

The Participation of the Kings in the Early Norwegian Sailing to Bjarmeland (Kola Peninsula and Russian Waters), and the Development of a Royal Policy Concerning the Northern Waters in the Middle Ages

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OTTAR OF HALOGALAND

Today one-third of Norway lies north of the Arctic Circle. But the realm has not always gone so far north. In earlier times Finmark and the inner parts of Troms were not inhabited by Norwegians but by a Finnish-Ugrian-speaking nomadic people, few in numbers, called the Fins.

The first move of Norwegians into the polar regions was to Finmark. Archaeologists cannot say for certain how early the Fins and the Norwegians came into cultural contact with each other. However, from the end of the ninth century we have a well-known written statement that deals with the settlement and casts light upon the economic structures thereof: the supplementary translation into the Anglo-Saxon language, made by King Alfred the Great, of the Latin *World History* by Orosius.

One of King Alfred's informants was Ottar (Ohthere), a chieftain and merchant from Halogaland in northern Norway. He lived — so he said — farther north than any Norwegian, at the West Sea. From here northward the land was unsettled, apart from a few places where Fins pursued a hunting economy. Ottar himself was engaged in cattle breeding, farming, and whaling. His greatest asset, though, was a flock of domesticated reindeer, and his most precious income was a tribute, which — like other chieftains — he collected annually from the Fins. It consisted of furs, eiderdown, walrus teeth, and sealskin hawsers used for ships. The Fins, because of their nomadic way of life, had little opportunity to profit from their hunting surplus. The Norwegian chieftains, however, were in a far better position.

The long-distance ships that belonged to Ottar and his fellow chieftains could transport the articles south to trading ports where prices were high. Ottar informed King Alfred that he used to sail to Heidaby in Schleswig, and had gone as far in the opposite direction. Ottar is the first man known to modern scholars who learned how far the Scandinavian peninsula extended towards the north and east. According to his own words, he was anxious to learn how far the land extended, and

whether any people lived beyond the wasteland. No description exists of Ottar's ship, but to his contemporaries his information about sailing distances, compass directions, and winds mattered more.

After sailing for six days and nights, he must have passed the North Cape "where the land turns right eastward." We can follow his journey along the coast of Murmansk, which Ottar called the land of the Ter-Fins. Where the Kola Peninsula "turns sharp to the south" Ottar had to contend with the north wind; sailing along the coast he entered Kandalaks Bay and eventually came upon a settlement of the Beormas, a Karelian tribe, near a river, probably the Varzuga. He and his crew lived with the people for some time, observing their hunting of the walrus. Such an expedition was not without precedent. Russian and Arabian contemporaries, and earlier chroniclers, told that the polar regions attracted people living far to the south.

BJARMELAND AND THE NORWEGIAN KINGS

In the next centuries the adventurous voyage of Ottar to Bjarmeland was repeated by many travellers, and the forced contribution of the Fins, of which Ottar spoke, became an institution. Icelandic and Norwegian sagas from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries confirm this, as does the Latin work *Gesta Danorum* (Chronicle of the Danes) by Saxo Grammaticus (ca. 1220 A.D.). The sagas were not based on contemporary eyewitness accounts, but probably on oral histories. Thus legends, myths, and fantastic happenings dominate these later works. Attention is focused on heroic fighting in Bjarmeland and on the huge bounty that could be won. Ottar's report was probably unknown to later medieval writers, but they all agreed with him on two points: the chieftains of Halogaland were still collectors of the Fin tax; and men from the chieftain class ventured on perilous voyages to Bjarmeland. One important change occurred after the days of Ottar: the founding of

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the Kingdom of Norway by King Harold Fairhair, a contemporary of King Alfred and Ottar.

King Harold and his successors wished to be sovereign kings of all Norway, including Finmark. According to the sagas, the newly-established dynasty displayed a particular interest in the Bjarmeland voyages while striving to obtain the tributes from the Fins. The first to claim the Fin tax as a royal prerogative was King Harold Fairhair himself. Only certain powerful men who acknowledged the King's sovereignty were authorized to collect the tax and to bargain with the Fins. However, antagonism developed between loyal and disloyal servants. A typical incident happened about 1020, during the reign of King Olaf the Saint. The king had sent a man called Karle from Halogaland to Bjarmeland to buy furs on behalf of his royal master. Another magnate, however, one of the king's antagonists, attacked Karle's ship with a superior force, killed Karle, and confiscated all the king's property.

Thirty years later Olaf's successor and half-brother, King Harold, in person inspected an Icelandic ship that had come from Finmark, suspecting it of having bargained illegally with the Fins and of hiding away the precious furs. Magister Adam of Bremen, in his Latin *History of the Diocese of Hamburg-Bremen* (ca. 1070), related that the same King Harold was nearly shipwrecked while attempting to discover the latitude of the northern ocean (*latitudinem septentrionalis oceani*).

Later kings met with similar difficulties. In the year 1115 King Sigurd the Pilgrim and his two brothers were drawn into a lasting lawsuit against a chieftain who was accused of having cheated the king by giving false accounts of the Fin tax.

The most famous of the sagas, *Heimskringla* by Snorre Sturlason (ca. 1220-1230), reports that Erik the Bloody-Axe, successor to King Harold Fairhair, and Erik's son King Harold Greyfur, had both sailed to Bjarmeland in person. The voyage of the latter is known from a poem of praise composed by the king's Icelandic bard, Glumr Geirason. The poem provides the first geographical detail since Ottar's day. The daring King Harold crossed the White Sea, called Gandvik, and anchored not far from the mouth of the Dvina (Vinu Mynni). There he fought the Bjarmir and burned down their settlement, probably the place that later on became Cholmogery (Arkhangelsk). This may have been the event that inspired a later bard at the royal court to tell his master, King Olaf the Saint, that "your realm reaches as far as Gandvik."

Similar activity was undertaken by the young King Hakon Toresfostre, a third member of the dynasty, who had a short reign in the 1090s. In a summary of that king's deeds the narrator tells about a voyage to Bjarmeland, where the king won a great victory after hard combat.

The late Norwegian historian, Halvdan Koht, held the opinion that the voyages of these three kings represented a conscious demonstration of Norwegian sovereignty. This, however, may be doubted. Not only were the reigns of these kings short, but their authority over the central parts of Norway was weak. Their trips to Bjarmeland should rather be compared with Viking raids, undertaken to win goods to supply their armed retinue (the *hird*).

After 1100 A.D. written sources become more reliable. A

paragraph in the Codex of Frostating — the ancient law for the middle region of Norway — gave the king a prior right to buy furs and falcons north of a geographical limit (the *Vennesund* in Namdalen). In the introductory chapter to the anonymous Latin work *Historia Norvegiae*, believed to have been written between 1160 and 1180, it is said that the fourth and most northern district of law and jurisdiction ends at Vegestaf, probably the Svjatoj Nos, the boundary of Bjarmeland. The author also confirms that the Fins were obliged to pay tributes to the kings of Norway.

By the thirteenth century the Norwegian kings seem to have had loyal servants in the north, men who went into action not on their own, but in the name of the Crown. Around 1220 two of King Hakon Hakonsson's sheriffs (*sysselmenn*) in Halogaland fitted out four ships on a punishment expedition to the White Sea, because a Norwegian crew, overwintering in Bjarmeland, had been killed. The king's men had a bloody revenge, sailing off with great bounty. On their way home the ships were wrecked and nearly everyone drowned.

Relations between the Norwegian authorities and the Bjarmir could be friendly, however. About 1250 a body of Bjarmir, forced to escape westward after a Tatar attack, were given new land by King Hakon himself, as far south as Malangen in Troms. This was hardly surprising: during the preceding 300 years Norwegian peasants and fishermen had taken up new homes along the coast of Finmark so that the two peoples often met.

To defend his northernmost province against attacks from warlike Karelian tribes, King Hakon V in 1307 built a fortress, with a church, on the island of Vardo. Four years later the same king issued the first laws concerning the Fins. Both activities made it clear that the Norwegian king looked upon Finmark, with its two peoples, as a territory belonging to the realm of Norway. His right to tax the Fins on the coast of Finmark and on the Kola peninsula, including those living on the north side of Kandalaks Bay, was acknowledged in 1326 by the Prince of Novgorod. The treaty signed that year is evidence that the two political states were now seeking legal rather than military grounds for the exploitation of the vast Scandia-Russian arctic region.

In summation, chieftains from Halogaland in Norway explored the extensive northern area comprising Finmark and the Kola peninsula and opened it for profit by the ninth century at the latest. The newly-established kingdom sought influence long before Norwegian settlers in any number set up permanent homes.

The King of Norway laid claim to the land for various reasons. The land to the north and east was contiguous to northern Norway, so expansion from the south was natural. In the age of the Vikings and in the Middle Ages, the sea route was the most important transit route, so important that it gave the country its identity — the North Way, Norway. Through mastering the sea the central government was able to maintain contact with the far-off regions, where during the summer one could sail around the clock. The prestige of reigning over such an enormous country was obvious, but economics mattered more.

THE NEAR POLAR REGION IN THE ECONOMY OF THE EARLY MEDIEVAL KINGDOM

The various products from the north — furs, walrus teeth and hides, eiderdown, falcons — were so valuable that in spite of the fact that they had to be gathered from a wide area with great toil and sometimes loss of life, they mattered a great deal in the economy. In the Middle Ages, Norway had no metal of its own for coining. Approximately 95% of the king's income was paid in kind. But apart from cattle hides, stockfish, and butter, the products of medieval Norway were of inferior quality and little was suitable for sale. It was essential that the king obtain other articles that could be easily changed into money, or goods that were not available in his own country. In the fourteenth century kings could pay debts to Hansa merchants with furs. The products from Finmark and Bjarmeland also had a unique function as gifts of prestige between people of high rank. Thus the king of Norway presented to the king of England sable furs, walrus teeth, and white falcons, and in return he received jewels, ceremonial weapons, and beautiful textiles. In a supplication brought to the Pope in 1347, King Magnus asked permission to sell falcons to the Sultan (the infidel!) because his realm was deeply indebted.

ROYAL AUTHORITY IN THE NORTHERN WATERS

In order for the distant regions to provide a surplus to the government, it was necessary for the king to maintain his sovereignty, including his right to tax the Fins. He did this by establishing laws and regulations, and by continuing to exercise supervision. It is the kings' early struggles for the purpose of maintaining sovereignty that are so often described in the sagas. Such efforts became even more important in the high and late Middle Ages when the export of another valuable product, the stockfish, had been turned to a profit.

Under the terms of a royal ordinance of 1294, and well into the sixteenth century, foreigners were forbidden to sail north of Bergen, the greatest town in medieval Norway. German and English merchants were forced to buy stockfish in the harbour of that town. Even Norwegian merchants were subjected to sailing restrictions (the King's *ban*).

During the high Middle Ages more regions and waters had come under the sovereignty of the King of Norway. Greenland and Iceland became outer parts of the realm (1262-1264). From the codex for Western Norway, the old Gulatings Law, we can infer that the king's authority over the sea was supposed to reach as far as the halfway point between Norway and Iceland. But after the expansion of the realm, the whole sea between the different parts of the king's *dominium* was looked upon as *his* waters. This was according to the state theory model that the King of Norway had adopted from abroad, which had developed over the preceding centuries.

Principles that the early medieval monarchs had laid down for the public management of Finmark and for contact with the Kola Fins were transferred about 1300 to the Norwegian dependencies in the North Atlantic Ocean. In addition to prohibitions against foreigners sailing further north than Bergen, rules were set down that covered trade with all tributary

islands. The underlying motive was the same as in the case of Finmark: the distant peoples were required to pay taxes to the state before Norwegian merchants from Bergen and Trondheim bought their surplus products.

After the fish from Icelandic waters had found a market abroad, the traffic became difficult to control. By about 1330, therefore, the king began to issue license letters for sailing to Iceland, first and foremost for English ships, later on for German ships and others. These licenses were issued in exchange for cash, which was needed more than anything else. Since many ships were bold enough to sail without any license, the monarch altered his policy. Foreigners obtained free admittance, on condition that they paid an export duty of 5% (the *sekkjagjald*), delivered to the king's governor in Iceland (the *hirdstjori*). Since the 1350s Norwegian merchants had paid the same tax, but disbursed it in Bergen. The people of Iceland, since the union with Norway, were obliged to pay a tax to the king not in fish or fur, but in russet (*vadmali*). The Icelanders were sheep-breeders, and in the Middle Ages russet was deemed to have primary value, in the absence of coins.

We have only one account of the tax, from the year 1311 when the king received more than 22 000 m of russet (36 000 *alen*). His governor, who had a demanding job in that distant island, received russet in value equivalent to salary. It amounted to no more than 3.5% of the total national tax, but like the tribute from the Fins, russet was an important contribution to overall revenues because of its usefulness. It provided warm winter clothes for the men in the king's service on board the ships and in the fortresses; it was the material used for sails, tents, and sacks, among other items. The russet tax from Iceland was sent to Bergen on Norwegian vessels. Every captain had to reserve one-quarter of the hold for the king's goods.

The principles behind this North Atlantic policy had been laid down during the reign of King Magnus Eriksson of Norway and Sweden, and Hakon VI, his son, during the period 1319-1380. Nothing was altered by their successors, King Olaf (died 1387) and Queen Margaretha (died 1412). Norway then entered a union with Denmark. The Danish monarchs, taking over the government of Norway with all its dependencies, became the heirs of the economic policy that had been initiated by the kings at the end of the Viking Age, long before any efficient management could be exercised.

Nevertheless, the policies had met with success. The sovereignty of the Crown of Norway over Finmark had become so much a matter of fact that it could resist any later attack from either Novgorod or Sweden. (But the right to tax Kola Fins was given up definitely in the sixteenth century.)

The incorporation of Greenland and Iceland into the realm gave the king of Norway a legal right to tax and govern these outer dependencies. But of greater international consequence was the development of the maxim that the Northern Waters was one huge *Mare Nostrum*.

It is of historical importance that the Danish monarchs inherited the medieval sea empire of Norway, because Denmark controlled the sea routes to and from the Baltic as well. In the next centuries Denmark became entangled in political conflicts

with English, German, Dutch, Swedish, and Russian interests. A struggle had begun for free economic enterprise in a *Mare Liberum*.

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