Who was Wulfstan?

by Judith Jesch

Over 20 years ago, Hildegard Tristram wrote a paper arguing that the accounts of Ohthere and Wulfstan were "kein nackter Tatsachenbericht".[1] Though she conceded that they might ultimately have been based on "tatsächliche Seereisen", she preferred to see them as literary accounts which were structured according to certain rhetorical conventions and generic expectations derived from the Latin literature of the time.[2] In this view, one would hardly need to ask the question "Who was Wulfstan?" since one could not assume that he was a real person who had actually made the journey described. However, there is a wealth of other evidence (much of it presented in this volume) showing that such voyages were perfectly possible, even likely. It is reductive to see Wulfstan's report simply as a combination of "Reiseliteratur", "Monstrenliteratur" and "traditionelle Geographie" as Tristram does,[3] when the text could be a valuable source of information about early medieval voyages in the Baltic.

This paper will explore what can be deduced from the text if one assumes that it is indeed a version, probably compressed and at second or third hand, of a report by someone who went to *Estland* sometime in the 9th or early 10th century – though given the loss of material from the Lauderdale manuscript we cannot entirely rule out a voyage as late as the early 11th century.[4] In particular, this paper attempts to establish Wulfstan's nationality and the nature of his experience of travelling in the Baltic regions. With a clearer idea of who Wulfstan could have been, it becomes easier to evaluate his report.

Wulfstan's name and nationality

The implications of Wulfstan's name have been much discussed, and some of the contributions are summarised by Matthew Townend.[5] He concludes that Wulfstan was "an Anglo-Saxon rather than a Scandinavian" because 1) Wulfstan is an extremely common Old English name, and 2) although both elements *ulfr* and *steinn* are regularly used in Old Norse name-giving, the name **Ulfsteinn* is not recorded.

Often cited in this discussion are some forms that hint at a Scandinavian version of this name, such as *Ulstanus*, a priest in 12th-century Lund, and forms like *Wulstain* and *Vltain* in English sources.[6] Despite the apparently Scandinavian forms (*Ulstanus* and *Vltain* showing Old Norse loss of /w/, and *Wulstain* and *Vltain* both with the Old Norse diphthong /ei/ rather than Old English /a/),[7] these forms do not in themselves provide any evidence for an Old Norse name **Ulfsteinn*. The solitary Scandinavian instance is from Lund, a town that had extensive English connections, especially in the Church, and it may well represent an English person. *Ulstanus* is in fact a normal, latinised, post-Conquest form of *Wulfstan*, and there are many examples of *Ulfstan* or *Ulstan* in *Domesday Book*.[8] The other examples from English sources are best explained as Anglo-Scandinavian formations, in which the Anglo-Saxon name is partially adapted to Scandinavian speech patterns in those parts of the country subject to Scandinavian influence, as can be seen from a similar process happening in place-names.[9] This overall picture is further reinforced by the fact that **Ulfsteinn* is

1. Tristram 1982: 168.
2. For the idea of the literariness of Wulfstan's report, see Simek this volume.
3. Tristram 1982: 165-167.
4. Bately this volume: 20.
5. Townend 2002: 93-94; see also Bately 2007: 26-27.
6. Searle 1897: 468, 518-520; Knudsen & Kristensen 1936-1948: 1529; Fellows-Jensen 1968: 327; Munby 1982: 2.10.
7. Townend 2002: 40, 33.
8. Searle 1897: 468, 519.
9. Townend 2002: 62, 82-85.

also absent from more recent studies of Norse names in the early records of England.[10]

The absence of evidence from Scandinavia is even more conclusive. While most commentators on Wulfstan's name use Lind's dictionary of personal names in medieval (often late medieval) Icelandic and Norwegian sources for their Scandinavian evidence,[11] there are now better collections of material for Viking-Age name-giving, in particular, the chronologically closer evidence of runic inscriptions, which preserve large numbers of personal names. Since the recent availability of Lena Peterson's *Nordiskt runnamnslexikon*, we can state with even more confidence than before that the name *Ulfsteinn* simply does not occur in Viking-Age or medieval Scandinavia.[12] The runic evidence also confirms that both elements are indeed extremely common in Scandinavian name-giving, occurring as both first and second elements (and, as first elements, in feminine as well as in masculine names). Thus, Peterson's material includes seven masculine names beginning in *Ulf-* and compounded with other elements, and 24 names that have another first element compounded with *-steinn*. Even the reverse name *Steinulfr* is recorded four times in the runic material, and this name also occurs in England.[13] Clearly, the Scandinavians could have coined the name *Ulfsteinn* if they wished to do so, but they did not.

There is also very little evidence for a name equivalent to Wulfstan on the Continent. Names with a second element deriving from *-stainaz* are in any case not common in Old High German, and there are no examples of an equivalent to Wulfstan in the standard dictionaries of such names.[14] There is, however, one example of an Alemannic *Uolfsten* in the Reichenau confraternity book.[15] Even in England, the name Wulfstan does not appear in the earliest sources, such as Bede, but is an innovation of the Middle Saxon period (after about 750), along with other names ending in *-stan*.[16]

Earlier discussions of Wulfstan's name, especially by those who think he was an Anglo-Saxon, have too readily assumed an easy correlation between the origins of a name and the ethnic identity of a person. Personal names must be used with great care in establishing ethnicity, and it is normally dangerous to base conclusions about an individual on the basis of his or her name, though larger patterns of name-giving may be indicative. However, if we distinguish the name from the individual, it is clear that Wulfstan bore a name that is recorded almost exclusively in Anglo-Saxon England. Whether or not Wulfstan was genetically an Anglo-Saxon (if there is such a thing), his parents certainly named him as if he had been one. Or, if Wulfstan was not the name his parents gave him, but one that he chose for himself, then he chose one that was very typically Anglo-Saxon. A further possibility is that Wulfstan was a name given him by Anglo-Saxons, for instance if they found his real name hard to pronounce, or for ideological reasons. Thus, we could imagine that Wulfstan was a baptismal name given to a Scandinavian who had been christened in England, just as the Danish leader Guthrum was given the name Æthelstan when King Alfred stood godfather to him in 878.[17] But even though we cannot ever know Wulfstan's genetic make-up, his name indicates quite clearly that he lived and operated in an English-speaking environment, and the simplest conclusion therefore is that he was indeed an Anglo-Saxon.

It is, however, an oversimplification to say "[t]he Ohthere section concerns a Scandinavian in England, whereas the Wulfstan section concerns an Englishman in Scandinavia".[18] As already noted, names are not reliable indicators of ethnicity, and Wulfstan, although almost certainly an Anglo-Saxon, equally certainly had Scandinavian contacts (at the very least he passed through Hedeby). Moreover, consideration of further evidence suggests that he was an unusual Anglo-Saxon

10. Insley 1982; Insley 1985; Insley 1994.
11. Lind 1905-1915.
12. Peterson 2007.
13. Peterson 2007: 209, 240-242, 283-284, 291; Fellows-Jensen 1968: 265.
14. Förstemann 1900; Bach 1943.
15. Autentrieth *et al.* 1979: 178.
16. Pers. comm. by John Insley.
17. Bately 1986: 51, 54.
18. Townend 2002: 90.

for his time, as there is little to show that his countrymen reached the shores of the Baltic in any numbers in the 9th, 10th or 11th centuries. Wulfstan's experiences are in fact more easily explained in the context of Scandinavian expeditions in Baltic regions. Even as an Anglo-Saxon, Wulfstan's life experience has a strong Scandinavian flavour to it, as is also indicated by some of the place-names in his account, which show contact with Scandinavian speakers.[19]

Anglo-Saxons and the Baltic

The best evidence for Anglo-Saxon contacts with the areas to the south and east of the Baltic Sea comes from Wulfstan's account itself, and it is not easy to find corroborating evidence elsewhere. This may in part be because of some Anglo-Saxonists' relative ignorance of the Baltic region and the sources for its study. It is also true that the Baltic is a big area and difficult to consider as a whole. Assuming that the locations of most interest in this context are the south and southeast coasts of the Baltic, it is however possible to make a few scattered observations about Anglo-Saxon connections.

Widsith: this Old English poem undoubtedly has some relevance for our understanding of Anglo-Saxon conceptions of other European regions, listing a large number of peoples and places throughout Europe and beyond.[20] Of Baltic peoples relevant to Wulfstan's voyage, it mentions the *Winedas* 'Wends', the *Wistle* 'inhabitants of the area around the Vistula',[21] the *Burgendan* 'Burgundians', and the *Eowan*, perhaps the 'inhabitants of Öland', as well as those in a number of regions in Scandinavia. However, while the poem's first-person account within a narrative frame has some parallels with Wulfstan's report,[22] it is hardly a realistic (or even semi-realistic) travel report but more just a poetic list of names, quite unlike Wulfstan's

rich description. Moreover, the difficulty of dating *Widsith*, and its lack of any useful information about the various places, tribes and rulers it mentions, other than their bare names, means it is hard, if not impossible, to make it work in the current discussion. All *Widsith* does is to establish that, at some point before the late 10th century (when the manuscript was written),[23] the Anglo-Saxons were aware of the existence of certain places and people in the Baltic regions.

Amber: amber is one of the most famous products of the south shores of the Baltic, though its provenance is not restricted to this area, as it can be found washed up on the shores of the North Sea. There is a definite vogue for amber in 6th-century pagan graves from Anglo-Saxon England.[24] The provenance of this amber is uncertain, although the sheer quantity suggests importation rather than chance finds on the beaches of eastern England.[25] It is hard to determine whether Anglo-Saxons continued to be interested in amber in the intervening centuries, until it reappears in quantity in the Viking Age. There is then evidence of both amber fragments (indicating amber working) and complete amber beads, finger-rings and pendants from Anglo-Scandinavian levels at York,[26] while amber is otherwise absent from both earlier and later levels there.[27] These amber finds span two centuries, from the mid 9th to the mid 11th centuries,[28] exactly the Anglo-Scandinavian period. Sampling indicates that the amber at York is predominantly "Baltic amber", though no nearer provenancing is possible.[29] As with the earlier 6th-century grave finds, the quantities found at York suggest importation rather than local beach finds.[30] The extent of evidence for amber working at York cannot be paralleled elsewhere in England, but only in Viking-Age Dublin.[31] Overall, then, the importation of Baltic amber into late Anglo-Saxon England seems closely linked to Scandinavian activities.

19. Townend 2002: 106-108.
20. Muir 1989: 1-23 is a useful edition of this poem.
21. The text actually has *Wistla wudu* (or *Wistlawudu*) 'W/wood of the *Wistla*', which might be a place-name incorporating this element.
22. Tristram 1982: 153-154.
23. Muir 1989: 1.
24. Meaney 1981: 67.
25. Sherlock & Welch 1992: 44-6.
26. MacGregor 1982: 158; Tweddle 1986: 258, 269; Mainman & Rogers 2000: 2632-2635.
27. Tweddle 1986: 209.
28. Mainman & Rogers 2000: 2509-2516.
29. Mainman & Rogers 2000: 2473-2474.
30. Mainman & Rogers 2000: 2501.
31. Mainman & Rogers 2000: 2517.

Coins: Anglo-Saxon coins first start appearing in the Baltic regions just before the millennium, when they are found in substantial quantities.[32] By the late 11th century, Slavic coin hoards even contain local imitations of early 11th-century Anglo-Saxon coins.[33] The absence of Anglo-Saxon coins before this time probably just reflects the general dearth of such coins in Northern Europe "in the two hundred years before Eadgar's reform of the coinage (ca 973)".[34] Coins do not in any case necessarily provide evidence of direct contact, but may reflect economic transactions with intermediaries such as Scandinavians.[35]

Other archaeological evidence: with increasing archaeological excavations in the Baltic, there is the possibility of discovering further evidence for Anglo-Saxon contacts with the region in the 9th and 10th centuries. One such piece is the antler handle with Borre-style decoration found in Wolin,[36] though the style of this would suggest some Scandinavian intervention. Similarly, the Valkyrie clasp found at Truso[37] has its closest parallels in Anglo-Scandinavian England.[38]

The reading of this limited evidence is that Anglo-Saxon contacts with the Baltic in the 9th and 10th centuries are most likely to have been mediated through Scandinavia or by Scandinavians. By the 11th century, there is a slight possibility of evidence from the coins for direct contact.

Wulfstan's profession and experience

Unfortunately, there is nothing in the text that will tell us in so many words what Wulfstan's profession was (e.g., diplomat, missionary, sea captain). Moreover, any interpretation of the text is made difficult by the fact that little of it is verbatim. The Wulfstan account has been described as "an interpolation, made *after* the completion of the [Orosius] translation, by someone who happened to have access to copies of" Wulfstan's report.[39] In other words, the text as we have it is only a précis of

what Wulfstan said, "based on notes which were at some point taken down verbatim".[40] As a result, it has many inconsistencies and awkwardnesses. However, there is enough evidence even in this second- or third-hand text to suggest that his voyage was not a unique event and that Wulfstan was quite familiar with the Baltic.

It is usually assumed that Wulfstan is describing a single, particular voyage that took seven days and nights to reach its destination of Truso and *Estland*. In fact the text is not so simple, and it could instead be read as an amalgam of various kinds of information: (a) an account of a journey from Hedeby to the mouth of the Vistula; (b) geographical facts about Truso and its region; and (c) an ethnographic account of *Estland*, which may or may not be related to the particular voyage described in (a). These will be each be discussed in turn.

(a) The account of the journey from Hedeby to the Vistula is told both in the third person ("*Wulfstan sæde þæt he gefore*", 'Wulfstan said that he travelled') and in the first person ("*7 þonne Burgenda land wæs us on bæcbord*", 'and then the land of the *Burgende* was on our port side'). The switch to first-person pronominal forms occurs at the point where the report moves out of regions which have already been described in Ohthere's account (i.e., *Denemearc*) and into new territory, as experienced by Wulfstan on his voyage. But it is by no means certain that all the information in this section comes from the experience of just one voyage. When Wulfstan says that the people of "*Burgenda land habbað him sylf cyning*" ('have their own king'), this is not something that he could have discovered for himself when sailing non-stop from Hedeby to Truso on one occasion, whether *Burgenda land* is just Bornholm or also includes part of the mainland.[41] At the very least it suggests that he was sailing with people who were well informed about the polity of the region, who could have given him this information. But, as some of the landmarks Wulfstan mentions

32. Kluge 1987: 3; Mikołajczyk 1987: 1; Berga 1996: 1; Leimus & Molvõgin 2001: 1.

33. Kluge 1987: 4, 27, nos. 1037-1132.

34. Blackburn & Jonsson 1981: 149. But see Jagodziński this volume, for the find of a penny of Ethelwulf at Truso.

35. Mikołajczyk 1987: 1.

36. Filipowiak 1988: 695.

37. See Jagodziński this volume.

38. Margeson 1997: 12; Leahy & Paterson 2001: 192.

39. Bately 2007: 33.

40. Bately this volume: 21; see also Bately 1980.

41. See also Hübener 1925-1926: 45.

(such as Öland and Gotland) are not visible from the direct Hedeby-Truso route,[42] it seems more likely that Wulfstan is not only describing a particular voyage, but also reporting on his knowledge of the Baltic more generally (see further on this below).

(b) "*Weonodland wæs us ealne weg on steorbord oð Wislemuðan*", 'Wendland was on our starboard side all the way to the mouth of the Vistula'. With this statement the first-person account (and therefore the description of a particular voyage) appears to end. It is followed by a long passage about the mouth of the Vistula and its surroundings,[43] which is an attempt at geographical description by someone who has actually been to the region, and who knows all the names of the peoples, the lands and the rivers. This geographical passage might be a digression inserted into the account of a particular voyage, with the thread picked up again in the passage which introduces (c), starting with "*Þæt Eastland is swyðe mycel*" ('The above-mentioned Eastland/*Estland* is very large'). There is at least one other instance of this kind of awkward structuring of the narrative, with the intertwining of two or more threads in the passage about honey and fishing, and how the rich drink mare's milk and the poor drink mead. This interrupts the account of the many towns and their kings, and the continual fighting between them, only to return again to the fact that the Ests do not brew ale, as there is plenty of mead.[44] However, the reference back to "*[þ]æt Eastland*" ('the above-mentioned Eastland/*Estland*') in the beginning of (c) is to the geographical passage (b) and not to the account of the voyage (a), so there is no necessary link between the voyage to Truso and the description of *Estland*. As there are no further first-person forms in the account, we cannot be entirely sure that the particular voyage Wulfstan is describing ended in *Estland*, though it seems likely.

(c) The rest of the report is an ethnographic description of an exotic place (*Estland*), presumably visited by Wulfstan, although as a general description, it has no textual details linking it specifically to Wulfstan's experiences. However, it is probable that, having established the geography, Wulfstan then goes on to tell of a particular trip to *Estland*, most likely, but not necessarily, in the immediate vicinity of the Vistula.

We need to allow for textual compression and a certain incoherence brought about by the rewriting and summarising of Wulfstan's verbatim report. Nevertheless, there remains sufficient detail in the text to suggest that he was an experienced traveller in this region, and that he reported both generally on his voyages, and specifically on the details of the journey to Truso.

Wulfstan's frames of reference

A comparison with a well-known passage from an Old Icelandic text provides a useful parallel for understanding the way in which Wulfstan expresses some of his geographical knowledge. Iceland was discovered and settled by westward-faring Scandinavians around the time Wulfstan was heading east (if that was in the late 9th century). Once the country was settled, Icelanders continued making the voyage back and forth across the North Atlantic, often for trading purposes. They also explored further westwards, reaching Greenland some time in the 10th century, and the North American continent around the millennium. There are no contemporary written accounts of these movements, but two medieval versions of the Icelandic Book of Settlements (*Landnámabók*) contain what are often seen as 'sailing directions' for the voyages to Iceland and beyond. The *Hauksbók* version from the early 14th century says:[45]

Learned men say that it is seven days' sailing from Stad in Norway to Horn in eastern Iceland, and four days' sailing from Snæfellsnes [in western Iceland] to Hvarf in Greenland. Hvarf is reached by sailing due west from Hennøya in Norway, and

42. Foote & Wilson 1970: 225.
43. Stanley 1977.
44. Bately this volume: 16, lines 1-8.
45. Benediktsson 1968: 33-35; my translation.

then one will have sailed to the north of Shetland so that it can only be seen if there is good visibility at sea, and to the south of the Faroes, so that the sea is [i.e., appears to be] halfway up the slopes, and to the south of Iceland so that they can see its birds and whales. From Reykjanes in the south of Iceland it is three days' sea-journey south to Slyne Head in Ireland, and from Langanes in the north of Iceland it is four days' sailing to Svalbard in the north of the gulf, and from Kolbeinsey [an island north of Iceland] it is one day's sailing north to the uninhabited areas of Greenland.

Despite the conventional reference to "learned men" (taken over from the earlier, 13th-century, *Sturlubók* version of the text), this passage builds on many generations of actual sailing experience. It also incorporates the observations of its author, Haukr Erlendsson, who travelled frequently between Iceland and Norway. Thus, for the second sentence, his *Sturlubók* source merely has: "And it is said that, if one sails due west from Bergen to Hvarf in Greenland, than one will have sailed half a day's sailing to the south of Iceland".[46] This statement of fact has been expanded in *Hauksbók* with Haukr's visual experiences of sailing past Shetland and the Faroes, and of the visible signs of the proximity of Iceland. The passage as a whole (in both versions) is structured around the major landmarks of these sailing routes. Thus, the island groups of Shetland and the Faroes are stepping-stones along the route from Norway to Iceland and Greenland, and all the other place-names mentioned are highly visible landmarks, either substantial promontories, or major peninsulas, by which the sailors judged their location.[47] The name of Hvarf in Greenland even means the 'turning point' where sailors would change course northwards once reaching the island. The distances between these landmarks are expressed in terms of how many days it took to sail between them. According to Alan Binns, if one does sail past Shetland and Faroe as described, "one will not in fact reach Greenland without

a drastic alteration of course to due north".[48] The passage therefore does not provide precise directions, but it does distil the experiences of generations of North Atlantic sailors down to two kinds of basic information: the important landmarks along the main routes and the sailing times between them.

This is essentially what the first part of Wulfstan's report does. His extensive knowledge of the Baltic route is distilled into its major landmarks (mostly islands in his case), and the sailing time between Hedeby-Truso. As already noted, some of the landmarks he mentions, such as Öland and Gotland, are not visible from the direct -Truso route. This reinforces the impression that Wulfstan is not only describing a particular voyage, but also reporting on his knowledge of the Baltic more generally. This could be due to his familiarity with the route to Birka, as Foote and Wilson suggest,[49] or because, as Binns suggests, he had a mental frame of reference that was conceived as "a grid whose North-South lines were identified by the islands on them".[50] Either way, Wulfstan's account seems to represent the perspective of an experienced sea traveller in the Baltic.

Conclusion

Both the geographical and the ethnographic sections of Wulfstan's account are fascinating in giving an insight into the experiences of a voyager to this region, but they do not explain why he made this particular journey. The usual categories assigned to early medieval travellers (when they were not Viking raiders, explorers or colonists) are those of trader, missionary or diplomat, though these categories then were no more discrete than they are today. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that the question of Wulfstan's profession can be resolved. However, we are on fairly safe ground in asserting that he was an Anglo-Saxon who had travelled extensively in the Baltic and had many Scandinavian contacts.

46. Benediktsson 1968: 32; my translation.
47. Jesch 2005: 120-121.
48. Binns 1993: 430.
49. Foote & Wilson 1970: 225.
50. Binns 1993: 429.

I. Wulfstan's account

Abbreviations

AY = The Archaeology of York
BAR = British Archaeological Reports
CBA = Council for British Archaeology
EETS = Early English Text Society
ÍF = *Íslenzk Fornrit*
MGH = *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*
SCBI = Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles

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