

King Solomon Visits the Eskimos

by Ahimaaz, Court Historian



Translated and Annotated by
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ON THE PALACE ROOF WAITED BENAIAH AND THE Singing Guards. The flying carpet, tethered by ropes, hovered beside them. It was loaded with supplies and lifted by a morning breeze.

Carrying an overnight bag, King Solomon emerged onto the roof and joined them.

“Gentlemen, are we ready?” he asked.

“Yes!” they chorused.

“For a journey to an exotic place?”

“Yes!”

“This expedition shall take us far from home. For our destination is the Arctic Circle—the northernmost region of the earth. Its inhabitants are a people known as the Eskimos. I wish to visit them, see how they live, learn about their folkways. What got me curious about Eskimos was their habitat—which is inhospitable, to say the least. In the *summertime*, the temperature in the Arctic is below zero. And virtually no plants grow there. Yet the Eskimos have managed to adapt, and even to thrive. I want to meet and get to know such a people. Also, there’s a question I’d like to put to them.”

The guards were exchanging looks. Their enthusiasm seemed to have waned.

“Whoa,” said Benaiah. “Below zero, you say? That’s awfully cold. Just how are *we* going to adapt?”

“Not a problem,” said Solomon. “I’ve arranged for a special wind to take us to the Arctic. The khamsin! The hot wind of the desert shall both transport us and keep us warm.”

Benaiah nodded judiciously. “It’s about time that ill wind did us some good.”

“Now I’ve anticipated another problem, and that’s communication. The Eskimos speak a language unrelated to

our own. So in order to communicate with them, we shall be requiring a translator. Let me summon him now.”

Solomon raised his ring and said: “Info Imp.” With a pop the information jinni appeared at his side.



“My friend here is a storehouse of knowledge,” said Solomon. “A walking encyclopedia. Among his many languages, he is familiar with that of the Eskimos—which, he claims, has 52 words for different types of snow. Moreover, he knows a great deal about Eskimos. So I have asked him to brief us on the subject. If you’d be so kind, professor.”

The Info Imp adjusted his glasses and addressed the expedition. “The Eskimos are a unique people,” he began. “They make their home in an extremely hostile environment—a bleak wilderness of ice, snow, and frigid waters. Each day is a struggle to survive. Confined to the Arctic—which they call Nunatsiaq, or ‘the beautiful land’—they’ve had little contact with other peoples. Indeed, a band residing in Greenland—isolated even from their fellow Eskimos—believe themselves to be the sole humans on earth.

“Their social structure is minimal. They have no tribes

—no clans—no chiefs, magistrates, or elders. No form of government whatsoever. Instead, each family is an independent unit. For practical reasons, a number of families may dwell in proximity. But there is little sense of community.

“Most Eskimos live in an igloo—a cozy little snowhouse. Entered via an insulating passageway, the igloo has neither door nor lock. For the Eskimos have no enemies, nor anything to steal. Their sole possessions are a few simple tools and hunting implements. Moreover, they are noted for their hospitality—anyone popping his head into an igloo is welcomed.

“The Eskimos are hunters, pursuing their quarry in a dog sled or a kayak. Their diet consists almost entirely of meat—walrus, seal, caribou, fish. Sometimes they cook the meat; more often, they just dig in with gusto. This protein-rich fare is supplemented with berries and seaweed. And with Eskimo Pies, a type of frozen dessert.

“Their religious practices are primitive but effective. Taboos are observed. Magical formulæ are recited. And three main deities—Sedna, the sea goddess; Narssuk, the weather god; and Tatqeq, the moon god—are propitiated. An Eskimo’s spiritual life is mediated by an *angekok*, or shaman. Entering a trance and leaving the earthly plane, the shaman is able to control spirits, effect cures, provide tips on hunting, etc.

“In summation—a hardy and resourceful people, whose distinctive life-style reflects the harshness of their environment.”

Solomon thanked the Info Imp. And signaling for the ropes to be untied, he climbed aboard the carpet. Benaiah, the Singing Guards, and the Info Imp piled on behind him.

Settling onto the portable throne, Solomon recited a prayer. Then he raised his ring and summoned the kham-sin.

The hot wind came rushing in from the desert. It swirled about the roof of the palace, lifting the carpet.

“The frozen Arctic!” commanded Solomon.

Borne by the wind, the carpet ascended into the sky and headed north.

●

For nearly a week the carpet flew toward its destination. It passed over towns and villages—glided over hills and valleys—soared over mountains and inland seas.

The Singing Guards occupied themselves by singing and playing cards. King Solomon had brought along scrolls, and spent the time reading.

They ate and slept in the sky. Now and then, Solomon would call for a rest stop. And landing in some nameless place, the voyagers would get off the carpet and stretch their legs.

Onward they flew, their sole company the birds and the clouds.

●

The days grew shorter; the nights, longer. And finally the daylight ceased altogether.

“We’ve entered the Arctic Circle,” explained the Info Imp. “During the winter up here, the sun remains below the horizon. So the night is continuous. From now on, our only light will come from the moon and the stars. And, of course, the Northern Lights.”

“What are they?” asked Solomon.

“You haven’t heard about the Northern Lights? They’re a meteorological phenomenon—and a spectacular sight. If conditions are right, we’ll be seeing them shortly.”

No sooner had he spoken than a curtain of light swept across the night sky. Enormous wisps of flame flitted about, like ghostly apparitions. Bands of color shifted and shimmered overhead.

“These lights are seen mainly in the northern latitudes,” said the Imp. “Hence their name. Their nature remains a mystery.”

Spellbound by the undulating lights, the voyagers gazed into the sky. Except for Benaiah, who was peering over the edge of the carpet.

“There’s one!” he cried, pointing. “An Eskimo!”

Crouched on the ice was a bulky figure. It was watching them fly by.

The Info Imp shook his head. "That's a polar bear," he said. "But we should be seeing Eskimos soon."

The carpet flew through the Arctic night. The Northern Lights cascaded in the sky. Their reflection glimmered in the ice below. And stretching from horizon to horizon was a frigid wasteland, empty save for mysterious piles of rocks.*

And finally an Eskimo came into view.

Spear in hand, he was standing over a hole in the ice. Nearby was an igloo, a sled, and a team of dogs. The Eskimo was intently watching the hole—so intently that he failed to notice the carpet in the sky.

"That's an Eskimo," said the Imp.

"What's he doing?" asked Solomon.

"Hunting seals. The seals swim about under the ice, looking for fish. But they have to surface periodically, in order to breathe. The Eskimo is waiting for one to stick its head out."

Solomon gave a command to the wind. And the carpet descended, landing with a thud on the ice. The Eskimo looked up in surprise and stared at them.

"Hello there!" called out Solomon.

"*Ai!*" translated the Imp.

With a look of terror, the Eskimo let out a shout and brandished his spear.

A female Eskimo poked her head out of the igloo. Seeing their visitors, she shrieked.

"We have come from afar," said Solomon, "and would like to chat with you."

Before the words could be translated, the Eskimo bolted—flinging aside his spear, crying "*Tupilakit!*" and racing toward the igloo.

"Devils!" translated the Imp.

The Eskimo crawled inside the igloo. The dogs had begun to bark.

Solomon was dismayed. "We seem to have frightened

* Thousands of rock piles are scattered throughout the Arctic. Known as *inuksuit*, or "stone figures," they serve as directional aids; indicators of abundant game; and objects of veneration—marking the abodes of spirits. Some of these piles, say the Eskimos, are extremely old and were erected by their predecessors in the region—the Tunniit, or "ancient ones."

the fellow,” he said.

A commotion sounded from within the igloo. Then the Eskimo reappeared—sticking his head out and scrutinizing the Israelites. The dogs continued to bark.

“How are you this evening?” said Solomon.

“*Qanuk ilissi unnupat?*” translated the Imp.

But the Eskimo ignored them. He began to barricade the entrance to the igloo, by stuffing it with bearskins.

“Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea,” said Solomon. “They apparently want nothing to do with us.”

“We’re like visitors from another planet,” said Benaiah. “Give them time to get used to us.”

Solomon shook his head. “I’m starting to think that this trip was a mistake—that we shouldn’t even be here. I wanted to meet and talk with Eskimos. But why should they want to talk with us? They’re going about their business, when suddenly a carpetful of strangely-attired men drop out of the sky. How could that be anything but disturbing?”

“And just look at how this doorless people has greeted us—with a door! We are interlopers. And these Eskimos are human beings, not anthropological subjects. Maybe we should simply go. In fact, I think we should. Stay on the carpet, everyone. We’re leaving. Wind—take us home.”

With a swirl of snow, the khamsin lifted them back into the sky.

As the carpet flew southward, Solomon seemed lost in thought. Finally Benaiah spoke to him.

“We came many miles, Sire. And for what? We never got to meet with the Eskimos.”

“True. But I did get the answer to my question.”

“What question?”

“There was something I wanted to ask these people,” said Solomon. “I wanted to know *why*. Why they resided in a frigid wasteland. Why they had chosen to settle here. And why they remained, instead of migrating to some less harsh environment. But I think I have figured it out.

“No one in their right mind wants to live in the Arctic, right? Or even pass through it. Thus, the Eskimos have the place to themselves. They don’t have to defend it from intruders. *So there’s no warfare*. They’ve solved the problem of

war. Now that's a real achievement—and a reason to live here.

“What brought the Eskimos here in the first place? Who knows? And who can make sense of the vagaries of fortune? Except to say that GOD has a unique role—an identity—a *destiny*—for each people. As part of His plan, He led the Eskimos to the Arctic. And He has sustained them in their hardships.

“As for seeking out a less harsh environment, it's too late. This frigid wasteland has become their home. It is the land of their ancestors—of their sacred sites—of their memories. Moreover, they are skilled at living here. The Eskimos are a part of the Arctic; and it has become a part of them.

“But the best reason for remaining in this place? Look at the sky, Benaiah. Behold the Northern Lights. They are awesome! Imagine having them as your constant companion. Would you want to live elsewhere? GOD's gift to us was the Temple; and His gift to the Eskimos was this sky. Both are filled with His Presence.

“So yes, we came thousands of miles and didn't get to meet with the Eskimos. But we did get to see the Northern Lights.”

“And a polar bear,” said Benaiah.

They fell silent and watched the celestial fireworks in the sky about them.*

* What are the Northern Lights (also known as the Aurora Borealis)?

Scientists attribute them to the solar wind—charged particles that flow from the sun and interact with the earth's magnetic field. Gases in the upper atmosphere become ionized and glow. The voltage generated is stupendous—greater than the daily power consumption of the U.S.—and can cause blackouts, interfere with radio transmissions, and affect compasses.

But the scientific explanation would have puzzled the Eskimos. In their cosmology a bridge linked the earth to heaven, which was located beyond the dome of the sky. In crossing that bridge, the souls of the dead were guided by *salamiud*, or “sky dwellers,” who lit the way with torches. The Northern Lights were the light from those torches.

(The Norsemen of Scandinavia entertained a similar notion. They attributed the Northern Lights to Bifrost, a rainbow bridge

over which souls journeyed to Valhalla.)

The Algonquin of northern Canada held a different view. They believed that the lights emanated from a bonfire, lit by Nanahbozho, the creator of the earth. Upon completing his creation, Nanahbozho had retired to the north. But as a sign of his solicitude for mankind, he kept a bonfire going.

Whatever their origin, the Northern Lights have inspired awe in those who beheld them. Here are some testimonials:

- “Who but GOD can conceive such infinite scenes of glory? Who but GOD could execute them, painting the heavens in such gorgeous displays?” (Charles Francis Hall, explorer who perished during an Arctic voyage)
- “Anything so strange, so capricious, so wonderful, so gloriously beautiful, I scarcely hope to see again.” (Bayard Taylor, travel writer)
- “No other natural phenomenon is so grand, so mysterious, so terrible in its unearthly splendor as this; the veil which conceals from mortal eyes the glory of the eternal throne seems drawn aside, and the awed beholder is lifted out of the atmosphere of his daily life into the immediate presence of GOD.” (George Kennar, explorer)
- “I pity the man who says ‘There is no GOD’ or who can look unmoved to the very depths of his soul by such displays of infinite power.” (Edward Sylvester Ellis, dime novelist)
- “Language is vain in the attempt to describe its ever-varying and gorgeous phases; no pen or pencil can portray its fickle hues, its radiance, and its grandeur.” (Lieutenant W. H. Hooper, British naval officer)

That grandeur continues to deeply move those who experience it. Among them are Japanese newlyweds, who have come to northern Canada on their honeymoon. For it is believed in Japan that a child conceived under the Northern Lights will be fortunate.