

Ohthere and Wulfstan

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Abstract

Ohthere and Wulfstan is an Old English prose text preserved in the geographical section of the *Old English Orosius*. *Ohthere and Wulfstan* consists of travel narratives recording journeys undertaken in Northern Europe by two seafarers, Ohthere and Wulfstan, as related to Alfred the Great, the Anglo-Saxon King of Wessex. Ohthere gives an account of voyages from his home in Hålogaland in northern Norway to the White Sea, and from Hålogaland to the port of Hedeby in southern Jutland. Wulfstan describes sailing from Hedeby to the Baltic. The accounts record the routes taken and the customs of the peoples encountered.

Main Text

Ohthere and Wulfstan is an Old English prose text describing the voyages of two seafarers in northern Europe, as recounted to King Alfred the Great. The text is a significant example of early Old English narrative prose, as well as an important record of the medieval north and the international interests of Alfredian Wessex. *Ohthere and Wulfstan* is contained within the *Old English Orosius*, a translation of Paulus Orosius's fifth-century Latin work *Historiarum adversum Paganos Libri Septem* (*Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*), produced in the period 870-930 (Godden 2012).

Ohthere and Wulfstan abruptly interrupts the geographical account of the world given in Book 1 Chapter 1 of the *Old English Orosius*; the text begins immediately after the description of Scandinavia. *Ohthere and Wulfstan* differs from the main text of the *Old English Orosius* in language and style, suggesting separate authorship (Bately 1980); it may be a later interpolation (Bately 1988), although the text is partially preserved in the earliest surviving *Old English Orosius* manuscript, London, British Library MS Additional 47967. The date of the voyages and the text recording them is uncertain, but the reference to King Alfred locates Ohthere's visit in the period 871-899, while the early eleventh-century date of British Library MS Additional 47967 provides a *terminus ad quem* for the written text.

The text states that Ohthere gave his account to King Alfred; Wulfstan's account follows immediately after Ohthere's with no introductory context. The two accounts are presented together, but nothing indicates that the two seafarers were present simultaneously, or even that Wulfstan attended the court at all. *Ohthere and Wulfstan* may have begun as independent records made by court scribes during the seafarers' visits to Wessex. The two accounts are stylistically and linguistically distinct, reflecting the differing origins of the two seafarers. Ohthere explains that he comes from Hålogaland in northern Norway, but Wulfstan's background remains obscure; his name is English, but he speaks as if based in the major Viking-age trading port of Hedeby in southern Jutland. Although Ohthere's account was recorded in Old English, he

probably spoke to the court in Norse (Townend 2002): there are a number of anglicised Norse words, and the halting style is indicative of responses to audience questions. In contrast, Wulfstan's account is fluent, with non-West Saxon word forms and the first person plural, suggesting direct copying from native Anglian speech (Cragie 1925; Fell 1984).

Ohthere and Wulfstan commences with Ohthere's account of Hålogaland. Ohthere then recalls an exploratory voyage along the northern Norwegian coast to the White Sea, where walrus are to be found. After making some brief ethnographic and linguistic observations about the peoples of the region, Ohthere describes the characteristics of walrus, and the text notes his gift of walrus ivory to King Alfred. The perspective of the text then changes from Ohthere's reported speech to an explication of his relative affluence. In implicit contrast to the more agricultural economy of Wessex, Ohthere's community reckons wealth in reindeer and animal skin tributes from the Saami. Ohthere then details the geography and peoples of the northern lands. He concludes by explaining the sailing route from Hålogaland to the port of Skiringssalr, and then on to Hedeby, giving estimated sailing times and the lands to port and starboard. Wulfstan's section begins at this point. The text reports a weeklong voyage from Hedeby to a place called Truso on the Baltic coast near the mouth of the Vistula; the lands passed on either side of the ship are listed. The geography of the Vistula river system is described, leading to an ethnographic account of Estland. The text records the political structure and drinking habits of the Ests, before giving a lengthy explication of their funerary customs. The Ests distribute the deceased's wealth through feasting, gambling, and horse racing over a period of six months, while the corpse remains in the house, preserved with ice. Following the description of the funeral in Estland *Ohthere and Wulfstan* breaks off, and the geographical description of the world resumes with Constantinople.

The majority of scholars have viewed the information about Northern Europe given in *Ohthere and Wulfstan* as a reliable and valuable historical resource because of the detailed regional knowledge displayed; however, Hildegard Tristram (1982) has argued that the text is pseudo-geography. The Borg *æstel* discovered in northern Norway has been identified as an Anglo-Saxon manuscript pointer, and is possibly connected to Ohthere (Hinton 2008).

SEE ALSO:

Alfred the Great; Old English Orosius

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