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”In Intelligence not much different from Apes”

Some comments on Erik Valkendorf’s report from Finnmark 1512

The number of documents and accounts from Northern Norway written in the 15.th. and 16.th. century is limited. The best known source from the 15th century is the Italian merchant, Pietro Querini’s 1432 account from the island of Røst in Lofoten. After a shipwreck which cost fiftyfour sailors their lives, Querini and ten of his men survived when they were saved by the people living on Røst.

Querini was very grateful to the people who had saved him and his men, and he considered Lofoten to be a good place, inhabited by kind and civilized people, who lived a clean, simple and Christian life, so he compared Lofoten to a Paradise. Although not the top level of Paradise, only the second level, *Paradisets andre krets*, to Querini and his sailors Lofoten still seemed a part of Paradise.

The next important account about Northern Norway was written ninety years later, probably in 1520, by the Danish clergyman, Erik Valkendorf, who probably travelled in 1512 to Finnmark. It is his account that will be examined in this essay.

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Erik Valkendorf was born on the island Fyn in Denmark, probably in 1465. His theological education was at the University of Greifswald in Germany, and he worked for a few years in the state administration in Copenhagen before he in 1506 was appointed to be the private secretary of Duke Christian, the Prince of Denmark, who became King Christian the II in 1514.

Already as a Prince Christian had strong political influence. Prince Christian and Valkendorf became close friends, and for many years Valkendorf was Christian's most important advisor. In 1511 Valkendorf was appointed to be Archbishop of Norway, seated in Trondheim.

When he appointed Valkendorf to be Archbishop, Christian expected Valkendorf's loyalty and obedience. But as the head of the Norwegian church, Valkendorf felt compelled to defend the independency of the church, which led to a bitter conflict between him and Christian, who, when he became King in 1514, wanted to confiscate the properties of the church.

Another source of conflict between Valkendorf and king Christian II was the King's use of the Dutch woman Sigbrit as an advisor. Sigbrit is known as "the ugly mother of the beautiful Dyveke", the King's young mistress, who mysteriously died in 1515, shortly after the King had married the fourteen year old Princess Elisabeth from Holland. Dyveke's death was a mystery. Accounts say that she died with a terrible stomach ache. Perhaps she was poisoned, perhaps she had appendicitis, in any case her death is one of the unsolved mysteries in Danish history. What is certain is that the King wanted someone to pay for Dyvekes death, so he executed a man called Torben Oxe, Chief of the Guard at the royal castle in Copenhagen.

Due to this hardening conflict with the King, Valkendorf fled from Norway in 1520. He spent some time in Holland, and then went to Rome to ask the Pope, Leo X, for help, but shortly after his arrival in Rome, he fell ill and died in 1522.

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What kind of man was Erik Valkendorf?

He was a man with an excellent education for his time, and a man with strong political influence. The King trusted in him, the Pope trusted in him, he was well read, he was a well travelled man, he knew Denmark and Sweden, he knew Germany and Holland, he knew Italy, and he had been to Rome. In other words,

a talented and experienced and enlightened man sailed North in the summer of 1512.

What did he observe?

According to his report to the Pope, he saw some kind of frozen fantasyland, a scaring, threatening landscape filled with primitive people and frightening monsters. In Valkendorf's opinion, Finnmark and Northern Norway obviously were not a part of the normal Norway, as he knew it from the South. Northern Norway was something totally different and much more primitive.

The land is dry and barren. There are no forests, and in most places there is no grass. He does not like the mountains. There are just too many of them, and in addition they look strange and have an unusual form - *de har et underligt og usedvanligt udseende*.

Valkendorf's conclusion is that it would be impossible for Christians (that is: normal people) to live in this part of the world - *landet vilde ikke være beboeligt for kristne mennesker* - if it was not for the abundance of fish. The inhabitants produce dried codfish. This fish tastes good, and when it is dry it is possible to store it for at least ten years. Consequently it is exported to almost all Christian countries - *til næsten alle fremmede kristne folk*.

Valkendorf had obviously seen a dried cod, and coming from the South, he was fascinated with this product. Dried fish is a product unique to the North. Anywhere else, a fresh cod hanging outside will soon rot and be covered with worms within two or three weeks. But if you do this during the winter in Northern Norway, the fish does not rot, it will dry.

Consequently, dried codfish has been the main product of Northern Norway for thousand years, and it is a perfect product for export. It does not weigh much, it is easy to transport, it can be stored for many years. It is also packed with proteins and nourishment, and the mild winter climate in Northern Norway, especially Lofoten, with winter temperatures around zero, is perfect for producing it. Dried codfish is easy to eat either by cooking it or by crushing it with an axe and tearing off small pieces and chewing it until it softens up. The taste is wonderful even though dried codfish smells so strongly that some people think it is only suitable as dogfood.

Valkendorf observed the dried codfish, hard as wood, and he concluded that the climate in Finnmark must be very dry. Judging by the dry fish, it rains very rarely, he wrote, maybe two or three times a year. It must have been a nice nice summer in Finnmark in 1512! However, when it rains, he added, the rain is so strong that people had to stay indoors.

The abnormal rain is typical for this land of extremes: The mountains are abnormal, the storms are stronger and they last longer than in other parts of Norway. And the winter darkness and the midnight sun add to the picture of this very abnormal climate and geography.

Valkendorf found the cold summer air in Finnmark unpleasant, but in one way it was an asset to the land, because the cold air was basically healthy, for there were no plagues in Finnmark. That was why people in Finnmark lived to be more than 150 years old.

According to Valkendorf many of them were thought to have second sight, they could look into the future which furthermore emphasized his main point: The people of the North are not normal.

According to Valkendorf, nature in Finnmark was not only abnormal, it was also dangerous: The storms are dangerous, and in the ocean along the coast of Finnmark there are dangerous animals. Among these animals were whales four hundred to six hundred feet long, very thick and of unusual form - *umåtelig tykke og av usedvanlig form*.

The most dreadful whale has a square head covered with sharp horns twenty or twenty-two feet long. It was black and had very large eyes, sixteen or eighteen feet in circumference, and the pupil, which was two feet long, shone flaming red - *pupillen, som er en alen lang, skinner rød og flammende*. Valkendorf admitted that he had not really seen this whale, but the crew on the ship had told him about it. They had also told him about the sea serpent. The smallest kind was ninety feet long and ten feet thick, and the largest was more than three hundred feet long. Their colour was grey.

Serpents or great sea monsters were thought to live in lakes like Mjøsa or Loch Ness, but that is just false rumors. Valkendorf knew, as did most people in the 16th, the 17th, the 18th and the 19th century, that the great monsters of the ocean lived in the North, where there were more fish to eat and deeper oceans to hide in.

In this abnormal land with abnormal climate and abnormal animals and abnormal inhabitants, even the neighbours were abnormal:

In a land called Trenes, to the east of Finnmark, Valkendorf writes, there are people who in their use of intelligence are not much different from apes. And out in the ocean to north-west there is a land inhabited by some kind of Arctic dwarfs, 90 cm long, called *screlingr*. (This term was earlier used by the Vikings who called the people they met in America, probably some Inuit tribe, *screlingr*.)

Unlike Querini, who in 1432 described Lofoten as a northern Paradise had described Lofoten as a northern Paradise. Valkendorf did not at all think of Northern Norway as a Paradise. To the contrary he thought he had come to Hell, or at least to the Purgatory, where the souls are purified from their sins - *hvor sjelene renses for syndenes smuss*. Hell is next station, but it is not far away.

Why did Valkendorf believe that Purgatory lies in Finnmark? One reason was that he was told so by his men, who said that they had heard some terrible voices - *ulykkelige og fryktelige røster* - coming from the mountain caves along the coast.

Another reason might be the old Norse tradition that the road to Hell goes North - *nordr ok nidr* - because the old Norse hell lies in the North where it is cold, wet and gloomy. It seems that Valkendorf imagined that Hell could be something similar to Finnmark.

Valkendorf's letter and his opinions had very little influence. The only one who mentions the letter, is the Swedish minister and historian Olaus Magnus. Olaus Magnus probably met Valkendorf in Trondheim in 1518, and he mentions Valkendorf's letter in his great work, the *History of the Nordic Peoples*, (Book 21, chapter

5.). Olaus Magnus also mentions that Valkendorf, along with the letter that he sent to the Pope in Rome, included the salted head of one of the sea monsters he had seen, which probably was the head of some ugly fish, maybe a catfish.

In his map of Scandinavia, *Charta Marina* from 1539, Olaus Magnus included an island to the North-West of Norway, and the inhabitants there are called screlingr.

Thus except except for being mentioned by Olaus Magnus, the letter from Valkendorf seems to have remained untouched in the Archives in Rome, until it was discovered in the year of 1900 by the Swedish historian Karl Henrik Karlsson and published in Norway in 1901. (Reprinted in *Mørkets og kuldens rike. Tekster i tusen år om Nord-Norge og nordlendingene*, Tromsø 1993)

It is, of course, possible to look at Valkendorf's letter just as a curious incident, with no influence and no historical importance. But if we choose to ask ourselves a few questions about this letter, the first question would be: Why does he write this nonsense?

One answer might be that he was scared to death. He must have heard so many rumors about the perils waiting for him up North that his imagination went wild, he seemed to expect monsters waiting for him behind every mountain. And his anxiety made him exaggerate. During his journey he probably saw many whales. But the whales were not two hundred meters long. In reality these creatures are from five to twenty-five meters, and they have very small eyes.

Another reason for his exaggerations might be that he wants to show the Pope what kind of risks he has taken in order to take care of the lost souls at the end of the world. A great risk deserves a great reward, and when Valkendorf wrote this letter, he really needed a reward from the Pope.

Perhaps the report was interesting to the pope, but in what way is it interesting today?

There are a number of reasons:

First Valkendorf's letter is interesting because it shows what kind of attitudes towards the North even educated men had at this time. Secondly, the letter is interesting because it also clearly demonstrates the change in attitude from previous centuries.

The Middle Ages, from 900 until 1250, was a significant period for Northern Norway, historically. The North possessed military and economic power and it had political influence. Certainly, there was a tendency to associate Finnmark and the Sami with witchcraft and magic, but mainly the North was considered to be fairly normal.

In Valkendorf's letter, written in 1512, all this is gone. A land of economic and military power has become a land of poverty and magic and monsters.

Thirdly, Valkendorf's report seems to have been taken from a horror movie, and typifies many prejudices against the North that were to influence the official Norwegian picture of the North and the Northerners for centuries to come. In Valkendorf's letter we recognize the traditional fear of the Northern climate; we recognize the traditional fear of the winter darkness; we recognize the traditional tendency to demonize the people, making them primitive and abnormal. The people of the North are made into the "other", different from the normal and genuine Norwegians in the Southern part of the country.

This pattern in the attitude towards Northern Norway can be traced through Norwegian literary history, for instance in the writings of minister Erik Colban, who in 1814 argued that the reason people in the North were so different from normal Norwegians was that they had a different type of blood, a thick and slow-flowing kind of blood that made Northerner's move very slowly and think very slowly.

There are many more examples, as recently as 1937, when the Bishop of Northern Norway, Eivind Berggrav, sat in Tromsø, writing his bestselling book about Northern Norway, *Spennings land - The land of Suspense*. In the introduction, he states that one important point that his book emphasized for people in the South was that people in Northern Norway really were normal Norwegians, quite like us: *Nordlendingen er ganske som vi andre*. And, of course, WE live in the South, because it is *normal* to live in the South, and *not* normal to live in the North. The Northerners are *the others*.

Maybe this does not seem to be such an important point for people coming from foreign countries. But for people living in Northern Norway, it is important to note that in this seemingly innocent quotation from bishop Berggrav we can hear an echo from Valkendorfs letter from 1520, that is, we can hear negative prejudices against the North and the Northerner's echoing through four hundred years of Norwegian history.

Valkendorf's account from Finnmark in 1512 is for the most part absurd, although it is now rather entertaining. However his comments typify attitudes about the North, which for a Northerner like myself can be rather depressing and rather provoking.

Literature

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