

Sample translation from

Katla, the Journey to Dorestad by Luit van der Tuuk

(Amsterdam: Omniboek, 2021)

Translated by Brendan Monaghan

A Travelling Woman in the Early Middle Ages

In the middle of the ninth century a wealthy young woman made the long journey between the Swedish trading centre Birka and Dorestad, the greatest trading port in the Low Countries. In her day, this voyage could only have been made as a passenger on a ship. It was a considerable undertaking, with much hardship and danger.

There were no ships with accommodation in a society where a tiny fraction of the population occasionally travelled. The only option for the few who did travel was accompanying merchants who were prepared to take passengers on their open cargo ships. Apart from merchants and sailors most were pilgrims and missionaries. Occasionally there was also a nobleman on a diplomatic mission. Besides colonists looking for new farmland or the handful of adventurers who had joined violent gangs, ordinary people very seldom went on long journeys. Most did not venture much farther than their local marketplace. As such, Katla, as the Swedish woman was called, was exceptional.

In this book we are going to retrace the voyage Katla made almost twelve centuries ago. To better understand her motives, we are first going to meet the author who described her experiences, the clergyman who knew about her world. Then we will get to Katla herself. Who was she and why did she undertake this journey?

All in all, we know precious little about Katla. But by putting her in the context of her time and linking her to the places she visited and the people she met, we can still get an impression of her. Which is why we will explore what her world was like in the northern region she came from. How did the Normans – as her countrymen and the rest of the population of Scandinavia were called at the time – live? We will focus specifically on Birka, where she lived. What kind of place was it, and in what circumstances did she and her townsfolk live? What was her position and that of women in general in society?

Then we will retrace her journey to the southwest, which will include examining trade and shipping. How was commerce organised, and what were the trade routes and important harbours? How did ships navigate, and what did they look like? And of particular importance to a better understanding of Katla's journey: what were the conditions like on board?

Finally, we will look at Dorestad, Katla's destination, at which point we will also examine the religious motivation of her voyage. What do we know

about this trading settlement? How did Dorestad develop, and what did the settlement look like? What do we know about its powerful ruling lords, its inhabitants, the merchants, the artisans, and especially the Frisians based there at the time?

At the same time as this book was published in Dutch a medieval Scandinavian cargo ship was officially unveiled in Wijk bij Duurstede – which is located where Dorestad used to be. This vessel is of a general model, with which Katla could quite easily have made her journey. A description of this ship and photographs of the reconstruction process are included at the back of the book.

[...]

Katla's World

In Katla's time, some twelve centuries ago, Sweden was divided into various kingdoms. This included Svealand, the realm of the Svear in central Sweden where Katla lived; Götaland of the Geats, sometimes called Goths, to the south-west of Svealand; whilst the southern coasts were in Danish hands. In the middle of the ninth century bellicose king Olaf ruled over the Svear and achieved several military successes in the Baltic region.

Normans and Vikings

In the early ninth century, the Frankish courtier Einhard wrote: 'A certain gulf [the Baltic Sea] with an unknown length and a width of no more than a hundred miles wide and in many places [much] narrower runs from the western ocean [the North Sea] towards the east. Many peoples live around this sea. In fact, the Danes and Swedes, whom we call Northmen, live along the northern shore and on all the islands located there. The Slavs, Estonians, and other peoples live along the southern shore.'¹

In this quotation, Einhard mentions the Northmen, or Normans, in an ethnic sense as inhabitants of the north. Nowadays we call people from this area Scandinavians. Normans are often confused with Vikings, the predominantly Scandinavian raiders whose pillaging menaced the shores of north-western Europe and sometimes beyond. Some of them settled permanently on distant shores, especially in Normandy, the British Isles, or the North Atlantic area, particularly Iceland.

Adam of Bremen ascribed this diaspora, now known as the Viking expansion, to overpopulation. The eldest son inherited the farm, forcing other brothers to look elsewhere for a better life – often meaning a daring life as a pirate. This idea has convinced many historians, even though it is not supported by the slightest evidence. Thirteenth-century Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson offered a more plausible explanation. He concluded from the lore of his countrymen that many fled to escape the aggression of upcoming potentates.

Nonetheless, most Normans seldom or never left their native region. Those who did leave often reached faraway shores. This was mostly for trade. The extension of which was sometimes pillaging, as some of them

¹ Einhard: *The Life of Charlemagne in Charlemagne's Courtier: The Complete Einhard*. Translated and edited by Dutton, Paul Edward. Guelph: Broadview Press, 1998.

were adventurers, ruffians looking for riches and fame. But the vast majority of these seafarers had peaceful intentions.

Like all other European societies in the Early Middle Ages, Norman society was mostly agrarian. Normans were generally free farmers – unlike their colleagues on the European mainland – farming their own land and not that of a landed property owner. The whole family spent much of the year working on the land. After the snows melted in spring, they ploughed the land and sowed grains, such as rye, oats and barley. They grazed cattle and sheep on the grasslands and mowed hay – a sizeable stock had to be collected for the animals to survive the long Scandinavian winter.

The harvest started soon after summer as the crops and hay had to be taken off the land before the onset of winter. Then they slaughtered some of the livestock and salted the meat for winter. Apart from meat, cattle produced dairy products and sheep produced wool. The women combed the wool, spun it onto spindles and wove the dyed or undyed yarns on a simple standing frame loom into cloth.

Their winter diet of grain and salted meat was supplemented with dried cod. Meat and fish were also dried, pickled or smoked for long sea voyages. When there was little to do in summer the men went fishing or hunting, leaving the farm in the women's care. They snared or trapped game or hunted with bow and arrow. Fox, ermine and marten pelts were mainly traded, as were walrus ivory and hides. Strips of walrus hide were braided to make rope for ships.

The men and women on the farms made just about everything they needed, from tools to household utensils, from clothing to carts and sledges. They also built their own houses. Only for specialist work did this rural population rely on others, on artisans such as smiths and beadmakers. They produced goods for local consumption. Sometimes they had a permanent place in a rural community, but more often they travelled round from one settlement to another.

The most distinguished free farmers came to form a ruling class of noblemen, who were elected at local assemblies as leaders. Displaying their wealth gave them prestige and authority. They tried to use gifts to win as many supporters as they could, flaunting their generosity and hospitality at the lavish feasts they regularly organised. Then they feted all their supporters to lengthy drinking bouts and sumptuous banquets at which costly gifts were exchanged. Beer and mead in drinking horns were passed from one person to the next. Their fraternity was sealed in drunkenness.

Whilst they were formally equal to all other free men, a separate class of warlords developed, consisting of noblemen who set themselves apart militarily. From an early age their sons practised sword fighting and throwing spears. They took part in various sports, further distinguishing them from the sons of common men.

These warlords were good commanders. Only with strict organisation and disciplined men could the Norman armies they led operate successfully. Wherever Normans settled abroad they tried to establish a well-functioning organisation. When a commander performed poorly, he was deposed by his supporters and someone else was chosen.

As commanders gave feasts and gifts, noblemen had to be very wealthy. In addition, they had to make a name for themselves on military ventures to maintain their prestige. They constantly looked for loot and fame to keep their position. Chiefs generally protected the free farmers in their area, who in turn had to fight for these noblemen. But there could sometimes be bloody fighting when their interests clashed with those of the local assembly. The proud free farmers also carried weapons.

Between the broad agrarian base and the martial elite was a 'middle class' of wealthy farmers, merchants and artisans. They lacked the power and wealth of the nobility but were well-off. A trading centre like Birka was largely populated by people of this class. This included Katla and her mother Frideburg.