

The Vikings and Their Voyages

By A. MacCallum Scott, 1926

The Nordic races, whose homeland and breeding ground were the shores of the Baltic sea, have been a factor in European history from the earliest recorded times. The Baltic may be regarded as a kind of northern Mediterranean, round whose shores, during the dark millenniums before the dawn of history, developed a special racial type, with mental and moral characteristics of its own, and with a distinctive culture, or primitive civilization, which has been called Scandinavian.

Physically, these men of the North were long-headed, fair-haired, blue-eyed giants, of great strength, and capable of long-sustained outbursts of energy, intellectual as well as physical. They had great powers of concentration and of thinking ahead. Passionately attached to their individual liberty, they resented any authority not emanating some degree from themselves. They were adventurous by temperament, and had an extraordinary gift for adapting themselves to changed circumstances.

Not till the Viking Age did the North emerge into the light of history and 'civilized' Europe began to learn something of the homeland of this unending series of invaders. The 'Viking Age' is a label used to indicate that period of from two to three centuries, roughly, from a.d. 750 to 1000, during which the Scandinavian races - Danes, Norwegians, and Swedes - no longer content with laboriously trekking overland as their predecessors had done in all their previous invasions, took to the sea, and added a new terror to their name. They swooped down suddenly, like an eagle, seized their prey, and departed again into the unknown.

But there was another characteristic of these maritime raids which reacted on the raiders themselves. Hitherto the invading hosts had been nations or tribes on the march. They came not merely to plunder but to occupy and to settle. They remained in the Promised Land which they had won, enjoying its plenty, mingling with the natives, acquiring rapidly their culture and civilization, grafting, as it were, a more vigorous shoot on to the older stock. In a generation or two they had become a new nation.

But the raiders who came by sea were more mobile. For the first hundred years, at any rate, they seldom came in sufficient numbers to occupy territory. It was a case of loading their boats and sailing off again. They returned to their homes in the north, stored their plunder, and set forth again for more.

As the system developed, as the raids became more numerous and were organized on a larger scale, as permanent footholds began to be established on the plundered coasts, more than bullion and weapons, and costly fabrics, and delicious wines, and slaves, were carried into the north. Stowed away among the plunder was an unseen freight, the seeds of the civilization and culture of the south, ideas and thoughts which were to lead to a spiritual awakening of the race, nor merely in the territory which it occupied, but in its own homeland. Even Christianity began to penetrate these pagan fastnesses, and the Christian Church discovered that the best protection was to Christianize the hive from which the spoilers of the abbeys issued.

This taking to the sea had another effect upon the northern peoples. It brought them all together in closer alliance or association than they had ever been before. There was already a common type of Baltic civilization, more primitive than, and very different from, the Mediterranean civilization. They had their own religion, their own traditional poetry, their mystic runes for carving inscriptions, and their distinctive decorative art in which figures of animals and plants were twisted into complicated geometric designs. It had been an unconscious growth, and though the various peoples spoke similar languages, and had the same mode of life, they knew little of each other. The new facilities for intercourse by sea, the cooperation in raiding expeditions, brought them closer together, made them more conscious of their numbers and their power, and created, for the first time, a kind of rude commonwealth throughout the north of Europe.

The ship was the key to this new phase of European history, the sea-going ship. Hitherto, the ships of the Mediterranean had been mere cockle-shells and glorified row-boats. The earliest sailors of whom we have knowledge navigated the Nile and the island-strewn Aegean, and when they ventured beyond these familiar waters they hugged the coast, avoiding the dangers of the open sea. In the Baltic and the North Sea a more seaworthy boat and an even more adventurous type of seamen were evolved. The Scandinavian race had perforce to be seamen. The deficiencies of northern agriculture were made good by the harvest of the sea. As fishermen the Norsemen won their bread on stormy waters. They followed the fish shoals far beyond the sheltered fjords. They were accustomed to the tides and fierce currents and tempests of the North Sea. Inured to such perils from birth, they gradually developed a type of ship, a method of navigation and a temper of mind which enabled them to face the open sea.

The Viking movement, seen in its proper perspective, is not an isolated phenomenon, but part of a long continued process of permeation of Europe by the northern races. At the beginning of the eighth century the north was ripening for another outburst of energy. The population of Scandinavia was already too numerous for the niggard provision of nature and the adventurous temperament of the people. One must not conceive of a great locust-horde of adventurers issuing out of the northern hive and swarming over the southern lands. It was a case of small parties, the younger sons for whom there were no fields to till or forests to hunt at home, who must go out into the world to push their fortunes. The means were at hand in the long-boat, the highwayman's horse.

In the year a.d. 787 three Viking ships raided the south coast of England near Dorchester, and carried off spoil. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle this was the first of the Viking raids. Soon all the coasts of western Europe were to know the terror of the longships, with their dragon heads and their bulwark of round shields. They came to plunder, ravish, slay, and then to disappear, carrying off treasure and slaves. No one knew when they might arrive. Their sudden, swift onslaught was irresistible. Their numbers seemed inexhaustible. They sailed boldly up the great rivers into the very heart of the land. It seemed the greatest disaster that had happened to Christendom since the irruption of Mahomedanism.

But even before this date the Vikings had been known, as traders, apparently, along the shores of France, and in the Mediterranean. These were the pioneers who spied out the richness of the land and brought back to the north the report of a southern Eldorado. The mighty Charlemagne, himself the descendant of northern invaders, and the inheritor and augments of their conquests, foresaw, before his death in 814, that the flood-gates were opening for a new deluge.

In his lifetime he did nothing to stem the tide, but already the Northmen were steadily encroaching on other lands. The Swedish Vikings were engaged in a peaceful penetration of what is now Russia. They sailed up the great Russian rivers which fall into the Baltic, and established a lucrative trade with Eastern merchants who ascended the Black Sea rivers.

On the other hand, the Norwegian and Danish Vikings had their faces turned towards the West. They confined in their settlements, in the first instance, to the north of Scotland and the Isles. They mingled with the Celtic population and from the mixed race sprang a generation of even more formidable leaders. Then came the raids upon the monasteries and towns which dotted the coast of Scotland, England and Ireland.

It was in the ninth century that the deluge broke through all dams. The story of the exploits of earlier adventurers had been celebrated by the 'skalds' (bards) throughout all the homesteads of Scandinavia. The rise to power in Norway of Harold Harfagr (Harold Fair-hair) drove forth the more recalcitrant spirits to seek new kingdoms. The emigration to Scotland, the Orkneys and Shetlands, the Hebrides and Ireland became something like a tribal movement; Iceland was discovered and settled. The mixed race became more numerous.

The contact with civilization only whetted the Vikings' appetite for bolder exploits. The coasts of Flanders and of France were raided. The great rivers, the Rhine, the Somme, the Seine, the Loire and the Garonne were highways by which the Viking boats penetrated right into the heart of the richest provinces of the Empire. Arab historians tell how they swarmed along the coast of Spain, and even the African coast. They

entered the Mediterranean and penetrated as far as the shores of Italy. Simultaneously the Varangians, as the Swedish Vikings were called, had launched their ships upon the Black Sea; their 'barbaric yawp' had been heard from the walls of Constantinople. Thus the pagan Northmen had encircled Christian Europe.

By the middle of the ninth century, the Danish Vikings, no longer content with casual raids, following the example of the Norwegians in Ireland, had established permanent fortified camps at the mouths of the Scheldt, the Somme, the Seine, the Loire and the Garonne, from which bases they organized formidable expeditions into the interior, boldly challenging the military resources of the Empire. England was at the same time overrun, and King Alfred, in desperate straits, was hiding in the marshes of Athelney. The Franks were at first a helpless prey. Wherever the great rivers afforded a highway there went the Vikings. When Paris resisted and stood siege, they sailed up the river and laid waste the country far beyond. It was only gradually that the Franks learned to build fortified bridges to bar the rivers and to fortify their cities.

Lure of the Imperial City

In the year 859 Bjorn 'Ironside', together with his foster father Hasteinn, sailed round Spain, and through the Strait of Gibraltar, into the Mediterranean. There they began a systematic harrying of the coast of France. They fortified a camp on the island of Camargue in the Rhone delta, from which base they plundered the cities of the Riviera. They sailed up the Rhone, despite its swift current, as far as Valence. They even planned an attack on Rome itself.

In eastern Europe a similar process was taking place. The Swedish Vikings, or Varangians, sailing up the Neva to Lake Ladoga, and thence up the Volkhof to Lake Ilmen, had built a fort, called Novgorod, and established there the central depot for their trade with the Greek and Armenian merchants from the Black Sea. In the year 862 one of the Varangian leaders, called Rurick, established his rule over the tribes round Novgorod, and thus laid the foundations for the Russian Empire.

Three years later two other Varangian leaders, Askold and Dir, set out for Constantinople. Halting at Kiev, they founded a kingdom there which, a few years later, was absorbed in that of Novgorod. Pushing on from Kiev with a fleet of Viking boats, they shot the rapids of the Dnieper, and then launched forth boldly on the Black Sea, as on their native element, the Baltic. They took to raiding the coast of Thrace and Asia Minor, as

Bjorn and Hasteinn were doing on the shores of Provence and Italy. Two hundred small but swift and seaworthy Viking boats passed through the Bosphorus and made their way into the sea of Marmora, where they began plundering monasteries and the luxurious villas of the Byzantine nobles, almost within sight of the walls of Constantinople. In 907 Oleg mustered a fleet of 2,000 ships on the Black Sea, and again harried the environs of the Imperial City. He was unable to carry the walls by assault, but it took heavy blackmail to buy him off. The chronicles record a series of similar attempts.

Meantime, and event was happening in Norway which was to have repercussions far abroad. Here the Norse race grew up under conditions which intensified all its special characteristics. The mountains rendered communication by land practically impossible. As a rule, only a tiny strip of arable land was to be found at the head of the fjord, and on the valley floor. The scattered families grew up in almost complete isolation and independence. The fjords and island-protected sound along the coast provided sheltered water in which navigation was easy, but beyond the islands were the tempestuous waters of the North Sea and the Atlantic, teeming with fish. Here was bred a race of the most fearless and adventurous sailors of the age, intolerant of restraint, the head of each family reigning as a king in his own remote fjord.

Events were slowly shaping towards the establishment of a kingdom over the whole of Norway. The movement was strongly resisted by these independent chieftains. Harold 'Fair-hair' was the son of Halfdan, the ruler of a large fertile district in southern Norway on the Christiania Fjord, the Vik, from which the Vikings took their name. A mighty warrior and a statesman of genius, he was the founder of the kingdom of Norway. One by one, by force or by policy, he subjugated the neighboring chieftains, and re-established them as feudal earls, holding their lands on condition of their acknowledging him as overlord.

There was desperate resistance, which culminated in 872 in a great naval battle in Hafrsfjord, near the site of the present town of Stavanger. For long the issue was doubtful, but in the end, the arms of Harold prevailed.

The kingship of Harold meant political unification, uniform administration of justice, the suppression of private wars within the realm and the regularizing of relations with neighboring powers. Taxation was necessary to meet the cost, and taxation was a thing which many of the old freeholders, who had been kinglets in their own right, could not submit to. The battle of Hafrsfjord was their last stand, but even then they could not reconcile themselves to the service of Harold. Returning to their homesteads, they repaired their battle-damaged ships, then, assembling their families, and taking so much of their household goods and stock as they could, they set sail west over sea to found new homes beyond the reach of Harold.

The earliest refugees settled in the Orkney and Shetland islands, and in the Hebrides, and joined the raiding bands which were harrying the coasts of England and France. Norsemen had already been settled for nearly fifty years in Ireland, where they had established permanent bases at the chief harbors, from which rose the towns of Dublin, Waterford and Limerick. They intermarried with the native Irish, and a mixed Norse and Celtic population, with roots in the soil, had grown up. Matters were complicated by subsequent arrivals of Danish raiders who plundered Norse and Irish alike. In this strange world of strife the refugees from Norway found a welcome and an occupation.

Having successfully established themselves overseas, the refugees began to think of revenge. They turned back on their tracks and commenced raiding the shores of Norway and spoiling those who accepted the rule of Harold. Vengeance overtook them again. When Harold showed that his arm could reach the Hebrides the exiles rose like a flock of sea-birds and began a fresh migration to Iceland.

In the course of a single generation this island was colonized by one of the most remarkable communities in the world, a nation of people who had come together because they rejected the control of any central government. They had a social and moral code of their own, which on the whole they observed, but they had no central authority to enforce it. They were, in fact, a nation without a state. It was from Iceland that the wonderful saga literature emanated, source of the greater part of our knowledge of the early history of the north and the Viking Age.

The story of Ketill 'Fletneb' (Flat-nose) is typical of this period. Ketill was a mighty 'hersir' in Norway, of noble birth himself, and with his numerous children married into powerful families. When the pressure of Harold 'Fair-hair' could no longer be withstood he called together his kinsmen and made known his decision to follow the example of many noble men and fly the country. Some were for seeking Iceland, of which they had heard many pleasing news, but Ketill said: "Into that fishing place I shall never come in my old age." Rather would he try his fortune west over sea, for there he knew many lands he had harried far and wide. So he settled on one of the fjords on the coast of Scotland, and from him sprang the famous line of Orkney earls. His daughter Unn 'the Deep-minded', married Olaf 'the White' who was king in Dublin. There, brought into contact with the Irish church, she became a Christian. On the death of Olaf she returned with her family, and retainers, and much wealth, to her father's home in Scotland. Her son Thorstein 'the Red', who had harried Scotland far and wide, and made himself the master of much of the country, was at last slain by the Scots in Caithness.

Her father, having died also, Unn resolved to leave this land of unending war and to seek refuge in Iceland, where so many of her kin had already settled. She had a ship built secretly in a wood, and loading it with her possessions, set sail once more with the remaining members of her family and retainers. In the Orkneys she halted to marry off one of her grand-daughters, and another she married off in the Faroe Isles. Landing in Iceland, she took possession of a wide stretch of country on the Broadfirth Dales, and divided it up among her followers. This remarkable woman lived to a ripe old age, a Christian woman among her pagan countrymen, and when she died, there being no consecrated land in Iceland, she was buried on the beach, below the high-water mark. Many of the leading families in Iceland and Scotland claim descent from her.

Not a few of the kings of Norway had served an apprenticeship in the wild Viking life. Olaf Trugvesson, who ruled in the last five years of the tenth century, started his epic career in his infancy, and after having been a slave in Esthonia, a refugee in Russia and a soldier of fortune in Pomerania, adopted the Viking life, and harried the coasts of Scotland, Wales, Ireland and France. He joined forces with Svein (Sweyn) ' Fork-beard. the Dane, in the siege of London in 994. Olaf ' the Saint ' ruled from 1016 to 1030, and went on his first Viking cruise at the age of twelve, and for over ten years took part in raids on the coasts of Finland, Sweden, Denmark, England and France. he was a seasoned veteran, when, at the age of twenty-two, he struck the first blow in the four years' struggle that was to leave him king of all Norway.

An even more remarkable story was that of Harold ' Hardrada ' (Hard in Council), who was king of Norway from 1047 to 1066. His kingdom was still largely pagan and outside the ken of civilized Europe; but, as a soldier of fortune, he had seen service in the very center of civilization, was familiar with the brilliant Byzantine court, and had fought the battles of the Roman Empire in Asia and Africa. When his half-brother, Olaf ' the Saint ' lost his life and his throne at the battle of Sticklestad, Harold escaped and fled to Russia where the descendants of Rurick still ruled, and thence he proceeded to Constantinople, where he joined the body-guard of Varangians, or Northmen, maintained by the Greek emperor. By his wit, his courage and his craft, he soon rose to be captain of the Varangian Guard, and he led his troops against the Saracens in Palestine, Egypt and Sicily. Great was his strength in battle, but greater still was his craft in devising stratagems. He accumulated much treasure, which he prudently always sent north by trusted countrymen to await his return.

He played some part in the politics of the Byzantine court, outwitting George Maniakes, the Greek commander-in-chief. He won the perilous favor of the empress Zoe, which was turned to enmity, however, by an intrigue with another lady of the court. The palace he found more dangerous than the camp, and he only extricated himself from this coil by flight. This was the training of the man who was to rule the stubborn North, and who came within a hair's-breadth of beating Norman William in the race for the conquest of England. He was the Harold who perished at the battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066.

Five hundred years before Columbus crossed the Atlantic and set ajar the gates of the New World the Vikings had discovered America. They made repeated voyages, and planted a colony there, and established trade. Children were born to them there, and on of these American born Norsemen returned to Iceland, where hi descendants were long known. Several of them became distinguished bishops of the Christian Church. The saga in which it is narrated is the story of the discovery of Vinland, as America was called, was written by Ari ' the learned ' four hundred years before Columbus set sail.

It was inevitable that the discovery of Greenland should follow soon after that of Iceland. It was only a few days sail further west. And Greenland was but a stepping-stone to America. In the year 985 Thorfinn and his son, Eric ' the Red ', outlaws from Iceland (too wild even for that community of outlaws), settled in Greenland. Another Greenland settler, called Bjarni, driven south by fog and gale, skirted the coast of Labrador, and caught sight of the low, wooded shores of Newfoundland, and his report aroused great interest among the adventurers in Greenland. There were many who blamed Bjarni for not having landed and prospected the new country.

Leif ' the Lucky ', son of Eric the Red, bought Bjarni's ship and set out to see for himself, with thirty-five comrades. First they came to the desolate coast of Labrador, to which they gave the name Helluland, or Stoneland. Next they came to the sandy beaches and forest-clad shores of Newfoundland, and this they called Markland, or Woodland. Two or three days later they reached land again and sailed up a great river, abounding in salmon. There they built huts and wintered. The winter was mild, and days and nights were nearly equal, so they must have reached as far south as, perhaps, Massachusetts Bay. Grape vines were discovered growing wild, so they called the country Vinland, and they returned to Greenland with a cargo of timber, most precious in that treeless land.

Altogether five Viking voyages to Vinland are recorded in the sagas. Thorvald, Leif's brother, made the next voyage but he was killed by an arrow in an encounter with the natives. Thorfinn, who had married

into the family of Eric the Red, egged on by his wife, was the next pioneer. He took out an expedition of a hundred and sixty people, men and women, with horned cattle, for making a permanent settlement. They built a strong palisade around their settlement, and established a trade in furs with the natives, who, at first, were inclined to be friendly. Thorfinn's wife bore him a son there, who was called Snorri. Trouble, however, developed with the natives, and they became so hostile that Thorfinn decided to abandon the settlement. The last expedition was got up by a sister of Leif's, but owing to dissension among her followers, it came to nothing. That is the last that is heard of Vinland in the sagas. The tradition lingered in the north, but southern Europe paid little heed to the legends of the northern barbarians. It was left for a great sailor, five centuries later, to rediscover America.

Long and diligent search has been made in America for some trace of this first European colonization. Sensational discoveries of runic inscriptions are continually being reported in the newspapers, but none of them, so far, has been able to stand scrutiny. The Dighton Rock, on the beach of Massachusetts was long supposed to bear a Norse inscription, and some experts even professed to read the runes. They have now been proved to be Indian picture-writing. The alleged 'Norse Tower' at New Port, Rhode Island is the remains of a windmill built about 1670-80 by governor Arnold. And so with all the others. The only indubitable evidence that remains is the saga story written before Columbus was born.

A survey of the North at the beginning of the tenth century reveals the Viking race, in this particular manifestation, spread far beyond the bounds of Scandinavia and Denmark, its original home. It was firmly established in Iceland, in large areas of the British Isles, in Normandy, on the southern shores of the Baltic and in Russia. On the development of all these countries it exercised a powerful and determining influence. This is not the place to tell of the wars of Alfred the Great with the Danes, of the reign of Canute, the Dane, over England, of the conquest of England by William the Norman, of the earls of Orkney, of Somerled, and the Lords of the Isles, and of the battle of Clontarf, at which the Irish king, Brian Boru, falling himself, like Samson, dragged down the pillars of Norse rule.

The Viking strain reveals itself, not merely in physical conquests, and the establishment of kingdoms, but in the trend of civilization and in the moulding of institutions. It is to the mixed races in which this potent blood has been blended that we owe feudalism, and representative institutions for the government of democracy, and the federal form of empire, and the Protestant Reformation and much else that forms the basis of Western civilization and culture which we now enjoy.