vitus Bering's birth." (The actual anniversary was 1956.)

A Soviet-Danish team of archaeologists and forensic physicians found Bering's grave in 1991 (along with five other seamen). The skeletons were examined in Moscow where scientists succeeded in re-creating Bering's appearance. In 1992, the remains of the six men were reburied on Bering Island.

## Conclusion

Denmark's Vitus Bering stamps are worth a closer study, as there are several nice varieties. But that is another story!

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Inspector Ole Schiørring, Horsens Museum, for information on Bering and for permission to use the picture of Bering's bust. Thanks also to Karsten Hagsten, Copenhagen, and to Alan Warren in the U.S.A. for valuable help with this article.

## References:

Note: Additional References are found in the Endnotes.

A Web-based version of this article is at the author's Home Page,

<http://www.norbyhus.dk/danes/bering.html>

*Nordisk Conversationslexikon*, Third Edition. A. F. Pullich and Gustav Storm. Copenhagen 1884. Vol. I, page 494.

The Horsens Museum has an Internet page on Bering's life, ([http://www.horsensmuseum.dk/bering/ber\\_en.htm](http://www.horsensmuseum.dk/bering/ber_en.htm))

*Dansk Biografisk Lesikon*. C.F. Bricka. Kjøbenhavn 1886, for a list of important dates in Bering's life.

*Aarbog 1942* for Det Danske Post-og Telegrafvæsen. 51. Aargang. Published and edited by Kontrolør E.H.C. Mikkelsen. Page 222.

Control Book for the Machine Counter at the Danish Stamp Printing House. The book is at the Danish Postal Museum in Copenhagen.

Stamp Control Book showing exactly when and how many sheets were discarded. The book is at the Danish Postal Museum in Copenhagen.

## Endnotes

i. From the Horsens parish register

<sup>ii</sup> Note that the dates given are in Julian Dates. Some sources mention his death date as 1741.12.19, which is the Gregorian Date. For more detail about the Julian and Gregorian Calendars, visit "The Perpetual Calendar" at <http://www.norbyhus.dk/calendar.html>

<sup>iii</sup> In 1648, a Russian, Semyon Dezhnyov, had sailed through the Bering Strait, but his report went unnoticed until 1736. See Encyclopædia Britannica Online, "Bering, Vitus (Jonassen)."

<sup>iv</sup> The information from many sources that Bering died of scurvy is wrong. In 1991, a Russian-Danish expedition found the grave of Bering and examined his skeleton. The teeth showed no sign of scurvy. The German scientist G. W. Stellar wrote in a diary that Vitus Bering died of an infection that started in the lower part of his body and spread. *P&T's Historie 1927-1960*, Bent Blüdnikow. Generaldirektoratet for Post-og Telegrafvæsenet. København 1993, pp. 232.

<sup>v</sup> Officielle Meddelelser fra Generaldirektoratet for Post-og Telegrafvæsenet, No 48 from November 12, 1941, pp.180.

<sup>vi</sup> "Danske Frimærker i stålstik - 50 År," By Chefen for Postens Trykkeri.Ingeniør H.J. Steen, *Nordisk Posttidsskrift* nr. 81,1993 pp. 4-8, 14.

<sup>vii</sup> Sundgaard's Private Book. Engineer Ricardo Sundgaard was the daily leader of the GPO Stamp Printing House. Unfortunately, this book disappeared after Sundgaard's death, but he allowed me to take many notes from his book before he passed away.

<sup>viii</sup> *En Dag med Vitus Bering*. Aa. Kabell, Posthistoriske Studier 7. Posthistorisk Forlag. Hobro, 1980.

<sup>ix</sup> Officielle Meddelelser fra Generaldirektoratet for Post- og Telegrafvæsenet "OM" No 38 from September 10, 1941, pp. 141.

<sup>x</sup> See Endnote vi.

<sup>xi</sup> See Endnote ix.

