1. The Scandinavian Community, II: Aspects of Society

In an earlier chapter under this same title we examined the notion that for all their differences of circumstance and habitat, their wars, dissensions and rivalries, the Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians were a meaningful community of peoples. With the political and dynastic history of the Scandinavian homelands *c.* 750–1000 recounted, and the military, economic, and colonial history of the vikings overseas to be told, this seems the place to consider certain aspects of Scandinavian life and society which help correct what otherwise can be too violent or romantic a view of the viking north.

Viking society conformed to the Indo-European pattern. It was a class society, carefully organized as such, and the number of classes was three. There were the unfree, the free, and their rulers. A tenth-century poem,[1] *Rígsþula*, the Song of Rig, providesus with a stylized and memorable account of the origin of these three divinely ordained classes. In the poem's prose introduction Rig (*Rígr*, Irish *rí*, king, gen. *ríg*) is identified with the god Heimdall, the father of all mankind. One day (and for the story that follows the poet invokes ancient tradition) this traveller-god came to a poorish habitation where dwelt an ancient couple Ai and Edda, Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother. He entered and introduced himself as Rig. They fed him on coarse, husky bread, and for three nights he lay down in bed between them. Then he departed. Nine months later Edda bore a son whose description we have already noted (see p. 67 above): black-skinned and ugly, with lumpy knuckles and thick fingers, his back gnarled and his heels long. They called him Thrall (*þræll*), and in time he mated with the bandy-

[1] This dating is not universally agreed.

legged, sunburnt Slavey (*Þír*) and begat on her litters of children, among them the boys Noisy, Byreboy, Roughneck, Horsefly, and the girls Lazybones, Beanpole, Fatty, and their like. Between them Thrall, Slavey, and their brood do the dirty work, carry loads, lug firewood, dung fields, feed pigs, cut peat, and from them are descended the race and varieties of thralls.

Meantime Rig had gone his ways and reached a second, more commodious home, where dwelt another couple, Afi and Amma, Grandfather and Grandmother. The man was making a loom, the woman spinning and weaving. Rig gave them good advice, and for three nights lay down in bed between them. Then he departed. Nine months later Amma bore a son, ruddy, fresh-faced, and with sparkling eyes. They called him Freeman or Peasant (*Karl*) and in time he married Daughter-in-law (*Snör*), and by her had many children, among them the boys Strongbeard, Husbandman, Holder, and Smith, and the girls Prettyface, Maiden, Capable, and their like. Karl's work was to tame oxen, build houses, barns and wagons, make and handle the plough; his wife managed the household, carried keys, and held the purse-strings; it was she who provided meals and clothes for her family. From them are descended the race and varieties of free men.

Once more Rig had gone his ways, this time to reach a splendid hall where dwelt a third couple, Father and Mother (*Faðir* and *Móðir*). The master was twisting a bowstring, bending his bow, fashioning arrows; the mistress, gaily attired, blonde and lovely, gave thought to her arms, smoothed her kirtle, pleated her sleeves. Rig gave them good advice, and soon Mother spread the table with a cloth of bright linen, white wheaten bread, pork and game, a wine-jug and drinking bowls of silver. They drank and talked together till the day ended. Three nights he lay down in bed between them. Then he departed. Nine months later Mother bore a son, fair-haired, bright of cheek, his eye piercing as a snake's. They called him Earl or Warrior (*Jarl*), and he grew up to use bow and arrow, shield and spear, to hunt with horse and ride with hound, practise swordsmanship and swimming. In course of time Rig returned to greet this special son of his, gave him his own name, taught him the magic art of runes, urged him to take possession of his hereditary estates. So Jarl went out into the world and stirred up war: he rode furiously, slew foes, reddened pastures, brought woe to earth. He came to own eighteen dwellings, and in true lord's

fashion dealt out treasure to his friends and followers. He married a lady as well-born as himself, Lively (*Erna*), daughter of Lord (*Hersir*), fair and wise, slim-fingered, and by her had twelve sons, skilled and valiant, and no doubt daughters, too. Most notable of the sons was Kon the Young (*Konr Ungr*, *konungr*, King);[1] they grew up to tame horses, wield weapons, but in addition Kon the Young, Royal Scion, so mastered runes that with their aid he could save life, blunt sword, quell fire, soothe sea, and excel Rig himself in the mysteries. He had the strength and energy of eight men, knew the language of birds, hunted and slew them in the copses, till one day a crow said to him: 'Young Kon, why should you silence birds? Better for you to bestride steed, draw sword, fell a host. Danr and Danpr have finer halls and better lands than you. You should go viking, let them feel your blade, deal wounds. . . .' On which bloodthirsty advice both crow and poem (*Ormsbók*, AM 242 fol) fall silent for evermore.

The social order thus picturesquely presented by a well-born and socially secure poet is the one we observe, with minor local variation, in all the viking countries throughout the Viking Age. In the petty kingdoms of Norway before Halfdan the Black's day; in the confusion of realms in Denmark till the time of Godfred, and maybe of Gorm; and in Sweden by way of the Vendel monarchs down to Ivar Wide-Grasper and Bjorn, Olaf, Eirik, and Bjorn again, who held considerable but undefined sway in the ninth century, there was a ruling caste, a community of free men, and a substratum of thralls or slaves. Such was the situation in the more unified kingdoms of Harald Fairhair, Hakon the Good and Olaf Tryggvason in Norway, Harald Bluetooth and Svein Forkbeard in Denmark, and Eirik Sigrsæll and Olaf Sköttkonung in Sweden; and there would be no essential change in the days of Harald Hardradi (Norway), Svein Estridsson (Denmark), Onund Jacob and his brother Emund (Sweden), with whose reigns the Viking Age concluded. In Iceland and Greenland there was one significant difference: they were free there of the authority of 'kings and criminals' from abroad; but in every other essential they, too, had a ruling caste, free farmers, and slaves.

At the bottom of the social order crouched the thrall. Because

[1] The etymology is popular, not scientific. *Konungr* is properly a patronymic, of common Germanic ancestry, with the meaning 'scion of a (noble) kin', or 'scion of a man of (noble) birth'.

the laws of the Scandinavian peoples were unrecorded till after the end of the Viking Age we know less about the slave's life and status than we could wish, but a long succession of English laws and a considerable number of references to thralls in Icelandic literature provide us with information which if cautiously interpreted will serve for homeland Scandinavia, too. The thrall might be an undischarged debtor or a man otherwise condemned to death; he might be the son (or a woman slave the daughter) of slaves, as much his master's property as the calf from his master's cow or the colt from his mare; but the great recruiting grounds for slaves were war, piracy, and trade. They came in great numbers from the British Isles, either caught in the dragnet of the viking raids and invasions or as straightforward objects of commerce; they came from all other countries where viking power reached; and above all they came from slave-hunts among the Slavonic peoples whose countries bordered on the Baltic. The very name Slav (*Sclavus*) became confused with the medieval Latin *sclavus*, a slave. Droves of human cattle came to the pens of Magdeburg, ready for their transfer west; there was a big clearing-house later at Regensburg on the Danube; and Hedeby in southern Jutland was well sited for its share of this northern traffic in men. Southwards the burghers of Lyons grew fat on slaves. The demand from Spain and the remoter Muslim world was insatiable: men and girls for labour and lust, eunuchs for sad service. By 850 the Swedes had opened up the Volga and Dnieper as slave-routes to the eastern market. And just as the slave-trade was essential to viking commerce, the slave himself was the foundation-stone of viking life at home. The Frostathing Law thought three thralls the proper complement for a Norwegian farm of twelve cows and two horses; a lord's estate might well require thirty or more. In the eyes of the law-makers a thrall counted as a superior kind of cow or horse. He commanded no wergeld, but in England if you killed him you had normally to pay his owner the worth of eight cows; in Iceland you paid eight ounces of silver (one and a half marks), and if this was paid within three days his master took no further action. He could be bought and sold like any other chattel. Hoskuld Dala-Kolsson of Laxardal in Iceland is said to have paid three marks of silver, thrice the price of a common concubine, for the Irish girl he purchased from a trader in a Russian hat in the Brenneyjar (*Laxdæla Saga*, 12). She was one of twelve on sale in the slaver's booth. In theory, and sometimes in practice, the thrall

could be put down like a horse or a dog once his usefulness was past. The male, and still more frequently the female, thrall could be sacrificed or executed to follow a dead owner, as we know from the most famous of all Norwegian graves, that at Oseberg, where a slave woman was buried with her mistress, from Birka in Sweden and Ballateare on Man,[1] from the 'beheaded slave's grave' at Lejre in Zealand, and as we read in Ibn Fadlan's account of a Rus burial ceremony on the Volga (see pp. 425–30 below). Rights he had none. Since he had no property he was exempt from fines; instead he was beaten, maimed, or killed. The mutineer or runaway could expect no quarter: the owning class would as soon tolerate a wolf on the foldwall as a slave on the run, and his end was a wolf's end, quick and bloody. For the slave born and bred life was hard. For a freeborn warrior taken in the wars, or a well-nurtured girl ravished from her burned home, it could be hell itself, and Icelandic sources record many a doom-laden attempt to wrest an impossible release from unbearable circumstance.

And yet the northern thrall was better off than his fellow in mediterranean and eastern lands. Where a master was bad or a thrall irreconcilable little could be hoped for; but there is evidence to suggest that most masters were reasonable and most thralls prepared to make the best of their lot. The ill-treatment of thralls was at least as bad a mark as the neglect of stock, and in so far as he was a member of a household the thrall could expect to benefit from the kindlier impulses of humanity. As the Viking Age wore on, and under the influence of Christianity, an increasing disquietude was felt about the ownership and sale of men. It operated most strongly on behalf of those of one's own nationality, and then those of one's own religion, but was a leaven in the whole situation. Sometimes we see economic pressures working on his behalf, as in the Icelandic *hreppar*. The slave, in fact, was not left devoid of means, possessions, and free time during which he could do work for himself. He had his peculium, and in favourable circumstances might hope to purchase, earn, or be rewarded with his freedom. Also, he was allowed to marry, though his children would be slaves.

[1] H. Shetelig, 'Traces of the custom of Suttee in Norway during the Viking Age', in *Saga-Book*, VI, 1910, pp. 180–208; H. Arbman, *Birka, Sveriges äldsta handelsstad*, Stockholm, 1939, pp. 77 and 87; G. Bersu and D. M. Wilson, *Three Viking Graves in the Isle of Man*, Society for Medieval Archaeology, Monograph Series, I, 1966, pp. 51 and 90–1.

Throughout our period the *freedman* (*leysingi*, *libertus*) was not a *freeman*. He was only half free, still dependent for a number of generations upon that former owner who was now his protector, and against whom he was not permitted to institute legal proceedings. There was much commonsense in this. The freedman had his human value, but this would protect him only as long as he had someone to champion it, and inevitably a great many freedmen had no free kinsman to do so. So he needed a patron or lawful master, and custom and law allowed for this. In a social sense the freedman had not quite arrived.

The overriding thing was to be free. The free peasant, peasant-proprietor, smallholder, farmer, call him what we will, was the realm's backbone. This class of free men was extensive; it ranged from impoverished and humble peasants at one extreme to men of wealth and authority (especially local authority) at the other; but what they had in common were legal and political rights, a wergeld, and land. As to this last there was much variation. Ideally a man had a farm, even a cot, of his own; in practice young men must often live with their parents, or farm land at the hand of a big proprietor. Even so their status was clear, and these were the men who tilled land and raised stock, bore witness and produced verdicts, said aye or no on matters of public concern at the Thing (including matters as important as the election or approval of a king or a change of religion), attended religious and lay ceremonies, worked in wood and metal, made and wore weapons, manned ships, served in levies, were conscious of their dues and worth, and so impressed these upon others that as a free peasantry they stood in a class of their own for Europe. Were so superior, for example, to their English counterpart that king Alfred's treaty with the Norse king Guthrum (Guthorm), *c.* 886, set the wergeld of a rent-paying English peasant and that of a Danish freedman at the same figure of two hundred shillings. The free Danish peasant of whatsoever kind was equated with the English peasant farming his own land, and his wergeld set with that of Danish and English noblemen at the high figure of eight half-marks of pure gold.[1]

Above the free men was the ruling caste, the aristocracy, most of it king-allied or god-descended. Here belonged the families with wealth, land, and rank. At different times during the Viking Age,

[1] The significance of, and reasons for, these equations have been much argued, but the higher standard accorded to the free Danish peasant is undoubted.

and in different parts of Scandinavia, we observe some of these families partly or fully independent of other authority, so that they enjoyed the rank of king or jarl over a defined territory. But we should not conclude that because the aristocracy existed by virtue of rank and descent and the recognition of degree it felt any automatic respect for a supreme monarch. Ideally a king to whom all the nation owed allegiance would head the hierarchy. But during most of the Viking Age Scandinavia presents us with a picture of too few supreme monarchs. In the case of Sweden we are ill-informed, but till at least the early tenth century we read that Danish Jutland bore its crop of kinglings, while in Norway the situation was worse. True, by the time Harald Fairhair felt the pressures of old age a great many petty kings had been tumbled out of their kingdoms, but he re-created almost as many in the persons of his sons. As late as the reign of Olaf the Stout, renamed the Saint, there were plenty calling themselves kings in none too remote stretches of the country, and it was not to be expected that a king in Heidmark or Raumarike, knowing himself to be lordly and of the seed of Frey, would readily give allegiance to a brother Yngling who planned to destroy his high-seat and his altars. Pride, piety, and self-interest bore weightily against it. The power of a Norwegian king had always been circumscribed, and not only by the exertions of those of his fellow countrymen with a claim to the same title. He depended heavily on the loyalty of the leaders of provinces, the farmer republics, and the jarls, the greatest of whom ruled the Trondelag, and at times, like jarl Hakon and jarl Eirik, held authority over most of the provinces of Norway which were not controlled by Danes or Swedes. He depended, too, on the approval of his free subjects. His very election depended upon their favourable voice at those public assemblies where he first presented himself to them. He had to carry them with him on all important decisions. We have already noted Hakon the Good's deferment to his subjects' preference for the old religion (see page 119 above), and reversals as spectacular are reported from Sweden. Snorri Sturluson is guilty of an anachronism when he portrays the victory of the Swedish farmers and Thorgny the Lawspeaker over king Olaf Eiriksson at the Uppsala Thing, *c.* 1020, but there is no doubting the limitation of royal power by the suffrage of the supra-regional Things. The king of the Swedes must make a progress (the so-called *Eiríksgata*) through his dominions and present himself for popular acclaim at all the Things. 'The Swedes,'

says the ancient West Gautish law, 'have the right to elect and likewise reject a king. . . The Thing of all the Götar must receive him formally. When he comes to the Thing he must swear to be faithful to all the Götar, and he shall not break the true laws of our land.'[1] During the eleventh century the northern kingdoms grew stronger and more integrated, which meant that the power of the aristocracy *vis-à-vis* the king was diminished. In Norway particularly the status of the old-style turbulent and self-seeking viking aristocracy declined, and in large measure its place was usurped by landowners emergent from and representing the élite of the bondi class. It is therefore possible that the smaller farmer, too, was strengthened in relation to the aristocracy. Certainly they helped change the character of the Scandinavian kingdoms after 1035, and helped bring the Viking Age to a close.

In what, then, did the king's prestige consist in these northern lands, apart from his divine ancestry, his connection with shrine, sacrifice, and sanctuary, and those personal qualities which command respect and obedience? Most of all it consisted in sea-power and the ability to employ this for conquest and profit. Command of the sea-lanes ensured exaction and tribute, and these in their turn bought loyalty and service, without which a northern king immediately stood helpless, as the reigns and disasters of the Norwegian kings from Eirik Bloodaxe to St. Olaf confirm. Such startling vicissitudes as the Swedish presence at Hedeby *c.* 900–35, the ups and downs of Svein Forkbeard's early career, the overthrow of Olaf Tryggvason, and the success of Magnus the Good in respect of Denmark are all evidence of the striking power attendant on control of the seas. A king's prestige consisted, too, in his wealth and territory, for he could hardly be other than one of the greatest landowners in a kingdom, and much of the profit of a successful war went into his personal chest. With no capital city or town he moved from one estate to another, he and his following more or less eating their way through the countryside, sometimes receiving hospitality from subjects great and small, but for the most part providing his own sustenance in his own farms. With him travelled his *hirð* or bodyguard, composed of hirdmen or retainers who had knelt and set their right hands to his sword-hilt, so pledging him loyalty, if need be to the death. In war these were the core of his army, in peace the executants of his authority, and without them he was

[1] *Corpus Juris Sueogotorum Antiqui*, ed. C. J. Schlyter, Stockholm, 1834, I, 36.

nothing. Most would be men of his own country, drawn from the length and breadth of the land by report of a king's valour, good faith, and generosity; but some would be professional fighters plying their trade where the rewards looked best, Danes loyal to an English king, Norwegians and Swedes in Knut's Thingmannalíð. The hirdmen were the king's elect—or it might be better to say their lord's elect, for any great man with wealth, power, and fame could maintain a retinue, though here as elsewhere a king would seek pre-eminence. From them most was demanded, to them most was given. Swords, helmets and battle-harness flowed from the king, arm-rings and torques; he clothed their bodies with tunics of silk and cloaks of squirrelskin and sable, and their bellies he filled with choice foods and mead from the horn. For those who earned them there were axes inlaid with silver, and for those who wanted them women. And friendship with their own kind, and music and merriment in hall, with minstrels, jugglers, collared dogs, and skalds whose wrists were gold-haltered. And when the need arose, friendly embassies and punitive forays, the exaction of scat and recovery of dues, service at home and overseas, war and wounds, hard deeds and sometimes death. 'Sweet is mead—Bitter when paid for!' These were the two sides of the medal, service and reward, and kings throve best when both were unstinted.[1]

The royal revenues derived in large measure from the royal estates. It is uncertain what, if any, dues connected with religion and its practices might come the king's way, as is reported of Uppsala in respect of the king of the Swedes; but in any case his outgoing expenses would not be light either. He received a share of the confiscated property of outlaws and felons, and while the kingdoms were in the making the conquest of a neighbour or rival implied sequestration. He could make limited demands on his subjects for national works and instruments of defence; when his kingdom was at war he took command of its fighting forces. The

[1] These generalizations may seem to do less than justice to Hans Kuhn's researches on the *hirð* in 'Die Grenzen der germanischen Gefolgschaft', *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte, Germanische Abteilung*, LXXIII, 1956, pp. 1–83. Kuhn's thesis is that there was a decisive break of some three and a half centuries between the abandoned *comitatus* of early Germanic times and the revived *hirð* of the late Viking Age. The new-style *hirð* should in that case be considered a product of Anglo-Danish civilization, welcomed and adopted at home in Scandinavia. I owe the reference to L. Musset, *Les Invasions: le second assaut*, pp. 251–2.

royal prerogative connected with the patronage of merchants and the safe conduct of goods, the very circumstance that trade could not take place except under a helm of power, was a considerable source of wealth to him. Of national taxes in the modern sense the viking world knew nothing, but clearly a king benefits by the prosperity of his subjects, whether this comes from good use of the soil, a developing trade, or the seizure of wealth abroad. Kings and kings' sons could take part in all these activities; Svein Forkbeard of Denmark and Olaf Tryggvason of Norway collected huge danegelds in England, and Olaf Eiriksson of Sweden earned the title Skött-konung, Scat-king, for his extra-territorial exactions; *Íslendingabók* (of the 1120s) records that the kings of Norway from Harald Fair-hair to St. Olaf levied a tax on emigrants from that land to Iceland; while the interest of the first of these monarchs in the trade out of Finnmark, and his stake in its profits, though rather freely presented by Snorri Sturluson in his *Egils Saga* (1220–5), is confirmed by his subjügation of the famed viking provinces of the south-west, whose inhabitants had long taken toll of the Frisian handlers of the northern trade in furs, hides, ivory, and down. Of Harald's son Bjorn we hear that he had merchant ships voyaging to other lands, acquiring thereby costly wares and such other goods as he needed. His brothers called him the Trafficker (*farmaðr*) or Chapman (*kaupmaðr*) (*Haralds Saga Hárfagra*, 35), and though the witness is late there is no reason for not believing it to be true in kind. Of the solicitude shown by Danish monarchs for the maintenance of trade we have already had occasion to speak in the case of Godfred and the Danevirke, Harald Bluetooth and the Wends, and king Svein, and we shall soon be observing the benevolent and profitable patronage bestowed on Helgö and Birka by the kings of central Sweden. Further, the right of a king to strike coins and control currency, though exerted comparatively late in Scandinavia, was a fruitful source of power. Part of the process whereby many kings became few, and the northern kingdoms achieved greater unity, we have already outlined in our Book Two, and the subject will be pursued in Book Four. In the later reaches of the Viking Period the power of a Christian king would be powerfully sustained by the Christian Church, with its learned clerks, diplomatic skills, and administrative experience. 'Men of prayer, men of war, men of work,' said our English Alfred. 'Without these [a king] cannot perform any of the tasks entrusted to him.' But with them, and a

'well-peopled land', he was a king indeed! In any case, the sense of dynasty was strong in the three northern countries, so much so that on the occasions when power in Norway was transferred to the lords of Hladir they never took the royal title, but were content, by will or perforce, to perpetuate their ancestral dignity of jarl.

The free man in possession of land and stock, the bondi (ON. *bóndi*, earlier *búandi*, from *búa*, to live, dwell, bide, have a household) ranging from smallholder to franklin, was, we have said, the back-bone of a Scandinavia which, like the rest of Europe, was over-whelmingly pastoral and agrarian. Few such lived far or long from soil, seasons, crops, and beasts. Where arable land and pasture were extensive there would be many farms, and often small villages, as in much of Denmark, and southern and central Sweden; elsewhere the population would be thin and scattered, as almost everywhere in Norway and Iceland, northwards in Sweden, and in many of the Baltic islands. The bondi might be many things besides, such as sailor, trader, viking overseas, and in the northern areas hunter and fisher, but almost certainly he would still be a farmer, even if his absences or acres were extensive enough to require the labour of other men, free or thrall. There was a rough and ready (and persistent) classification of the Norse colonists of the Atlantic islands as farmers with a fishing-boat or fishermen with a farm, both categories being ploughers of land and sea; and it serves none too badly for dwellers on the prodigious litoral of the Scandinavian peninsulas and islands. The feeling for land of one's own was intense; in Icelandic tradition one of Harald Fairhair's chief enormities was his (reputed) infringement of the hereditary right to land of the *óðalsmaðr* or owner of an allodium.[1] Such love for one's

[1] The most famous written expression of this feeling is to be found in the Icelandic *Njáls Saga*, of the late thirteenth century, and owes much to art and nature. It tells how the saga-hero Gunnar of Lithend was riding off to exile when he was thrown by his horse and so alighted that he stood with his face looking back to his home. 'Lovely is the hillside,' he said, 'so that it has never looked lovelier to me, the cornfields white, and the new-mown hay. I shall ride back home and not leave it.' And so he did, knowing that death was the price of his return.

In the main the cornfields at Lithend would be of barley, which yielded both flour and malt and was of the first importance as a means to food and drink. Barley was the typical Scandinavian *korn*, though rye, oats, and (in the southern regions only) a little wheat were grown. Bread was made, and

patrimony was natural in those whose fathers felled trees, drained marshes, cleared fields of stones, tamed heath and mountain pastures, broke iron furrows, and when the frost-giants fought against them brought their little worlds through winters so cruel that in the spring the enfeebled animals had to be carried in arms from the barns on to the life-giving feeding-grounds. It was the same need and craving which carried Norwegians to the Atlantic islands and to America; while in England in the ninth century the Danes not only conquered land but are held by some to have purchased it with the price of conquest. A varying number of farms and cots with their ground, plus a varying amount of common land and grazing, constituted the minimal local unity, with varying title, but bound together by common interest, eleemosynary function, dues and services, law and religion. Aggregations of such units constituted a province, however entitled. And it was the aggregation of provinces which could lead to a boundaried king-

prized, but a great deal of *korn* was consumed in the shape of *grautr*, porridge or gruel.

Other foods grown in the Scandinavian lands, including the Atlantic colonies, were beans and peas, turnips and cabbage. ('Does he intend to be sole ruler over all the lands of the North?' asked the indignant St. Olaf concerning king Knut; 'Does he mean to eat up all the cabbage of England himself?') Garlic and angelica were culled and in places cultivated. Where nuts grew nuts were eaten; where berries were found berries were gathered, to be enjoyed fresh, strained for their juices, or employed in the manufacture of a winy drink. The Icelanders made moderate use of edible seaweed.

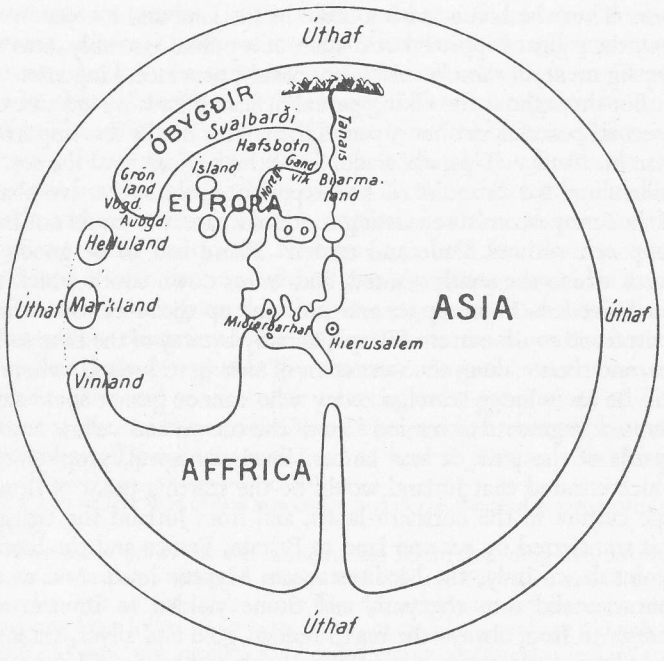
A most impressive piece of viking ploughland has been found at Lindholm Høje, where it had been preserved under a sudden sand-drift. Not only a 'washboard' of wide furrows is visible, but even the wheel-tracks of the viking farmer's last carting (Oscar Marseen, *Lindholm Høje, Beskrivelse af udgravninger og fund*, Ålborg Historiske Museum, n.d. (1962?)). There is a set of plough-marks on the floor of the grave at Gronk Moar, Isle of Man (See Plate XIII, G. Bersu and D. M. Wilson, *Three Viking Graves in the Isle of Man*, Society for Med. Arch., 1966).

For completeness' sake we mention meat and fish, much of this last dried, as staples of northern diet, and milk and its products, butter, cheese, and ambrosial skýr. And see Roesdahl, pp. 55–6 and 122–5.

Grass was of immense importance as the basis of animal husbandry. Among Icelanders of one's own generation one still encounters a passionate love of green growth, at times approaching a mystique. This, rather than a dubious philological argument, lends support to the notion that *Vínland* (Wineland, North America) began life as *Vinland* (Grassland), though the saga-writers and the land-naming practice of Eirik the Red's family speak against it.

dom. Thus the bondi, with a stake in the land and a voice in the law, the right of approval or dissent at a public assembly, was the key figure at all these levels, farm, parish, province, kingdom.

But throughout the viking period in Scandinavia we are aware of a second peaceful, or almost peaceful, activity hardly less important than husbandry. This was trade. Since the beginning of the second millennium B.C. Scandinavia had experienced the successive phases of the European culture existing south of it, and this could not have happened without trade and traders. There had to be goods up north which the south wanted, and wares down south which the north needed. Thus copper and tin came up the river routes from central and south-eastern Europe, notably by way of the Elbe to the sea, and thence along the west coast of Slesvig to Jutland, where he will be an unlucky searcher today who cannot garner some small blunted fragments to remind him of the brown and yellow amber-hoards of the past. It was amber, lovely, magical, prophylactic, which ensured that Jutland would be the starting-point of Bronze Age culture in the northern lands, and from Jutland the treasure was transferred by sea and land to Britain, France and the Iberian Peninsula, to Italy, the Mediterranean, Mycene itself. And as the centuries slid into the past, and Stone yielded to Bronze, and Bronze to Iron, always the north needed gold and silver, ceramics and filigrees, glassware, fine fabrics, jewels and wine; and the south was greedy for the winter harvest of bearskins and sables, squirrel and marten, for walrus ivory and reindeer hides, wax and ship's cables, and always slaves, and a little amber. Dealings in these or similar commodities would continue to the end of the Viking Age. Admittedly it is at times difficult to know whether certain goods and coin from abroad accumulated in the north as a result of warfare, piracy, or honest trade. Irish bronzes and the western European so-called 'Buddha bucket' of Oseberg; Scandinavian and Slavonic pottery at Wollin; Arabic, German, and Anglo-Saxon coins on Gotland; kufic silver, Arabic and Rhenish glassware, Frisian cloth, and Frankish weapons at Birka; Swedish iron ore and slag at Hedeby; these are not to be explained without some reference to trade. Or that entire rollcall of valuables we have listed before and will need to list again: slaves, weapons, furs, malt, wine, fruit, sea-ivory, cables, ornaments, silks, woollens, fish and fish products, timber, nuts, reindeer antlers, salt, millstones, livestock, combs, pots, fats, coins, hacksilver, even European hoods and gowns in Greenland.



19. THE WORLD CIRCLE OF THE NORSEMEN
After A. A. Bjørnbo.

Also, the frequent occurrence of weights and scales, with bars of silver, in Scandinavian graves is substantive evidence of the mercantile calling. The total weight of trade is not calculable, but must have been considerable, and we have frequent mentions of trade goods and trading voyages in the written sources, too.

The best known of these to the English reader is Ottar (Ohthere) the Halogalander's account of his economy and travels, inserted by king Alfred of Wessex in his translation of Orosius, probably in the early 890s.

Ohthere said to his lord, king Alfred, that he lived farthest north of all Norwegians.[1] He lived, he said, in the north of the country alongside the Norwegian Sea. He said, though, that the land extended a

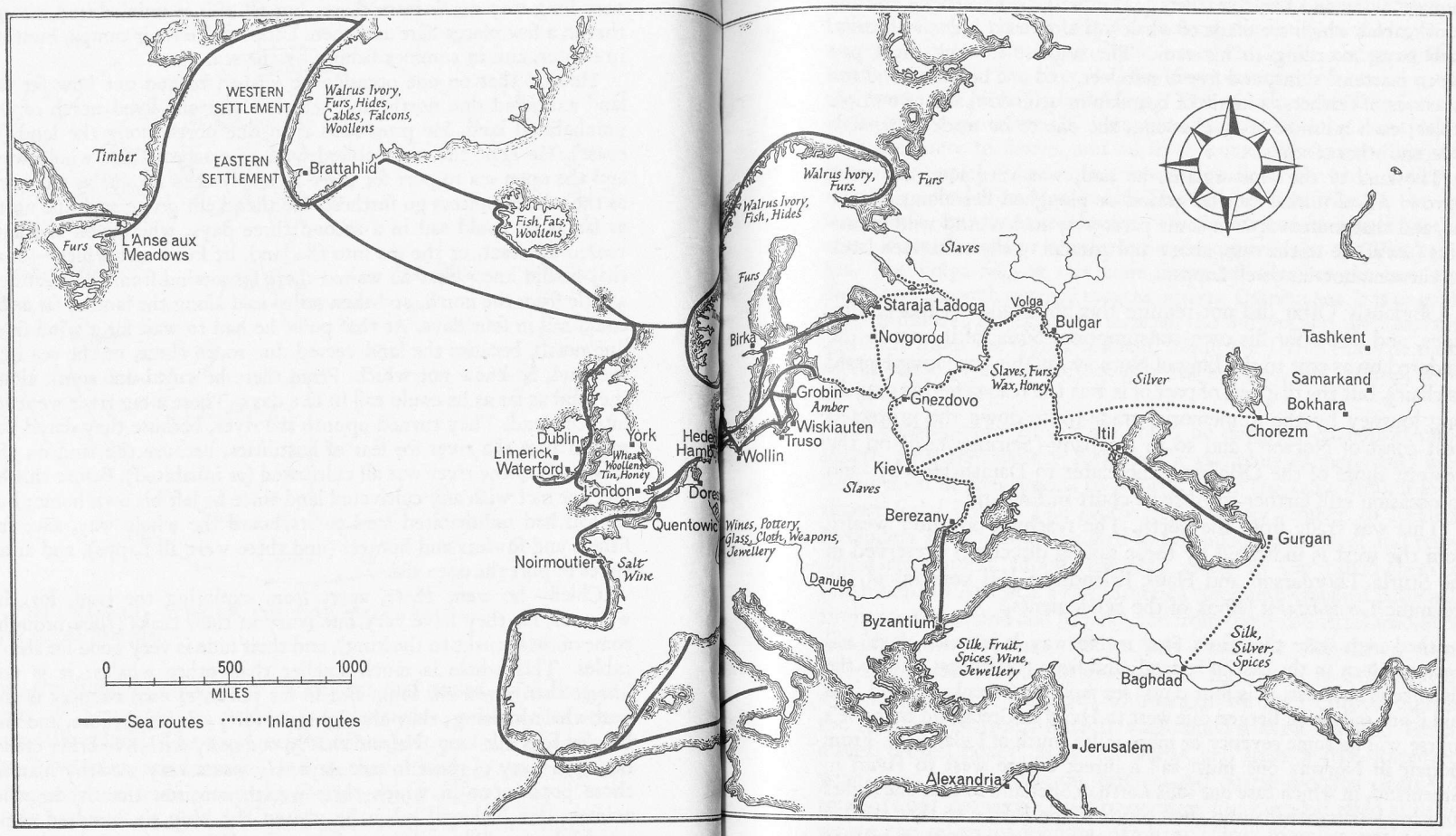
[1] There is general agreement that he lived somewhere in the Malangenfjord-Senja-Kvaløy area, *c.* 69°N.

very long way north from there; but all of it is uninhabited, except that in a few places here and there Lapps make their camps, hunting in winter, and in summer fishing by the sea.

He said that on one occasion he wished to find out how far the land extended due north, and whether any one lived north of the uninhabited land. He proceeded then due north along the land (*or* coast). He kept the uninhabited land to starboard the whole way, and the open sea to port for three days. By then he was as far north as the whale-hunters go furthest. He then kept going still due north as far as he could sail in a second three days, whereupon the land veered due east, or the sea into the land, he knew not which[1]—save that he did know that he waited there for a wind from the west and a little from the north, and then sailed east along the land as far as he could sail in four days. At that point he had to wait for a wind from due north, because the land veered due south there, or the sea into the land, he knew not which. From there he sailed due south along the land as far as he could sail in five days. There a big river went up into the land. They turned up into the river, because they dared not sail on past the river for fear of hostilities, because the land on the other side of the river was all cultivated (*or* inhabited). Before this he had not met with any cultivated land since he left his own home; but he had had uninhabited land to starboard the whole way, save for fishers and fowlers and hunters (and these were all Lapps), and at all times to port the open sea. . . .

Chiefly he went there, apart from exploring the land, for the walruses, for they have very fine ivory in their tusks (they brought some of these tusks to the king), and their hide is very good for ship's cables. This whale is much smaller than other whales: it is not longer than seven ells long. But in his [Ottar's] own country is the best whale-hunting; they are eight and forty ells long, those, and the biggest fifty ells long. He said that in company with five other crews he killed sixty of these in two days. He was a very wealthy man in those possessions in which their wealth consists, that is, in wild animals. He had still when he visited the king six hundred tame unsold beasts. These beasts they call reindeer; six of them were decoy reindeer. These are very costly among the Lapps (*Finnum*), for with them they capture the wild reindeer. He was among the foremost men in the land; even so, he had not more than twenty head of cattle and twenty sheep and twenty pigs, and the little that he ploughed he ploughed with horses. But their wealth consists for the most part in the tribute which the Lapps pay them. The tribute consists in

[1] Ottar had reached the North Cape. He would thereafter proceed as far as the White Sea and Kandalaks Bay.



MAP 3. THE VIKING WORLD AND TRADE ROUTES

animals' skins and birds' feathers [i.e. down], in whalebone and the ships' cables which are made of whale's [i.e. walrus] hide or of seal's. Each pays according to his rank. The highest in rank must pay fifteen martens' skins, and five of reindeer, and one bearskin, and ten measures of feathers, a kirtle of bearskin or otterskin, and two ship's cables; each must be sixty ells long, the one to be made of whale's hide, the other of seal's. . . .

The land of the Norwegians, he said, was very long and very narrow. All of it that can be grazed or ploughed lies alongside the sea, and that moreover is in some parts very rocky. And wild mountains (*moras*) lie to the east, above and parallel to the cultivated land. On these mountains dwell Lapps.

Obviously Ottar did not require this abundance of ivory, furs, hides, and down for his own consumption. Some of it, maybe, he rendered up as scat to the king of Norway (at this time king Harald Fairhair), but the disposal of part of it was the reason for his month-long journey by the immemorial trade-route down the protected west coast of Norway, and so to Kaupang (Sciringesheal) on the western shore of the Oslofjord, thereafter to Danish Hedeby, and on occasion still farther to Alfred's court in England.

This was trade from the north. The reaching out after wealth from the west is indicated by these sailing directions preserved in the Sturla Thordarson and Hauk Erlendsson [H] versions of the Icelandic *Landnámabók* (Book of the Settlements).

Learned men state that from Stad in Norway it is seven days' sail west to Horn in the east of Iceland; and from Snæfellsnes, where the distance is shortest, it is four days' sea west to Greenland. And it is said if one sails from Bergen due west to Hvarf in Greenland that one's course will lie some seventy or more miles south of Iceland [H. From Hernar in Norway one must sail a direct course west to Hvarf in Greenland, in which case one sails north of Shetland so that one sights land in clear weather only, then south of the Faroes so that the sea looks half-way up the mountainsides, then south of Iceland so that one gets sight of birds and whales from there.] From Reykjanes in the south of Iceland there is five days' sea to Jolduhlaup in Ireland [H. *adds* in the south; and from Langanes in the north of Iceland] it is four days' sea north to Svalbard in the Polar Gulf. [H. *adds* And it is a day's sail to the unlived-in parts of Greenland from Kolbeinsey (*i.e.* Mevenklint) in the north.]

The great serpent-ring of Rus and Swedish trade is outlined thus by the author of the *Russian Primary Chronicle*:

A trade route connected the Varangians with the Greeks. Starting from the Greeks, this route proceeds along the Dnieper, above which a portage leads to the Lovat. By following the Lovat, the great Lake Ilmen is reached. The river Volkhov flows out of this lake and enters the great Lake Nevo [Lake Ladoga]. The mouth of this lake (*i.e.* the Neva River) opens into the Varangian Sea [the Baltic]. Over this sea goes the route to Rome, and on from Rome overseas to Tsargard [Constantinople]. The Pontus, into which flows the river Dnieper, may be reached from that point. The Dnieper itself rises in the upland forest, and flows southward. The Dvina has its source in this same forest, but flows northward and empties into the Varangian Sea. The Volga rises in this same forest but flows to the east, and discharges through seventy mouths into the Caspian Sea. It is possible by this route to the eastward to reach the Bulgars and the Caspians, and thus attain the region of Shem. Along the Dvina runs the route to the Varangians, whence one may reach Rome, and go from there to the race of Ham.[1]

The documentary evidence could be deployed at considerable length. Anskar travels to Birka in the company of merchants who forfeit most of their goods to pirates, while the saint himself loses almost forty books. The Norwegians supply timber to Iceland, Icelanders supply Eirik the Red in Greenland with meal and corn, and Greenlanders supply coloured cloth to the broad-cheeked inhabitants of America. From America come unblemished pelts and timber to Greenland and Iceland, and from those countries woollens, seal-oil, sea-ivory, fats, falcons and (save for floe-riders, from Greenland only) white bears, back to the marts of Scandinavia, whence they were dispersed southwards through Europe. Across the Irish Sea Norse merchants maintained a brisk trade in Welsh slaves, horses, honey, malt and wheat, and Irish or Irish-imported wine, furs, hides, whale-oil, butter, and coarse woollen cloth.[2] A treaty of 991 between Olaf Tryggvason and king Ethelred aims to secure the safety of foreign merchant ships, together with their crews and cargoes, in English estuaries, and a full respect for English ships encountered abroad by vikings. That Danes and Norwegians were frequent traders into London (the Danes with a 'more-favoured nation' clause) may be deduced from a twelfth-century city custumal which appears to refer to conditions during

[1] English translation S. H. Cross and O. P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, Cambridge, Mass., 1953, p. 53.
[2] A. H. Williams, *An Introduction to the History of Wales*, Cardiff, 1941, I, 157.

the reigns of Knut and Edward the Confessor.[1] Meanwhile the Church strove to bring humanity and sometimes theology into the slave-trade. We read of the Rus from Kiev buying silk in Byzantium and horses and slaves in Regensburg. 'Pereiaslav on the Dnieper,' said Svyatoslav their lord, 'where all riches are concentrated: gold, silks, wine and various fruits from Greece, silver and horses from Hungary and Bohemia, and from Russia furs, wax, honey, and slaves.' We read of the Arab merchant of Cordoba, Al-Tartushi, visiting Hedeby in the mid-tenth century, from whence the (English?) merchant Wulfstan had sailed to Truso some fifty years earlier. Al-Musadi and Muqqadasi report on the wares of the Rus at Bulgar on the Volga bend, just below the confluence of that river and the Kama: sables, squirrel, ermine, black and white foxes, marten, beaver, arrows and swords, wax and birchbark, fish-teeth and fish-lime, amber, honey, goatskins and horsehides, hawks, acorns, hazel nuts, cattle and Slavonic slaves. Some of these the Rus had brought a prodigious distance out of the cold and spectred north, by a three-months journey from a dark and sunless land facing the northern ocean. Ibn Fadlan describes the merchants themselves, as he saw them on the Volga in 922:

I have seen the Rus as they came on their merchant journeys and encamped by the Atil (Itil, Volga). I have never seen more perfect physical specimens, tall as date palms, blond and ruddy; they wear neither *qurtaqs* (tunics) nor caftans, but the men wear a garment which covers one side of the body and leaves a hand free. Each man has an axe, a sword, and a knife, and keeps each by him at all times. The swords are broad and grooved, of Frankish sort. . . . Each woman wears on either breast a box of iron, silver, copper, or gold; the value of the box indicates the wealth of the husband. Each box has a ring from which depends a knife. The women wear neck-rings of gold and silver. . . . Their most prized ornaments are green glass beads. . . . They string them as necklaces for their women.[2]

[1] Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 533.

[2] Amin Razi's version of Ibn Fadlan's *Risala*, of 1593 but maybe based on a good early MS., has the following interesting details: 'In place of gold the Rus use sable skins. . . . The Rus are a great host, all of them red-haired; they are big men with white bodies.' I have by kind permission used the version of H. M. Smyser, 'Ibn Fadlan's Account of the Rus with Some Commentary and Some Allusions to Beowulf', in *Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honour of Francis Peabody Magoun*, New York, 1965, pp. 92–119. Other recent renderings will be found in Brøndsted, *The Vikings*, 1965; A. Zeki Validi Togan, *Ibn Fadlan's Reisebericht*, Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes, xxiv, 3, Leipzig, 1939; M. Canard, 'La relation du voyage d'Ibn Fadlan chez les Bulgares de la Volga', in *Annales de l'Institut d'Études Orientales*, Algiers, 1958, xvi, pp. 41–6. I have not seen A. P. Kovalevsky's translation into Russian of 1939 and 1956. A new and direct translation from Arabic into English is needed, if only to reassure those who like myself know no Arabic.

. . . When they have come from their land and anchored on, or tied up at the shore of, the Volga, which is a great river, they build big houses of wood on the shore, each holding ten to twenty persons more or less. Each man has a couch on which he sits. With them are pretty slave girls destined for sale to merchants. A man will have sexual intercourse with his slave girl while his companion looks on. Sometimes whole groups will come together in this fashion, each in the presence of the others. A merchant who arrives to buy a slave girl from them may have to wait and look on while a Rus completes the act of intercourse with a slave girl.

. . . When the ships come to this mooring place, everybody goes ashore with bread, meat, onions, milk and *nabid* [an intoxicating drink, perhaps beer] and betakes himself to a long upright piece of wood that has a face like a man's and is surrounded by little figures [idols], behind which are long stakes in the ground. The Rus prostrates himself before the big carving and says, 'O my Lord, I have come from a far land and have with me such and such a number of girls and such and such a number of sables,' and he proceeds to enumerate all his other wares. Then he says, 'I have brought you these gifts,' and lays down what he has brought with him, and continues, 'I wish that you would send me a merchant with many dinars and *dirhems*, who will buy from me whatever I wish and will not dispute anything I say.'

Contemplating this picture (which might be considerably enlarged) of Danes, Norwegians, Swedes, Gotlanders, and Ålanders driving trade with peoples as varied and distant as the Lapps of Finnmark and the Baltic Fenns, the Greeks and Arabs of the East and Spain, Slavs and Germans, Franks and Frisians, Irish and English, and the Atlantic island-dwellers from Faroes to Labrador, we must not forget that there was much trade both between and within the Scandinavian countries themselves. Trade often allied to manufacture, in soapstone pots and iron goods, for example. The twelve rough-finished axe-heads found near Grenaa in eastern Jutland, threaded on a stave of spruce, were a Norwegian or possibly

a Swedish export to Denmark. We have already remarked on Swedish iron-ore and slag at Hedeby. But our pressing task now is to look briefly at the growth of the Scandinavian merchant towns.

The Viking Age was a period remarkable for the rise, development, and sometimes decline, of towns and market-places. The Norseman abroad, whether as invader, settler, or merchant, needed havens and bases. Sometimes he took into his use towns already in existence, sometimes he established them for his convenience, from Limerick on the Shannon to Kiev on the Dnieper. Many of these we have had, or shall have, occasion to mention in other contexts, and the same is true of certain of the Scandinavian home marts also. Most of the towns they established at home were shaped by two considerations: accessibility for the merchants who needed to use them, and protection from the pirates who wanted to prey on them. For the ampler the volume of trade the stronger the temptation to privateering.[1] Over long periods the south-west coast of Norway, the Øresund passage, and the Baltic were infested with pirates. Adam of Bremen is endlessly indignant on this theme. There is much gold in Zealand, says he, accumulated by pirates who ravage the coasts of southern Norway; between Zealand and Funen (Fyn) lies a pirate den, a place of terror for all who pass by; Fehmarn and Rügen are the haunts of robbers who spare none that pass that way; it is the distinction of the Sembi, or Pruzzi, that they succour mariners attacked by pirates;[2] even the natives of Greenland, greenish from the sea-water whence the country derives its name, trouble seafarers by their piratical attacks. Scores of references in the Icelandic sagas, and almost as many in Snorri's *Heimskringla*, relate to pirate haunts, ships' crews out viking in Skagerrak, Kattegat, and Baltic, raids on coastal and sometimes inland towns, and the

[1] And the ampler the volume of wealth secured from viking raids abroad the stronger the compulsion to trade at home. It is the merchant's immemorial privilege to redistribute the superfluous coin of wealthy clients. (See P. Grierson, 'Commerce in the Dark Ages', in *Trans. Royal Hist. Society*, 5th Series, IX, 1959, pp. 123–40.)

[2] This occasions a useful note on the fur trade. 'They (the Sembi) have an abundance of strange furs, the odour of which has innoculated our world with the deadly poison of pride. But these furs they regard, indeed, as dung, to our shame, I believe, for right or wrong we hanker after a martenskin robe as much as for supreme happiness. Therefore, they offer their very precious marten furs for the woollen garments called *faldones*' (IV, 18). Trans. F. J. Tschan.

taking of merchant ships in Scandinavian waters. That cool repository of Norse worldly wisdom, the *Hávamál*, advises the farmer not to move far from his weapons when out in the fields; the crew of a merchantman needed no such warning, for every sail was read as hostile till it proved friendly. Even as the merchant ship or ferry carried arms, so the towns between which they plied were protected by being sited away from the sea, inside narrow fjords like Hedeby and Lindholm Høje, on inland lakes like Birka and spray-free Sigtuna, on rivers leading from such lakes like Aldeigjuborg, Old Ladoga, or within bays where islands, shoals, and complicated channels made the approach slow and observable, as at Wiskiauten, Kaupang and, presumably, Truso. In addition many of the towns were given strong man-made defences, like the northern fort and look-out station and the semicircular rampart at Hedeby, the rock-fortress and town wall of Birka, and the earthwork stronghold of Grobin. Even so, the emergence of towns, and especially of towns with mints, was clearly consequential upon the growth of royal power and an increased social stability. Their number was substantial. 'Along the North Sea and the Baltic coasts, like blind eyes, lie the vanished towns of the Vikings, the sites of Northern Europe's oldest trading centres, following the winding route from the mouth of the Rhine along the coast of Jutland right up to Lake Mälar in the north. If you think of the traders of those times—wherever they came from or wherever they were bound—a picture of trading towns, once swarming with life, but now dead, springs to mind: the Frisian town of Dorestad; Hedeby in the south of Denmark; farther north, still in Denmark, Lindholm Høje, on the Limfjord; the Latvian Grobin; the Norse-Slav Wollin; the Estonian Truso; the Swedish Birka; and, in southern Norway, Skiringssal [Kaupang].'[1] And these were by no means all. By the end of the Viking Age Norway had seen the birth of Trondheim-Nidaros, Bergen, and Oslo; Sweden knew Skara, Lund, and Sigtuna; Denmark had well-established centres of population at Ribe, Viborg, Århus and Ålborg, Odense and Roskilde, some of them centres of mercantile and religious life, some royal creations. On the other hand, Old Uppsala and Helgö were much or entirely fallen away, and Lindholm Høje was about to disappear under its mantle of blown sand, so leaving the way open to the development of Ålborg at the same eastern end of the Limfjord.

[1] Brøndsted, *The Vikings*, pp. 149–50.

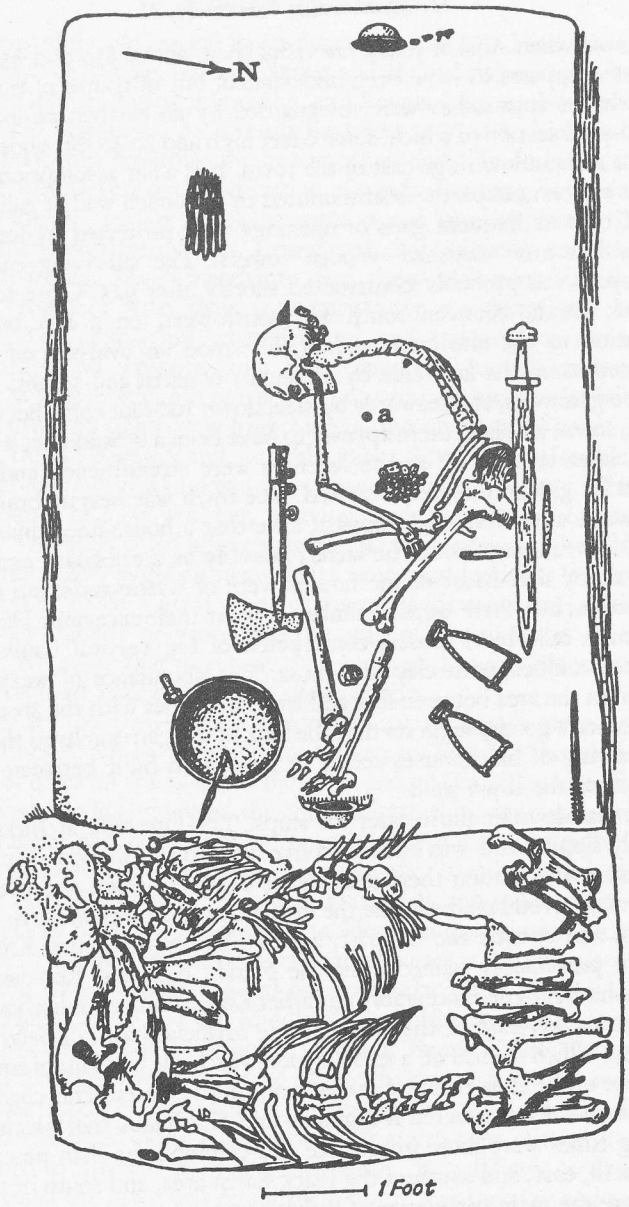
Many of the old market towns have been excavated and studied, Birka by the Swedes Hjalmar Stolpe and Holger Arbman, Hedeby by the German Professor Jankuhn, and Kaupang by the Norwegian Charlotte Blindheim. As a result we know a good and increasing deal about their structure and history, their daily life, and their role in the manufacture and distribution of goods. Kaupang, it appears, was a summer market only (the name means 'market-place'). The permanent settlement was strung out and without man-made defence-works. Many merchants died there and were buried in boats, together with their instruments for weighing gold and silver. The connection with England and Ireland was strong; ornaments and weapons from those countries have been found there, as well as Rhenish pottery and western glassware, and half a dozen assorted coins come from Mercia, the kingdom of Louis the Pious, the Arab world, and, possibly, Birka. Mrs. Blindheim thinks that large quantities of down were exported from Kaupang. There is evidence of metalworking, weaving, and manufacture in soapstone. The mart stood adjacent to the wealthy region of Vestfold, and presumably supplied many of its needs and luxuries. It would also appear to be a good point of assembly for merchants sailing south to Hedeby or proceeding by way of the Øresund to the Baltic. We know that merchant ships were glad to sail in company as a safeguard against piracy in those waters.

Security from enemies and accessibility to friends were considerations much in the minds of those who founded the trading town of Birka on the island of Björkö in Lake Mälar. The incoming merchant, having traversed the thirty labyrinthine miles of islands and skerries east of Stockholm, must complete a further eighteen miles of observed navigation through the island-studded lake before reaching Björkö. The island is so lonely and quiet under its birch glades today, its remains so mouldered in grassy earth, that it requires a strong effort of the imagination to see it as it was, a hub of traffic whose spokes reached out to England and Frisia in the west, Lake Ladoga and the Middle Volga in the east, Uppsala and the fur-bearing lands in the north, Gotland, Truso, Wollin, Hedeby, and all that lay beyond them, to the south. But such it was, one of the most important marts of viking Scandinavia. Its site is identifiably the so-called Black Earth area in the north-west of the island, darkened as this was by human habitation. It is difficult to determine when the town was established, but it was thriving and well

known when Anskar made his visits there about 830 and 850. At first it appears to have been undefended, but in course of time its landward approaches were safeguarded by an earthen rampart, a 550-yard section of which, some 6 feet high and 20-40 feet wide, still runs along a low ridge east of the town. It is a fair assumption that this earthen rampart was surmounted by a wooden wall or palisade, and that its frequent gaps or openings were protected by formidable but now vanished wooden towers. The surviving eastern rampart was probably constructed shortly after 925. Close to the Black Earth, between south and south-west, on a low but in relation to the site commanding hill stood an oval-shaped fort, protected on the land side by a rampart of earth and stones, with three gateways, and seawards by steepdown 100-foot cliffs. Between fort, town, and lake there appears to have been a beacon site, which was later levelled off as the defences were strengthened and the need for garrison houses increased. The town was heavily built up between waterfront and rampart, save that a house-free boundary was left running inside the latter, possibly as a safeguard against assault by fire. Most of the houses were of wattle-and-daub construction, but there were a number of what their excavator Holger Arbman calls blockhouses, constructed of big vertical baulks of timber caulked with clay and moss. The abundance of weapons found in the area between fort and town, together with the absence of women's goods, suggests that the bulk of the garrison lived there, but a ring of blockhouses seems to have been built between the town and the town wall.

A seaside mart must cater for ships. The foreshore at Birka is gently sloping and was entirely convenient to the shallow ships of the time. In addition there is evidence of oaken jetties and breakwaters at several places inside the fortified area. Immediately to the north, and outside the rampart, are two natural harbours, Kugghamn, presumably named after the Frisian cog, and Korshamn, 'cross-harbour', or conceivably an earlier Kornhamn, 'corn-harbour'. Farther away, east of the town, is the artificial basin of Salviksgropen, which opened off a small lagoon which has now disappeared because of the slow rising of the land out of the water. This change of water-level has affected Kugghamn and Korshamn, too, which in viking times were more impressive and commodious than now.

North, east, and south of the Black Earth area, and south of the fort, are the main cemeteries of Birka, containing more than 2,000



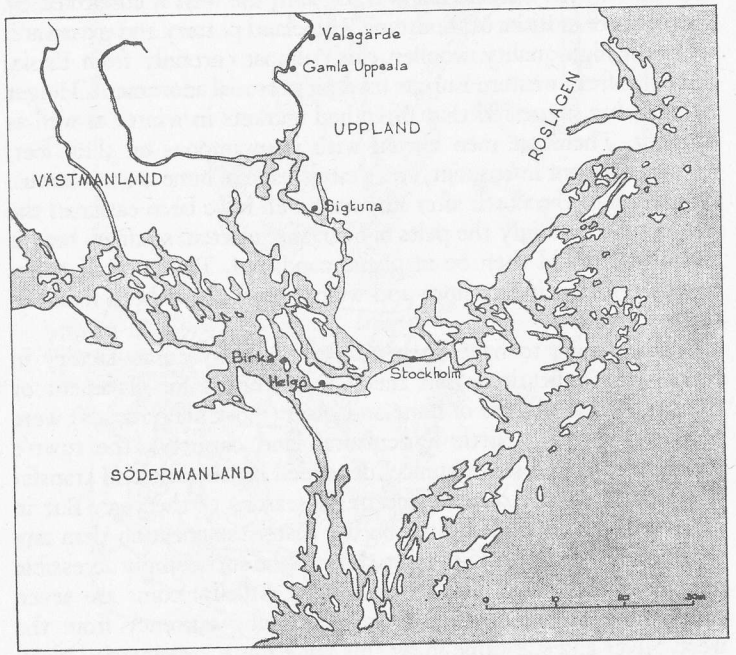
20. BIRKA GRAVE, NO. 581.

graves, most of them grassy barrows, large and small, but including many fine chamber graves also. The wealth of recoverable grave goods here is unparalleled in any other viking settlement. The richly furnished graves of chieftains, warriors, merchants, and their womenfolk have been excavated, to reveal the high standard of living here in the ninth and tenth centuries. In the grave illustrated (Birka 581) a fighting man has been laid to rest with everything he could require in the next world: two shields (one at his feet, one above his head), axe, sword, dagger, knife, two dozen arrows (we presume with a wooden bow), two spears, stirrups, and two horses, as well as a comb and bowl and other objects. A silver dirhem (*a*) found under the skeleton, which must have been minted 913–33, allows us to date the interment in the period 913–*c.* 980. Less splendid but equally revealing are the graves of merchants with their fine balances and weights, and the graves of men and women containing goods and coins indicative of the town's trade. Rimbert writes of its connection with Dorestad, and trade with the west is confirmed by the presence in Birka of handsome Rhineland pottery and glassware, scraps of high-quality woollen cloth almost certainly from Frisia, and coins from western Europe used for personal adornment. Holger Arbman has suggested that Birka had markets in winter as well as summer. There are men buried with ice-crampons on their feet, ice-picks are not infrequent, and skates made of bone are numerous. Progress into the north after furs may well have been easier in the winter, and certainly the pelts of bear, fox, marten, squirrel, beaver and otter, would then be in prime condition. Traces of all these, together with reindeer horn and walrus ivory, have been found in the town.

There seems to have been no very extensive manufactory in Birka—just indications that metal was worked for ornament or coins, and that objects of bone and glass (most likely beads) were produced—so with little agricultural land close by, the town's prosperity, indeed its existence, depended on the sale and transfer of goods, from any quarter and at all seasons of the year. But in practice Birka depended more on her eastern connection than any other, and more specifically on trade with the surprisingly accessible regions of the Volga. Graves containing Muslim coins are seven times more numerous than those containing currency from the west. Silver and silk came in by this same route, ornamented glass, rings and necklaces, and other luxurious appurtenances of a flourish-

ing society. The Birka necklace of Plate 16 is a microcosm of the town's business interests. It is composed for the most part of beads of glass, crystal, and carnelian, but it is the additions, the inserted souvenirs or 'charms', which most excite our interest. Top left is a silver coin of the emperor Theophilus (829–42) from Byzantium; then two pendants culled from the Khazars of the lower Volga; after that come two silver wires threading one bead and five beads respectively, probably Scandinavian, followed by a fragment from an Arab silver bowl; then two more silver wires, each with one bead, and thereafter another silver wire coiled to make a disc, again probably Scandinavian, and yet another silver wire, this time strung with three beads; the next object, still bottom left, is an oblong book-mount brought from England, by what agency we cannot say; then come two round pendants, their centres hollowed, and finally a miniature silver chair.

But Birka's witness to the variety and extent of Viking Age



MAP 4. SWEDEN: THE EAST CENTRAL PROVINCES

trade is not its only claim to attention. We have earlier noted the significance of a combination of military power, an assembly for law, and a meeting-place for trade, in making possible the development of petty kingdoms in dark-age Denmark, and by implication elsewhere in Scandinavia. Birka is an example of this at a later stage of history. It is clear that it could not have come into being without royal approval. The island is small and thinly populated, and situated between the great royal estates of Uppland and Södermanland. It could be reached only by traversing the royal lands and waters, and safeguarded by none but the royal power. Hardly less significant, the island lay at the meeting-point of three different herreds or hundreds, so that the problem of what law would be observed on Björkö was quickly an urgent one. The slender evidence provided by the old Västergötland law suggests that the various regions of Sweden were accustomed to look after their own folk better than the outsider. It was cheaper to compound the slaying of a man from another province, while men from abroad had no assured atonement at all. But if Birka was to attract merchants it must unequivocally guarantee their lives and property. We cannot doubt that the necessary changes in customary law came about on the initiative of the king of the Svea, though the laws themselves would be maintained by the Birka Thing. And, indeed, Rimbert informs us that at the time of Anskar's visits Birka was governed by a Thing under the leadership of a *præfectus regis*. There must have been a delimitation of authority as between king and townspeople, but a firm rule of law had such advantages for both parties that they may be assumed to have worked in harmony. We cannot feel assured that the so-called *Bjarkeyjarréttr*, the Law of Bjarkey or Björkö, was the law of Birka on Lake Mälar, but it is a likely supposition. The Frisian, Dane, German, Englishman, Finn, Swede, Balt, Greek or Arab (if he ever showed up) was offered safety and fair play; the townsmen and local traders could look to the peaceful pursuit of riches; and the king who safeguarded these processes enjoyed esteem, privilege, and profit. This personal hold on the Birka market brought much wealth to the Swedish king, and helps account for the strengthening of the monarchy and kingdom of central Sweden during the ninth and tenth centuries.

When Birka declined it declined rapidly. Its falling away may have been helped by the change in the water-level of Lake Mälar and its southern entrance in the late tenth century, but a more

convincing explanation is the break in eastern trade which took place about 970 as a result of Svyatoslav's assaults on the Bulgars of the Volga Bend. There was no more kufic silver, no more coin from Islam. The men of Birka failed to adapt, and the indefatigable Gotlanders took over. There was no recovery, and at the beginning of the eleventh century trade moved northwards to Sigtuna.[1]

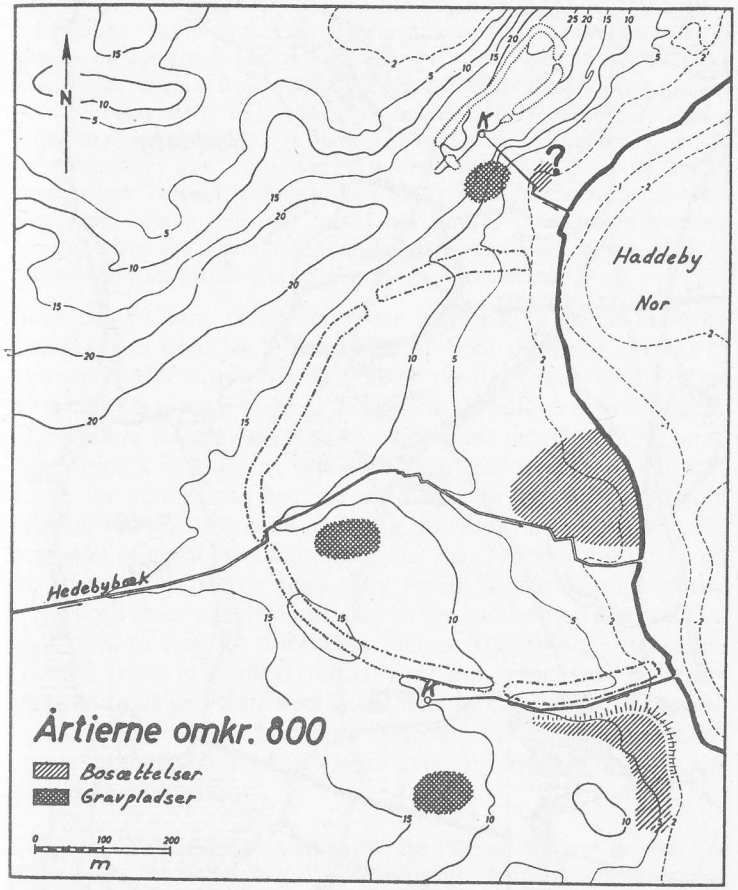
For Hedeby we are quite remarkably well informed. The town dates from the eighth century and seems to have developed from the growing together of maybe three small communities, each with its cemetery, one associated with the brook running immediately to the south of the (later) rampart, a second (rather less certain) with the still smaller stream north of the rampart (but south of the now tree-covered Hill Fort or Borghøjde), and the third with the rivulet which ran through the middle of the enclosed market-town and supplied it with fresh water. It grew rapidly in the early ninth century, and we read of it in connection with the political and mercantile ambitions of king Godfrey *c.* 800–10, and the missionary activities of Anskar in 826, 850, and 854. Thereafter the town is never out of sight. Seafarers like Ottar and Wulfstan refer to it, an exotic visitor like Al-Tartushi describes it, it experienced a Swedish interlude (see pp. 111–2 above) and a German, and was the scene of a Danish triumph under Svein Forkbeard in 983. In the mid-eleventh century its destruction by Harald Hardradi of Norway would be celebrated in verse exultant and durable.[2] Al-Tartushi was not

[1] The discovery in 1953 of rich finds covering a period of 600 years from the fifth (possibly the fourth) to the eleventh century on the island of Helgö, less than ten miles distant from Birka in Lake Mälar, has posed some so far unanswerable questions about the relationship between the two marts. Helgö dominates the water routes from the Baltic into central Sweden; it trafficked in luxury goods, and iron was smelted there. We assume it must have enjoyed a similar kind of royal patronage as Birka, which it outlasted, though its importance seems to have waned as that of Birka waxed. It certainly confirms that the Viking and pre-Viking Ages developed naturally and by steady process out of the centuries that preceded them.

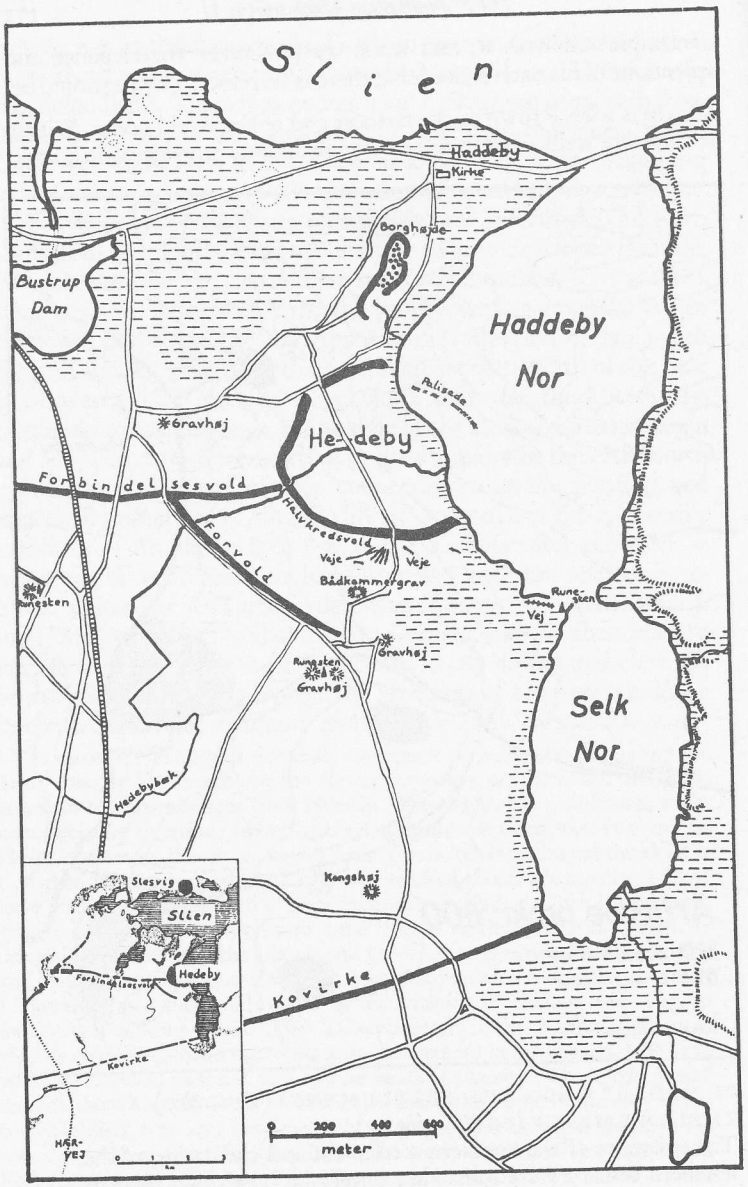
[2] There are two memorial stones in the vicinity of Hedeby which make mention of a king Svein. The 'Danevirkesten' from Busdorf (Bustrup) records that 'King Svein raised the stone in memory of his housecarle Skardi, who had travelled west but now met his death at Hedeby.' The 'Hedebysten' records that 'Thorolf, Svein's housecarle, raised this stone in memory of his comrade Eirik who met his death when the warriors besieged Hedeby. He was a captain, a man of noble birth.' The likely candidates are king Svein Forkbeard (*c.* 983) and king Svein Estridsson (*c.* 1050), but it is not certain that both stones refer to the same king Svein.

overimpressed with it, and when we remember the elegance and splendour of his native Cordoba, there is no reason why he should be.

Slesvig is a large town at the farthest end of the world ocean. Within it there are wells of fresh water. Its inhabitants worship Sirius, apart



21. HEDEBY *c.* 800. THE SETTLEMENTS (*Bosættelser*) AND THEIR CEMETERIES (*Gravpladser*)
The existence of the northern settlement and the dating of the northern cemetery are somewhat uncertain. The town rampart, of the early ninth century, is indicated by stipple lines. K. Spring.



MAP 5. HEDEBY AND NEIGHBOURHOOD

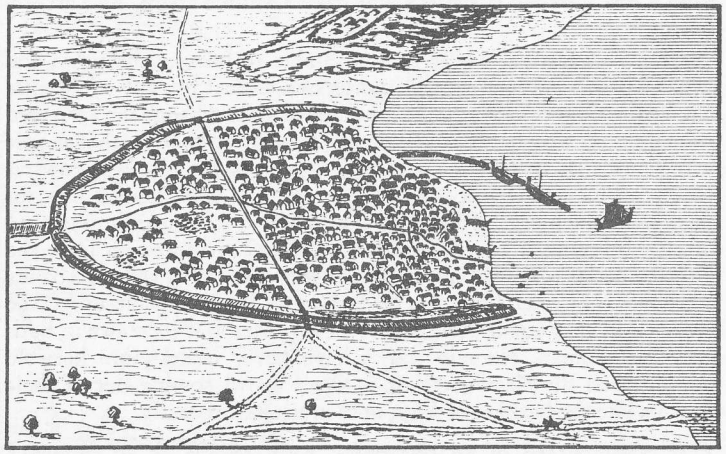
from a few who are christians and have a church there. Al-Tartushi relates:[1]

They hold a festival where they assemble to honour their god and eat and drink. Anyone who slaughters an animal by way of sacrifice has a palisade [or pole] outside his house door and hangs the sacrificed animal there, whether it be ox or ram, he-goat or boar, so that people may know that he makes sacrifice in honour of his god. The town is poorly off for goods and wealth. The people's chief food is fish, for there is so much of it. If a child is born there it is thrown into the sea to save bringing it up. Moreoever he relates that women have the right to declare themselves divorced: they part with their husbands whenever they like. They also have there an artificial make-up for the eyes; when they use it their beauty never fades, but increases in both man and woman. He said too: I have never heard more horrible singing than the Slesvigers'—it is like a growl coming out of their throats, like the barking of dogs, only much more beastly.

This commentary of an observant Arab allows us an unforced transition to what we learn of Hedeby from the archaeologists of Germany. Al-Tartushi was right about the freshwater wells,[2] many of which have come to light with their skilfully contrived water-pipes. Once we allow that to worship Sirius means nothing more than being a heathen, he was right about the mixture of religions there, for graves both heathen and Christian and written sources confirm this. He was right in saying that much fish was eaten, the exposure of infants not forbidden, and that Norse women enjoyed far more independence than their sisters in the Muslim world. That both sexes used eye make-up to render themselves attractive is as open to belief or disbelief as John of Wallingford's complaint that the Danes in England combed their hair, took a bath on Saturdays, and changed their woollens at reasonable intervals to ensnare by these novelties our high-born English ladies. On the Slesvigers' throat for song and the Arab ear for music it is not for less favoured nations to comment.

[1] Al-Tartushi's relation is preserved in the 'Travel Book' of Ibrahim ibn Jakub, *c.* 975. See H. Birkeland, 'Nordens historie i middelalder etter arabiske kilder', in *Norske Videnskabs-Akademiets Skrifter*, II, Hist. philol. Klasse, 2, 1954, Oslo.

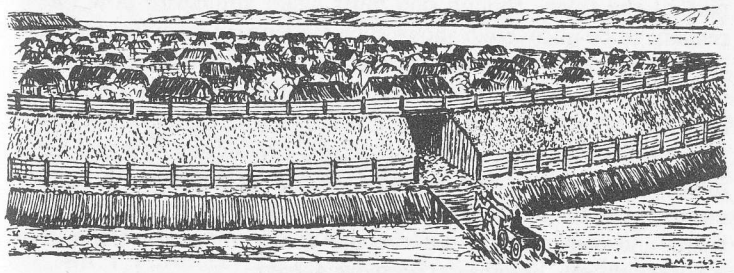
[2] Arne Hægstad, 'Har Al-Tartushi besøgt Hedeby (Slesvig)?' *Aarbøger for nordisk Oldk. og Hist.*, Copenhagen, 1964, pp. 82–92, suggests that by 'wells of sweet water' the Arab meant the local women, and that we cannot be sure his visit was to Hedeby and not to Wollin.



22. HEDEBY IN THE TENTH CENTURY (A PICTORIAL RECONSTRUCTION)

For its day Hedeby was a well-built and well-organized town. On three sides, north, west, and south, it was protected by a rampart roughly semicircular in shape and two-thirds of a mile long. To the east it was bounded by the waters of Haddeby Noor, with its notably shallow and therefore protective entrance from the Schlei. This circumvallation had begun modestly enough as a yard-high rampart with stockade and ditch, but successive developments raised it during the tenth century to well over 30 feet, with a deep moat and strong timber revetments. It had three gateways or tunnels, one south and one north for the transit of men, horses, and wagons, and one west at the point where the rivulet came in to run quietly between its piled and strengthened sides down to the fjord. The road tunnels were rather more than 6 feet wide, wedge-shaped and planked, and the roadway beneath paved with stones to ease the progress of horses' hoofs and cart-wheels. The area enclosed between rampart and sea was a full 60 acres (Birka was 32), most of it heavily built up, but with some open spaces left around the cemeteries and alongside the stream, and an open flattish strip alongside the water where ships and small boats could be beached. Here, too, are traces of a slip for shipbuilding or repairing, important

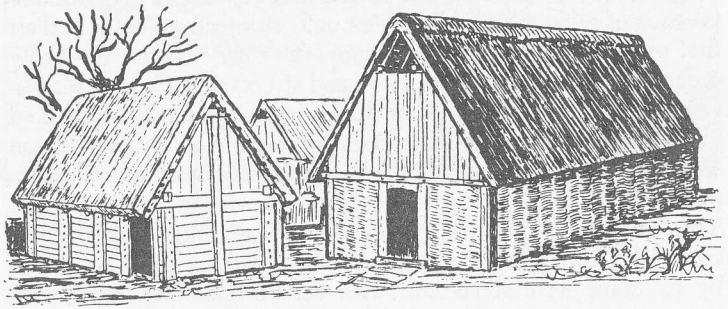
trades in a mercantile and seafaring community. Running in a 480-foot arc from north to south-east out into Haddeby Noor was a strongly built wooden mole, which protected the foreshore from floods and offered ample opportunity for vessels to tie up to its massive bollards. Judging by the admittedly limited areas so far excavated, it was a well-made and agreeable place enough, though we shall not expect to find in a constantly developing town the constructional exactitude of the military establishments at Fyrkat, Trelleborg, or Aggersborg. The numerous dwelling-houses, workshops, store-houses, barns and stables, at first sight give the impression of being where they are for no better reason than that their first owners put them there. Even so the town was not too badly ordered. There were at least two good streets; the circumvallation never needed to be enlarged or drawn in; the town was well sited in the first place, and appears to have grown in a tidy progression westwards and inwards from the first well-developed area of settlement extending northwards from where the rivulet enters the sea. The 'craftsmen's quarter' was apparently earmarked as such. The size of the town's buildings varied from 22 feet by 54 to a mere 10 by 10. Some were stave-built with vertical planking, some with horizontal, and yet others were frame-built, with wattle-and-daub panels. The roofing was normally of reed-thatch. The doors were uniformly low, and the houses dating from the town's later development westward often had a sunken floor. When a house was rebuilt this took place on the old site. In general buildings were placed so that their gable end faced the street and their attendant outhouses stood behind them. The enclosures in which the houses stood were



23. HEDEBY: THE TOWN AND RAMPART (A PICTORIAL RECONSTRUCTION)

fenced or palisaded off, and many such enclosures were furnished with a well. Some Slesvigers gave house-room to cats and dogs.

The town seems not to have been deeply rooted in its countryside. Its geographical position at the head of the Schlei, within easy reach of the Baltic and, by way of Hollingstedt, handy to Frisia, western Europe, and the North Sea, ensured it a different destiny. To it, for sale and distribution, came the wares of many countries: ceramics and glassware and perhaps frankish swords from western Europe; millstones of basalt from the Rhineland, and



24. HOUSES AT HEDEBY (A PICTORIAL RECONSTRUCTION)

from Norway pots and dishes of soapstone. From the Slav hunting-grounds came slaves, and from the eastern verges of the Baltic furs. Nor need we doubt that wine and jewellery moved through the town, with other luxury goods such as garments and fabrics. To this variety and abundance the town added its home-made quotas. One part of the town, though one must again emphasize how much remains to be uncovered, shows such evidence of manufacture that, as we have seen, its excavators at first called it the 'craftsmen's quarter', where the potter and weaver, jeweller and worker in bone and horn, plied their several skills. In the matter of workaday pots we can speak of something like mass-production. It was not the intention to rival the best imported goods: the Hedeby manufacturers aimed at the less wealthy buyer. Bronze and iron were worked there, and coins struck, but the site of the mint, like the site of Anskar's church, has not yet been discovered.

By the early eleventh century Hedeby had seen the best of its time, and it was not in its fortune to show vigour beyond the

Viking Age. Harald Hardradi burned it more or less to the ground in 1050, and there was a destructive raid by the Slavs in 1066; and eventually the town called by the Saxons Schleswig, 'the town on the Schlei', by the Danes Hedeby, 'the town at the heaths', and, on Ottar's authority, by the English *æt Hæþum*, 'at the heaths', fell into disuse and had its name and function usurped by a new Slesvig on the north side of the Sliefjord. But even more than the Swedish Birka, Hedeby presents the twentieth century with a surprisingly detailed picture of a viking town and mart from its modest beginnings in the eighth century to its brutal extinction in the mid-eleventh.[1]

[1] In addition to the fundamental studies of H. Jankuhn and Vilh. la Cour cited on p. 101 above, the reader is currently well served in respect of Hedeby by Helmuth Schledermann's two articles, 'Slesvig-Hedebys tilblivelse' in *Sønderjyske Årbøger*, 1966 and 1967, the first dealing with place-names, trade and routes, archaeological finds and topography; the second with royal power and its relevance to the town, the town's surroundings, and other Danish towns; the same author's 'Fra den Havn plejer skibe at udgå', in *Skalk*, 1963, nr. 3, pp. 15–26; Kurt Schietzel (recent leader of the excavations there), 'Neue Ausgrabungen in Haithabu', *Praehistorische Zeitschrift*, vol. XLIII-XLIV, 1965–6, pp. 303–7; the handbook of the Schleswig-Holsteinisches Landesmuseum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte, Schloss Gottorp, *Danevirke og Hedeby* (German and Danish versions), Neumünster, 1963; and in English the summary in Brøndsted's *The Vikings*, pp. 150–5.

For Birka see H. Arbman, *Birka, Sveriges äldsta handelsstad*, Stockholm, 1939, and *Birka, Untersuchungen und Studien I, Die Gräber*, Stockholm, 1943; and in English the relevant passages in H. Arbman, *The Vikings*, 1961; Brondsted, *The Vikings*; P. H. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings*, 1971, more particularly pp. 177–86.

Kaupang: Charlotte Blindheim, *Kaupang, markedsplassen i Skiringssal*, Oslo, 1953, and 'The Market Place in Skiringssal. Early Opinions and Recent Studies', in *Acta Archaeologica*, XXXI, Copenhagen, 1960. Helgö: W. Holmkvist, B. Arrhenius, and P. Lundström, *Excavations at Helgö*, I and II, Stockholm, 1961 and 1964. Lindholm Høje: Th. Ramskou, '*Lindholm (Høje)*'. Preliminary Reports in *Acta Archaeologica*, XXIV (1953), XXVI (1955), XXVIII (1957). Jomsborg: O. Kunkel and K. A. Wilde, *Jumne, 'Vineta', Jomsburg, Julin: Wollin*, Stettin, 1941. Grobin: B. Nerman, *Grobin-Seeburg, Ausgrabungen und Funde*, Stockholm, 1958.

Kurt Schietzel, *Berichte über die Ausgrabungen in Haithabu*, Neumünster, 1969ff; Sawyer, 1971, pp. 177–201; Charlotte Blindheim, 'The Emergence of Urban Communities in Viking Age Scandinavia. The Problem of Continuity', in R. T. Farrell (ed.), *The Vikings*, 1982; E. Roesdahl, 'The First Towns', in *Viking Age Denmark*, 1982.

2. Causes of the Viking Movement Overseas

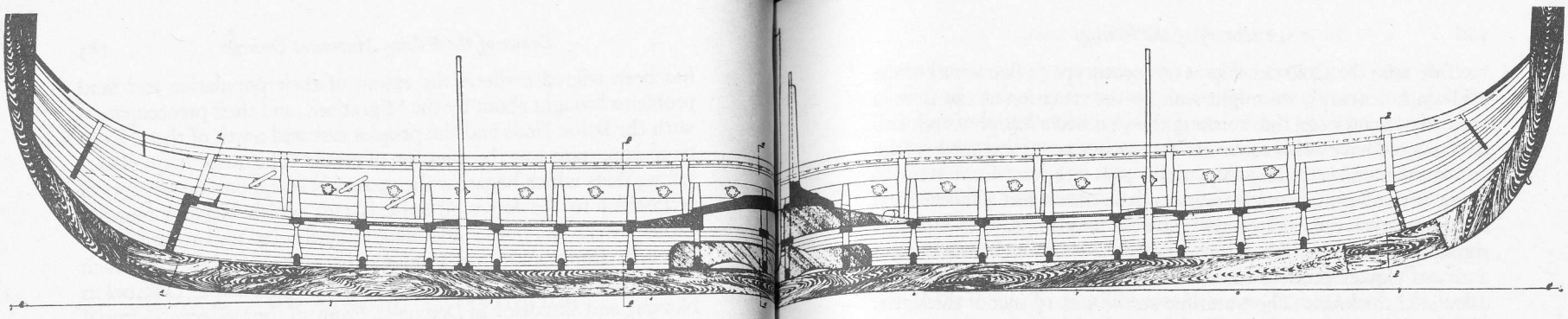
BUT IT WAS NOT AS FARMERS OR TRADERS, NOR for their arts, industry, and domestic virtues, that the vikings most impressed the ecclesiastics recording the contemporary scene elsewhere in Europe. Of the five principal modes of making a northern living, by agriculture, fishing and hunting, following a craft, buying and selling, or robbing and fighting, it was the last which made the most spectacular impact on chroniclers abroad. And naturally enough, for the pain and grief of war incite the pen more than the tamer processes of trade. The movement of disturbed, needy, or merely warlike peoples southwards out of Scandinavia against their unwelcoming neighbours in what are today the British Isles, France, Germany, Spain, and Italy, had been taking place intermittently for almost a thousand years before the viking movement proper began towards the end of the eighth century. In the second century before Christ the Teutones and Cimbri had left their homes in Jutland to test the Roman power, and before the Age of Migrations was over Öster- and Västergötland, Skåne, Bornholm, and Vendsyssel would spawn with Goths, Langobards, Burgundians, and Vandals to add to the Empire's troubles. The southern wanderings of the Eruli during three centuries, the Geat attack on Frisia, and the Angles' share in the conquest of Britain have been referred to as illustrations of this northern overspill. But so far as we can tell, the seventh and most of the eighth century was a period of respite. For this there must have been good reason, part of which will be found in the close and unrelenting struggles for regional and national power both within and between the Scandinavian countries during this time, some account of which

has been offered earlier,[1] the easing of their population and land problems brought about by the Migrations, and their preoccupation with the Baltic lands and the peoples east and north of them. Even more important was the question of means. The quick-in quick-out viking raids which began in the 790s, and still more the voyages of settlement to the lesser Atlantic islands which began somewhat earlier, were sea-borne and could hardly be undertaken until northern shipwrights had brought the sailing-ship to some such state of excellence as we observe in the vessels found at Gokstad in Norway and Skuldelev in Denmark. From all the evidence, pictorial and archaeological, the necessary command of techniques was attained about the middle of the eighth century.[2] It was then that northern sailors reaped the benefit of centuries spent traversing the leads and fjords of the Norwegian coasts, the belts and sounds and sandy entries of the Danish mainland and island-archipelago, the lakes and rivers of Sweden, and the crossing to Åland, Gotland and Öland, and all such training in seamanship as Skagerrak and Kattegat, Baltic and Baltic Gulfs provide.[3]

[1] More especially in the chapter on 'The Legendary History of the Swedes and the Danes' and the earlier part of 'The Historical Traditions of Norway to 950'.

[2] The classical early accounts of the viking ship for the English reader were those in Hjalmar Falk's chapter on 'Seafaring' in Shetelig and Falk, *Scandinavian Archaeology*, 1937; Brøgger and Shetelig, *The Viking Ships, Their Ancestry and Evolution*, 1950, new ed. 1971; and Thorleif Sjøvold, *The Oseberg Ship and other Viking Ship Finds*, 1959. Thereafter came the relevant chapters of P. H. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings*, 1962, revised ed. 1971, which among its other excellences summarized the views of Harald Åkerlund ('Áss och beitiáss', *Unda Maris*, 1955–6, and 'Vikingatidens skepp och sjøväsen', *Svenska Kryssarklubbens årskrift*, 1959); B. Almgren (ed.), *The Viking*, 1966; and Jacqueline Simpson, *Everyday Life in the Viking Age*, 1967. More recent studies, which have a far wider range of material to work on, including underwater wrecks, include D. Ellmers, *Frühmittel alterliche Handelsschiff-fahrt in Mittel- und Nordeuropa*, Neumünster, 1972, and numerous monographs and articles, e.g. Olaf Olsen and Ole Crumlin-Pedersen, *Vikingskibene i Roskilde Fjord*, Copenhagen, 1962–3, and *Fem vikingeskibe fra Roskilde Fjord*, 1978; A. E. Christensen, 'Scandinavian Ships from earliest Times to the Vikings', in G. F. Bass (ed.), *The History of Seafaring*, 1972; O. Crumlin-Pedersen, 'Skibstyper', in *KLNM*; 'The Ships of the Vikings' in *The Vikings*, Uppsala, 1978; 'Some Principles for the Recording and Presentation of Ancient Boat Structures', in S. McGrail (ed.) *Sources and Techniques in Boat Archaeology*, 1977; S. McGrail, 'Ships, Shipwrights, and Seamen', in J. Graham-Campbell (ed.), *The Viking World*, 1980.

[3] It is easy to overlook the obvious. Scandinavians were travellers by land,



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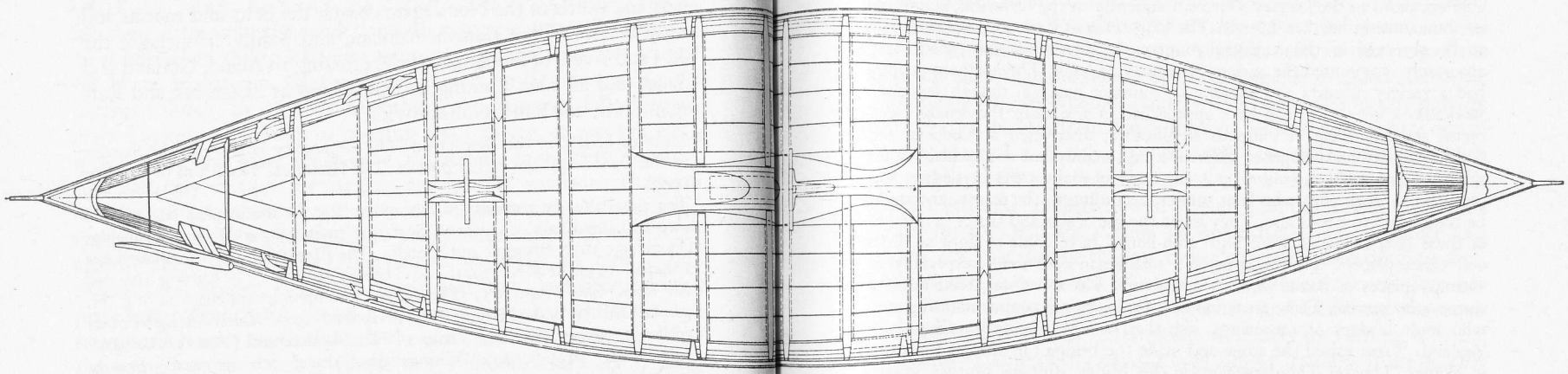

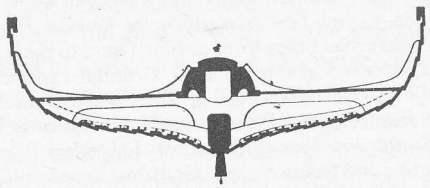

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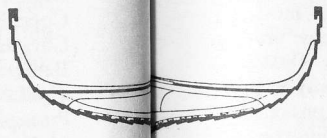

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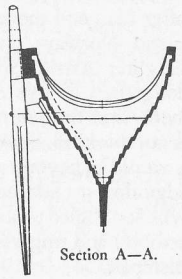


Section A—A.

Section D—D.

General arrange *of the Gokstad ship.*
S *1 : 80.*

If we take the Gokstad ship as our prototype (a fine vessel of the mid-ninth century), we might sum up the situation at the time of the early viking raids thus: around the year 800 a leader of rank and means could have at his command for ventures overseas a seaworthy and manoeuvrable sailing-ship, some 76½ feet long from stem to stern, with a beam of 17½ feet, and a little over 6 feet 4 inches from the bottom of the keel to the gunwale amidships. The Gokstad ship had a keel of 57 feet 9 inches, made from a single oak timber, and was clinker built of sixteen strakes of differing but carefully calculated thickness. The waterline strake was 1¾ inches thick, the nine underwater strakes and the three immediately above the

too. Their principal aid to locomotion was the horse, referred to on innumerable occasions in the literary sources, frequently in the historical, and found in abundance in heathen burials. The long trails of loose-roped pack-horses to be observed in the Icelandic countryside almost till the present day accurately represented the ancient Scandinavian habit. The northern peoples had a variety of carts and wagons for summer haulage, though few such workaday conveyances can have approached in splendour the ornate specimens, some of them of religious significance, discovered at Oseberg and Gokstad. They had sledges of different kinds, mainly but not exclusively for winter. Some scholars believe that the body of many carts or sledges was designed to work with wheels or runners according to the season, and could be transferred to a boat also. They knew the use of skis and skates (a number of these last, fashioned from pigs' shin-bones, have come to light at Birka and other places). The building and maintenance of roads, especially in swampy places or across streams and rivers, was a well-regarded form of community service. There are a number of runic stones commemorating men who built bridges or causeways, like that now in Fjenneslev Church in Zealand: 'Sazur raised the stone and made the bridge'; or that at Kallstorp in Skåne: 'Thorkel Thordarson made this bridge after his brother Vragi.' Interestingly enough, many of these inscriptions have a Christian flavour, like that on a rock at Södertalje: 'Holmfast had the ground cleared and a bridge built after his father Geir, who lived in Nasby. May God keep his soul. Holmfast had the ground cleared after his good mother, Ingigerd'; or the elaborate stone from Dynna in Hadaland, Norway: 'Gunnvor Thidrik's daughter made this bridge after her daughter Astrid. She was the most accomplished maiden in Hadaland.' Among the carvings on this stone are God (or Christ) and the Star of Bethlehem, and the journey of the Three Wise Men of the East. But the major works of this kind, like the causeway and river-bridge at Risby in southern Zealand, would be beyond private provision; and at Ravning Enge near Jelling a true bridge almost a kilometre long, built on at least 1700 strong wooden piles with maybe 800 angled posts, can hardly have been undertaken by any save Harald Bluetooth; and mighty engineering feat though it was, even that soon fell into disrepair.

waterline strake were precisely 1 inch; above this was the oar strake, 1¼ inches, and the two topmost strakes were just ⅞ inch. The gunwale was substantial, 4½ inches by 3½. The strakes were joined together by round-headed iron rivets driven through from the outside and secured inside by means of small square iron plates. The caulking was of tarred animal hair or wool. The hull was kept in shape by nineteen frames and cross-beams. The decking of pine, in this case loose so that the space beneath could be used for storage, was laid over these beams. The strakes below the waterline were tied to the frames with spruce root lashings (in the Oseberg ship with narrow strips of whalebristle, in the Tune ship with bast), a device which contributed much to the ship's flexibility. This was still further increased by a carefully systematized trenailing of the above-water strakes to wooden knees and cross-beams or, in the case of the top two, to half-ribs secured to the strakes below and butted into the underside of the gunwale. The elasticity of this part of the ship was such that the replica of the Gokstad ship sailed across the Atlantic in 1893 by Magnus Andersen (a twenty-eight day passage from Bergen to Newfoundland) showed a gunwale twisting out of true by as much as 6 inches, yet was safe, fast, and watertight. With her mighty keel and flexible frame and planking the viking ship was an inspired combination of strength and elasticity. And this power to cross seas and oceans did not exhaust her excellence as a raider. An exceedingly shallow draught, rarely exceeding 3½ feet, allowed her to penetrate all save the shallowest rivers, gave her mastery of harbourless shelving beaches, and facilitated the rapid disembarkation of men at the point of attack. By turning into the wind and making off by oar she was almost immune from pursuit by the clumsier sailing-ships of the lands she preyed on.

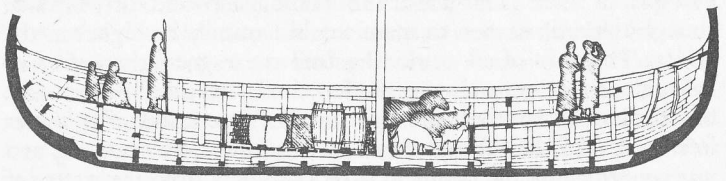
The ship was constructed almost entirely of oak. The sixteen pairs of oars were of pine, so regulated in length that they struck the water in unison. They were operated not by means of rowlocks but by closable holes in the fourteenth strake. The mast, too, was of pine, 26–35 feet tall, with a rectangular sail *c.* 23 by 36 feet, made of strips of heavy woollen cloth, strengthened it appears by a rope network, and hoisted on a yard some 37 feet long. The apparatus for bearing and supporting the mast was massive and strong. First there was the 'old woman' (*kerling*) or keelson, a prostrate block of solid oak resting on the keel over a span of four frames, with a cunningly designed socket to take the boot of the mast and assist

its raising and lowering. Above the *kerling*, supported by the 'old woman' and no less than six cross beams, was another big block of oak, the mast partner, its forward section massive and closed, to take on three sides the pressure of the raised mast when the ship was running under sail and transmit the wind's power to the hull, its rear grooved to facilitate the mast's lowering. When the mast was raised this groove was filled with a fitting oak block or wedge. From the Gotland pictorial stones it appears that sail could be effectively shortened by the use of reefing lines, and recent opinion has inclined to the view that the viking ship could be sailed across and even near the wind. This was largely due to the use of the *beitiáss*, a removable pole or tacking boom whose heavy end was seated in a socket abeam of the mast while its lighter end was fitted to the forward leech of the sail to keep it taut and drawing when the ship was sailing on the wind.[1] She was steered by a side-rudder fastened to the starboard quarter, a singularly effective instrument pronounced by Magnus Andersen to be one of the clearest proofs of northern shipbuilding skills and seamanship. On his Atlantic crossing he found it satisfactory in every way, decidedly superior to a rudder on the sternpost, and manageable by a single member of the crew in any weather with just one small line to help him. Such ships would frequently be furnished with a ship's boat, sometimes stowed on board, sometimes towed behind. Three such were found with the Gokstad ship, beautifully made and 32, 26, and 21½ feet long respectively, two with masts and all three equipped for rowing, but it is possible that the two bigger ones are not true ship's boats but grave goods. Bailing was by bucket and muscle-power; the anchor was of iron, and in general was served by a rope and not an iron chain. The ship could be tented for sleeping quarters by night. Finally it is worth re-emphasizing that the ship which carried the Norsemen overseas, whether to the British Isles, the Frankish Empire, or (self-evidently) to the Atlantic Islands, Iceland, Greenland and America, was a *sailing ship*: her oars were an auxiliary form of power for use when she was becalmed, in some state of emergency, or required manoeuvring in narrow waters, fjords, for

[1] The *beitiáss* has been reported on favourably by Captain Magnus Andersen, who crossed the Atlantic in a replica of the Gokstad ship; Captain Folgar, who in 1932 took a replica of a 60-foot knörr across the Atlantic by one of Columbus's routes and returned to Norway by way of Newfoundland; and by Captain C. Sølver, after his experience of the *Hugin* in 1949.

example, or rivers. This was true of raiding ships and carriers alike, though the ratio of men to space would naturally be higher in the raider. The ship of all work, the true ocean-goer, the *hafskip* or *knörr*, was in its general construction similar to the Gokstad ship, but broader in the beam, deeper in the water, and of a higher freeboard. This has always seemed clear from saga evidence, and was confirmed by the raising of Wrecks 1 and 3 from the waters of Peberrenden-Skuldelev in Roskilde Fjord, Denmark in 1962.

The study of the viking ship took a new turn in the fifties and sixties, when the developing science of underwater archaeology permitted the examination of a substantial number of vessels of different types and sizes which, unlike the early exemplars, were neither grave-goods nor of a sacrificial nature, but vessels built for a lifetime of hard work before finding their more or less natural end and resting-place. The picture is still far from complete, but what impresses at once is the hitherto undemonstrated variety of northern shipbuilding. The sagas preserve many names for warships, *skúta*, *snekkja* (taken into French as *esnèque*, the general word for a Norse pirate vessel, and into Russian as *shneka*), *skeið*, *dreki* (dragon-head), *karfi*, as well as the generic *langskip* (longship), and these between them represent a spread of from six to twenty oars a-side. Longships, levy-ships, or defence ships (*leiðangrsskip*, *landvarnarskip*), always assuming that this last is a genuine viking term, could be very big indeed and deploy much manpower, sometimes more than a hundred men. Olaf Tryggvason's *Long Serpent* is described as having thirty-four oars a-side, and Knut, we are informed, would build a longship of sixty benches, but we await the discovery of any such formidable monsters. The five Skuldelev ships now on display in their waterside museum by Roskilde suggest a comparable range on a more realistic scale in respect of the carriers of cargo. These ships were sunk in the channel there *c.* 1000, to prevent a seaborne incursion. Wreck 2 is a longship, 29 metres long and 4.2 wide, fully capable of moving 50–60 men over to England; Wreck 5 is a small warship, 18 m. by 2.6. But the real finds proved to be Wreck 3, oak-built, 13.3 m. by 3.3, and Wreck 1, built mainly of pine, 16.6 m. by 4.6. In these we discern a coaster and a deep-sea carrier respectively—the first of their indispensable kind to yield up their secrets to the shipwright and archaeologist. Students of the western voyages may well hold Wreck 1 in esteem as representative of the *knerrir* which maintained the Iceland–Greenland–Vinland routes, even if their beginning was with the Gokstad ship. With her open



25a. LENGTHWISE SECTION OF SKULDELEV WRECK 1, A SEAGOING CARGO-SHIP WITH A HOLD AMIDSHIPS

carrying-space or hold amidships, her half-decks fore and aft protective of further freight, she is estimated to have been able to carry a cargo of 15–20 tons in a carrying-space of 30–35 cubic metres. With her good design, sound construction, tractable sail and shallow draught, this northern-type clinker-built, double-ended keel boat, could carry her cargo to all marts, all coasts, and put it safely ashore. The Gokstad ship, Skuldelev 1, and their kinds were the culmination of a long process of experiment which began at least as far back as the Bronze Age, can be charted with fair accuracy from the fourth to the seventh century, and found the right answers, particularly in respect of bow, stern, and keel, and the all-important business of mast and sail in the eighth. When the Viking Age was over bigger ships would be built, and the distinction between warship and merchantman would be sharpened, but these are developments which concern us less than directly.

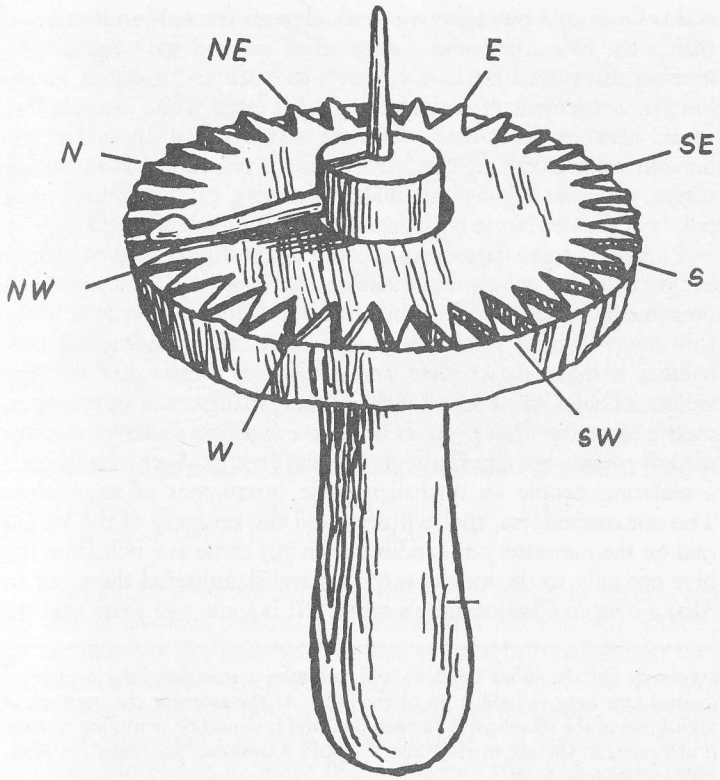
The ship of all work, we have said, was the *knörr* (pl. *knerrir*), and if we seek to understand the haven-finding art of the Norsemen it must be with this sturdy craft in mind. It is generally accepted that when the great Atlantic voyages of discovery and exploration took place in the ninth and tenth centuries the North had neither compass nor chart. How then could a Norwegian, Icelandic, or Greenland skipper in the year 1020 make his way confidently and accurately from, let us say, Bergen in Norway to L'Anse-aux-Meadows in northern Newfoundland? Clearly he had his sailing directions, and some of these have been preserved in the passage from *Landnámabók* quoted on page 162 above. First and foremost he would commit himself to a latitude sailing. This was no haphazard affair. To begin with he would move thirty miles or so north of Bergen to the landmark of Stad, because this had the same degree of latitude as his landfall in Greenland. If now he sailed due west he would

find himself after the right count of days passing north of the Shetlands, and thereafter south of the Faroes at a recognizable and prescribed distance from them. On the same course he would next traverse the ocean well to the south of Iceland and know where he was not by the later measurement in miles but by observing the birds and sea-creatures associated with those waters. On a good passage, in clear weather, and with a following wind, this part of the voyage would have taken about seven days. It would take him almost as long again to sight the east coast of Greenland about eighty miles north of Cape Farewell. Now he must head south-west and reach the west coast of Greenland either by rounding the Cape or by threading Prins Christians Sund. From here on he would be following a well-described coastal route till he reached Herjolfsnes (the modern Ikigait), with its Norse farms and haven. Ahead lay the landmark of Hvarf, and thereafter many ports of call in the Eastern Settlement, in the region of the modern Julianehåb. He was now in the warm northward-setting coastal current of West Greenland and would progress with comparative ease and plenty of directions to the Western Settlement, in the neighbourhood of the modern Godthåb. From here we assume he would continue north by the familiar route to the northern hunting grounds, to the modern Holsteinsborg or the huge island of Disco. If from Disco he turned south-west for the eastern coast of Canada he would be conforming to a classic principle of Norse navigation, to make the shortest practicable ocean passage and use the clearest landmarks. He would also stand to benefit by the frequent northerly winds of the Davis Strait. From Disco or Holsteinsborg he would reach the southerly part of Baffin Island and know what kind of coast to expect there. He must now follow the land south, for an estimated number of days, passing the big inlet of Frobisher Bay and the entrance to Hudson Bay, till he sighted the forest land of Labrador, south of modern Nain. South of Hamilton Inlet he would be looking for the white beaches of the Strand and the distinctive keel-shaped Cape Porcupine (the Furdustrandir and Kjalarnes of the sagas), and so down past Battle Harbour till in time he sighted Belle Isle and thereafter the northernmost tip of Newfoundland and Cape Bauld. From here to Épaves Bay and the Norse houses by Black Duck Brook was a defined route without navigational problems.

This, inevitably, is a crude simplification of the sailing directions a skipper and his crew must carry in their heads as they sailed the

coasts of West Greenland and Labrador. The knowledge of landmarks could be hardly less demanding on a sailor through the Norwegian skaergaard, or a newcomer threading the western islands of Scotland, though here the use of local skills might sometimes be relied on. An immense sea-lore was indispensable, the lessons to be learned from cloud formations and the colour of water, marine creatures and birds, iceblink, currents, driftwood and weed, the feel of a wind. These sailors knew the sun and stars, the arts of rough and dead reckoning, and the use of a line to search the ocean's bottom. In a good day's sailing of twenty-four hours they could cover 120 miles and more.

But for the long Atlantic voyages between Norway, Faroes, Iceland, Greenland, America, the first requisite was the mariner's ability to fix his latitude. That the Norseman could do this is certain, though there is still doubt as to his method and instruments. We read, for example, of a detailed set of tables attributed to the Icelander Star-Oddi, which gave the sun's midday latitude week by week throughout the year, as he observed this in northern Iceland towards the end of the tenth century. This or similar information recorded on so simple an object as a marked stick would give the mariner an indication of his then latitude as compared with a known place. Any observation of the midday sun, or if need be of the Pole Star, even by so crude a method as the measurement of a shadow cast at noon or the calculation of the Star's height above the horizon expressed in terms of one's own arm, hand, or thumb, was a fair guide to latitude, which on the western voyages was much more important than longitude. Because if a storm-driven mariner (and there were many such during the early voyages of discovery and the ensuing period of trade) could get himself back to his correct latitude and sail in the desired direction he must, accidents and disasters apart, reach the place he was aiming for. The extreme casualness of thirteenth-century saga sources relating to sea-voyages is possibly thus explained. A ship leaves the Oslofjord for Breidafjord in Iceland, or Breidafjord for the Eastern Settlement in Greenland, or the Eastern Settlement for Leifsbudir in Vinland, or makes any such voyage in reverse, and the full extent of our information may be that it had a following wind, an easy passage, was much delayed, or blown about, and then arrived at its destination. The casualness would be still more understandable if we could be sure that in the Viking Age the Norsemen had learned to make use of the light-



26. A NORSE BEARING-DIAL

polarizing qualities of calcite or Iceland spar (*sólarsteinn*, sun-stone), and could thus make an observation of the sun even when it was hidden from view.[1] It is reasonable to assume that they had bearing-

[1] *Flateyjarbók* and other Icelandic sources describe a phenomenon best explained by such a use of Iceland spar or something similar to make an observation of the sun. *Flateyjarbók* does so with a reference to St. Olaf of Norway in the first third of the eleventh century. The scientific principle of the polarization of light by Iceland spar was first formulated by Erasmus Bartholinus in Denmark in 1669, and in an indirect way led to the invention of the Kollsman Sky Compass, or 'twilight compass', *tusmørkekompas*, in use today by those civil airlines and air forces which ply the polar routes. It is certain that the Viking Age had no knowledge of the scientific principle

dials of a simple but effective kind, though the only indication of this is the half of a round disc of wood marked with equidistant notches discovered by C. L. Vebaek in 1948 at Siglufjord in the Eastern Settlement of Greenland. Had it been whole the notches would number thirty-two, offering a sophisticated division of the horizon reminiscent of the late Middle Ages rather than viking times, when an eight-point dial conforming to the eight named points of the Old Norse horizon would appear more natural.[1]

Finally, even so cursory an account of the viking ship cannot be left without one substantial qualification. The Gokstad ship would presumably carry a crew of thirty-two to thirty-five; it is unlikely that many raiding ships were bigger and carried more; the probability is that most of them were smaller. It is estimated that the weight of the Gokstad hull, with all her fittings, was just over 20 metric tons; the *Viking* replica of 1893 was of just under 32 register tons. It sounds less than large, but it was enough. Such vessels gave a seafaring people an unchallengeable instrument of aggression. The unexpectedness, the swiftness, and the savagery of the viking raid on the monastery at Lindisfarne in 793 came as a bolt from the blue not only to the monks surprised and slaughtered there but to Alcuin over in Charlemagne's court.[2] 'It is some 350 years that we

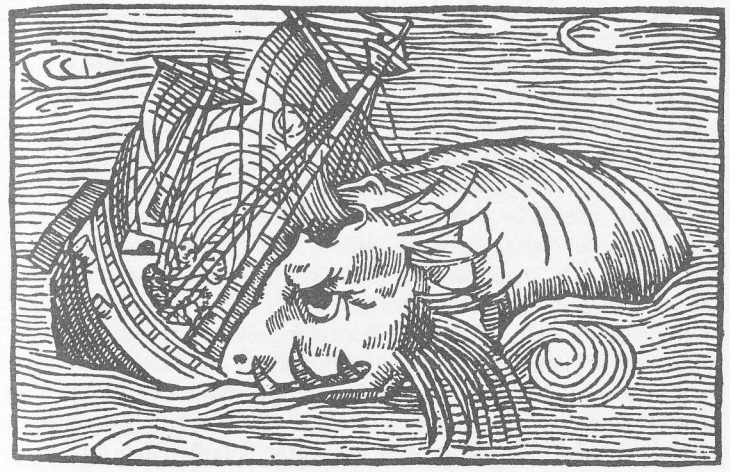
involved. On the other hand, it will not take a man handling a piece of Iceland spar long to hold it up to the light. At the moment the question of viking use of the *sólarsteinn* is an open one, and it would be gratifying to have it answered in the affirmative. See Thorkild Ramskou, 'Solstenen', in *Skalk*, 1967, nr. 2, pp. 16–17.

[1] The half-disc was found in a ruin thought to date from *c.* 1200. It has a hole in its centre which could well be for a shaft, and this shaft might well contain a shadow-pin and even a course-indicator. Not everyone accepts that the half-disc is part of a bearing-dial, but it is hard to know what else it could be. Similar but earlier finds would be useful. Carl. V. Sølver has argued convincingly for its nature and use in *Vestervejen. Om vikingernes sejlads*, Copenhagen, 1954, but is mistaken in describing it as a *sólarsteinn*. There is a useful description in English in Jacqueline Simpson, *Everyday Life in the Viking Age*, 1967, pp. 94–5. The illustration on p. 193 is after Sølver.

[2] The date of the first Danish raid is rather loosely determined as during Beorhtric's reign. He reigned from 786 to 802. The tone of the entry which deals with it in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is markedly different from that for 793:

[789, for 787]. In this year Beorhtric took to wife Eadburh, daughter of king Offa. And in his days came for the first time three ships of Norwegians from Hordaland, and then the king's reeve rode thither and tried to make them go to the royal manor, for he did not know who or what they were, and with that they killed him. These were the first ships of the Danes to come to England.

793. In this year terrible portents appeared over Northumbria and sadly affrighted the inhabitants: these were exceptional flashes of lightning, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air. A great famine followed soon upon these signs, and a little after that in the same year on the ides of January [*read* June] the harrying of the heathen miserably destroyed God's church in Lindisfarne by rapine and slaughter.



27. PERILS OF THE NORTHERN SEAS, I: THE DEVOURING WHALE (OLAUS MAGNUS)

and our forefathers have inhabited this lovely land, and never before in Britain has such a terror appeared as this we have now suffered at the hands of the heathen. Nor was it thought possible that such an inroad from the sea could be made.' Fifty years earlier he would have been right; but now, within a period of five years, Norse freebooters plundered and slew at Lindisfarne and Jarrow in Northumbria, Morganwg in South Wales, Lambey Island (Rechru) north of Dublin in Ireland, in Kintyre and the Isle of Man, and at the sacred island of Iona on the west coast of Scotland. In 799 they raided various islands lying off Aquitaine in France. All this was a presage of calamity which the future would not belie.

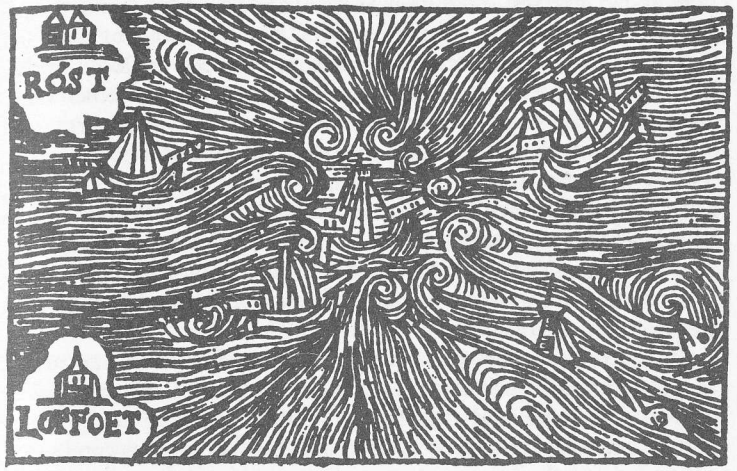
The reasons for this fresh stirring of 'tumultuary arms and numbers' were many. For Alcuin the sackers of Lindisfarne were God's instrument of wrath visited upon the sins of the people, but this, even if true (and Alcuin quotes Jeremiah 1:14 in support),[1] is not enough. The deeper causes of the viking movement overseas were rooted in human nature: the northern peoples had needs and ambitions, were prepared to make demands, and had the will, strength, and technical means to enforce them. They wanted land to farm, wealth to make life splendid, or bearable, and some of them wanted dignity and fame. Trade, colonization, piracy, and war would get them these things, and such could be practised only at the expense of neighbours near and far. The northern irruption surprised most contemporaries, but can surprise no one today.

A long tradition as well as the Migrations themselves testifies to recurrent overpopulation and land-shortage in Scandinavia. 'Each of these countries ("those peoples whom the northern pole aspects") was like a mighty hive, which, by the vigour of propagation and health of climate, growing too full of people, threw out some new swarm at certain periods of time, that took wing, and sought out some new abode, expelling or subduing the old inhabitants, and seating themselves in their rooms.'[2] A case in respect of the Viking Age proper was deployed by Johannes Steenstrup in his mighty *Normannerne*.[3] The limitations imposed on both crop and animal husbandry in parts of Scandinavia in early times by sea, mountains,

[1] 'Then the Lord said unto me, Out of the north an evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land.'

[2] Sir William Temple, 'Of Heroic Virtue', 1690, quoted from *Works*, iii, 363, 1814. The quotation, *populos quos despicit Arctos*, he takes from Lucan. Temple had canvassed northern matters with men as notable as Count Oxenstern (Oxenstierna) and Olaus Wormius, and shared their views and at times their errors. The bees and the hive he found in Jordanes.

[3] *Normannerne*, 4 volumes, Copenhagen, 1876–82. The two best-known examples of the tradition are Hengest's tale to Vortigern about the expulsion of surplus 'Saxons', best known through Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, vi, 10, Wace, and Layamon (the earlier stages of the tradition are discussed in K. Schreiner, *Die Saga von Hengist und Horsa*, 1921); and the emigration of the Gotlanders, as recounted in *Guta Saga*, ed. Pipping, Copenhagen, 1905–7. For a trenchant account of the latter, and the similar stories in Paulus Diaconus, *Historia Langobardorum*, Dudo, *Dudonis sancti Quintini de moribus et actis primorum Normanniae ducum*, and Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, with a reference back to Herodotus, see L. Weibull, 'En forntida utvandring från Gottland', in *Nordisk Historia*, I.



28. PERILS OF THE NORTHERN SEAS, 2: THE DEVOURING WHIRLPOOL (OLAUS MAGNUS)

latitude, and cold, especially in respect of Norway and upper Sweden, were always constrictive, and at times severely so. Domiciled in this circumscribed and vulnerable region was a vigorous and fast-breeding race whose numbers increased considerably from the seventh to the tenth century. Their social habits were shaped to increase, though we must regard with caution the written evidence for Norse polygamy. That men like girls, concubines, mistresses, and that those who can afford them frequently acquire them, is not a very particularized indictment. According to Adam of Bremen, every Swede whose means allowed had two or three wives, while the wealthy and high-born set themselves no limit. It sounds excessive, even for Swedes, while Ibn Fadlan's comments on the crude sexual arrangements of the Rus in Russia (see p. 165 above) express along with some truth the satisfaction of a man who manages these things more elegantly at home.[1] On the most parsimonious count

[1] Their king, he says further, had forty women in his harem, and when he wished enjoyed them in public, while his hirdmen were supplied with girls for service and joy exactly like Harald Fairhair's champions back in Norway. 'Glorious is their way of life, those warriors who play chess in Harald's court. They are made rich with money and fine swords, with metal of Hunaland and girls from the east.' (*Hrafnsmál*, 8.)

Harald had nine sons who grew to manhood; his son Eirik Bloodaxe had eight—and all needed a substantial patrimony. Great men had wives by marriage-contract and, if they wished, by loose-bridal. For any save the very poor a quiverful of sons was welcome. They were proof of a man's virility, the extension of his right arm, and along with poetry or a standing stone his best memorial to posterity. They also manned ships and, in viking terms much the same thing, filled armies. But they had to be provided for. Above all they had to be fed. There were too many men at home, of chieftains' and farmers' sons both, and 'Out they must, for the land cannot contain them'. The tools of empire are younger sons, and throughout Scandinavia these were in good supply.

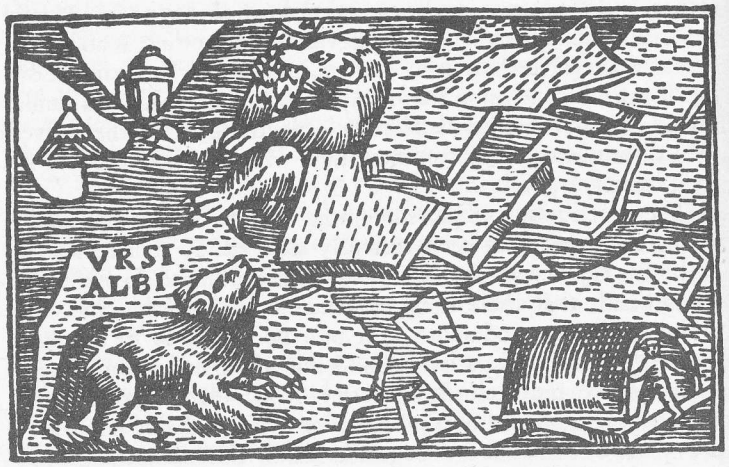
It does not, of course, follow that their numbers were enormous, as is sometimes argued for and sometimes contested. All they had to be was sufficient. And this, in terms of far-reaching conquest or permanent colonization, they often failed to be. Peoples can be too numerous for their own meagre acres, yet not numerous enough to fill and hold shires, provinces, and realms abroad.

For one particular category of men there was a second reason why out they must. There must have been periods of violent disturbance in Denmark during the first thirty years of the ninth century, while Godfred established his realm and cleared its coasts of sea-kings, and later, when the sons of king Godfred fought the sons of an earlier king Harald for supremacy; and, equally, a long process of dynastic strife in the petty kingdoms of Norway during the hundred years preceding the accession of Halfdan the Black *c.* 840. In wars of succession losers lose all, making a shift abroad welcome to all parties. We know very little about the earliest Norse incursions into the Shetland and Orkneys and thereafter the Hebrides, but the first settlements, *c.* 780, appear to have been peaceful and carried out by men concerned not with plunder but with a search for pastureland where they could live the life and reproduce the institutions they were used to. Vikings seeking a base came later, nearer the middle of the ninth century, in part, one suspects, because pressure was building up more strongly at home. The main areas of colonization as opposed to conquest were explored and taken over after 860. In the case of those dispossessed Danish princes who found lands in Frisia, and the Norwegian vikings who found themselves at loggerheads with Harald Fairhair, we have indicative if not over-reliable information as to names and circumstance, and the record can be extended down through Gold-Harald in the one kingdom and Olaf Tryggvason in the other. Who led the first attacks on Northumbria, Scotland, and Ireland, we do not know, but it is a fair conclusion that many of them were made in a similar mould, men in trouble with a lord or lords stronger than themselves, men dispossessed, men banished, men who left their country for their country's good.

The contribution of pressures from outside Scandinavia to the viking movement has been variously assessed. So considerable an authority as Johannes Brøndsted will have nothing to do with it, on the grounds that there is no evidence for it, and that the early viking raids west and south-west bear no similarity to the great movements of the migration period.[1] But where no one cause seems sufficient we must clutch at every straw—and Charlemagne's Empire as it expanded northwards after *c.* 770 probably felt quite a heavy straw to those it drove against. Clearly this had nothing whatever to do with the Norwegian occupation of the Atlantic Isles and their first raids on the British Isles, but the strong Danish reaction against the Franks and Frisians and their Abodrit allies was an important part of the complex of motives and events characteristic of that first phase of the viking movement which may be held to have terminated at the end of the second decade of the ninth century. The disturbing influence of a great power acquisitively on the move was as marked in early times as in our own, and few survivors of the 1930s will feel that British and French politicians acted with more wisdom or courage then than did Godfred between 800 and 810. If Charlemagne's conquest of Saxony did nothing more to the north, it hardened Denmark militarily and drew its attention south; while the harm done to Frisia weakened the Empire's northern defences and established the most natural Danish raiding route south as the easiest and most assured. Soon, in any case, the political condition of the Empire, England, and Ireland would exert not pressure but an irresistible pull on all Norsemen to come down and exploit their exposed coasts, ill-knit territories, and their immense and ill-defended treasures.

We have mentioned trade, and trade's dark sister, piracy (pp. 166–7 above). Both were essential to the viking movement, for the vikings practised both, assiduously. When circumstance favoured they were happy to be merchants, but when seas were undefended and

[1] *The Vikings*, 1965, p. 25.



29. PERILS OF THE NORTHERN SEAS, 3: POLAR ICE AND POLAR BEARS (OLAUS MAGNUS)

towns lay open they turned privateer. The first relevant entry in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, that dealing with the Hordalanders who encountered the king's reeve at Dorchester, and the amplified account of the episode in the *Chronicon Æthelweardi*, is symbolic. The unfortunate reeve thought they were merchants and directed them to the royal manor for the customary preliminaries to trade. But if merchants, they were rough-dealers, and for reasons which the *Chronicle* does not explain they killed him. When Norwegians next came to England they came to plunder. The process once started, no mystery remains. Loot is loot in any language, and western Europe was full of it. Ireland, England, France were the vikings' Mexico, with learning, arts, wealth, and a civilization superior to those of their northern *conquistadores*, and a similar inability to defend themselves from a numerically inferior but mobile and energetic foe. Report of the more accessible monasteries and churches, the coastal marts and riverine towns, the defenceless manor-houses and well-stocked farms, must have seeped through the viking world like water through thirsty earth. There was still a short delay: the Norwegians were taking over the sheep-pastures of the Atlantic Isles and the Southreys; the Swedes were facing east to the rivers and forests of Russia; and the Danes were at grips

with the Empire and each other. But the storm-bell was tolling and in 834–5 the breakers would come crashing in.

One other 'cause' of the viking movement invites comment. The northern peoples as the ninth century drew near had to be ready for it. Here, too, there is no mystery. Greed, self-interest, profit, advantage, describe or qualify it as one will, is endemic in human nature. Yet this is an unflattering way of describing the viking upsurge. That it was the expression of a heroic ideal is, on the other hand, all too flattering—and misleading. To see the viking movement in terms of heroic literature is like seeing the Italian Risorgimento in terms of grand opera, or the winning of the American West in terms of its equine equivalent. We have noted the three viking compulsions of land, wealth, and fame. Naturally these did not often operate separately or in isolation. They arose out of the northern way of life, and were pursued in the existing context of politics, geography, and economics. They indicate a not unusual way of thinking expressed in appropriate action. It was not even a matter of bravery, much less a heroic ideal: the vikings were no braver than the English whom they would eventually subjugate (with curious consequences for themselves), or the Welsh with whom they would fail. But by and large they were self-confident;

30. PERILS OF THE NORTHERN SEAS, 4: DRIFTWOOD AND WRECKAGE OFF GREENLAND (OLAUS MAGNUS)

today, tomorrow, or the day after they knew they had the beating, or it might be safer to say outmanoeuvring, of their enemy. Take selfconfidence and professional skill, add resource, cunning, no nonsense about fair play, a strong disregard for human life and suffering, especially the other man's, and you have a good soldier. Give a ship's crew or a mounted commando of such men a leader in whose intelligence, tactics, valour, profitability, and record of success they can trust, and you have a good unit. Multiply the units, find them a general like the famed Halfdan or Hastein, Ganga-Hrolf or Olaf Tryggvason, or a monarch like Svein Forkbeard or Knut, and you shake kingdoms. It is not surprising that the vikings prospered overseas as much as they did: the surprise is that they did not prosper more. For this, too, there were reasons, which will be discussed later. For the moment we may conclude that the viking's trade dovetailed well with the state of affairs in Scandinavia as the eighth century wore to its close. Fame, profit, change, adventure, land, women, danger, destruction, service, comradeship, command, irresponsibility, were all made realizable. And the North now had the ships.

As in Scandinavia, so at the receiving end in Europe the times were favourable to the art and practice of *víking*. From the beginning access, outrage, and escape were easy for individual and uncoordinated raiding parties. Till their sails notched the horizon of Scotland, Ireland, and the kingdoms of England, they moved in secrecy; in lucky conditions of weather and coastline they were on their prey with hardly an hour's warning; whether they strandhewed for cattle,[1] or plundered a monastery or coastal town, there would in their own phrase be 'little defence for the land'; and when the time came for them to row out and take the breeze in their sail they had soon vanished utterly. They held a comparable advantage on the national scale. Scotland, Ireland, England, Wales (and still less Russia in the east) were at no time kingdoms single and indivisible, and in 840 the Frankish Empire ceased to be such. In Scotland there was a medley of realms and races: Picts north of

[1] *strandhögg*, a shore-raid whereby vikings provided themselves with cattle, alive or slaughtered, and other stores. This was a practice eloquent of the ancient disunity of Scandinavia, where a man's loyalties were confined to his own patria, region, or petty kingdom, so that a Zealander would not plunder in Zealand (or his section of it), or a man of Sogn in Sogn, but felt free to help himself elsewhere. As the petty kingdoms were welded into larger units the custom grew displeasing to kings like Harald Fairhair and Harald Bluetooth. It had always been displeasing to those plundered.

Argyll and the Forth; Welsh in Strathclyde and Cumberland, and mingled with the Picts in Galloway north of the Solway Firth; Scots in their expanding kingdom of Dalriada (Argyllshire, Kintyre, and the islands of Bute, Arran, Islay and Jura); and Angles in Bernicia. In Ireland, true, there was a High King in Tara to whom the seven kingdoms of Connaught, Munster, Leinster, Meath, Ailech, Ulaidh, and Oriel did homage, but this was a unity more apparent than real. Between north and south there was the normal Celtic jealousy which no Golden Age contrives to charm away. Division in Wales was equally acute, and in England it was worse. In everything save material possessions Northumbria had long since declined from eminence and splendour, and the supremacy of Mercia, established in the eighth century by Ethelbald *rex Britanniae* and Offa *rex Anglorum*, broke in pieces within thirty years of Offa's death in 796. East Anglia regained its independence some time after 825 and Essex and Kent had hankerings of a similar nature. These two would submit in different degree to the emergent kingdom of Wessex under Ecgbert, though as late as 856 king Ethelwulf could be made to accept a division of Wessex which split off Kent and the provinces of the south-east. In the south-west the Welsh of Cornwall remained long unreconciled to an English yoke, and after 835 were briefly misled into thinking to exchange it for a Danish. Across the English Channel the death of Louis the Pious in 840 played straight into Danish and Norwegian hands. His eldest son Lothar, who had spent the last decade quarrelling with his father, now committed himself to quarrelling for another two with his brothers Charles the Bald and Louis the German. They defeated him heavily at Fontenoy, and the treaty of Verdun in 843 saw the end of Charlemagne's Empire. Lothar was still emperor, but his domain shrank to contain Italy, Provence, and Burgundy, and the lands running northwards to Frisia and the North Sea. All territories to the east of this Middle Kingdom went to Louis the German. They included Bavaria, Thuringia, Franconia, and Saxony, and brought him flush with the southern frontier of the Danes. To Charles went the territories west, roughly modern France between the sea and the rivers Rhône, Saone, Meuse and Rhine, and Spain down to the Ebro. Even here Brittany and Aquitaine had pretentions to independence. We may safely regard the increase of viking activity in the newly partitioned Empire as neither accident nor coincidence.