

“Ohthere's Report” from *The Old English Orosius*
dated to late 9th c. (sometime during Alfred's reign 871-899)

Ohthere sæde his halforde Ælfrede cyninge, þæt he ealra Norðmonna norþmest bude. He cwæð þæt he bude on þæm lande norþweardum wiþ þa Westsæ. He sæde þeah þæt [þæt] land sie swiþe lang norþ þonan, ac hit is eal weste, buton on feawum stowum styccemælum wiciað Finnas, on huntoðe on wintra 7¹ on sumera on fisceape be þære sæ.

He sæde þæt he æt sumum cirre wolde fandian hu longe þæt land norþryhte læge, oþþe hwæðer ænig mon be norðan þæm westenne bude. Þa for he norþryhte be þæm lande; let him ealne weg þæt weste land on ðæt steorbord 7 þa widsæ on ðæt bæcbord þrie dagas. Þa wæs he swa feor norþ swa þa hwælhuntan firrest faraþ. Þa for he þa giet norþryhte swa feor swa he meahte on þæm oþrum þrim dagum gesiglan. Þa beag þæt land þær eastryhte, oþþe seo sæ in on ðæt lond, he nysse hwæðer, buton he wisse ðæt he ðær bad westanwindes 7 hwon norþan 7 siglde ða east be lande swa swa he meahte on feower dagum gesiglan. Þa sceolde he ðær bidan ryhtnorþanwindes, for ðæm þæt land beag þær supryhte, oþþe seo sæ in on ðæt land, he nysse hwæþer. Þa siglde he þonan suðryhte be land swa swa he mehte on fif dagum gesiglan. Ða læg þær an micel ea up in on þæt land. Þa cirdon hie up in on ða ea, for þæm hie ne dorston forþ bi þære ea siglan for unfriþe, for þæm ðæt land wæs eall gebun on oþre healfe þære eas. Ne mette he ær

Ohthere told his lord, King Alfred, that he lived northernmost of all the Northmen². He said that he lived in the north of the country by the West Sea³. He said though the land stretches a long way north from there, yet it is completely unpopulated except for a few places here and there, where Finnas [Sami] camp⁴, hunting in winter and fishing by the sea in summer.

He said that on one occasion he wanted to find out how far north the land went, and whether anyone lived to the north of the wilderness. So he sailed north along the land; he kept the waste land to his starboard⁵ and the open sea to port⁶ for three days. By then he was as far north as the whalehunters travel at the farthest. So he went still northward as far as he could sail in the next three days. Then the land turned to the east, or the sea went into the land, he did not know which⁷, but he did know that he waited there for a wind from the west north-west and sailed then east along the coast as far as he could sail in four days. Then he had to wait there for a due north wind, because the land turned south there, or the sea turned into the land, he did not know which. Next, he sailed south along the land as far as he could sail in five days. There a large river⁸ opened up into the land. They turned into the river, not daring to travel beyond it for fear of hostility, because the land on the other side of the river was all settled. He had not before then met any populated land since leaving his own

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- 1 This is not the number seven. This is an abbreviation used in Old English (OE) manuscripts for the OE word *and* “and.”
 - 2 Somerville and Page translate the Old English “Norþmonn” as “Norwegian.”
 - 3 The Atlantic ocean.
 - 4 OE *wiciað*, from the noun *wic* (“camp”), which has been suggested as an origin for the word “viking.”
 - 5 The OE word “*steorbord*,” “steering side” is the origin of the modern English word “starboard,” meaning the right-hand side of a ship. It’s the “steering side” because the steering oar was placed on the right side of the ship.
 - 6 The use of the term *port* for the left side of a boat starts showing up in writing in the mid-1500s, and comes from the boat being pulled up with its left side closest to the dock or shore because the rudder was on the right side. The OE text here uses another term which died out: *bæcbord*, literally “back side.” “In OE. the corresponding term was *bæcbord*; this did not survive into ME., though its etymological equivalent still remains in all the mod. continental Teut. tongues, and was adopted into Rom. (F. *bâbord*). The word seems to have meant ‘the side at the *back* of the steersman’; the rudder or steering-paddle of early Germanic ships having been worked over the right side, whence the name *stéorbord* ‘steering-side.’” *Oxford English Dictionary* 2nd ed., s.v. “larboard”.
 - 7 “went into the land” meaning to form an inlet in the land. Bately interprets “he didn't know which” as indicating that Ohthere can't tell whether he's reached the northernmost extremity of continental Europe or “the sea on which he is sailing penetrates the continent as the Baltic does” because he has not continued north (183).
 - 8 Somerville says “probably the Dvina” (2).

nan gebun land sibban he from his agnum ham for, ac him wæs ealne weg weste land on þæt steorbord, butan fiscerum 7 fugelerum 7 huntum, 7 þæt wæron eall Finnas, 7 him wæs a widsæ on ðæt bæcbord. Þa Beormas hæfdon swiþe wel gebud hira land, ac hie ne dorston þæron cuman. Ac þara Terfinna land wæs eal weste, buton ðær hunga gewicodon, oþþe fisceras, oþþe fugeleras.

Fela spella him sædon þa Beormas ægþer ge of hira agnum lande ge of þæm landum þe ymb hie utan wæron, ac he nyste hwæt þæs soþes wæs, for þæm he hit self ne geseah. Þa Finnas, him þuhte, 7 þa Beormas spræcon neah an geþeode. Swiþost he for ðider, toecan þæs landes sceawunge, for þæm horshwælum, for ðæm hie habbað swiþe æþele ban on hiora toþum – þa teð hie brohton sume þæm cyninge – 7 hiora hyd bið swiðe god to sciprapum. Se hwæl bið micle læssa þonne oðre hwalas: ne bið he lengra ðonne syfan elna lang; ac on his agnum lande is se betsta hwælhuntað: þa beoð eahta and feowertiges elna lange, 7 þa mæsatan fiftiges elna lange; þara he sæde þæt he syxa sum ofsloge syxtig on twam dagum.

He wæs swyðe spedig man on þæm æhtum þe heora speda on beoð, þæt is on wildrum. He hæfde

home, but all the way there was empty land to starboard except for fishermen, fowlers, and hunters, and they were all Sami, and to port there was always the open sea. The *Beormas*⁹ had widely settled their land thickly, but they¹⁰ dared not set foot there. The land of the *Terfinnas*,¹¹ however, was completely uninhabited except for where hunters, fishermen, or fowlers camped.

Many tales the Beormas told him, both about their own land and about the lands which lay around them, but he did not know how true these tales were because he did not see it for himself. It seemed to him that the Sami and the Beormas spoke almost the same language.¹² He traveled there mainly, in addition to the exploration of the land, for the walrus,¹³ because they have very fine bone in their teeth¹⁴ – they brought some teeth for the king – and their hide is very good for ships' ropes¹⁵. This whale is much smaller than other whales¹⁶, being no more than seven ells¹⁷ [14 feet] long; but in his own land is the best whale-hunting: there they are forty-eight ells [96 feet] long, and the biggest fifty ells¹⁸ [100 feet] long; of these, he said that he and six other men killed sixty in two days¹⁹.

He was a very wealthy man in those possessions that comprise their wealth, that is wild beasts. He

9 Possibly the Permians, or Komi, another indigenous people like the Sami.

10 Ohthere and his crew (Somerville 2).

11 Bately says this group is “a people tentatively identified with the [Sami] of the modern *Terskij bereg*” which suggests that the area referred to is the southeast Kola peninsula in northwest Russia, bordering on Finland (186; also Somerville).

12 OE *geþeode*. At the root of this term for “language” is the OE word *þeod*, which means “people,” as in a large group of people like a tribe or nation. The Sami and the Komi speak languages in the Uralic language family.

13 The Old Norse (ON) word is *rosmhvalr*; “whale” is the second element of both the OE and ON name for the walrus, which may be one reason why it is later referred to as a “whale.”

14 Bately takes this to be referring to the walrus's tusks (188), which are a source of ivory, but it is possible that it is indeed referring to walrus teeth because objects, like game pieces, made from walrus teeth have been found. See William Short, *Icelanders in the Viking Age*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 180

15 Bately explains that the ropes were made from skins “probably . . . by cutting the hide in a spiral round the body” (188). However, there is no archaeological evidence for animal skin ropes despite the literary mentions (Short, 141-42).

16 Here Ohthere is comparing the walrus to whales; he is placing both into a class called “whale,” which may be due to the “whale” element in both the OE and ON names for the walrus.

17 Bately notes that “ell” is used in Anglo-Saxon texts to translate the Latin unit *cubitus*, which is between 18 and 22 inches, but that the Anglo-Saxon ell may have been between 22 and 24 inches. She further explains that using this larger ell would give a measurement in the right range for a bull walrus (188).

18 Bately notes that this would give a measurement in the right range for a blue whale (188).

19 Bately is skeptical of the numbers here. She notes that this may mean “six or seven men and their crews” and that “it is much more likely that we have here to do with condensed or inaccurate reporting and that Ohthere had at this point passed from an account of the size of some of the whales caught to an illustration of how good on occasion whale-hunting off Norway could be” (188-89).

þagyt, ða he þone cyningc sohte, tamra deora unbeohtra syx hund. Þa deor hi hatað hranas; þara wæron syx stælhranas, ða beoð swyðe dyre mid Finnum, for ðæm hy foð þa wildan hranas mid. He wæs mid þæm fyrstum mannum on þæm lande; næfde he þeah ma ðonne twentig hryðera 7 twentig sceapa 7 twentig swyna, 7 þæt lytle þæt he erede he erede mid horsan. Ac hyra ar is mæst on þæm gafole þe ða Finnas him gyldað. Þæt gafol bið on deora fellum 7 on fugela feðerum 7 hwales bane 7 on þæm sciprapum þe beoð of hwæles hyde geworht 7 of seoles. Æghwilc gylt be hys gebyrdum: se byrdesta sceall gyldan fiftyne mearðes fell 7 fif hranes 7 an beran fe 7 tyn ambra feðra 7 berenne kyrtel oððe yterenne 7 twegen sciprapas; ægþer sy syxtig elna lang: oþer sy of hwæles hyde geworht oþer of sioles.

He sæde ðæt Norðmanna land wære swyþe lang 7 swyðe smæl. Eal þæt his man aþer oððe ettan erian mæg, þæt lið wið ða sæ; 7 þæt is þeah on sumum stowum swyðe cludig, 7 licgað wilde moras wið eastan 7 wið uppon, emnlange þæm bynum lande. On þæm morum eardiað Finnas. 7 þæt byne land is easteward bradost 7 symle swa norðor swa smælre; eastewerd hit mæg bion syxtig mila brad oþþe hwene brædre, 7 middeward þritig oððe bradre; 7 norðeward, he cwæð, þær hit smalost wære, þæt hit mihte beon þreora mila brad to þæm more, 7 se mor syðþan on sumum stowum swa brad swa man mæg on twam wucum oferferan, 7 on sumum stowum swa brad swa man mæg on syx dagum oferferan.

still had, when he visited the king, six hundred unsold animals. These animals are called reindeer; of these six were decoy reindeer, which are very valuable to the Sami because they catch wild reindeer with them. He was among the most prominent men in that land, yet he had no more than twenty horned cattle, twenty sheep, and twenty swine, and the little land that he plowed, he plowed with horses.²⁰ Their property, however, is mostly the tribute paid to them by the Sami. This tribute consists of animal hides, bird feathers²¹, whale bone²², and ships' cables made from whale²³ and seal skins. Each pays according to his rank. The highest ranking must give fifteen marten skins, five reindeer hides, a bear skin, ten ambers²⁴ of feathers, a bear or otter skin coat, and two ships' cables, each sixty ells long, one made from whale skin and the other from seal.

He said that the land of the Northmen is very long and very narrow. All of it that one can either graze or plow lies beside the sea, and even that is very rocky in some places, and wild mountains lie above and to the east, alongside the inhabited land. In these mountainous wastes live the Sami. The inhabited land is broadest to the east²⁵ and the father north it lies, the narrower it becomes; eastward, it can be sixty miles²⁶ broad, or slightly broader, and in the middle, it can be thirty miles or broader; and northward, he said, there where it is narrowest, it might be only three miles broad up until the wastelands; and the wasteland in some places is as wide as a man can travel over in two weeks, and in some places, as wide as a man can

20 Bately notes that at this time both oxen and horses were used as draft animals, but that oxen were the preferred draft animal in England, and that “it is possible that [this] observation here is to be interpreted either as another instance of Ohthere's relative poverty in terms of domestic livestock, or as an indication of the small amount of arable land he cultivated” (190-91).

21 Bately notes that “Eiderdown-type bed coverings were found at Oseberg, a down-filled pillow is recorded from a Danish grave at Mammen, Jylland, while bedding and feathers are mentioned as part of the booty taken after the sack of Dublin in 1000” (191).

22 Bately notes that this could refer to baleen, bone – she mentions the “carved board made from a whale's shoulder blade in the Tromsø museum” – narhwal tusks, walrus tusks, or sperm whale teeth (191).

23 This is most likely referring to walrus hide, as above (Bately, 191).

24 Bately notes that an “amber” was used as both a liquid and a dry measure, that its capacity is unknown, and that the term is an adaptation of the Roman *amphora*, which was equivalent to 6 gallons (191).

25 This is most likely referring to the southern part of Norway, which has the eastern-most extent of cultivated land. Bately notes the “Norse practice of describing a traveller going to the south coast of Norway . . . as travelling east” (191). Also Somerville, 3.

26 Bately notes that “mile” is not normally used as a measure of distance in ON and that its “rare occurrences” are “mainly in texts where foreign influence is strong.”

Donne is toemnes þæm lande suðewardum, on oðre healfe þæs mores, Sweoland, oþ þæt land norðward; 7 toemnes þæm land norðewardum Cwena land. Þa Cwenas hergiað hwilum on ða Norðmen ofer ðone more, hwilum þa Norðmen on hy, 7 þær sint swiðe micle meras fersce geond þa moras, 7 berað þa Cwenas hyra scyfu ofer land on ða meras 7 þanon hergiað on ða Norðmen; hy habbað swyðe lytle scyfa 7 swyðe leohte.

Ohthere sæde þæt sio scir hatte Halgoland þe he on bude. He cwæð þæt nan man ne bude be norðan him. Þonne is an port on suðewardum þæm lande þone man hæf Sciringsheal. Þyder he cwæð þæt man ne mihte geseglian on anum monðe, gyf man on niht wicode 7 ælce dæge hæfde ambyrne wind; 7 ealle ða hwile he sceal seglian be lande; 7 on þæt steorbord him bið ærest Iraland, 7 þonne ða igland þe synd betux Iralande 7 þissum lande; þonne is þis land oð he cymð to Sciringsheale, 7 ealne weg on þæt bæcbord Norðweg. Wið suðan þone Sciringsheal fylð swyðe mycle sæ up in on ðæt land, seo is bradre þonne ænig man ofer seon mæge, 7 is Gotland on oðre healfe ongean 7 siðða[n] Sillende. Seo sæ lið mænig hund mila up in on þæt land. 7 of Sciringsheale he cwæð þæt he seglode on fif dagan to þæm porte þe mon hæf æt Hæpum, se stent betuh Windeum 7 Seaxum 7 Angle 7 hydrð in

travel over in six days. Then in the south, on the other side of the mountains, Sweden²⁷ runs alongside the land²⁸, up to the northern part of the land²⁹; and adjacent to the northern part³⁰ is land of the *Cwenas*. Sometimes, the *Cwenas*³¹ harry the Northmen across the mountainous wastes, and at other times the Northmen raid them. There are huge freshwater lakes throughout the wastelands, and the *Cwenas* carry their boats over land to the lakes and from there raid the Northmen. They³² have very small, very light boats.

Ohthere said that the district is called Hålogaland, which he lived in. He said that no one lived to the north of him. In the south of that land is a port called *Skiringssal*³³. He said that a man could not sail there in one month if he camped at night and had a favorable wind every day;³⁴ and all the while, he must sail along the land, and to his starboard, first there will be Ireland and then the islands³⁵ between Ireland and this land³⁶; then is this land [on the starboard side] until he comes to *Skiringssal*, and all the way on port is Norway. South of *Skiringssal*, a very large sea penetrates into the land; it is broader than anyone can see across, and Jutland is opposite on the other side and then *Sillende*.³⁷ The sea flows many hundreds of miles into the land. And from *Skiringssal*, he said that he sailed for five days to the port called *Hedeby*³⁸ which stands between the Wends, the Saxons, and *Angol*³⁹ and belongs to the Danes.

27 The OE word *Sweoland* means “land of the Svear”; the Svear were one of the Germanic tribes in what is now modern Sweden.

28 Norway

29 Norway

30 Of Norway

31 ON *Kvenir*, another Sami group (Bately, 192).

32 The *Cwenas*

33 ON *Skiringssalr*. This is identified as Kaupang in Vestfold, Norway, which was one of the main trading towns in the Viking Age.

34 Bately notes that Adam of Bremen uses similar negative language to describe the minimum traveling time: Norway “can hardly” be crossed in a month, and Sweden is “not easily” crossed in two.

35 Bately notes that the “basic problem – that even in the most northerly part of a voyage such as that described by Ohthere Ireland would not be the land on the seafarer’s starboard, since Britain would intervene – is most neatly and easily resolved if we adopt W.C. Stokoe’s convincing argument . . . that Ohthere is thinking in terms of sea-routes” (194). The islands referred to are probably the Orkneys and Hebrides, and are “between” Ireland and Britain in terms of the sea-route, according to Stokoe. See Bately, p. 194.

36 Britain

37 Bately 2007 says *Sillende* refers to “the southern part of Jutland, roughly the former duchy of Schleswig” (p. 56)

38 ON *Hedeby*. Along with Kaupang and Birka, it was one of the main trading towns in the Viking Age.

39 Bately 2007 argues, based on the word form, that “Angle” here is referring to the place Angeln, not the people from it (Angles).

on Dene. Ða he þiderweard seglode fram Sciringesheale, þa wæs him on þæt bæcbord Denamearc 7 on þæt steorbord widsæ þry dagas; 7 þa, twegen dagas ær he to Hæþum come, him wæs on þæt steorbord Gotland 7 Sillende 7 iglanda fela – on þæm landum eardodon Engle, ær hi hider on land coman – 7 hym wæs ða twegen dagas on ðæt bæcbord þa igland þe in Denemearce hyrað.

Old English text from Janet Bately's edition of *The Old English Orosius*, EETS S.S. 6 (London: Oxford University Press, 1980).

When he sailed there from Skiringssal, Denmark⁴⁰ was on his port side and open sea on his starboard for three days; and then for two days before he came to Hedeby,⁴¹ on his starboard were Jutland and Sillende, and many islands – on which lands the English lived before they came here to [this] land⁴² – and for these two days on the port side were the islands that belong to Denmark.

Translation is mine, based on the glossary in Bately's edition and using A. A. Somerville's translation in *The Viking Age* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), R. I. Page's translation in *The Chronicle of the Vikings* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), and Janet Bately's translation in *Ohthere's Voyages* (Roskilde: Viking Ship Museum, 2007) as references.

40 This is most likely referring to the southwestern coastal area of the Swedish peninsula which was part of Denmark in the Viking Age. Bately notes that there are a couple of other instances of the use of the name “Denmark” in Anglo-Saxon documents c. 900 and mentions the instance of the term in Danish on the Jelling 1 runestone (195).

41 ON *Hedeby*. Along with Kaupang and Birka, it was one of the main trading towns in the Viking Age.

42 Both Somerville and Page take “this land” to mean England.