

INTRODUCTION

THE term 'Viking' is derived from the Old Norse *vik*, a bay, and means 'one who haunts a bay, creek or fjord¹'. In the 9th and 10th centuries it came to be used more especially of those warriors who left their homes in Scandinavia and made raids on the chief European countries. This is the narrow, and technically the only correct use of the term 'Viking,' but in such expressions as 'Viking civilisation,' 'the Viking age,' 'the Viking movement,' 'Viking influence,' the word has come to have a wider significance and is used as a concise and convenient term for describing the whole of the civilisation, activity and influence of the Scandinavian peoples, at a particular period in their history, and to apply the term 'Viking' in its narrower sense to these movements would be as misleading as to write an account of the age of Elizabeth and label it 'The Buccaneers.'

¹ The word is older than the actual Viking age: it is found in Anglo-Saxon in the form *wicing*. Some writers have said that it means 'people from the district of the *Vik*' in South Norway, so-called from the long fjord-like opening which is found there, but the early Anglo-Saxon use of the term forbids this derivation.

It is in the broader sense, that the term is employed in the present manual. Plundering and harrying form but one aspect of Viking activity and it is mainly a matter of accident that this aspect is the one that looms largest in our minds. Our knowledge of the Viking movement was, until the last half-century, drawn almost entirely from the works of medieval Latin chroniclers, writing in monasteries and other kindred schools of learning which had only too often felt the devastating hand of Viking raiders. They naturally regarded them as little better than pirates and they never tired of expatiating upon their cruelty and their violence. It is only during the last fifty years or so that we have been able to revise our ideas of Viking civilisation and to form a juster conception of the part which it played in the history of Europe.

The change has come about chiefly in two ways. In the first place the literature of Scandinavia is no longer a sealed book to us. For our period there are three chief groups of native authorities : (1) the prose sagas and the *Historia Danica* of Saxo Grammaticus, (2) the eddaic poems, (3) the skaldic poems. The prose sagas and Saxo belong to a date considerably later than the Viking age, but they include much valuable material referring to that period. The chief poems of the older Edda date from the Viking period itself and are invaluable for the information they

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give us as to the religion and mythology of the Scandinavian peoples at this time, the heroic stories current amongst them, and their general outlook on life. The skaldic poems are however in some ways the most valuable historical authority for the period. The *skalds* or court-poets were attached to the courts of kings and jarls, shared their adventures, praised their victories, and made songs of lament on their death, and their work is largely contemporary with the events they describe.

Secondly, and yet more important in its results perhaps, archaeological science has, within the last half-century, made rapid advance, and the work of archaeologists on the rich finds brought to light during the last hundred years has given us a vast body of concrete fact, with the aid of which we have been able to reconstruct the material civilisation of the Viking period far more satisfactorily than we could from the scattered and fragmentary notices found in the sagas and elsewhere. The resultant picture calls for description later, but it is well to remember from the outset that it is a very different one from that commonly associated with the term 'Viking.'

With this word of explanation and note of warning we may proceed to our main subject.

CHAPTER I

CAUSES OF THE VIKING MOVEMENT

THE period of Scandinavian history to which the term Viking is applied extends roughly from the middle of the 8th to the end of the 10th or the first half of the 11th century. Its commencement was marked by the raids of Scandinavian freebooters upon the coasts of England, Western Scotland and Ireland and upon Frankish territory. Its climax was reached when in the course of the 9th and 10th centuries Scandinavian rule was established in Ireland, Man and the Western Islands, the northern and midland districts of England, Normandy, and a great part of Russia. Its close was marked by the consolidation of the Scandinavian kingdoms in the late 10th and early 11th centuries under such mighty sovereigns as Olaf Tryggvason and Olaf the Holy in Norway, Olaf Skötkonung in Sweden, and greatest of all, king Knut in Denmark, who for a brief time united the whole of Scandinavia and a great part of the British Isles in one vast confederacy.

The extent and importance of the movement is indicated from the first by the almost simultaneous appearance of trouble in England, on the coast of France, and on the Eider boundary between Denmark and the Frankish empire.

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In the reign of Beorhtric, king of Wessex (786–802), three ships of the Northmen coming from Hörðaland (around Hardanger Fjord) landed near Dorchester, in June 793 Lindisfarne was sacked, in March 800 Charlemagne found himself compelled to equip a fleet and establish a stronger coastguard to defend the Frankish coast against the attacks of the Northmen, and from 777 onwards, when the Saxon patriot Widukind took refuge with the Danish king Sigefridus (O.N. Sigröðr), there was almost constant friction along the land-boundary between Denmark and the Frankish empire.

This outburst of hostile activity had been preceded by considerable intercourse of a varied character between Scandinavia and the countries of Western Europe. Early in the 6th century the Danes or, according to another authority, the Götär from Götaland in south Sweden, invaded Frisia under their king Chocilaicus. Reference is made to this raid in the story of Hygelac, king of the Geatas, in *Beowulf*. Professor Zimmer suggested that the attacks of unknown pirates on the island of Eigg in the Hebrides and on Tory Island off Donegal, described in certain Irish annals of the 7th century, were really the work of Scandinavian raiders. The evidence of Irish legend and saga goes to prove that in the same century Irish anchorites settled in the Shetlands but were later compelled by the arrival of Scandinavian settlers

to move on to the lonely Faroes. Here they were not to be left in peace, for the Irish geographer Dicuil, writing in 825, tells us that the Faroes had then been deserted by the monks for some thirty years owing to the raids of Northmen pirates. Dr Jakobsen has shown that the forms of place-names in the Shetlands point very definitely to a settlement from Scandinavia in pre-Viking days—before 700—while the sculptured stones of Gothland show already at the end of the 7th century clear evidence of Celtic art influence. Possibly also merchants of Scandinavian origin were already settled in the Frankish empire and it is certain that there was considerable trade between Scandinavia and the West.

Most of the intercourse thus demonstrated was slow in development, peaceful and civilising in character. How came it that in the later years of the 8th century this intercourse was suddenly strengthened and intensified, while at the same time it underwent a great change both in methods and character?

The traditional explanation is that given by Dudo and by William of Jumièges in their histories of the settlement of Normandy and by Saxo in his account of Danish settlements in Baltic lands in the 10th century, viz. that the population of Scandinavia had outgrown its means of support and that enforced emigration was the result. There may be a certain element of truth in the tradition but when it says

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that this excess of population was due to polygamy we have every reason to doubt it. Polygamy does not lead to an over-rapid growth of population as a whole, and it is fairly certain that it was practised only by the ruling classes in Scandinavia. It is quite possible, however, that the large number of sons in the ruling families made it necessary for the younger ones to go forth and gain for themselves fresh territories in new lands.

A clearer light is perhaps thrown on the matter if we examine the political condition of the Scandinavian countries at this time. In Norway we find that the concentration of kingly authority in the hands of Harold Fairhair after the middle of the 9th century led many of the more independent spirits to leave Norway and adopt a Viking life in the West or to settle in new homes in Iceland. So strong was the spirit of independence that when Harold Fairhair received the submission of the Vikings of the West after the battle of Hafrsfjord, many of them rather than endure even a shadowy overlordship abandoned their Viking life and settled down to peaceful independence in Iceland. It is quite possible that earlier attempts at consolidation on the part of previous petty Norwegian kings may have had similar results.

Of the condition of Sweden we know practically nothing but we have sufficient information about the

course of events in Denmark at this time to see that it probably tended to hasten the development of the Viking movement. Throughout the first half of the 9th century there were repeated dynastic struggles accompanied probably by the exile, voluntary or forced, of many members of the rival factions.

External causes also were certainly not without influence. From the 6th century down to the middle of the 8th, the Frisians were the great naval and trading power of North-West Europe. They had probably taken some part in the conquest of England and, during the 7th and 8th centuries, the whole of the coast of the Netherlands from the Scheldt to the Weser was in their hands. Their trade was extensive, their chief city being *Duurstede* a few miles south-east of *Utrecht*. The northward expansion of the Franks brought them into collision with the Frisians in the 7th century. The struggle was long and fierce but in the end the Frisians were defeated by *Charles Martel* in 734 and finally subjugated by *Charlemagne* in 785. The crushing of Frisian naval power and the crippling of their trade probably played no unimportant part in facilitating the Scandinavian advance, and it is curious to note that while there is considerable archaeological evidence for peaceful intercourse between the west coast of Norway and Frisian lands in the 8th century, that evidence seems to come to an

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end about the year 800, just when Frisian power finally declined. There can be no doubt also that the conquest of the Saxons by Charlemagne at the close of the 8th century, bringing Franks and Danes face to face along the Eider boundary, made the latter uneasy.

There has been much arguing to and fro of the question as to the respective shares taken by Danes and Norwegians in the Viking movement. That of the Swedes can fortunately be determined with a good deal more certainty. The Swedes were for the most part interested only in Eastern Europe and there by way of trade rather than of battle: we learn from runic inscriptions and other sources that some Swedes did visit England and the West, but these visits were due to individual rather than national activity. The question as between Dane and Norwegian has been to some extent made more difficult of settlement through the national prejudices of Scandinavian scholars; e.g. Danes for the most part decide in favour of the Danish origin of Rollo of Normandy, while Norwegians decide in favour of his Norwegian birth. Such differences of opinion are unfortunately only too often possible owing to the scantiness of the material upon which we have to base our conclusions. Medieval chroniclers were for the most part unable or unwilling to distinguish between Danes and Norwegians; they were all alike

‘Nordmanni’ to them and the term ‘Dani’ is practically interchangeable with it. The vagueness of their ethnographical knowledge is manifest when we find the Norman Dudo at the beginning of the 11th century tracing back the Dani (or Daci) to an original home in Dacia. The Irish annalists did, however, draw a very definite distinction between Norwegians and Danes—Finn-gaill and Dubh-gaill as they called them, i.e. White and Black Foreigners respectively¹. They seem never to confuse them, but exactly on what grounds they gave them their distinguishing epithets it is now impossible to determine. They do not correspond to any known ethnographical differences, and the only other reasonable suggestion which has been offered is that the terms are used to describe some difference of armour or equipment as yet unknown to us. The Irish annals also distinguish between Daunites or Danes and Lochlanns or men from Lochlann, i.e. Norway; but again the origin of the term Lochlann as applied to Norway is obscure. The writers of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle seem to use the term *Norðmenn* very definitely of Norwegians, just as Alfred does in his translation of Orosius, but the term *Dene* came to be used more vaguely and uncertainly. It is only very rarely that the chroniclers

¹ The name *Finn-gaill* survives in Fingall, the name of a district to the north of Dublin, while *Dubh-gaill* is the second element in the proper names MacDougall and MacDowell.