NORTHERN NORWAY IN VIKING AGE

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to present some aspects of the image of Northern Norway in the Viking period. The article first sketches the Viking Age and its underlying causes, by also defining, in brief, the specificity of the Vikings. It continues with considerations on the creation of Norway, so as to finally outline the country's image in the Viking Age. Aspects of navigation, language and trade are also presented in short. This entire portrayal of Northern Norway in Viking times is based on Ottar's account about Northern Norway at the court of King Alfred. From a literary perspective, Harald Hårfagrets Saga (The Saga of Harald Fairhair) from about 850 was analysed. This saga tells the story of a Danish princess being transformed into a Norwegian woman. Thus, one encounters the myth of Northern women. All these aspects lead to a comprehensive image of Northern Norway in the Viking Age.

Rezumat:

Scopul acestei lucrări este de a prezenta câteva aspecte ale imaginii Nordului Norvegiei în perioada vikingă. Articolul descrie mai întâi epoca vikingă și substratul acesteia, definind, de asemenea, pe scurt, specificul vikingilor. Aceasta continuă cu considerații privind crearea Norvegiei, pentru a schița în cele din urmă imaginea țării în epoca vikingă. Aspecte legate de navigație, limbă și comerț sunt, de asemenea, prezentate în mod concis. Întregul tablou al Norvegiei de Nord în epoca vikingă se bazează pe expunerea lui Ottar la curtea regelui Alfred despre Norvegia de Nord. Din perspectivă literară, Harald Hårfagrets Saga (Saga lui Harald Păr-Frumos) de pe la 850 a fost deja analizată. Această saga spune povestea unei prințese daneze transformată într-o femeie norvegiană. Astfel, în cadrul acesteia întâlnim mitul femeilor nordice. Toate aceste aspecte oferă o imagine cuprinzătoare a Norvegiei de Nord în epoca vikingă.

Keywords: Northern Norway, Viking Age, Saga, Ottar' s account

Introduction

This article discusses the image of Northern Norway in the Viking Age, in the attempt of coming with a different perspective on such a vast and controversial topic as Viking studies.

The main source of documentation in illustrating the image of Northern Norway in the Viking period is the book entitled *Two Voyagers at the Court of King Alfred. The ventures of Ohthere and Wulfstan together with the Description of Northern Europe from the Old English Orosius* and edited by Niels Lund. The foreword mentions the record of voyages made by two merchant ventures, Ohthere and Wulfstan, in the time of King Alfred. This record is considered a major primary source, not only for Anglo-Saxon England, but also for Scandinavia and the Baltic in the Viking Age¹.

Before going into details about Ohthere's account, we would like to draw an overview of the Viking Age, by contextualising it and by defining who the Vikings really were.

Viking Age and its causes

No major event or significant period in history has ever occurred without some underlying causes. Their correct understanding is, in my opinion, a key towards a more theoretical approach in general terms.

In his article entitled *The Causes of the Viking Age*, P.H. Sawyer² tackles precisely the above-mentioned topic, concluding that the Viking activity needs complex explanations, and that it led to developments in Scandinavia:

“We should also recognize that our evidence is inadequate and that we can never hope to understand that activity or its causes fully. Recent studies, have however, cast new light on the eighth and ninth centuries and suggest that the reasons for Viking activity should not be sought only in Western Europe or Scandinavia, but in the links that joined these two areas long before the first Viking raid³.”

¹ Niels, Lund, ed, *Two voyagers at the Court of King Alfred. The Ventures of Ohthere and Wulfstan together with the Description of Northern Europe from the Old English Orosius* (York: William Sessions Limited, 1984), 4.

² Professor of Medieval History at Leeds University.

³ P. H. Sawyer, “The Causes of the Viking Age,” in *The Vikings*, ed. R.T. Farrell (London and Chichester: Phillimore, 1982), 2.

The same article states another interesting fact, namely that it was the western European demand for northern products, and the parallel Scandinavian demand for western goods, that caused close contacts between the two areas. This trade also tempted pirates, and the competition led to the development of remarkable sailing ships that are indeed the key to the Viking Age. Why Scandinavians were able to change the social and political map in such a profound way in northern Europe is still under discussion. One important factor may be the new kind of sea-going ships that Scandinavians started to build.

As Sawyer also concludes, one thing is for sure. Viking influence spread across continents: in the east, through Europe to Russia and Greece; in the west, to Britain, Ireland, Greenland, Iceland, and to the New World⁴.

Who were the Vikings?

In the introduction to a recent compendium concerning Viking studies, Stefan Brink outlines some important data about the period. Namely, it is stated that The Viking Age was the period when the Scandinavians made themselves known, or rather notorious. From around 800 to around 1050 Scandinavian stirred up northern Europe in a way they had never done before or since.

Their migration to the four corners is as well mentioned:

“Norwegians in particular controlled and colonised the whole of the North Atlantic, from Norway, to the Faroes, Iceland, Shetland, the Scottish islands, parts of Ireland, Greenland and all the way to the Eastern brim of North America. Especially Danes, but also Norwegians and Swedes, ravaged and had an impact on the political and social development of England and parts of France. Swedes travelled eastward, traded along the Russian rivers, and down to the Byzantine and Islamic world. They established in Kiev, under the name of *Rus'*, a new policy, the embryo of Russia⁵.”

⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁵ Stefan Brink et. al., ed, *The Viking World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 1.

The same author makes the affirmation according to which “the historical period of the Viking Age is a late construction”⁶. The Vikings themselves had, of course, no clue that they were living in the Viking Age. Nonetheless, a constructed historical period is framed between a starting point and an end point.

Regarding the Viking Age, it is framed by two major ‘events’: it started in the year 793, when they attacked and plundered the monastery at Lindisfarne, near the coast of Northumberland (mentioned in Anglo-Saxon chronicles). The island of Lindisfarne, in the far northeast of England, had long been a monastic centre of great importance, respected across Christendom, a place of learning, of religious artistry and of quiet piety. Actually, it was widely acknowledged as the holiest place in Britain. 1066 marks the end of the Viking Age, with the battle at Stamford Bridge, near York (when a large army of Northmen, led by the Norse King, Harald was defeated by the English King Harold). Nonetheless, the introduction of the new Christian religion and the establishment of the Church (with a new administration and government based on literacy) ultimately brought the Viking Age to an end. “Anyhow, it is all a just an approximation and a late construction to help us understand a complicated past”⁷, concludes Brink.

“Every era uses history for its own purposes; every time shapes its own history”⁸. This quote is remarkable in perceiving history, in opening our horizon when trying to understand any past events.

When it comes of the Vikings, a first line of interpretation which has diminished during the past fifty years is the ravaging, killing, raping, burning Viking; instead, the peaceful, industrious, trading Viking has been in focus. Viking-age Scandinavians, no doubt, spent time on both activities. Still today, the word *Viking* is, in the Anglo-Saxon world, associated with pirates and men of violence. The reason for focusing on Vikings as traders in research within the past decades, is partly because this side of the Northmen was neglected in early history writing, but it partly also mirrors a complete image of the society.

Another striking thing about Vikings is that, despite what story-books say, Vikings never fought in helmets with attachments such as horns or wings. Helmets were worn only on ceremonial occasions. A Viking helmet

⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁸ Ibid., 4.

had a conical shape and it was made out of iron or leather. The Viking's favourite weapons were his sword and axe. Some swords were said to have been made by the dwarfs or given by the God Odin. It is also said that a Viking warrior was never separated from his sword and long-handled, battle axe⁹.

The creation of Norway

'Norway' was originally a geographical concept. The English and German specificity of its name stands proof, rather than its modern Scandinavian form (*Norge*). 'The way to the north' was the long sailing route along the Norwegian coast. It began in the Skagerrak-Kattegat area, went round Lindesnes – the country's southernmost point – and continued northwards, until permanent settlement. In the Viking Age, this was represented by the islands around Tromsø.

Around 890, a man called Ottar (Ohthere) travelled from the northernmost part of this area, all the way to England. He told King Alfred of the journey he had made, and his account was written down. Ottar said that all the way south he had had 'the land of the northmen' (*nordmanna land*) on his port side. This country was long and narrow. Ottar called it *Northweg*.¹⁰ Ottar's tale is not the only mention of 'northmen' (Norwegians) at this time. In a contemporary skaldic poem, we find Harald Finehair called 'king of the northmen'¹¹ ('*dróttinn nordmanna*'). Hence, one can deduce that names such as 'Norway' and 'northmen' were used in the second half of the ninth century. The terms themselves almost certainly derive from southern Scandinavia, because it is from that perspective that the Norwegian coast and its people lay to the north.

Ohthere's accounts

The following part of the article focuses on portraying the image of Northern Norway in the Viking Age, as reflected by Ohthere's accounts. As

⁹ S. C. George, *The Vikings* (Newton Abbot: David&Charles, 1973), 12.

¹⁰ Niels, Lund, ed, *Two voyagers at the Court of King Alfred. The Ventures of Ohthere and Wulfstan together with the Description of Northern Europe from the Old English Orosius* (York: William Sessions Limited, 1984), 18-22.

¹¹ Finnur, Jónsson, ed, *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning, 2nd edition*, Vol. iB: *Rettet tekst* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1967), 22.

mentioned in the beginning, we have based our research on the book edited by Niles Lund, *Two Voyagers at the Court of King Alfred. The ventures of Ohthere and Wulfstan together with the Description of Northern Europe from the Old English Orosius*.

In the introduction to the edition, we are given a contextualisation of Ohthere's accounts of his voyages from northern Norway, a highly quoted text of the Viking Age. These accounts have survived in a translation into Old English of the *Seven Books of History against the Pagans* (*Historiarum adversum Paganos Libri Septem*), made by the Spanish churchman, Paulus Orosius. It is a world history starting from the Creation until AD 417, and the title foreshadows the political situation of those times. King Alfred the Great¹² encouraged its translation into Old English, because, by the ninth century, Orosius's world history had won its place as a classic masterpiece¹³. In the text, Alfred is called Ohthere's lord, his *hlaford*. A *hlaford* was the lord of his men in the sense that they owed him allegiance and service, and, in return he owed them protection, *mund*, and sometimes stipend and keep. Nevertheless, one cannot really know what type of relationship existed between them. Nor do we know how long Ohthere spent at the king's court¹⁴.

Orosius's world history begins with a geographical examination of the world (as much as Orosius was aware of, at that time). However, the English version encompasses a wider description of areas not dealt with by Orosius, such as Europe north of the Alps¹⁵.

About Ohthere we find out that he had his origins somewhere near Tromsø, in the North of Norway. He started travelling in two directions: both northwards, round North Cape into the White Sea, and southwards, to the market-place *Sciringesheal*, later known as Kaupag, in the Oslo-fjord, and, further on, from Hedeby to Truso, in present day Poland¹⁶. He told his audience that he was a rich man in his country. Consequently, they became interested in what he owned (how many cows, sheep and pigs) and how

¹² Alfred had become king of Wessex in 871. At that time, Wessex was the only Anglo-Saxon kingdom not conquered by the Vikings.

¹³ Niels, Lund, ed, *Two voyagers at the Court of King Alfred. The Ventures of Ohthere and Wulfstan together with the Description of Northern Europe from the Old English Orosius* (York: William Sessions Limited, 1984), 5-6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

much land he ploughed. By their measures, his wealth seemed far from impressive; hence, they required him to explain what it consisted of¹⁷.

The following lines represent part of the account Ohthere gave to the English king, Alfred. They are of outmost importance, as they reflect in a very detailed manner Northern Norway's image in Viking times. The description of Northern Europe translated below is not a translation of Orosius, but an original excerpt from the late ninth century, included in Lund's edition.

First, we are offered some information related to the geographical positioning of the land:

"Ohthere told his lord, King Alfred, that he lived the furthest north of all Norwegians. He said that he lived in the north of Norway on the coast of the Atlantic. He also said that the land extends very far north beyond that point, but it is all uninhabited, except for a few places here and there where the *Finns* have their camps, hunting in winter, and in summer fishing in the sea. He told how he once wished to find out how far the land extended due north, or whether anyone lived to the north of the unpopulated area¹⁸."

We also find out that the Norwegians had interactions with other peoples, such as the Lapps, which he calls for *Finns*, and that they had various outdoor activities, such as fishing and hunting.

The account continues with the description of the Norwegian soil, convenient for a certain type of agriculture, and hostile to other. There is made a distinction between the North and the South of Norway, especially on this basis of its richness:

"He said that the land of the Norwegians is very long and narrow. All of it that can be used for grazing or ploughing lies along the coast and even that is in some places rocky. Wild mountains lie to the east, above and alongside the cultivate land. In these mountains live the *Finns*. The cultivated land is broadest in the south, and the further north it goes the narrower

¹⁷ Ibid., 11.

¹⁸ Ibid., 18.

it becomes. In the south it is perhaps sixty miles broad or a little broader; and in the middle, thirty or broader; and in the north, he said, where it is narrowest, it might be three miles across to the mountains. The mountains beyond are in some places of a width that takes two weeks to cross, in others of a width that can be crossed in six days. Ohthere said that the district where he lived is called *Halgoland*. He said no-one lived there to the north of him¹⁹."

An interesting thing to notice is that Ohthere was of the opinion that the region he was placed in was the Northernmost one, and that no one lived any further there. This is of course a misconception encountered even today – the myth of the north, the unknown, dark territory, full of mysticism, of trolls and of strong, but extremely few people.

The magic of the north shall follow us further in our investigation about their naval system, their trade and also in discussing some linguistic aspects.

The naval system in the reports of Ohthere and Wulfstan

Ole Crumlin-Pedersen states in his short article *Ships, navigation and routes in the reports of Ohthere and Wulfstan* that the goods took by the north Norwegian chieftain to the markets of south Scandinavia also included goods from the inner riches of the White Sea, except for his own produce and the tribute from the Lapps in his area. One may assume that he sailed to England directly with his goods and went to Alfred's court, probably in order to offer him gifts, as Alfred was the protector of trade. Given the fact that the route between Norway and England was well known, it was not worth giving a detailed description of it.

The normal route for Ohthere's trading journeys was along the Norwegian coast to *Sciringesheal*. The details of Ohthere's status suggest that he was probably the owner of both ship and cargo, and that the crew, probably eight to ten, were his own men²⁰.

¹⁹ Ibid., 20.

²⁰ Ole Crumlin-Pedersen, "Ships, navigation and routes in the reports of Ohthere and Wulfstan," in *Two voyagers at the Court of King Alfred. The Ventures of Ohthere and Wulfstan together with the Description of Northern Europe from the Old English Orosius*, ed., Niels, Lund (York: William Sessions Limited, 1984), 30-31.

Trade as exposed in Ohthere's accounts

In his article "Ohthere and Viking Age Trade" P.H. Sawyer is of the opinion that the tribute taken by Ohthere from the Lapps offers a glimpse into the most valuable exports of the far north: furs – marten, otter and bear, skins of reindeer and seal, and feathers. It seems that walrus ivory was something that Ohthere and his companions hunted for themselves.

The growing demand for northern goods in Western Europe (the best furs come from the coldest regions) has two direct consequences, both reflected in the accounts of the voyages of Ohthere and Wulfstan. First, it led to expeditions for new supplies. Secondly, it led to the development of trading centres in Scandinavia and around the Baltic.

The account of Ohthere's activities provides a detailed image of ninth-century Norway. On the one hand, it confirms archaeological evidence according to which there was a lively demand for northern products. This determined the Norwegians to colonise the far north, just as Swedes from Mälardalen were at the same time colonising the northern coasts of the Gulf of Bothnia. On the other hand, it sketches the competition (and sometimes the cooperation) between Swedes, Norwegians and Finns to exploit the riches of the Arctic, in part by forcing tribute from the native Lapps²¹.

The linguistic aspect of Ohthere's account

When it comes to the linguistic aspect, Christine E. Fell states in "Some Questions of Language" that it is unclear what language Ohthere was speaking at the court of King Alfred. There are two hypothesis: either Ohthere may have been fluent in Old English – and he knew something about the possible relationship of the tongues spoken by *Finns* and *Beormas*. More precisely, he heard many stories from the *Beormas*, though it is unknown which language mediated the communication. Or, the second hypothesis might be that King Alfred and some of the men at his court may have become familiar with Old Norse, during the treaties with the Danes. There is clear evidence that words have interfered from one language to

²¹ P.H. Sawyer, "Ohthere and Viking Age Trade," in *Two voyagers at the Court of King Alfred. The Ventures of Ohthere and Wulfstan together with the Description of Northern Europe from the Old English Orosius*, ed., Niels, Lund (York: William Sessions Limited, 1984), 43-53.

another. The text also reveals two factors that are the hidden – the presence of the interrogator and the discovery that Old English did not actually have words for all the information that Ohthere was trying to convey²².

A literary approach – the image of Northern Norway in Harald Hårfagres saga (The Saga of Harald Fairhair)

The following lines are written with the intention of offering an analysis of the way Northern Norway was portrayed in literary sources. Based on a saga written by Snorre Sturluson, a saga belonging to the category of king sagas (*kongesagaer* – Norwegian term), the analysis offers some illustrative quotes for the image of the North, as reflected in the literature of the age. More precisely our inquiry is written on Harald Hårfagres saga (The Saga of Harald Fairhair). We have chosen it both because it presents one of the most important kings in the Viking history of Norway, and because it contains good illustrations of specific Northern Norway elements, such as the myth of the strong northern woman.

First of all, the image of the woman, namely the one coming from Northern Norway, is presented in different contexts. The idea is that women in the North are extremely beautiful and powerful, capable of a high power of seduction. Right at the beginning, we encounter a description to support this argument: “She was the daughter of King Eirik of Hordaland [...] He wanted to get married to her, because she was of an outstanding beauty²³.” Moreover, the wife was not only a domestic human being, but also a fighter who impressed everyone by her posture: “King Harald had many wives and children. He got married with Ragnhild, daughter of King Eirik of Jylland. He was called Ragnhild the powerful, and their son was Eirik Blodøks²⁴.” We consider that the best quote portraying the Northern woman in this saga is the following one: “When he [Eirik] came back to Finnmark, he was

²² Christine E. Fell, “Some Questions of Language,” in *Two voyagers at the Court of King Alfred. The Ventures of Ohthere and Wulfstan together with the Description of Northern Europe from the Old English Orosius*, ed., Niels, Lund (York: William Sessions Limited, 1984), 56-57.

²³ “Hun var datter av kong Eirik av Hordaland [...] Henne ville han ta til frille, for hun var meget vakker, men nokså stor på det.” Sturluson, Snorre, 57, our translation – from Norwegian bokmål.

²⁴ “Kong Harald hadde mange koner og mange barn. Han fikk en kone som het Ragnhild, datter av kong Eirik fra Jylland. Hun ble kalt Ragnhild den mektige, og sønnen deres var Eirik Blodøks.” Ibid., 69, our translation.

bestowed a wife in a turf hut. She was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. Her name was Gunnhild and she said that her father lived in Hålogaland and that his name was Ossur Tote²⁵."

We are afterwards given a detailed description of the organizational system in Viking Age Norway, under the reign of Harald the Fairhair. Hence, we find out that every county was ruled by a so-called *jarl*, with administrative and territorial power: "In every district he entitled a *jarl* to judge after law and to collect taxes, out of which the third part came from household and others expenses²⁶."

Other details concerning their ship-management are worth mentioning at this point, because we are given this traditional image of dragon-like ship: "During spring he made himself a ship. During winter, he had built a really properly equipped *drage* (a ship with a dragon head) ²⁷." With such a ship, there is no obstacle heading north: "He travelled northwards till Dovnerfjell unto Tronheimen with honour and pride²⁸." Last but not least, we would like to mention the fact that in one of these voyages, we are presented the first encounter with the Vikings: "During the autumn, Einar sailed across the sea, and when reaching Orknøyene, there landed two ships with Vikings - Tore Treskjegg and Kalv Skurva. Einar fought them with ferocity and won, defeating them both²⁹."

The saga ends by summing up the image of the hero. It is said that he deserved the appellation *Fairhair*, as his hair was noticeably nice: "First, he was called Harald Luva, but now he was given a new nickname by jarl Ragnvald, and called Harald Hårfagre (Harald Fairhair). All the ones seeing him were of the opinion that it was an appropriate name, because his hair

²⁵ "Da han [Eirik] kom tilbake til Finnmark, fant mennene hans en kvinne i en gamme. Hun var noe av det vakreste de noen gang hadde sett. Hun kalte seg Gunnhild og sa at far hennes bodde på Hålogaland og het Ossur Tote." Ibid., 77, our translation.

²⁶ "I hvert fylke satte han en jarl som skulle dømme etter lov og lands rett og kreve inn sakøre og landskyld, og jarlen skulle ha en tredjedel av skatter og skylder til hushold og andre utgifter." Ibid., 60, our translation.

²⁷ "Om våren skaffet han seg med skip. Han hadde bygd en prektig utstyrt drage om vinteren." Ibid., 61, our translation.

²⁸ "[...] han dro nord over til Trondheimen med heder og ære." Ibid., 62, our translation.

²⁹ "Om høsten seilte Einar vest over havet, men da han kom til Orknøyene, lå det to skip med vikinger der, Tore Treskjegg og Kalv Skurva. Einar la straks til strid med dem og vant, begge vikingene falt." Ibid., 74, our translation.

was both big and beautiful hair³⁰." Furthermore, he is considered the most representative king of his time: "The scholars of the time argue that Harald Fairhair had been the most beautiful, powerful and important of all. [...] Eirik was a big and beautiful man, extremely powerful. He was an important army man, brutal, unfriendly. His wife, Gunnhild was beautiful, smart, mysterious and very brutal as well³¹."

To conclude, we consider this saga of outmost importance for the portrayal of Northern Norway in Viking Age. This because it encompasses elements presenting different aspects of that time, i. e. financial, social and administrative points are mentioned. Likewise, it is a written literary source, which enriches its originality and verisimilitude.

Conclusion

This article mostly followed a descriptive approach, meant to underline the specificity of Northern Norway in the Viking period. This was done by summing up Ohthere's account about Northern Norway at the court of King Alfred. The naval system, the trade and some linguistic aspects illustrated by Ohthere's account were also analysed. From a literary perspective, there was a short analysis of an illustrative saga: *Harald Hårfagre's Saga (The Saga of Harald Fairhair)* from around 850. The initial part of this article contextualised the Viking Age and its causes and then it presented some points related to the creation of Norway.

³⁰ "Før kalte de ham Harald Luva, men nå gav Ragnvald jarl ham et nytt tilnavn og kalte ham Harald Hårfagre. Alle som så ham, sa at det var et treffende navn, for han hadde både stort og vakkert hår." Ibid., 74, our translation.

³¹ "Lærde menn sier at Harald Hårfagre har vært den skjønneste, sterkeste og største av alle menn. [...] Eirik var en stor og vakker mann, sterk og kraftig. Han var en stor hærmann man, seiersæl, hissig av gemytt, grusom, uvennlig og fåmælt. Hans hustru, Gunnhild, var fager, klok og trollkyndig, gladlynt, underfundig og meget grusom." Ibid., 84, our translation.

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