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MERVI KOSKELA VASARU

# Bjarmaland and Interaction in the North of Europe from the Viking Age until the Early Middle Ages

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**ABSTRACT** The medieval Scandinavian written sources locate Bjarmaland to the White Sea. The words *Terfinna land* connect the location with the Kola Peninsula and the environs of the Varzuga River whereas the name *Gandvik* guides our interest towards the Kantalahti Bay of the White Sea. The name *Vina* can be connected with either the Northern Dvina River or Viena Karelia. The Bjarmians as portrayed in the written sources seem to have been a permanently settled group of Baltic Fennic speaking people that lived in the north of Europe since the Viking Age (first mentioned in writing in the ninth century) until the early Middle Ages (mid-thirteenth century). They seem to have been involved in the international fur trade and had continuous contacts with Norwegians with both looting and trade as integral part of interaction. The Bjarmians cannot be connected ethnically with any existing group of people but must be considered as a group of their own. The origin of the specific ethnical identity most likely lies in economical interaction (trade with furs and possibly other items) with neighbouring areas. Since the twelfth and thirteenth centuries new

settlers moved to the northern areas and many political and economical changes occurred in Northern Fennoscandia and Russia, all of which would have contributed to a change that left the Bjarmians out of written sources.

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KEYWORDS Bjarmaland, Bjarmians, Beormas, Kola peninsula, Finno-ugrian peoples, Baltic Fennic language, fur trade.

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This article intends to look at interaction in the very north of early medieval Europe with Bjarmaland as a starting point. After a short introduction to sources and historiography about Bjarmaland, the main content of the sources will be shortly discussed in order to establish what kind of information the written sources have to offer. Ethnical identification and economy of the Bjarmians will be discussed somewhat more thoroughly, since these aspects are closely related to interaction between Bjarmaland and other northerly areas, offering a perspective into fur trade that involved Scandinavia as well as areas in North-Western Russia. Archaeological material is scanty in the north, but can nevertheless contribute to our knowledge about areas of interaction and the finds that may in some way enlighten possible contacts between the various areas in the north of Europe will be included in the discussion.

The article at hand is based on a dissertation (Koskela Vasaru 2008) that discusses the sources in detail. Within the limits of this article it is impossible to have full discussions about all the aspects and the aim has thus been to include a summary of the main results and widen the discussion a bit on those aspects that enlighten the topics of interaction and contacts, as seen in the light of both the written sources and the archaeological material.

## Sources, Historiography and Historicity

Bjarmaland (alternative spelling in the sources *Biarmaland*, in Latin texts *Biarmia*, *Byarmia*, and within Finnish literature *Bjarmia*) and its inhabitants (*Bjarmar* ON/*Beormas* OE, Latin spelling *Biarmar*) are known to us through c. 30 medieval written sources, most of them written in Norse, a few in Latin and one in Anglo-Saxon. The majority of the texts were written during the thirteenth century, but the stories they relate may nevertheless be of earlier date. The Kings' Sagas in particular often refer to tenth century events. The oldest of the sources is the so-called Ohthere's account, a ninth century Anglo-Saxon text added to the OE *Orosius* translation. The rest of the sources are of Norse-Icelandic origin including a number of *konungasögur* (several sagas in *Heimskringla* [*Haralds saga hárfagra*, *Haralds saga gráfeldar*, *Óláfs saga helga*, *Magnús saga berfætts*], *Nóregs konunga tal* and

*Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, chronicles (*Historia Norvegiae*, *Saxonis Gesta Danorum*) and *Íslendingasögur* (*Kormáks saga*, *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, *Landnámabók* and *Njáls saga Þorgeirssonar*), some texts of geographical nature (*Mappa Mundi*, *Landafræði* and two other geographical accounts, AM 736 I, 4° and AM 764), *Eymundar þáttur Hringssonar* (“*Eymundar saga*”), *Þáttur Hauks hábrokar* and a number of *fornaldarsögur* (*Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, *Órvar-Oddssaga*, *Saga Heiðreks konungs ens vitra*, *Hálfdanar saga Eysteinssonar*, *Áns saga Bogsveigis*, *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*, *Hálfdánar saga Brömufóstra*) as well as six annals (*Flatøbogens Annaler*, *Annales Reseniani*, *Henrik Høyers Annaler*, *Annales Regii*, *Skálholts-Annaler*, *Gottskalks Annaler*). Additionally *Haralds saga gráfeldar* contains a few skaldic verses (Ross 1940: 29–42).

No group of people or area is known as Bjarmians or Bjarmaland today and consequently there are many theories about the location and identity of them. The earliest theories in the sixteenth century placed Bjarmaland on the Kola Peninsula. During the seventeenth century Bjarmaland was often located in Lapland. Association with the Perm area in Russia was introduced in the seventeenth century and this theory has persisted until modern times despite being shown as scientifically untenable. Currently Bjarmaland is regularly connected with the Northern Dvina River. This association was first introduced in 1589 by Richard Hakluyt but became popular only from the eighteenth century onwards. In 1554 (Johannes Magnus, *Gothorum Sveonumque historia*) and 1555 (Olaus Magnus, *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*) the Magnus brothers interpreted the line “in ulteriorem Byarmiam navigant” in *Gesta Danorum* (Orik & Ræder (eds.) 1931: 228) in a misguided manner as a reference to the existence of *Biarmia ulterior* and *Biarmia citerior* (see Magnus [1554] 1617: 10, 91, 192; Magnus [1555] 1972: 9–10), although the text actually only reads “sailed on to the further coast of Biarmaland” (Fisher 1979: 251). Based on this faulty reading of Latin it is still often assumed that Bjarmaland was divided into *Biarmia ulterior* and *Biarmia citerior*. Many of those who rely on this theory place one part of Bjarmaland on the Kola Peninsula whereas the other part is often connected with the Northern Dvina River. Currently many researchers suggest that Ohthere’s destination was on the Kola Peninsula whereas the target of later expeditions was on the Northern Dvina River. Bjarmians have been ethnically identified with many groups of people including the Karelians, Vepsians, Vatyans, Permians and Čud’. Nationalistic Finnish research of the nineteenth century also connected them with the Finns before they moved to the current Finnish area (Koskela Vasaru 2008: 55–58; Koskela Vasaru 2012: 399–400).

We do not know any area as Bjarmaland today and if medieval Scandinavian sources were the only literary proof of Bjarmaland, it might be justi-

fied to question the historical existence of the area, because the sagas are far from historically reliable sources in many ways, although some of them are contemporary and reflect the historical reality at the time of the writing more faithfully than for instance the non-contemporary *fornaldarsögur*. That is why it is significant for the historicity of Bjarmaland that the oldest source about Bjarmaland, a late ninth century Anglo-Saxon text addition to King Alfred's *Orosius* translation that is considered as a contemporary source (Bately 2007a: 18, 27; Storli 2007: 76), mentions the Bjarmians quite independently of the later Scandinavian sources.

A few elements in the medieval Scandinavian sources further give grounds to conclude that despite being unknown today, at one time an area named by the Viking Age and early medieval Scandinavians as *Bjarmaland* really existed and was visited by Norwegians. Bjarmaland appears in saga texts about Eiríkr blóðox (see Aðalbjarnarson (ed.) 1962: 134–135; Einarsson (ed.) 1985: 79) as one of the destinations of so-called “Viking” expeditions together with the British Isles and the wide Baltic area. In these texts that offer a Scandinavian view of “Viking” expeditions Bjarmaland, England and the Baltic area all appear on equal terms. Part of the motivation for writing the Kings’ Sagas was to offer a historical perspective to the lives of the Norwegian kings (Knirk 1993: 362–363) and this kind of historical objective in a way anchors the general setting of the saga into an actual historical environment, albeit reconstructed up to several hundreds of years after the events. In establishing Bjarmaland as an actual historical area it is worth mentioning that it was still part of the Scandinavian scope of the world in the early thirteenth century as testified by the contemporary *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, one of the youngest sources available excepting the less reality oriented *fornaldarsögur*. It is also in principle one of the historically more reliable sagas by the force of having been written only a few decades after the events it describes (Knirk 1993: 365; Schach 1993: 259–260). In other words, the events in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* are effectively placed in the actual historical environment at the time of the writing. In this text Bjarmaland is a part of this current world, not part of some mythical fantasy world as in many of the *fornaldarsögur*. Additionally, *Historia Norvegiae* (late twelfth century, *terminus a quo* in 1211) is thought to be at least partially independent from the Kings’ Sagas in regard to the sources that were used (Santini 1993: 284–285). That Bjarmaland also appears in this text adds certain credibility for Bjarmaland as an actual historical area.

Bjarmaland appears in many *fornaldarsögur* and in a way the fantasy elements of these sagas lessen the image of Bjarmaland as a historical area. However, there are enough more historically oriented, contemporary sources to establish that Bjarmaland at one time existed and was visited by



Norwegians. But what do the sources we have available actually say about Bjarmaland?

## Assorted Information about Bjarmaland

Bjarmaland most often appears in the written sources in connection with the Norwegian kings and their expeditions, or as a part of a general geographical description of northern areas. Consequently what we learn about Bjarmaland is somewhat haphazard and does not offer a complete picture although at times the information can be very detailed.

The information about the location of Bjarmaland is not precise enough to pinpoint Bjarmaland on the map with absolute precision and this has resulted in various theories. Location of Bjarmaland somewhere north and east of Norway is indicated by the place names *Vina*, *Gandvik* and *Terfinna land*. *Gandvik* directs the interest towards the White Sea and *Terfinna land* connects the location of Bjarmaland with the southern coast of the Kola Peninsula (especially the area around the Varzuga River). Neighbouring areas like Norway, Kvenland, Finnmark and Russia that appear in the texts also give some reference points in regard to the location. In Ohthere's account we can read that the fifteen-day journey from Northern Norway to Bjarmaland followed the coast and this information put together with the proximity of *Terfinna land* locate the *Beormas* on the Kola Peninsula (Ross 1940: 6–7, 24–28, 43, 58; Koskela Vasaru 2008: 89, 92–94, 103–105, 109–114, 255; Koskela Vasaru 2011: 176–177, 180–181). Varzuga is often mentioned in this connection (Johnsen 1923: 9; Ross 1940: 58; Binns 1961: 49; Vilks 1980: 647; Englert 2007: 127–128) and interestingly there are two medieval twelfth–thirteenth century burial sites at Kuzomen' by the Varzuga River (see Ovsyannikov 1984: 98–105; Jasinski & Ovsyannikov 1998: 25, 28, 30, 32, 34) indicating that there existed at least some sort of permanent medieval settlement in the area.

Many researchers today connect *Vina* of the sagas with the Northern Dvina River in Russia, but this association is in practice only based on the likeness of the names *Dvina*, *Viena* and *Vina*, since there really is no further substantial support for this assumption in either the written sources or the archaeological material. Thus it is advisable to consider if there are other names in the area that resemble *Vina*. There are no other *Dvina* names in the White Sea area nor is any name spelled *Vina*, but three toponyms in the White Sea area contain the Finnish name *Viena*. Besides the previously mentioned Northern (Severnaya) Dvina River that is called *Vienajoki* (i.e. the River Viena) in Finnish, the White Sea itself is called *Vienanmeri* (the Sea of Viena) and the northernmost part of Karelia (south of the Kantalahti

Bay) is called *Vienan Karjala* or just *Viena* (i.e. Viena Karelia). *Gandvik* in the Scandinavian sources is generally connected with the White Sea and it is interesting that one of the large bays of the sea is called *Kantalahti* Bay since this name resembles the name *Gandvik* (Finnish *lahti* means the same as Norse *vik*, i.e. 'bay'; *gand* and *kanta* sound very similar, although they mean different things; see Heide 2006 on *gand* and Itkonen (ed.) 1992: 300, 302; and Toivonen (ed.) 1955: 157 on *kanta*). It is worth considering that the existence of the name *Gandvik* hints at Scandinavian contacts with the Kantalahti Bay area. As long as the likeness of names is the only concrete evidence that connects Northern Dvina with the medieval Scandinavian *Vina*, one cannot in my opinion discard entirely the possibility that Viena Karelia south of the Kantalahti Bay of the White Sea could have been the source of *Vina* instead of Northern Dvina (Koskela Vasaru 2011: 177–183).

Bjarmians seem to have spoken a Baltic Fennic language, very much like Finnish or Karelian. This assumption is based on two things, firstly on Ohthere's observation that the languages of the Sami and the *Beormas* sounded alike (Bately (ed.) 2007b: 45), which would mean that the Bjarmian language was Finno-Ugrian and more importantly on the word *Jómali* (*Jómáli/Jómale*) that is mentioned in *Óláfs saga helga* as a name of a statue of a Bjarmian god located next to burial mounds (Aðalbjarnarson (ed.) 1945: 230). The word *Jómali* has been interpreted as the Finnish/Karelian word *jumala* that means 'god' (Ross 1940: 49–50).

One of the geographical accounts lets us know that the Bjarmians paid taxes to Rus' (in this context Novgorod) (*skattgilt undir Garða konúng*, Rafn (ed.) 1852: 404) probably by the end of the twelfth century. The words *Bjarmskar kindir* (i.e. 'Bjarmian peoples' or even 'peoples of Bjarmaland') in the verses of *Haralds saga gráfeldar* (Aðalbjarnarson (ed.) 1962: 217) uses a form that may indicate that the Bjarmians could have consisted of more than one group of people, although the wording may simply rise out of the verse form. However, additional confirmation for this assumption is found in *Historia Norvegiae*, which refers to two kinds of Bjarmians (*utrique Biarmones*, Rafn (ed.) 1852: 116). However, these meagre references do not give enough information for us to deduce the nature of the division, but it appears probable that it was either ethnical or geographical. *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* mentions the king of Bjarmaland (*Bjarma-konung*, Vigfusson (ed.) 1964: 87) indicating a hierarchic society (albeit not necessarily a society with actual kings).

## About the Ethnicity of the Bjarmians

Ethnicity (derived from Greek *ethnos*) and ethnical group are concepts much used in sociology and anthropology as well as archaeology. The concept of

ethnicity includes the idea of contacts with other groups and can be approached from both the in-group and out-group point of view, the in-group having to do with a person's own identification with a certain group and the out-group identification making a difference between "us" and "them." By and large, ethnicity and group identity are created by communication with other groups (Hansen 1996: 32–40; Emberling 1997: 295–296, 301–302; Aalto 2010: 15, 17–18).

In regard to Bjarmaland we only have the out-group point of view, that is to say "Bjarmian," as an ethnonym in the medieval written sources refers to a group of people that are seen through medieval Norwegian eyes. Comparing the current ideas of ethnicity to those of medieval times is problematic (see Hansen 1996: 39). For instance, ethnic groups may cease to exist, new ones may appear, or the content of an ethnonym may change. There are countless attempts in the literature at ethnical identification of the Bjarmians. The following discussion is intended as a commentary on those suggestions.

Differences in almost any cultural feature can distinguish one ethnic group from others. Language is one of these features, but language (just like any other feature, for instance religion, economy or common geographical area) alone is not sufficient (Barth 1969: 10–11, 14; Emberling 1997: 303, 310). The sources provide us with only fragmentary pieces of information about Bjarmaland. By deduction it has been assumed that the Bjarmians spoke a Baltic Fennic language and this is perhaps the most important pointer regarding the ethnical identification of the Bjarmians. Geographically the location of Bjarmaland is bound with the (coastal zone of the) White Sea area. Although our knowledge of the ethnic situation in medieval North-Western Russia is far from complete, it is clear that we do not know enough to determine the ethnicity of a group based on location of the group only. For this the situation was too complex with several groups living alongside one another. However, putting together the information about both the language and the location it is possible to draw some conclusions and at least exclude certain suggestions.

As for the ethnical identification, the sources give indications that the Bjarmians were a group of people by the White Sea area speaking a Baltic Fennic language. The Bjarmians cannot be identified directly with any existing group of people simply because no group of people is currently or in the recent past known with this ethnonym. Over the years researchers have suggested many ethnical identifications for the Bjarmians, but closer scrutiny shows that none of the identifications are without problems. The most common suggestions include Karelians, Vepsians, Vatyans, Permians, Čud' and Finnish.

Karelians are mentioned in the written sources from the twelfth century onwards (Uino 1997: 192) and since Karelian is a Baltic Fennic language the Karelians are potentially interesting. However, the Bjarmians appear as a group already in the late ninth century and researchers today agree that clear Karelian ethnicity did not exist this early. In addition the Karelian settlement in Viena Karelia and the rest of the White Sea area is of a considerably later date than the late ninth century (Uino 1997: 101, 111–120, 128, 130, 166, 198, 203–204; Saksa 1998: 15, 157, 197–198, 202–206; Koskela Vasaru 2008: 403–404).

The Vepsian language is not that remote from Karelian or Finnish and the Vepsian variant of the word for 'god' is not very different from that in the two other languages, although the Finnish and Karelian word *jumala* is even closer to Scandinavian *Jómali* than the Vepsian variants *juma*, *jumal* and *gumal* (Haavio 1965: 198–199). However, to our knowledge the Vepsians lived in the south-eastern Lake Ladoga region and did not move so far to the north as the coast of the White Sea (Saksa 1998: 196), which is indicated in the written sources as the location where the Bjarmians lived. Since Bjarmians of the written sources are clearly coast bound, it appears that we cannot connect the Bjarmians with the Vepsians. On the other hand, the medieval archaeological finds from the Varzuga River region show that many of the finds have counterparts exactly in the Vepsian south-eastern Lake Ladoga region (Gurina 1984: 16; Koskela Vasaru 2008: 133–138) and thus the inhabitants in the Varzuga area seem to have had some sort of connection with the Vepsian area.

As for the Vatyans, this is a rare suggestion (Jaakkola 1956) that has very little support save for the Finno-Ugrian/Baltic Fennic language of both the Vatyans and the Bjarmians. The Vatyans have traditionally lived in Ingria (Vuorela 1960: 7, 113–114) and there are no records of any kind (Ross 1940: 55) to connect them with the White Sea area that is inexorably bound with the location of Bjarmaland. The archaeological material does not reveal anything that would connect the Bjarmians with the Vatyans, either.

Permians (also known as Zyrians or Komi) of the Perm area in Russia (an area stretching from the White Sea to the Ural Mountains) have been etymologically connected with Bjarmaland due to similar sounding ethnonyms. However, modern etymological research rejects a connection between the two (Itkonen & Joki (eds.) 1962: 524–525). Permians speak a Finno-Ugrian language, but their language is Permian, not Baltic Fennic (Vuorela 1960: 7–9) like the language of the Bjarmians was according to the written sources. Also, the Permian area is far too easterly to fit into the descriptions of Bjarmaland that are found in the written sources. It has been suggested that the Permians came in contact with the Karelians in the

Northern Dvina River area, but the evidence for this is somewhat uncertain (Ross 1940: 53–55; Vuorela 1960: 245–247). There are no archaeological finds that would connect the inhabitants of the Perm with the White Sea area including both the Kola Peninsula and the Northern Dvina River as well as Viena Karelia (Koskela Vasaru 2008: 152). It is also worth noticing that references to Zyrians as Permians are late (Vasmer 1955: 343), which makes it unlikely that there would be any connection between the late pre-historical ethnonym *Bjarmian* and the later use of the ethnonym *Permian*.

The ethnonym *Čud'* (at times *Zavoločskaja Čud'*) appears in medieval Russian sources (Ovsyannikov 1984: 98; Hansen 1996: 83; Koskela Vasaru 2008: 402). It is assumed that it refers to Finno-Ugrian peoples in the northern areas of Russia. Some instances seem to refer to Estonians in particular but most often it appears to have been used as a general denomination of Finno-Ugrian groups of people. Some researchers have expressed the opinion that the ethnonym *Čud'* in medieval Russian written documents corresponds to the ethnonym *Bjarmians* of Scandinavian sources (see e.g. Storm 1894; Aspelin 1910; Brøgger 1928; Jansson 1936; Stang 1977; Häme 1987), but in my opinion *Čud'* is used of groups of people in a far too large geographical area to be connected with the Bjarmians in particular, although as a Finno-Ugrian people in Northern Russia the Bjarmians could be called *Čud'* if we follow the logic that it could refer to all Finno-Ugrian groups.

The nationalistically oriented Finnish research of the nineteenth century often suggested that the Bjarmians were Finnish. At that time it was maintained that the Finnish moved to their current area during the Iron Age, but this view has been discarded and there are no reasons to believe that Finland was devoid of the ancestors of the current Finno-Ugrian population during the early Iron Age (Koivunen 1992: 149–150; Koskela Vasaru 2008: 32, 36–39, 55; Koskela Vasaru 2012: 397, 399–400). The word *Jómali* corresponds closely to Finnish *jumala* and regarding the language only it appears reasonable to say that the language spoken in Bjarmaland was not very different from Finnish. However, archaeological material does not offer any indications at all that there might have been connections between the White Sea area and the current area of Finland. The content of two of the Northern Russian hoards that have artefacts similar to the Northern Finnish finds offer the only remarkable similarities (Koskela Vasaru 2008: 140–141, 145–146). However, the Northern Norwegian hoards contain artefacts similar to hoards in Northern Finland and Northern Russia (Spangen 2005: 77–78) and this indicates some sort of cultural affinity in the large northern area in general rather than a specific connection between the Bjarmians and people in Northern Finland. All in all, there is no evidence to connect Bjarmians with the Baltic Fennic inhabitants in Finland.

But if the Bjarmians cannot be identified with any of the ethnic groups that have been suggested over the years, who were they? It should be remembered that there existed many small Finno-Ugrian groups in Northern Russia that are not present today and that were never recorded in the medieval Russian written sources (Glazyrina 2000: 517–518, 521; Saarikivi 2009: 109, 113–114, 117–118). Since the Bjarmians cannot be connected with any known group of people it is reasonable to consider that they were one of the anonymous Finno-Ugrian groups of people in Russia that do not exist today.

It is also worth noting that late pre-historical/medieval populations were not in general very large (Jutikkala 1984: 366) and consequently the Bjarmians in all likelihood were a relatively small group of people. This notion may have a certain bearing as to why the Bjarmians disappear from the written sources after the mid-thirteenth century. That is to say, as a small group it is not unthinkable that they might have assimilated with another group of people.

The Bjarmians first appear in written sources in the late ninth century and are regularly (if not that often) mentioned during the following around 400 years. Soon after the middle of the thirteenth century this ethnonym is no longer present in the Scandinavian written sources save for a number of late texts and *fornaldarsögur* which are novel-like in their content and cannot be regarded as a historical source in their own right (Mitchell 1993: 206–208). The more historically oriented Kings' Sagas were not produced after the thirteenth century (Knirk 1993: 365) and partially the disappearance of Bjarmians from the written sources is connected with this change in the nature of the source material. Additionally the changing geopolitical conditions during the same period seem to have contributed to a process that made the ethnonym Bjarmian disappear. It is noteworthy that the written sources (including the Scandinavian ones) dated from the thirteenth century onwards consistently mention the Karelians in the area that had been previously connected with Bjarmaland (Hansen 1996: 56, 61; Hansen 2003: 14; Hansen & Olsen 2004: 160–161).

Medieval Novgorod was an important centre for fur trade and was expanding towards the northern areas of Russia with increasing intensity. One of the main reasons for this expansion was an interest in furs (Urbańczyk 1992: 232; Uino 1997: 192; Hansen & Olsen 2004: 138). The Karelians were under the rule of Novgorod and involved in the international fur trade. The Karelian settlement was expanding towards the north and in time reached the White Sea (Saksa 1998: 180–181; Hansen 2003: 12–14) and those areas that are in the written sources connected with the settlement area of the Bjarmians. Written sources (AM 736 I, 4<sup>o</sup>) let us know that by the dawn of the thirteenth century Bjarmaland was under Russian/Novgorodian rule (Rafn (ed.) 1852: 404).

Karelians and Bjarmians share a number of circumstances including allegiance to Novgorod, involvement in fur trade and closely related languages. These factors should perhaps be seen as the main reasons for explaining why the Bjarmians seemingly disappear from the written sources as an ethnic group. It is conceivable that the Bjarmians assimilated with the Karelians who in increasing numbers were settling in the White Sea area (Hansen 1996: 55–56; Koskela Vasaru 2008: 403–408).

This development becomes perhaps even more understandable and likely if we consider that the general geopolitical circumstances in Northern Europe were under change from the twelfth to the thirteenth century. These changes were of both economic and political character and included more organised states with control over the economy, new direction of trade, new trade articles (esp. dried fish) and Mongol invasion of Russia. In addition to all these factors the expansion of Novgorod that brought with it increased hostility with Norway in the northern areas (Johnsen 1923: 16; Urbańczyk 1992: 55, 231; Schach 1993: 259–260; Saksa 1998: 204–205; Hansen 2003: 9; Hansen & Olsen 2004: 61, 138–139, 152–154, 165–166, 219) may have contributed to why the Norwegians seemingly ceased to travel to Bjarmaland by the mid-thirteenth century. Although it does not necessarily have any direct bearing on Bjarmaland, it adds to the image of a changing political environment to keep in mind that Swedish expansion to Finland took place between the end of the twelfth century and the early fourteenth century (Törnblom 1993: 297–298, 310, 314). Also, Novgorod was in conflict not only with Sweden but the rest of its neighbours and this had a decisive impact on the geopolitical situation in the eastern part of the Baltic Sea and around the Lake Ladoga area. As a result of the war with the Mongols and the accompanying killing and looting, large areas in Russia became deserted. This escalated the settlement activity in the northern wilderness of Novgorod (Halperin 1987: 75–76, 79–80).

It appears that the Bjarmians are not the only Finno-Ugrian group of people who are not mentioned in the written sources after the thirteenth century. The Icelandic Annals mention the Kvens for the last time in 1271; after this only the Karelians or the Russians alone are mentioned (Carpelan 1993b: 223). As referred to earlier in connection with the Bjarmians dropping out of the written sources, this may have something to do with the change in nature of the written material that was produced, but it is not inconceivable that the circumstance may be partially due to the changing geopolitical conditions that affected people in the north and perhaps rearranged their way of life.



## Observations Regarding the Economy of the Bjarmians

Our knowledge about the economy in Bjarmaland mainly relies on two separate pieces of information. There is the late ninth century observation that the Bjarmians cultivated land as opposed to the neighbouring Sami that had an itinerant lifestyle. In addition some of the Kings' Sagas (as well as *Orvar-Oddssaga* and *Pátrr Hauks hábrokar*) refer to fur trade between the Bjarmians and the Norwegians.

To look at the cultivation first, according to Ohthere “*Pa Beormas hæfdon swiþe wel gebud hira land*” which translates ‘The *Beormas* had settled their land very well’ (Bately (ed.) 2007b: 45). This bit about settling the land well has been regularly interpreted as having “very greatly cultivated their land” (Crossley-Holland 1984: 64), although cultivation is not directly mentioned in the original Anglo-Saxon text. Yet researchers have found that this is the implicit meaning of the text (Ross 1940: 44–45; Binns 1961: 49; Odner 1983: 23, 81). This assumption finds support in the manner in which Ohthere makes a clear distinction between the “well settled” land of the *Beormas* and the “waste” land of the itinerant *Finnas* and “Terfinnas:”

*He sæde þeah þæt [þæt] land sie swiþe lang norþ þonan; ac hit is eal weste, buton on feawum stowum styccemælum wiciað Finnas, on huntode on wintra 7 on sumera on fiscaþe be þære sæ*

[‘He said however that the land extends a very long way north from there, but it is all waste, except that in a few places here and there Finnas camp, engaged in hunting in winter and in summer in fishing by the sea’];

*Ne mette he ær nan gebun land siþþan 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*

[‘He had not previously encountered any settled land since he travelled from his own home, but there was waste land all the way on his starboard side, except for fishermen and [wild]fowlers and hunters, and they were all Finnas, and open sea was always on his port side’];

*ac þara Terfinna land wæs eal weste, buton ðær huntan gewicodon, oþþe fisceras, oþþe fugeleras.*

[‘But the land of the Terfinnas was all waste, except where hunters camped, or fishermen, or fowlers.’] (Bately (ed.) 2007b: 44–45)



The clear dichotomy between the well-settled land of the *Beormas* and wasteland of the *Finneas* indicates that the livelihood of the *Beormas* must have included other things than just hunting, fishing and fowling and thus cultivation of land appears as a likely solution.

It is worth noting that Ohthere considered himself as an agriculturalist although he cultivated only small portions of land in addition to keeping cows, sheep, pigs and reindeer, all of which was on a modest scale compared to for instance contemporary Englishmen (Bately 2007c: 55). We can only guess at the type of agriculture among the *Beormas* and both pastoral and arable variants are conceivable, as well as a combination of the two. If the cultivation was arable, rye is the most probable crop, but barley is also conceivable. Nowadays the cultivation of rye, the ripening of fodder-grass and hay-making are possible on the south coast of the Kola Peninsula under natural conditions and it is known from historical times that Karelians by the White Sea cultivated land and had domesticated animals (Storm 1894: 96; Ross 1940: 45; Urbańczyk 1992: 174–175).

Growing of crops cannot have had a very prominent role as was the case in northerly regions in general, including Northern Norway (Storli 2007: 88). Mixed livelihood (in Finnish called *erä*) with a certain amount of agriculture and animal husbandry that was supplemented by hunting, fishing and other related activities like collecting down was still practised in the northern parts of Fennoscandia during the Middle Ages, although people were considered as permanently settled (Luukko 1981: 40–43, 45; Myrdal 1993: 3).

In addition to Ohthere's rather explicit references there are a number of more circumstantial pointers that corroborate the notion that the Bjarmians did not lead an itinerant life. Stressing this has some importance since a number of twentieth century researchers have suggested that the Bjarmians were ambulant traders who gathered at seasonal trading places (Vilkuna 1980: 647–651; Carpelan 1993a: 231–233; Hansen 1996: 45–46, 51–52). Looking at the written sources as a whole this kind of idea has to be rejected.

Reference to dwellings in the verses of *Haralds saga gráfeldar* and existence of burial mounds give indications of permanent settlement. *Haralds saga gráfeldar* mentions burning dwellings in connection with a battle in Bjarmaland (Aðalbjarnarson (ed.) 1962: 217). This seems to be a clear reference to houses, a clear sign of permanent settlement rather than a seasonal trading place. The account in *Óláfs saga helga* (Aðalbjarnarson (ed.) 1945: 227–232) implies that the burial/religious site that the Norwegians looted was not very far from the river. It is very common that the burial sites were placed close to where people lived (see e.g. Koivunen 1985: 56). We can only assume that this applies to the Bjarmians as well. Accordingly, it would seem

that if the burial site was located close to the market place by the river, then the Bjarmians could not have lived very far from these two sites. All this would seem to indicate a regular pattern of settlement with men, women and children living together in a permanent type of settlement.

The conclusion based on these texts is that the Bjarmians lived and traded at the same location. Actually none of the texts give rise to the idea that the Bjarmians would have needed to travel to meet the Norwegians. It was the Norwegians who travelled to meet the Bjarmians in the location where they lived on a regular basis. Of course, the references are very scanty and one may discuss their accuracy. However, we can perhaps read between the lines that part of the image of Bjarmaland was that the authors had regarded the Bjarmians as a permanently settled group of people, since this is the implicit image that the texts reflect (and Ohthere's account also refers to this explicitly).

It appears reasonably clear that the Bjarmians were permanently settled agriculturalists, but the written sources offer one more piece of information that probably had a central role for the economy in Bjarmaland. It is mentioned in *Óláfs saga helga* that the Norwegians made a truce during which they traded with the Bjarmians. According to this text the Norwegians bought furs of squirrel, sable and beaver from the Bjarmians (*Tóksk þar kaupstefna. Fengu þeir menn allir fullræði fjár, er fé hófðu til at verja. Þórir fekk óf grávoru ok bjór ok safala. Karli hafði ok allmikit fé, þat er hann keypti skinnavoru marga*, Aðalbjarnarson (ed.) 1945: 229). Also *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* refers first to a trading expedition to Bjarmaland and later on to looting furs among other valuables (Vigfusson (ed.) 1964: 70–71). The importance of furs for the economy in all of Northern Fennoscandia, Karelia and Northern Russia (esp. Novgorod) is constantly stressed (Kivikoski 1964: 290; Martin 1986: 19, 41, 51, 53, 151–152, 166–169; Urbańczyk 1992: 231; Uino 1997: 166; Hansen 2003: 12, 14; Hansen & Olsen 2004: 138) and based on this it can be suggested that trade with furs was a key element in Bjarmian economy.

If we assume that fur trade played a major role in the economy of the Bjarmians, it appears likely that at least to some extent they hunted the animals themselves in the areas surrounding their home district and perhaps also in areas further away. Furs from the northernmost areas are considered to have the highest quality (Martin 1986: 1) and these were sought after in Europe. Since the Bjarmian area was located in the very north, the furs hunted in the area would have held high quality and this assumed high quality may have been one of the reasons why the Norwegians would have wanted to trade particularly with the Bjarmians.

It might have been profitable to partially replace long hunting expeditions and instead trade furs from people who lived in more easterly areas. In

this manner the Bjarmians would also have been able to secure access to furs of animals that lived only in the more easterly areas. For example, sable that is mentioned in connection with Bjarmaland in the medieval Scandinavian sources has an easterly distribution (Wallerström 1995: 226).

A little piece of information in *Óláfs saga helga* lets us know that the furs the Norwegians had bought in Bjarmaland ended up in England (Aðalbjarnarson (ed.) 1945: 253) and this tells us that there existed a further market for the furs. An episode in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* (Vigfusson 1964: 70–71) gives rise to the idea that also Suzdal may have been a market for Bjarmian furs, either through direct trade between the Bjarmians and the Suzdalians or through intermediaries like the Norwegians that are mentioned in the saga.

Neighbouring areas including Novgorod, Norway and also Finland (people from southern Finland and/or the Kvens) would have been the most likely market for furs from Bjarmaland. However, we have explicit (written) sources only about trade between the Bjarmians and the Norwegians, the others remain as suggestions only.

Despite many possible supplementary ways of livelihood, fur trade seems to have had an undeniable role in the Bjarmian economy. It is considered that Finno-Ugrian peoples in Russia had a complex economy at the end of the first millennium AD with a combination of hunting, fishing and simple (slash-and-burn) agriculture as the basis, supplied by other means of livelihood including various crafts. Each group practised their own, specific combination of economic activities (Glazyrina 2000: 518–519). This kind of model seems to fit to the Bjarmians as well, with pastoral and/or arable agriculture (perhaps fishing and fowling too) as the basis supplemented by hunting and trade with furs.

We know that fur trade was gaining importance during the Viking Age. There were good hunting grounds in the north and this could have made it tempting to settle in the very north when fur trade was expanding. For somebody living by the White Sea there would also have been trading partners in nearly all directions including (Northern) Norway, Karelia, Novgorod and the Vepsian area in the south-eastern Lake Ladoga region (Saksa 1998: 201). Based on accessibility to furs and the market for them it is quite feasible that there would have been reasonably good conditions for people to settle in the White Sea area and make a decent living.

A thought to consider is that perhaps the Bjarmian ethnical identity in fact was born when fur trade provided a sufficient incentive for the Bjarmians to settle permanently in a specific location on the White Sea. It is worth noting that the archaeological material on the Kola Peninsula shows close contacts with the (probably Vepsian) south-eastern Lake Ladoga area (Gurina 1984: 16; Jasinski & Ovsyannikov 1998: 25, 28, 30, 32, 34, 62). One possi-

bility to consider is that people from the south-eastern Lake Ladoga region could have migrated to the Kola Peninsula in the late Merovingian Period or early Viking Age and became known as the Bjarmians by the Norwegians when they started to trade together.

## Further Observations Regarding Contacts

The sources we have available were written from the Norwegian point of view (i.e. persons that appear in the accounts are from Norway with the exception of a few characters in some *fornaldarsögur*), and they only refer directly to contacts between the Bjarmians and the Norwegians (disregarding the few fictive references to Swedish in *Gesta Danorum*, *Pátttr Hauks hábrokar*, *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, *Hálfdanar saga Eysteinnssonar* and *Sturlaugs saga starfsama*; see Koskela Vasaru 2008: 419). These contacts had an economic incentive, had both a peaceful and a belligerent aspect, and continued for nearly 400 years from the late ninth century until the middle of the thirteenth century (Koskela Vasaru 2008: 366–368, 370).

In the written sources the kings of Norway are closely (although not exclusively) connected with Bjarmaland expeditions. Either the king himself travelled to Bjarmaland, or sent his representative. The sources most often mention Viking Age expeditions of the kings. A number of the Kings' Sagas (*Nóregs konunga tal*, *Haralds saga hárfagra*, *Haralds saga gráfeldar*, *Magnús saga berfætts*, *Óláfs saga helga*, *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* as well as *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*) mention battles and looting indicating contacts of a less peaceful nature, but trade is mentioned as well (*Óláfs saga helga*, *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*), although less often and in both cases as an addition to looting. In fact many of the Norwegian Bjarmaland expeditions are described in the sources in the same manner as other so-called “Viking” expeditions that were carried on in both western and eastern parts of Europe (esp. the Baltic Sea area and the British Isles) (Koskela Vasaru 2008: 378–379).

An episode in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* (Vigfusson (ed.) 1964: 358) recalls that around the middle of the thirteenth century a group of Bjarmians settled in Malangen in Norway after they had been forced to leave their home. This incident hints that the relations were not necessarily always aggressive and it appears quite possible that partially the aggressive image of the Norwegian–Bjarmian contacts is due to the nature of the sources, that is to say what kinds of things and in what manner it was common to mention them in the sagas. Undoubtedly aggression was a part of the expeditions, but the frequency of it need not have been as high in reality as the frequency of such accounts in the written sources (Koskela Vasaru 2008: 261, 366–368). In any case, trading and looting seem to have gone hand in

hand, as an account about trading turning into looting in *Óláfs saga helga* (Aðalbjarnarson (ed.) 1945: 227–232) would seem to suggest.

If we are to find any further clues about contacts we have to take a look at the archaeological material, which is rather scarce in the Russian north, but nevertheless the only additional means save for pure speculation. Medieval twelfth–thirteenth century burials in Kuzomen' I and II close to the Varzuga River seem to point mostly towards contacts with the (Vepsian) south-eastern Lake Ladoga area. The material also shows some similarities with material from the Vaga and Beloozero areas and it might be justified to say that the finds in Kuzomen' are generally connected with the Finno-Ugrian settlement in Northern Russia (Gurina 1984: 16; Ovsyannikov 1984: 98–105; Jasinski & Ovsyannikov 1998: 25, 28, 30, 32, 34). The southern coast of the Kola Peninsula is linked with the location of Bjarmaland and consequently the archaeological finds give rise to the thought that there were contacts between (the Bjarmian) inhabitants of the Kola Peninsula and the Vepsians of the south-eastern Lake Ladoga region at least around the twelfth–thirteenth centuries.

The few Northern Russian hoards found in Kem, Varzuga and Arkhangelsk area connect the White Sea with the larger Northern Fenno-scandian cultural area. Northern hoards have been connected with border and transition zones where the Sami and other ethnical groups met (Hansen & Olsen 2004: 83–86). In Northern Norway the other ethnical group was the Germanic population but in regard to Northern Finland and the White Sea area we can only speculate who the other group(s) might have been. On the other hand, Russian scholars connect the Northern Russian hoards with trade. The hoards from Varzuga and Kem contain a collection of artefacts similar to the Northern Finnish hoards and a few artefact types that have been found in the White Sea area have counterparts in a couple of the so-called stray finds in Northern Finland (neck rings from Oulujoki Koveronkoski and Vaala) (Jasinski & Ovsyannikov 1998: 62; Koskela Vasaru 2008: 145–152). The similarity would seem to refer to some sort of connections between Northern Finland and the coastal area of the White Sea, but the nature of these connections remains unclear as long as there is no additional source material that could clarify the issue.

We have no direct knowledge of other Bjarmian contacts than those with the Norwegians, but if we consider the neighbouring areas of Bjarmaland and take into account that the Bjarmians were involved in fur trade as stated in the written sources, we can assume that they had some sort of contacts with Novgorod. It appears likely that the Bjarmians would have had contacts with the Karelians as well since they, too, were involved in fur trade and closely associated with Novgorod. Suzdal should be considered as

a possible party in fur trade, as suggested by a reference in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* about trading Norwegians travelling to Suzdal from Bjarmaland (Vigfusson (ed.) 1964: 70–71). It is known that Sami lived on the Kola Peninsula (Vuorela 1960: 23–27) and since Bjarmians are located there as well, it is likely that these two groups had some sort of contacts.

## A Few Summarising Notions

Written sources reveal some details about Bjarmaland. We can pinpoint its approximate location to the White Sea. The Kola Peninsula seems to be firmly connected with Bjarmaland, whereas association with either Viena Karelia or the Northern Dvina River is less firmly indicated in the sources. Bjarmians seem to have been an independent group of people that spoke a Baltic Fennic language. They were permanently settled and engaged in agriculture and fur trade. Written sources indicate that the Bjarmians had come under the political influence of Novgorod just prior to the thirteenth century. After the mid-thirteenth century written sources mention only Karelians in the area that was previously connected with Bjarmaland. Bjarmians may have become assimilated with the Karelians with whom they shared many characteristics including language, involvement in fur trade, association with Novgorod and gradually also area of settlement.

Involvement in fur trade offers a perspective into interaction in the north of Europe. Written sources mention explicitly trade between Bjarmians and Norwegians and hints in a more roundabout way about contacts with Suzdal. Otherwise we can speculate about contacts with neighbouring areas. Novgorod and Karelia are both associated with fur trade and from a geographical point of view it appears likely that Bjarmaland would have had contact with these areas. There is very little to connect Finland with Bjarmaland (similarity of archaeological material between artefacts in hoards and a couple of stray finds) and even less to connect Bjarmaland and Sweden (a few references in fantasy filled sagas), but from a geographical point of view it is entirely possible that people from these areas would have had (fur trade motivated) contacts with the Bjarmians. Additionally archaeological material gives indications that the people living on the Kola Peninsula in the vicinity of the Varzuga River had some sort of connections with the Vepsian south-eastern Lake Ladoga region. It must also be mentioned that there are records of the Sami living on the Kola Peninsula, especially east of the Varzuga River, and the proximity of this area to that of the assumed Bjarmian area would seem to suggest that these two groups must have been having some sort of contacts.



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