

PERSPECTIVE

Larsen's cairn: the birth of a new historical site in Antarctica

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Abstract

This article describes the history of Larsen's cairn, one of the oldest historical sites in Antarctica, and explains how it became one of the most recently declared Historical Site and Monuments (HSMs) on the continent. Norwegian explorer and whaler Carl Anton Larsen constructed the cairn on Marambio/Seymour Island during the Norwegian Whaling Expedition in 1892. Officially designated as C.A. Larsen Multiexpedition Cairn (HSM 94), this site featured in several episodes of Antarctic history, spanning three periods of Antarctic history: Antarctic whaling, the Heroic Age of Antarctic exploration, and a period characterized by the installation of permanent stations at the end of World War II. Argentina, Norway, Sweden and the UK have all had some involvement in the cairn and all four nations now share an administrative role vis-à-vis the HSM, making it the HSM with the largest number of administrators to date. Adding to its significance, the cairn is linked to the earliest phase of invertebrate palaeontology in Antarctica and can also be considered the first material remains of the Norwegian presence in Antarctica.

Introduction

As the last continent to be explored and inhabited by humans, Antarctica has few historical remains compared to other continents. The harshness and remoteness of Antarctica has limited human presence there to only parts of the continent, and usually for only for short periods of time. Environmental changes, such as coastal erosion and glacial melt, among other factors, significantly affect the preservation of historical material remains (Flyen & Thuestad 2022; Nicu & Fatoric 2023). For this reason, the protection of the historical remains by the Antarctic Treaty System, under the HSM designation is important.

Although the Antarctic Treaty System declares any human installation in Antarctica that predates 1959 a historical heritage site that should be protected, the specific designation as an HSM constitutes a much stronger and more precise measure in terms of safeguarding that heritage. Each HSM is proposed based on the consensus of one or more countries' delegations at the ATCMs. Then, one or more countries are designated as site administrators, being responsible for its preservation. Today, there are 95 Antarctic HSMs. The first 43 were approved at ATCM VII in Wellington, New Zealand. This was in 1972, a time when some countries, particularly the claimants, presented various proposals for HSMs that highlighted the history of their presence on the White Continent.

Keywords

Historical site and monument; Sobral; whaling history; heroic age; HSM 94; Operation Tabarin

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Abbreviations

ATCM: Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting
HSM: Historical Site or Monument
IAA: Argentine Antarctic Institute (Instituto Antártico Argentino)

Many of the HSMs date from the Heroic Age, a period that has tended to be a focus of attention of Antarctic historiography to the detriment of other periods (Howkins 2009; Senatore & Zarankin 2014). Another large set of HSMs dates from the period of intensive deployment of occupation, tensions and confrontation in the 1940s and 1950s, when several countries established permanent stations in Antarctica, or from the massive effort during the International Geophysical Year 1957–58.

Here, we describe an HSM whose significance extends over three periods of Antarctic history and which was proposed and is administered by the largest number of countries. This is the C.A. Larsen's Multiexpedition Cairn, designated by the Antarctic Treaty System with number 94. A cairn is a human-made pile or stack of stones, which in Antarctica was usually constructed as a marker or to contain – and advertise the presence of – a message. The cairn is linked to the earliest phase of invertebrate palaeontology in Antarctica and can also be considered the first material remains of the Norwegian Antarctic presence.

The cairn from 1892 to 1945

The story of Larsen's cairn begins with the earliest human presence on Marambio/Seymour Island, on the north-western side of the Weddell Sea and off the tip of the Antarctic Peninsula (Fig. 1). Its origin dates back to

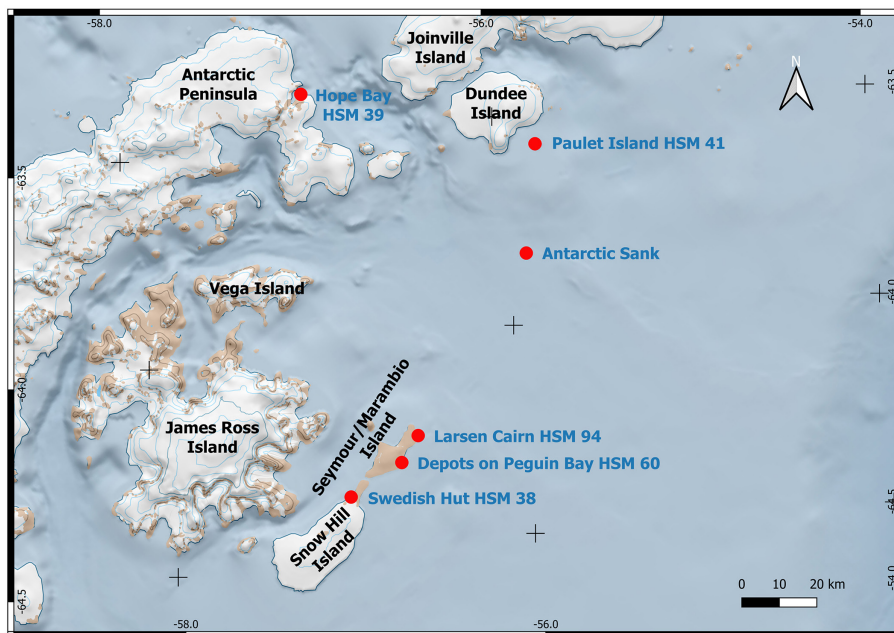


Figure 1 Map of the northern tip of the Antarctic Peninsula and nearby islands.

1892, when it was installed by Carl Anton Larsen. Larsen was a Norwegian whaler and explorer with early experience in the Arctic Ocean. During the austral summers from 1892 to 1894, he led two Antarctic expeditions as captain of the sealing ship *Jason*. The Norwegian company Oceana wanted to investigate the whaling potential in the Weddell Sea and sent out this reconnaissance expedition (Riffenburgh & Klover 2016). The *Jason* left Norway on 3 September 1892, visited the South Orkney Islands, and finally, on 4 December, arrived at Marambio/Seymour Island. This was the first recorded human landing on the island, which had been assumed to be a cape on the Antarctic Peninsula up to that time. Near the north-eastern coast, Larsen set up a cairn consisting of relatively heavy rocks and a wooden pole with a red handkerchief. On the pole he carved the name of the expedition ship and the date: “Jason 4-12-92” (Kløver 2016). During his visit to the island, Larsen and his men found fossils of petrified wood, some of the first fossils discovered in Antarctica. They became a source of scientific interest as evidence that Antarctica had not always been covered by ice. In addition, the sedimentary rocks demonstrated that Antarctica was a continent rather than a volcanic archipelago.

After the visit to Marambio/Seymour Island, Larsen navigated to the south and discovered parts of the unexplored east coast of the Antarctic Peninsula. Many whales were observed during the expedition, providing a commercial reason for further expeditions. In a continuation of this expedition, Larsen landed on the island again on 18 November 1893.

The fossils that Larsen had collected motivated the organization of the Swedish Antarctic Expedition in 1901–03, led by Otto Nordenskjöld, with the ship *Antarctic*, commanded by Larsen (Nordenskjöld 1911). At that time, the kingdoms of Norway and Sweden were in a union and the expedition had a Swedish scientific component, but a mostly Norwegian crew. In mid-December 1901, the *Antarctic* arrived in Buenos Aires and the expeditioners requested food and equipment from the Argentine government. This was granted, in exchange for the participation in the expedition of a meteorologist from the Argentine Navy, the young ensign José María Sobral. In January 1902, they arrived at the northern part of the Antarctic Peninsula, and in February they built a summer/winter station on Snow Hill Island, which is separated from Marambio/Seymour Island by a narrow strait. Nordenskjöld spent the winter with Sobral and four other members of the expedition in that hut, which today carries the designation HSM 38. This group would make important geological and palaeontological discoveries in the region (Nordenskjöld 1911).

In the austral winter of 1902, Larsen explored Tierra del Fuego and the islands of the South Atlantic with the *Antarctic*. He planned to pick up the party at the hut on Snow Hill Island in the 1902/03 summer because the sea ice extended too far north. He dispatched three expedition members in Hope Bay, on the peninsula mainland, to cross the sea ice to Snow Hill Island and come back with Nordenskjöld’s team. The ship left Hope Bay. The

three men could not reach their destination because of the condition of the sea ice and the ship could not return to Hope Bay: it was trapped by the ice and wrecked. Guided by Larsen, the crew took refuge on Paulet Island. The stone shelter they built there, as well as the tomb of one member of the team and the cairn they constructed at a high point of the island, are today known as HSM 41. The three expedition members who had failed to reach Snow Hill Island had to survive the winter in Hope Bay in a makeshift stone shelter, today known as HSM 39. There, the geologist and palaeontologist Johan Gunnar Andersson made outstanding palaeobotanical discoveries thanks to the fossils he found on the hill that he named Flora. The Hope Bay team finally reached Snow Hill Island in October and shared the shelter with the team that was already there.

In October 1903, Ensign Sobral, along with Andersson, was surveying in the northern part of Marambio/Seymour Island, investigating and mapping the area, when they came across the cairn that Larsen had erected there in 1892. Below the original inscription, they added their names and the date on the post: "Andersson, Sobral, October 1903" (Sobral 1904). The first rescue expedition that managed to get there was the corvette ARA *Uruguay* of the Argentine Navy, commanded by Navy Lieutenant Julián Irizar. On 7 November, they arrived at the north-east coast of the island, where Ensign Felipe Fliess and Naval Surgeon José Gorrochátegui disembarked to carry out a reconnaissance tour. There, Fliess and Gorrochátegui found Larsen's cairn with the inscriptions made by Sobral and Andersson and, thus, had hope that they were alive (Destéfani 2004). With the idea of continuing their search farther south, the two Argentines left a message in the cairn, written in French, for the men they were looking for or for an ongoing French rescue expedition led by Jean-Baptiste Charcot. This is the first written material traced from an Argentine official expedition in Antarctica. Finally, on 8 November, they found the expedition members in Penguin Bay, and hours later Larsen managed to arrive from Paulet Island at the Snow Hill hut. Irizar installed a new depot—today known as HSM 60—in Penguin Bay and penned a note describing the situation. He later managed to rescue the crew of the *Antarctic* on Paulet Island. After the rescue, in Buenos Aires, Larsen publicly thanked Argentina and encouraged the Argentines to exploit the whaling resources of the South Atlantic (Tønnessen & Johnsen 1982). Thus, on 29 February 1904, the company named Compañía Argentina de Pesca S.A. was born. The company installed a factory at Grytviken, the first permanent human settlement in the South Georgia Islands, with Larsen as the on-site manager. Larsen died at sea in the Ross Sea region in 1924.

The next recorded visit to the cairn was four decades later, during the UK's Secret Operation Tabarin, conducted against Argentina and Chile during the last two years of World War II and the immediate postwar period (Dudeney & Walton 2011). In the late 1930s, Antarctic geopolitics began to intensify on account of whaling interests among various nations, set against a backdrop of rising political tensions in Europe that foreshadowed a new world war. In 1938, Norway called for an international polar conference to be held in Bergen in 1950. This prompted several nations to undertake new Antarctic expeditions, further worsening the situation (Fontana 2014). Argentina, for its part, carried out two expeditions—one in 1942 and one in 1943—with various objectives, including the study of locations where permanent stations might be established. At that time, Argentina had only the Orcadas Observatory, on Laurie Island, in the South Orkney Islands, established in the territory over which it claims sovereignty. Viewing these actions as a threat to its sovereignty claim, the UK decided to establish stations in the same locations. However, to avoid a direct conflict with Argentina, on which it depended for meat and wheat to win the war, it used the pretext that they were fighting Third Reich forces. As part of this operation, a dogsled patrol from Hope Bay Station, carried out by members of the British forces, photographed Larsen's cairn in August 1945. It removed the note that had been left by the Argentine Navy in 1903. This note and other historical objects taken from the remains of the Irizar and Nordenskjöld expeditions were later sent to the Colonial Office (Haddelsey & Carroll 2014). The cairn was thereafter left alone for seven decades and it slipped into obscurity.

Finding the cairn again

In 2014, one of us (PGF) led an effort to locate the cairn. The first step of the search was carried out on the basis of Sobral's descriptions and the 1945 cairn pictures and report found in the archive of British Antarctic Survey. The report described the objects found, including a wooden box and a rusty can 6 by 3 inches. The can contained frozen sand and a note, written in pencil, on a sheet of torn paper from a blue-lined notepad written in pencil. The Argentine notes of Larsen's cairn and Penguin Bay depot were finally found in 2015 in the archive of the Scott Polar Research Institute (Fig. 2). The notes had been sent to the institute in 1949. Informed by the descriptions and the historical photographs, the IAA Museum Group—comprising PGF and non-commissioned officers (Sergeant Major Guillermo Aguilera Meneses and Sergeant Cristian Rodolfo Rojas) of the Argentine Army Antarctic Command—undertook the

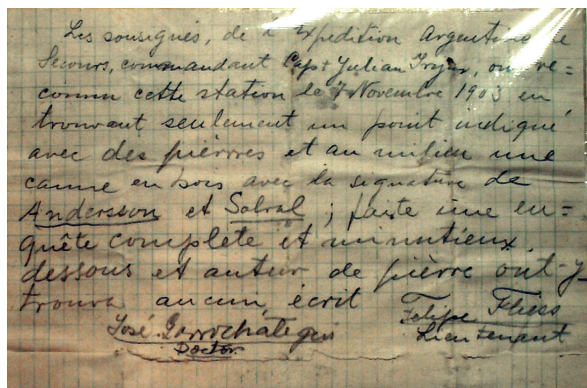


Figure 2 Note written by Gorrochátegui and Flies, left in the cairn, November 1903 (archive of the Scott Polar Research Institute, Folder MS370).

search for the cairn in the Antarctic Summer Campaign of 2015/16. The three members of the group explored by foot the entire surface of the northern cape of the island following the description of the location given by Sobral (1904). On 5 February, the group located the cairn with the help of the historical pictures. The cairn was photographed (Fig. 3), georeferenced, measured and fenced. It was found at coordinates 64°14'13.06" south and 56°35'7.50" west, 26 m a.s.l. and 70 m west of the shore.

In 2020, a Swedish–Argentine team digitally surveyed the site (Almevik et al. 2020). The cairn's rocks, which measure between 40 and 60 cm long and some of which are granite, seemed to be found in their entirety. However, the wooden post, which was 2 m high and had a diameter of 5 cm (Taylor 1945), was not found at the site. While searching the extreme north of the island, a section of the pole was possibly found at a cairn that had been assembled by a camp of IAA geologists in the 1990s. The found section of pole matched the known characteristics of the one used in the older structure. One of the geologists who had participated in the 1990s camp recalled that the re-used pole had been found south-east of the campsite, which coincides with the location of Larsen's cairn. A sample from the section of pole that had been found at the IAA cairn was analysed and found to be Norwegian pine, making it likely that it is a fragment of the pole originally mounted at Larsen's cairn. The piece of wood is on display at Marambio Base, 1.7 km west of Larsen's cairn.

The team also found a fragment of a rusty iron can, measuring 15 cm by 8 cm, about 1 m from the rocks of the cairn.

Becoming an HSM

As the site met several of the requirements set forth during ATCM XXXII, held in 2009, in the document



Figure 3 Larsen's cairn in 2016. (Photo: Pablo Fontana, IAA).

Guidelines for the designation and protection of Historic Sites and Monuments (Appendix to Resolution 3), PGF requested that Argentina's National Antarctic Directorate consider proposing Larsen's cairn as a new HSM. To be considered for HSM status, a site or monument must satisfy at least one of the criteria laid out in the guidelines. The cairn meets four criteria: (1) "a particular event of special significance in the history of science or exploration of Antarctica occurred there"; (2) it has "a particular association with a person who played an important role in the history of science or exploration in Antarctica"; (3) it has "a particular association with a feat of endurance or achievement"; and (4) "it has a symbolic or commemorative value for people of many nations."

The National Antarctic Directorate (Dirección Nacional del Antártico) invited the delegations of Norway, Sweden and the UK to participate in the proposal, which all accepted. This was agreed at ATCM XXXIX, in 2016. Eventually, Argentina, Norway, Sweden and the UK reported the precise location of the historical remains in *Working Paper 48* (ATS 2016). The only point of discussion regarding the proposal was related to the toponym used in the text. The Argentine proposal included the use of dual toponymy for the island (Seymour/Marambio), but the Argentine toponym was not accepted by the UK. This issue was resolved by simply stating that the cairn was located near Marambio Station, without mentioning the name of the island. The designation of Larsen's cairn as an HSM was delayed by a moratorium on establishing new HSMs as it had been agreed that new and more rigorous criteria needed be set. This was achieved in 2019, at ATCM XLII. Once the moratorium was lifted, the cairn was approved as a new HSM—number 94. The four countries that jointly proposed it share an administrative role for the new HSM. The IAA placed a sign next to the cairn in the four languages of the Antarctic Treaty (Spanish, English, French and Russian).

Conclusions

Larsen's cairn has material remains of metal, wood, and stone. Other objects, dislocated from their original context, such as photographs, notes and reports, are also associated with the site and the events surrounding its establishment and subsequent visits to it. Some of these objects—such as the inscribed wooden post and the handwritten notes left in the cairn—were picked up by later visitors, who re-used them locally or took them away and archived them. Thus, the materials link different people, times and cultures. Having been established at the beginning of the period of Antarctic Whaling and being revisited during the Heroic Age and, later, the period when countries with a geopolitical interest in Antarctica were establishing stations there, HSM 94 spans three periods of human engagement with the continent. The material objects associated with the cairn serve as testimonies of change. The written and inscribed messages in particular are poignant reminders of efforts by individuals to communicate information to others or simply to their existence. The designation of HSM 94 highlights the cultural heritage significance of the cairn, promotes awareness about the preservation of this Antarctic memory, and emphasizes the potential for its further research. The designation process of this new HSM also shows how in Antarctica, thanks to the Antarctic Treaty, it is possible to build a shared transnational memory.

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Disclosure statement

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