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THE VIKING DANES

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The Viking Danes

was published by the National Travel Association of Denmark,
in connection with the "Viking-Expedition 1949"
in order to mark the 15th centenary of the arrival of
Hengest and Horsa in England, 449 A.D.

Drawings of the Viking Ships by Ernst Hansen
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Further information concerning the literature on the subject
is to be found in Viggo Starcke's: *Denmark in World History*.

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First published by
The National Travel Association of Denmark
1949

Republished by Henry George Forlaget in
1995

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Electronic Reprint

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It is not easy to be a Viking nowadays. One is easily regarded as a pirate and buccaneer, even if one crosses the North Sea in a primitive boat on the most peaceful errand in the world. But neither was it easy to be a Viking in olden times. One's visits were not always welcome, and the hard life on the sea demanded skilled seamanship and dauntless courage.

Our age looks down on the Vikings as barbarians. But if the Vikings could see what the cities of Europe look like today, can we be sure that they would feel such a reproach justified?

The Vikings must be seen against the background of their own times. It is not fair merely to look at their obvious faults and failings without also considering their creative abilities.

The broad waters of the North Sea separate England from Denmark. But in spite of the three hundred and fifty miles which divide the two countries, it is the sea which has knit their peoples closely to each other. Even today maritime transport and trading form the link which binds the real interests of the two countries closely together. England is an island-kingdom. So too is Denmark. In ancient times, it consisted of the peninsulas of Jutland and Skaane, with five hundred islands lying between. Just because the land was so indented by Sounds, Belts and Fjords, the Danes early became a sea-faring people, and the free life upon the sea has been instrumental in producing their ubiquity, their enterprise and their talent for business.

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Until some three thousand years ago, the Teutons, i.e. the race comprising Scandinavians, English, Germans, Franks and Frisians, were found only in the Old-Danish countries. Here they had established an ancient culture, which, judged by the standards of the Stone Age and Bronze Age, has hardly been surpassed in any other country. At the conclusion of the Bronze and Iron Age, most of Scandinavia and northern Europe were colonized from Denmark; and in the days of the great migra-

tions, very many of those tribes which overran and disrupted the Roman Empire, had their origin there.

Denmark has learnt immeasurably from English culture, just as it has also imbibed much from the culture of other great nations. But Denmark has not only received. She has given in return.

Though it is bad form to speak about one's own achievements, perhaps we may be forgiven if we quote a little of what England's own historians say about the significance for the English people of the Danish invasions. This account therefore is founded upon the authority of English authors; from Freeman, Green and Collingwood, to Kendrick and Hodgkin, Trevelyan and Stenton.

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It is exactly 1500 years ago since Hengest and Horsa landed in Thanet at the estuary of the Thames. Green estimates this event so highly, that he says: "It is with the landing of Hengest and his warriors at Ebbsfleet on the shores of the Isle of Thanet, that English history begins. No spot in Britain can be so sacred as that which first felt the tread of English feet".

Before Hengest, there were no English in Britain, only Britons. The Celts had come some centuries before Christ, and had subdued the Iberian aborigines. The Romans came under Julius Caesar in B.C. 55 and established the Roman dominion. This dominion was to last till A.D. 410, when the last Roman troops were recalled home to defend the imperial city against the Western Goths.

The Romans did not leave Britain in any flourishing condition. Many districts were enfeebled by Roman slave-traders, and since the Britons were unaccustomed to standing on their own feet, they became an easy prey to the assaults of barbaric races from Scotland and Ireland. It was because of these assaults that the king of the Britons sent an invitation to Hengest and his Jutes, asking for help in the defence of his country.

It is reasonable to suppose that they came in boats such as the one found near Nydam in South Jutland. It is an open boat propelled by oars; a strenuous pastime in a choppy sea. Now, 45 generations later, the descendants of the Vikings again cross the North-Sea in Hengest's wake.

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Before Hengest came to Britain, he had been involved in struggles in the south of the Channel, against the Frisian King Finn, struggles which were sung by a bard in a renowned Old-English lay. That it is the same Hengest here sung, seems certain, for the name is rare, and both warriors were of the same nationality, had the same social and military status, lived at the same time and in the same district beside the English Channel. Otherwise, why should an English heroic-poem have any interest in Hengest?

The strange names Hengest and Horsa have caused some perplexity. They mean respectively "stallion" and "mare". But Horsa's name is known from the Runic inscription which the Vikings later carved on the flanks of the marble lion in Pireus, the port of Athens. Today the lion keeps guard over the arcenal in Venice. The carving is about a man named Horsa. The name is also known from Danish place-names such as Horserød, Hostrup, and Horsted. Animal names were not unusual among nomadic peoples in the age of the great migrations.

Judging by archaeological discoveries, the followers of Hengest and Horsa were a motley crew whom Hengest had collected from along all the shores of the North Sea: Jutes, Danes, Angles, Saxons, Frisians and Franks. That Hengest himself came from Denmark, where he had been in the kings' service, seems certain.

It was on Thanet, that the new-comers first pitched their tents. But after a few years, strife broke out with the Britons. "They revolted over a matter of food supplies and overran the land".

Food is always an important concern for human beings, and for the Jutes too, it had its significance. It is said that when God first created a Jute, the first thing the Jute said was, "Here I am!" The next, "There is North". And thirdly, "But where is my food-wallet?". This shows his self-esteem, his shrewdness concerning Nature, and his sense of reality: all of which is quite reason-able, since he belongs to that race which later on was to furnish the best foodstuffs for British markets.

However all this may be, the aforementioned quarrel with the Britons resulted in a victory for Hengest at the Battle of Aylesford. Hengest's brother Horsa fell on this battle-field in the hour of victory. He was buried in a flint-heap hard by, in a village which still bears his name; the village of Horsted.

In the following year the Jutes conquered the whole of Kent, that important south-eastern corner of England from whence trade-routes lead out over the Channel to connect Britain with the continent.

They also seized the Isle of Wight and the Hampshire coast opposite, where Hengest perhaps lies buried on Hengistbury-Head.

The Jutes' southerly neighbours the Angles, (so named from Angel in South Jutland) followed them to England in the latter half of the 5th century. These Angles conquered north-east Britain including East Anglia, Mercia and Northumberland.

Simultaneously came the Saxons from Holstein, the most northerly branch of the later German stock. These conquered the southern counties of England, a conquest whose results are seen in the suffixes to old Saxon names such as Essex, Sussex, Wessex, and Middlesex.

The Angles must have been a domineering race, perhaps because they were governed by kings and had a fairly fixed organisation. Anyway it was they who gave their name to the whole country, for England and Angelland are the same. All the great Englishspeaking nations therefore bear an old Danish name, and by one of those strange accidents of history, the Brit-

ish Army today sits as lord in Angel in South Slesvig; the only spot in Europe which for the last millennium and a half could rightly bear the name England.

South Slesvig was Danish territory from the Stone-Age until 1864, when it was conquered by the Germans. Today there is an vital movement in South Slesvig for its return back to Denmark again.

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The age of the Vikings proper, first began three or four hundred years later; by which time the Jutes, Angles and Saxons had already firmly established themselves on the fertile soil of England, as large, well-to-do proprietors.

The Vikings were of the same stock as these peoples, but were even more full of energy and enterprise. First and foremost they were tradesmen and seafarers, but when they came into opposition with the growing expansion of the Franks under Charlemagne, they observed that the kingdoms of western Europe were but loosely defended against attack from the sea. It was as if an America rich in treasure lay open before their eyes. What a sin to let leave it untouched!

A storm of Viking expeditions therefore broke loose over Europe. Wave upon wave of hardy sea-warriors plundered the coasts of France and Germany and infested the British Isles.

The Norse Vikings' expeditions made for Scotland, Ireland and Western Europe. On deserted Iceland they formed a famous republic. They colonized Greenland and crossed the Atlantic ocean to Newfoundland, Labrador and Massachusetts.

The Swedes sailed along the Russian rivers down to the Bosphorus and the Caspian Sea. Indeed the Swedes founded the kingdom of Russia. There are those who think they ought not to have done it. The word "Rus" is an old word meaning a Swede. Kiev, Novgorod, Smolensk and Rostov were founded by Swedes.

The lands along the Channel, the North Sea, and the shores south thereof, formed the Danish sphere of interest. Viking ex-

peditions were often instigated by the Danish kings for the purposes of conquest and colonization.

From Iceland to Constantinople, from the Arctic to the Black Sea, the Vikings roved around. From the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, from Greenland to the Sahara, their sea-routes stretched. They were the cosmopolitans of the age, men who had learnt to know other kingdoms and cultures.

Seen against the background of present-day culture, no doubt they appear barbaric; and their contemporaries, who often tasted the sharpness of their sword, and experienced something of their violence, naturally enough avoided them. But what sort of a treatment have the cultured nations of our own times given to the primitive peoples of their colonies?

And how have we treated each others' cities and peoples? Are we so very far in advance of the Viking-times?

Be the answer what it may, the Vikings were unusual pirates. Wherever they appeared and established themselves, one of the first things they did was to set up a constitution and open up free markets. When Rollo and his men, for example, had conquered Normandy, Northern France was ravaged and dissolved; but Rollo soon built up a firm government again, by making a law that no man should lock his door. If anything was stolen, Rollo replaced it to the full. But woe to the thief if Rollo caught him! From this same flourishing Normandy, conquests of Sicily, South Italy and England were subsequently made.

The Vikings despised liars, backbiters, traitors and thieves; and nowhere in Europe was the position of women so safe, respected and honoured as in the Nordic countries. Magnanimity and munificence were virtues esteemed as highly as valour and fearlessness.

"A man is a man and a word is a word" runs an old Danish saying. The highest store was set upon a promise, and a man's word was sacrosanct. It is true that the Vikings plundered and harried many lands, but after all, they were simple Vikings living in Viking-times, - times, that is to say when everybody

plundered, including the petty Anglo-Saxon kings. As Collingwood says, "The Viking was only doing what the most civilized were doing; his fault was that he did it rather more skilfully".

The quality of mercy was not one of the Vikings' strong points. But they possessed a freshness of spirit, realism, and a vitality which one still feels intensely as one breathes the pure and invigorating air of the Sagas. They make the legends of the monks seem extravagant and untrustworthy by contrast.

In their ancient myths of the gods and their legends of heroes, they have assembled a treasury of ideals fashioned with great art. In their ornaments and wood-carving they have produced a vigorous and beautiful ornamental art. They were musical too. At all events the first trace of musical harmony is found in their part-songs, which, if we may believe Giraldus Cambrensis who wrote in 1180, were customarily sung by Danes in Northumberland.

Their language, 'the Danish tongue,' was from the 8th to the 13th century a kind of universal language. It was spoken in Scandinavia, England, Northern France, and along the Russian rivers right up to the streets of Constantinople, where it was the language of the Emperor's bodyguard, and it was the first European language to be spoken in the New World across the Atlantic.

The men, who, in the Viking period, almost transformed a continent, did not only come like a hurricane, but like boisterous springweather as well, making things grow which hitherto had stood still. They dug their spurs into the flanks of older nations and rode them brusquely in their own way into a new age.

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In England there were two outstanding peaks in the Viking-period. The first was about 870, when Regner Lodbrog's sons conquered and colonized some three quarters of England. The second was in Svend Fork-beard's and Canute's days, when the whole of England was conquered.

Regner Lodbrog had conquered Paris in 845. In 841 London was plundered. And about the year 860, Regner's sons went on their long and eventful expedition to Spain, North Africa, Italy and Greece; "an adventure which stands out in this age like Drake's circumnavigation of the globe in the age of the Elizabethan sea-dogs" as Hodgkin says. In 866 the great Viking fleet sailed from France to Kent and Eastern England. The year after, they sailed to the Wash and the river Humber, where they hurriedly established their supremacy in York and in the Danish 'five-boroughs': Lincoln, Derby, Nottingham, Stamford and Leicester.

From thence they conquered East Anglia and Mercia; and finally, in 872, subdued London itself, where coins struck by Regner's son Halfdan have been found. Among them is the first English halfpenny.

Wessex was almost rent in pieces. It was only the initiative and energy of Alfred the Great which prevented the conquest of the whole of England. Collingwood says, "The success of the Vikings was by no means a success of rude and savage force; it was a triumph of mental power as of moral endurance and physical bravery." He admires their strategy and diplomacy and thinks that "it is impossible to escape the idea that some great plan was in operation, some strong mind directing a warfare which, however originated, had become no casual scramble of independent adventurers, nor even an organization merely to exploit their sporting instincts, but a resolute scheme of Conquest played with the skill of a chessplayer on the field of empire". He thinks that the leading spirit behind these great operations, was Ivar, Regnar's son. The result of them was, that almost three quarters of England was conquered, colonized, and put under the Danish rule known as the Danelaw. It was only after the death of Ivar, that Alfred managed to put a stop to further conquests.

Very many English place-names bear witness to the extent of the Danish colonization and the parcelling out of the land by

the victorious Vikings. They settled as free, selfsupporting smallholders, who, as Stenton says, "were certainly independent of anything that can be called manorial discipline. The plan of the Domesday survey shows that they were responsible for the taxes due from their land, and they were scattered over the land in a way which shows that they cannot have been subject to any heavy agricultural services to their lords. It is easy to underestimate their numbers."

In the Danelaw the population consisted of men essentially free. Tenants and serfs were rare. Under the ancient Celtic and Anglo-Saxon regimes, the reverse had been the case. This explains why things happened as they did. Green says, "It was in the degradation of the class in which its true strength lay that we must look for the cause of the ruin which already hung over the West-Saxon realm." The freedom, democracy, and parliamentary government of England, all have important roots in the Danelaw. In the northern countries from whence the Vikings came, it was the ancient custom for the people to meet in common court for the purposes of law and judgement. In such courts the people themselves were the arbitrators of justice and of practical matters.

In the domain of law, Nordic codes have exercised a great influence. Even the English word "law", is the Danish "lov"; and the first trace of trial by jury is found in the Danelaw, where, in accordance with old Nordic custom, twelve jurymen held court.

The English language contains more French words (owing to the Norman influence) than Danish. Nevertheless, in the common speech of the people, a great many of the small words which are used hundreds of times every day, are of Danish origin. That alone testifies to the intensity of the Danish colonization.

The Scandinavians were not barbarians. They merely had a different culture from that of the Christian lands. Dirty and unwholesome they were not; but at first they were by no means

liked. One explanation why the Anglo-Saxons hated them, is suggested by the Anglo-Saxon chronicler John of Wallingford, who says, "The Danes combed their hair every day, took baths every Saturday and changed their underclothing frequently, so that they were held in high favour by the ladies." Of course they were hated!

Shetelig adds the remark, "If this seemed surprising to their contemporaries, as it did, we may venture to draw the inference that the later English partiality for baths and washing is not an Anglo-Saxon characteristic, but a heritage from the Viking times".

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So much for the first "peak" period of Viking history in England. We come now to the second. King Svend Forkbeard, was its first hero.

Svend's father, Harald Bluetooth, had consolidated his kingdom in Denmark. He had conquered Norway and secured dominion over a great part of the Baltic. Svend himself went further. He first safeguarded himself in the rear against Sweden, by marrying Gunhild, widow of the late Swedish King Eric, who had been his opponent. With the help of Sweden and the Norwegian Earls, he next crushed King Olaf Trygvason of Norway, who had reigned but a short time. By these means, Svend became once more the overlord of Norway; he controlled the Kattegat and secured for himself the hegemony of the North.

The Viking expeditions against England began again and exhausted England's power of resistance. Ethelred the Unready, England's King, was unable to defend his country. He therefore in 1002 tried the desperate plan of instituting a kind of S. Bartholomew's massacre upon Danes who lived in Anglo-Saxon territory.

Svend's sister was one of the murdered, and this only impelled Svend further to seek revenge. His onslaughts reached their height in 1013. He had secured himself against Sweden

and Norway; Poland and Germany were at that time engaged in a life and death struggle; so he set sail with a mighty fleet to England. The inhabitants of the Danelaw rallied to him, and after but a few months' campaign, he had subdued the whole of England. His triumph, however, was but short-lived, for he died at Gainsborough in February of the following year, leaving his army and his problems to his son.

Naturally enough, the English did not love his memory. They had only learned to know his sterner side. Yet he was a king with great powers of statemanship and a man of outstanding talent in the field. Think what it meant in those times to build a Viking ship! Think what it meant to build a fleet of perhaps 1000 such ships! Think what it meant to equip and victual such a fleet, to hold discipline over those great arrogant desperados, and yet manage an invasion in a few months! It was a military feat which, seen in its context, can well bear comparison with the Allied invasion by convoy of North Africa and Normandy.

When Svend died, Canute was between 16 and 19 years old. He was a prince without a country. England, on his father's death, had re-instated Ethelred; Norway had again won its independence under Olaf the Holy; and Canute's elder brother Harald had inherited the throne of Denmark. Canute, therefore, had to conquer England once more in 1015. In 1018 he inherited Denmark upon Harald's death, and finally in 1028 he won back Norway. When Canute died in 1035, he was King of Denmark, England, Norway, South Sweden, and all the coast of the Baltic as far as Estonia. He was also the overlord of Scotland, Wales, and perhaps Ireland. As king of Norway he was overlord of the Hebrides, the Orkneys and the Shetlands. And we may suppose also that he was recognized by the distant colonies of Greenland.

He had founded an Empire; and in 1028 he held a veritable Imperial Conference in Nidaros. He is one of the very few rulers whom the whole world honours with the title "the Great".

He did what surely no other man in history has done. He came as a savage conqueror to a country with an ancient culture; he placed himself on its throne; he ruled that country for 20 years; and when he died, he was one of England's most beloved and honoured kings.

The period of the Vikings was at its highest when he was a boy. When he died, he himself brought it to a close. Piracy was brought to an end, and slave-trading was forbidden. As a law-giver, Canute was great; he laid the foundation of a strong administration by securing for the crown fixed revenues, using the same system of land-taxation which was already in use in the Danelaw and in his home country. Green says, "They were in fact the first forms of that land-tax which constituted the most important element in the national revenue from the days of Ethelred to the days of the Georges." He standardized the monetary system by dividing the Danish mark into 240 pennies. To this day the English pound is still worth 240 pence.

The first standing army in England was that of Canute. His army, therefore, was the parent of the British Forces. And Canute's fleet, by its absolute mastery of the seas is one of the most important ancestors of the Royal Navy.

By adopting a policy of reconciliation towards the indigenous population, and drawing them into high administrative posts Canute introduced that characteristic feature of British statesmanship which today has its part in holding together the British Commonwealth of Nations.

The aim of his dynasty's policy, was to control the North Sea, the Kattegat and the Baltic, having Denmark in the middle and England and Scandinavia on either side. The purpose in view, was to make seafaring safe, and maritime commerce profitable. By such a policy, Canute managed to set England on its feet again.

When Canute died, he was still under 40. His sons also died young, but they were not of his quality. It was the Danes from Normandy who at last, in 1066, reaped the fruits of that which

the Danes in England had grafted into the British race. "Britain had become England in the five hundred years that followed the landing of Hengest." - says Green.

In the eleventh century" says Trevelyan it was as difficult to hold together an Empire astride of the North Sea as it was difficult in the Eighteenth Century to hold together an Empire astride of the Atlantic." If Canute had lived till the age of 60, his kingdom would have been consolidated; and had he managed to achieve that consolidation, he would have altered the course of worldhistory.

The effects of his work, however, still remain; for it strengthened the maritime, commercial, and colonizing characteristics in the English people.

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From Queen Elizabeth's time the same remarkable process of expansion has gone on, spreading westward to the New World, and also to the whole British Empire. Here freedom lives and enterprise flourishes.

And by another of the strange accidents of history, the United States, the British Empire, Denmark, Norway, and other free nations, have only this year bound themselves together in the Atlantic pact - astride of the North-Sea, astride of the Atlantic. Bonds which are knit by common interests, common desire for freedom, and common origins, do not easily burst.

A frail wooden Viking-boat, a millennium and a half later, has rowed over the North Sea from Hengest's homeland to Hengest's Kingdom, bearing greetings to Kent, to all Great Britain, and to all the English-speaking nations beyond the seas, in memory of the events which created a new epoch in the history of mankind.