

The story of the Vikings

(about 700 AD to about 1,200 AD)
by Karl Rasmussen

The Vikings are generally thought to come from Scandinavia. People think of Norway, Denmark and Sweden. That is all true, but there were more from some regions than there were from other regions. Highly populated regions produced more Viking warriors than regions that were either remote or relatively more insignificant in size.

The word 'Viking' is derived from Vig Konge which is Danish. Vig means cove or bay and konge means king. Viking means Bay King. It comes from the fact that the Danish Vikings were sea fares and they came from numerous bays, coves, rivers, inlets and other coastal settlements. The name was a term of ridicule among locals.

Around the time of the decline of the Roman Empire the population of the Northern European countries began to increase. Denmark, which, for centuries had a stable population of around ½ million people, increased to about one million at the height of the Viking era. The reason seem to come from the Medieval Warming, which started at about that time (500 AD). The land (very flat and only slightly above sea level) would have been more productive, producing more food and allowing the population to increase.

Before 500 AD, the whole region (known then as Dane Mark – the field of the Danes) was populated with tribes, living in settlements. Basically, small villages, with surrounding cultivated farmland, a few domesticated animals and a few small boats for fishing. The villages were predominantly on the edge of a body of water (either ocean, river or lake). Each village was separated by forest (mostly beech with some spruce, pine, oak and birch). The forests had wild deer, pigs, wolves and smaller animals and birds. Technology came from the south. Iron had replaced bronze and the Danes were cleverly learning to work this versatile material.

After the population began to increase, population pressure became evident. There was plenty for all, except space. Space remained the same and a new class of people evolved. It was the landless people. They were still members of the tribe but they had no right to work on farms or to farm themselves and there was only room for so many craftsmen, such as black smiths, carpenters or potters. The only thing left was to hunt and to fish. So, restless young men, without a future, became fishermen.

The population continued to grow and eventually, the surplus population became a social problem. Restless young men would form gangs and roam. When they had caught more fish than they could trade, they would raid neighboring settlements. This caused reprisals. The gangs were penalized by the village leaders and so the gangs went further a field. They had their fishing boats, so distance was no object. The problem was, that the villages they raided, also had boats and they also had social problems. Eventually, the restless fishermen were forced to stop what they were doing. However, they were continually becoming more numerous, restless and difficult to control. They spawned leaders, who became known as (spitefully) Vig Konger (gang leaders).

By now, the Vig Konger had become a serious force. The local village leaders had to deal with them and that caused the Vig Konger to band together, build fortresses and form armies. At the same time, the boatbuilders were improving fishing boats, so that the raiders could travel further and raid communities that would not retaliate. At this time (about 700 AD), Christian missionaries came to Dane Mark. Vig Konger saw that Christian settlements would be a good catch. It became a new goal to travel out of Danish waters and to raid coastal settlements far away, especially Christian settlements.

It became an annual event to gather in a central location, where they would travel together as a flotilla of warriors. The island of Samsø became the central location. Now, the Vig Konger became so numerous that there would be collectives of Vig Konger. They, in turn, would spawn leaders. These leaders became residents on or around the island of Samsø and they built castles of stone, a skill they had learned from the places they visited on their raids in distant lands. A leader of a collective of Vig Konger was a Konge (King). This is when Dane Mark began to evolve into the kingdom of Denmark. The center of the kingdom was Samsø (sams = collective and ø = island). Samsø is the island where they meet and collect into a large flotilla force. The whole country (which consisted of all the fertile land in Scandinavia, Jylland, all the islands and Skaane – the southern tip of

Sweden), was eventually controlled from Samsø. The surrounding settlements (coves) all contributed to the flotilla. Some, provided just one ship but others would provide 2 or 3. The ships were not actually provided by the villagers, but by the warriors themselves. They were landless fishermen, out to better themselves. When they returned in the autumn, they were the envy of many of the villagers who had stayed behind. As a result, the villagers often would join the warriors the following spring.

The warriors remained landless fishermen and they were the scorn of every village leader, who referred to them gangsters. The village leaders lost no opportunity to lay scorn on those young men, who eventually gained status from wealth obtained in foreign lands. They called the leaders Vig Konger (king of the cove). Typically, a leader would be in charge of a boat but sometimes two gangs would join forces to buy a boat. Other times a gang would be so large that they could occupy more than one boat. Boat building became a major industry and there was rivalry to build better boats. Warriors returning from a successful expedition, typically spent much wealth on a new and better boat. Ordering a boat to be built, was a two season wait, because boats could only be built in the warm half of the year. A warrior would go with others, while his own boat was being built. Once he had a boat, it was easy to find a crew full of warriors.

There are no written accounts of Denmark before the Vikings. They had writing (Runes) but nothing survives except a few stones, into which the inscriptions were chipped. There are a few references to Denmark in accounts written by people in other, more civilized countries. Academics, such as scribes and Christian monks in other countries, did, on a few occasions, refer to events and places, which would have been Denmark. However, most knowledge about the period is archeological in origin. Christianity was knocking on the door but the Danes were reluctant to discard their old beliefs. They had no need of a higher master (the Pope in Rome). It took till 1200 AD before the country became Christian, when, at that time, the Danish king was given an ultimatum from the Holy Roman Empire. He was asked to accept Christianity or be invaded by a Christian army. Denmark was not invaded by that army but all now had to pay tribute to the Roman Catholic Church.

I have left out the exploits about the Vikings, as they are well documented. My main purpose here has been to document the rise of the Vikings and the reason for it. As there are no documented accounts from that period, we rely on word of mouth, foreign references and archeology. There is plenty of evidence pointing to what occurred. We have the graph of the Medieval Warming, beginning around 400 - 500 AD. There are the archeological sites on Samsø, which point to castles being erected and a canal being dug, to facilitate the control of all shipping from the south. This is when Denmark first became a large naval power, which lasted for more than 1,000 years. The rise in population numbers, which is archeological. They were ½ million before the Medieval Warming and it peaked at one million at the height of the Viking era. After that time, due to a cooling climate and some severe epidemic diseases (bubonic plague, cholera, influenza) the population again fell to ½ million, where it remained for the next 400 years.

Due to a shortage of warriors and the tight control of the Catholic Church, the Viking era came to an end. However, it was due to the Vikings the kingdom of Denmark was created. The center of the Viking era was, for several centuries, the island of Samsø. The kingdom of Denmark was born on Samsø and from there it drifted to other areas, such as the towns of Ribe and Roskilde, which were more centers of religious power than that of any king. As the control of power drifted between the Catholic Bishops and the Danish Royal House, so other places became influential, such as Helsingør and Copenhagen (København). It is notable that, during the Viking era, Aarhus was the dominant mainland settlement (just 25 Km from Samsø) and it has been an important city since then, making it the oldest city in Denmark. During that time (more than 1,200 years), it has been the second most important place in Denmark and it remains so to this day.

During the Viking era, warriors came from all over Denmark and assembled on Samsø. The most active places for recruitment of warriors, were near Samsø. The further away from Samsø, the less the number of recruits. Norway was a long way away and the typical number of recruits from there, were in the order of less than 10% of the flotilla. Admittedly, some went direct, of their own accord, from Norway, to places such as Scotland, but they were few. The action was on Samsø and the Viking flotillas began there. The Viking era began there and the kingdom of Denmark began there. Some flotillas of up to 1,000 ships left Samsø for foreign lands. What a spectacle it must have been to see them all sail away.

A ship could hold from 20 to 30 people and they sometimes brought their wives and their farm animals. After spending several days at sea, they would find a place to land and spend a few days, so as to recover, while they may have slaughtered an animal and cooked it. As they consumed their own food, they would then hunt or commandeer food or animals to replace it. Once they left home, they were subject to the hospitality of others, either voluntarily or involuntarily. It was tough being a Viking. They were constantly under pressure, both at home and on expeditions. They were constantly at risk of either being killed or of starving. While at sea, a storm could overwhelm them. At home, remembering that the Viking warriors were the disadvantaged class of society and during the winter, there was the cold. They had to fish or hunt for food during snowstorms and other bad weather. They were sometimes lost at sea, while fishing. They were the last to be given rations.

Plundering in foreign lands was more of a need than a lust for adventure. The Pagan Nordic Gods were a wish rather than a belief. Just like every other religion, they imagined that, everything they found to be scarce here on Earth, was plentiful in the next world. In Valhalla (Heaven), life was eternal with plenty of food and drink. On Earth, their lives were difficult, dangerous and short. They were driven to what they did. In 1,200 AD, they were also driven to become Catholics. About 300 – 400 years later, when the Lutheran revolution swept over the major portion of Northern Europe, the Danes converted straight away. They lost no time in shaking off the heavy burden of the Catholic Church. With a little wink at Odin (the chief pagan god), Denmark became 99% Lutheran. Just as with the Catholic Church, there remained a struggle between the Church and the Royal House, so it continued with the Lutheran Church. However, in 1864, a Democratic government took control of the country and (unlike many other countries, such as France and the United States of America) they enshrined the union of church and state in their constitution. To this day, the government pays the Church. The existence of the Church is guaranteed by the constitution. In spite of that, there are today, nearly as many who believe in the Pagan Gods as there are people who believe in Christianity. Most in Denmark are Agnostics.

Today, Vikings are glorified and veiled in myths, just like Santa Claus or Cowboys and Indians. It is a little sad that reality is unable to exist as fact. It has to be modified and to be made commercially palatable, which distorts the truth. To place them in historical context, the Vikings existed at the time of the Islamic expansion and they declined after the Middle Eastern Crusades. They began to evolve as a force at the time of the decline of the Roman Empire. The Vikings formed the first kingdom of Denmark by banding together a vast army of dispossessed young men. They compelled the small villagers to form larger coalitions which eventually became the nobility from which rose a king of Denmark.

Denmark is now the wealthiest (per head of population) country in the world. It has the highest standard of living. People there are the happiest. It is, technically, very advanced and it is, commercially, very successful. People are well educated with a high percentage of whom comply. It is a welfare state, where health and education is provided to all. Denmark is one of the most egalitarian places on Earth.

The country has no natural resources other than the people. They are planning to provide themselves, 100% energy from the environment. They do not see insolvable problems but unsolved solutions. They are optimists, realists and bound for new and higher achievements. This is not due to anything the Vikings did. The Vikings are history and existed so long ago that their effect is no longer felt. The Danes have evolved through history and difficulties. They are where they are, in spite of difficulties. They will achieve more, in spite of more difficulties. It is the Danish psyche that has allowed a successful social evolution. They just can not be held back.

Give them nothing and promise them nothing and they could rule the world. However, the Danes do not have the temperament to domineer others, they are more inclined co-operate with others. Therein lies their success. It is quite simple. Co-operation will achieve more than competition.

Coming back to Samsø, where the Vikings first assembled about 1,400 years ago, we have a community of 4,000 rural people, who are 100% self sufficient with energy. They have (by themselves) installed windmill generators, which provide them with an excess of electricity. They farm the land and have a good income. Heat is provided by neighborhood facilities and farm vehicle diesel fuel is grown on their farms. They have no need to import any fuel at all. As a result, their wealth is now growing and soon, they will be able, if they wish, to retire early.

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