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978-1-108-07144-4 - Northward Ho!: Including a Narrative of Captain Phipps's Expedition

Albert Hastings Markham

Excerpt

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NORTHWARD HO!

CHAPTER I.

EARLY POLAR VOYAGES.—FROM THE SIXTH
CENTURY, TO THE YEAR 1613.

IT is difficult to determine, with accuracy, the exact date of the despatch of the first expedition from England, that had for its object the exploration of those regions situated to the northward of the Arctic circle.

If credence is to be placed in the writings of old historians, transmitted to us by various authorities, we can trace these voyages back to as early as the sixth century, for we are told by one "Galfridus Monumetensis," otherwise known as Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his *Historie of the Kings of England*, that "in the

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[CHAP.

yeere of Christ, 517, King Arthur, in the second yeere of his raigne, having subdued all partes of Ireland, sayled with his fleete into Island,¹ and brought it and the people thereof under his subjection.”

A voyage to Iceland, in those days, may very fairly lay claim to being considered as an Arctic one, although the island itself is not actually inside the Polar zone. But the Iceland here mentioned may not be identical with the island bearing that name at the present time, and as the history connected with our country, during the sixth century, is more or less mythical, we must accept this report concerning the despatch of King Arthur's ships, with due reservation, more especially as Iceland, so far as we know, was uninhabited until peopled by its discoverers, the Norwegians, in the ninth century.

This statement of Geoffrey's, regarding the subjugation of Iceland, is, curiously enough, corroborated by another historian, who not only mentions Iceland, but also Greenland, as being

¹ Iceland.

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1] KING ALFRED'S NAVIGATOR. 3

a dependency of Britain at that time, whereas the discovery of the last mentioned continent did not occur until 500 years subsequently! This writer is a Master Lombard, who tells us that, "Arthur, which was sometimes the most renowned king of the Britains, was a mightie, and valiant man and a famous warrior. This kingdome was too little for him, and his mind was not contented with it. He therefore valiantly subdued all Scantia, which is now called Norway, and all the islands beyond Norway, to wit, Island and Greenland, which are appertaining unto Norway, &c. &c. &c., and many other islands beyond Norway, even under the North Pole!"

Alfred the Great, in the ninth century, also relates the history of an Arctic expedition. He tells us how a wealthy nobleman, who lived at the extremity of the island of Heligoland, and whose name was Othar, having an irresistible desire to travel for the purpose of discovering distant lands, visited his Court.

On being presented to the king, Othar

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stated his wish, requesting that he might be provided with a couple of ships, which he would man with experienced sailors and would provision for twelve months ; assuring Alfred, at the same time, that he would either “die, or discover new realms for him.”

Othar's proposal was gladly listened to by King Alfred, and his offer of service accepted by that monarch.

Two ships, we know nothing regarding their size and capacity, were ordered to be equipped, and under Othar's leadership they sailed to the northward.

We read that, “Othar advanced further to the north than any mortal had done before him. The sea was open and the dangers he had to surmount were only trifles to his courage.”

Further on, we are told that, “he rounded the point of the globe beyond which it again sinks to the south.”

This announcement would lead us to suppose that this daring navigator actually sailed to the

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1.] HIS DISCOVERIES. 5

northern summit of the earth, and that the North Pole which is now, apparently, so inaccessible, was, with comparative ease and safety, reached a thousand years ago!

It is not easy to offer an explanation regarding the meaning of this statement. Had the mariner's compass been in existence in those days, and the variation of the needle understood, we could readily comprehend and account for the apparent error under which Othar was labouring, by supposing that he had reached the latitude, or nearly so, of the magnetic pole; but as he must have been totally ignorant of the laws of terrestrial magnetism, it is difficult to form, or even to hazard, any reasonable conclusion, as to the cause that would induce him to imagine that he had reached that "point of the globe, beyond which it again sinks to the south."

In the region to which he sailed he discovered land, which he describes as a country "covered with rocks and filled in the interior with lofty snow-capped mountains. Never

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did a tree shoot forth, nor did the rocky soil produce a single fruit." This land was inhabited by a people, small in size and of an uncouth shape, who were, nevertheless, well prepared "to bear all the burthens of life, indefatigable in the most difficult tasks."

The description of this country agrees perfectly with that of Greenland, whilst the remarks of Othar, given at some length, regarding the people, their dwellings, manners, and customs, coincide so exactly with the habits of the Eskimos of the present day, that it seems clear he must have had communication with them.

Again, unfurling his sails to the wind, he discovered another country, along the shores of which he coasted, inhabited, as he tells us, by *civilised* men, whom he calls Biarmians.

These shores were in all probability the northern coasts of Norway and Finland.

Thence sailing northward, with a favourable breeze from the south-west, he passed by an island, "far beyond the countries inhabited by

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1.] RESCUE OF SHIPWRECKED MEN. 7

men." If any belief is to be placed in the account of the voyage, this can have been no other than Spitzbergen. Still intent on carrying out king Alfred's wishes, Othar sailed onwards, until he discovered a small island, from which he saw a little cloud of smoke arising. The strangeness of this discovery induced him to land, when he found a party of shipwrecked fishermen (Biarmians), who, having lost their vessel whilst in search of whales, had spent six miserable years of their existence on that wretched and inhospitable island, enduring great hardships and sufferings.

Having rescued these unfortunate men, Othar sailed to the East, but the decline of the long days, and being surrounded by vast floating islands of ice, proved that navigation was no longer safe, so the helm was put up and he sailed to the south. His reasons for arriving at this determination are thus told:—

"The robust Northmen feared not death,

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8 OTHAR'S RECEPTION BY KING ALFRED. [CHAP.

if it encountered them in the shape of a sword or a spear; but they knew that on the frozen northern coast every harbour would be a grave; that no land for an immense distance, produced the necessaries of life; that their vessel could not resist the shock of the floating masses of ice—that it was very uncertain whether any part of the deserted regions were at all inhabited—that a miserable death, hunger, and frost awaited them, and that no courage could resist such evils.”

Having landed the fishermen, whom he had rescued, in their own country, he arrived at Heligoland towards the end of the year, and reached England the following spring.

The account of this voyage is concluded in the following words:—

“Alfred listened with pleasure to the adventures of his navigator, and the narrative of the men abandoned to nature alone. He was too kind to expose his courageous seamen to the certain dangers of destruction, by farther voyages to the extreme north, and

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1.] EARLY WHALE-FISHERY. 9

therefore gave to the intrepid Othar another commission, but one much easier to execute."¹

The capture of whales was undertaken even in those early days, and in much the same manner as it is practised at the present time. For we read that, on Othar being presented to king Alfred, he told him that "the seas nourish monstrous fishes, compared to which the elephant is but a small animal. Nevertheless they serve as booty to man; and one of those fishes is of the value of one hundred pounds of silver. My Northmen know how to conquer these monsters; to them it is mere play to pursue these giants on the seas, with their javelins."

Accepting King Alfred's relation of Othar's expedition as a truthful one, the next really authenticated account of a Polar voyage is related by that grand old divine and author, Richard Hakluyt, in his *Principall Navigations*, published in the year 1589. In it he briefly alludes to the voyage of Nicholas

¹ This commission was a voyage to the Baltic Sea.

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de Lynna, a Franciscan friar, and an “excellent mathematician of Oxford, to all the Regions situate under the North Pole in the yeere 1360, and in the raigne of Edward the Third, King of England.”

The account is derived by Hakluyt, on the authority of Gerard Mercator the famous cartographer.

It is extremely difficult to trace the voyage of this enterprising ecclesiastic, but we are told that he, “came into those islands,¹ who leaving them and passing further by his Magicall Arte, described all those places that he saw, and tooke the height² of them with his Astrolabe, according to the forme that I, Gerard Mercator, have sette downe in my mappe.”

Dr. John Dee, the learned astrologer, confirms the writings of Mercator, in the following words :—“Anno 1360, a frier of Oxford, being

¹ These are, in all probability, the Hebrides, or Western Isles.

² By “taking the height” is meant the zenith distance, by which the latitude was determined.