

Pre-Viking and Viking Age Denmark

Ancient Europe, 8000 B.C. to A.D. 1000, 2004

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Although Danish Vikings are famous in history, much of the Viking Age lacks indigenous documents; thus, "history" largely reflects the views of Denmark's neighbors, leading to the popular connotation of a warrior culture bent on senseless or greedy destruction. In fact, in many ways Denmark was unremarkable during this era: all of the incipient post-Roman European states were equally engaged in mutual raiding, warfare, and conquest. Given the uneven historic record—literate European chroniclers versus largely prehistoric Danes, archaeology, along with careful reading of what documents there are, is the best way to understand circumstances surrounding the formation of Denmark.

Before the Viking era, A.D. 800–1050, economic and sociopolitical development in Germanic Europe, including Denmark, was profoundly influenced by interaction with the Roman Empire, whose borders lay along the Rhine; thus, the period from A.D. 1–400 is called the Roman Iron Age. Many traditions important in the state-building Viking Age are rooted here: the indigenous concept of the Danish provinces as loosely allied chiefly peer polities; the thing, a regularly scheduled civic meeting; a social code balancing "ordinary" people with the military hierarchy; and a tradition of long-distance trade. After Rome's fall, a period of post-Roman economic and political reorganization is referred to as the Germanic Iron Age, A.D. 400–800.

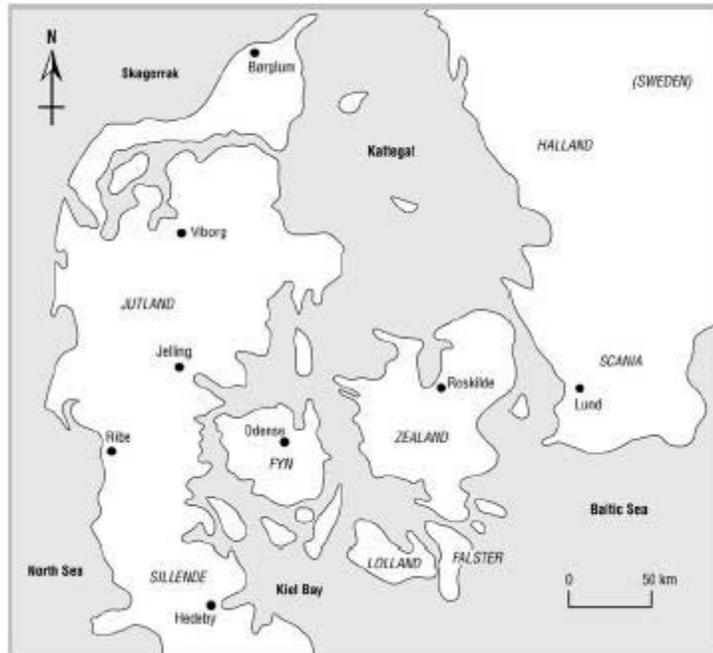
Denmark is a small, mostly archipelagic land mass, consisting of the Jutland peninsula, four large islands—Zealand, Fyn, Lolland, and Falster—and 470-odd small islands. Before 1654 Denmark included Scania and Halland, now Sweden. This geography in part determined the location of Roman Iron Age chiefdoms.

DENMARK IN THE ROMAN AND GERMANIC IRON AGES

Roman documents shed some faint light on the region, but like all nonindigenous texts, reflect outside views. Roman-Germanic interaction led to the writing of *Germania* by the Roman politician-historian Tacitus, around A.D. 98, and his description is considered fairly reliable. Tacitus describes a social code wherein leaders did not have unlimited power and required the assent of an assembly in making decisions. Several small chiefdoms operating on these principles coexisted simultaneously in the Roman era, in continual competition, yet interacting via the exchange of Roman goods. In times of warfare with Rome or other "outsiders," a single warlord was selected to lead them collectively for short periods, but the support of his peers was required. If an overly ambitious leader seized too much power, the social code actively encouraged his assassination. Other typical chiefly leveling mechanisms, such as extravagant

feasting and the distribution of treasure to followers, kept a balance of power, a tradition that continued in later times.

Tacitus is amply validated through archaeological data. Competing polities and their chiefly centers can be identified by clusters of Roman imports, elite or warrior burials with Roman goods, and sacrificial deposits that were made into water—often the arms and armor of local



foes, including Roman-made swords. Some competing centers were located on the large, defensible, fertile islands. Similarly, bountiful Scania and Halland supported local rulers. Jutland was agriculturally poorer but ideal for cattle, and chiefly polities also rose there.

Chiefdoms were based upon what is commonly called a prestige-goods economy. Prestige goods are nonutilitarian objects that are indispensable for social and political relations—in this case, Roman imports of weapons, ornaments, and feasting and drinking equipment. In return, the Romans received leather, fur, meat, cloth, and probably slaves. In Denmark, personal reputation and power were intertwined with the ability and degree to which one could control and own Roman goods, a system that only worked if their flow was controlled by an elite minority. In return for sharing prestige goods with lower-level elites for their own legitimation, chiefs received staple tribute: livestock, grain, and other supplies. Lower-level elite in turn extracted tribute from farmers in return for their services in defense, upholding law, and overseeing ritual activities. Grave goods reflect this hierarchy: a few have the full complement of prestige items, others less but still rich, while many have small quantities of less valuable Roman items. War chiefs had much power within society but were balanced by the thing, a regular meeting of freemen—and possibly some women, if we infer from some later sources—who could vote against the plans of chiefs. In addition, a chief's son was not automatically a chief; all contenders had to prove themselves, leading to a degree of upward mobility in society. One of the greatest changes during the Viking Age was the replacement of this system with a more powerful, centralized leadership and the ascribed inheritance of rulership.

In the Roman era, "Denmark" consisted of many peoples. A long-debated question has thus been "when did the Danes become the Danes?" By combining archaeology and documents, we find that the answer lies in understanding the social and political changes between the Roman, Germanic, and Viking Ages. When Rome fell in the mid-fifth century, so did the prestige economy, but most of Denmark's small realms did not collapse: they reorganized and expanded. A few groups found themselves in disarray and sought new lands, leading to what is called the Migration period, when Langobards, Teutons, and others overran the Continent and staked a claim. Despite this, around A.D. 550, Gothic writings indicate that many small polities in Denmark were being consolidated into bigger political units during the Germanic Iron Age.

DENMARK IN THE VIKING AGE

While historians mark the beginning of the Viking Age in the 790s by the first Danish sea raids on England, archaeologists are less interested in events than in processes, and they track a gradual but significant transition in political and economic organization between the eighth and ninth centuries, and beyond.

In the 700s, Frankish and English records of political, military, and economic interactions with the north describe the Danes as one people ruled by a king, and Denmark as comprising Jutland, all the islands, and Scania. Conversely, other texts state that there were simultaneously two or even three Danish kings, and to further complicate the picture, later indigenous chronicles state that there were sometimes one, two, or five kings.

These conflicting representations reflect the fact that protracted conflicts with the Franks elevated the temporary overlord to a more permanent ruler, or king, while the ability to claim this new position still rested on the old traditions of successful warfare, personal reputation, and distribution of wealth to followers. Several early Danish rulers were assassinated by their own people, also after ancient custom. During the 800s, a rapid succession of leaders claimed the Danish crown, fought among each other, and were overthrown, all calling themselves kings in the process. During the ninth and tenth centuries, some failed claimants grabbed parts of Europe as small kingdoms, also perhaps calling themselves Danish kings. Later, when the Danes ruled England and Denmark, a father might make his son a "sub-king" in Denmark. Slowly, Danish kings became more permanent and powerful. Sons began to inherit, some as adolescents or children, a clear sign of a shift from achieved to ascribed status. To legitimize themselves in a world with new rules, new forms of marking and holding power emerged. One of the most prominent is at Jelling in central Jutland.

Jelling has no habitation: it is a symbolic center consisting of royal monuments and runic inscriptions (fig. 1). Some archaeologists see it as a "nationalist" response to ever-threatening Franco-Germans, others as a king's attempt to firmly legitimize his rule with both monumental architecture and written texts proclaiming his own power. These intertwined purposes are probably both true.

At Jelling, around A.D. 950, King Gorm raised a rune stone to his wife, Thyra, calling her the adornment of Denmark—the first written reference to the kingdom. Olaf Tryggvason's Saga mentions that Gorm (who reigned from about 920 to 950) cleared all remaining "petty kings" from Denmark, conquered the Slavs, and persecuted proselytizing Christians. A second rune stone was raised by Gorm's son King Harald Blåtand, commemorating his parents, his rule of a unified kingdom (from about A.D. 950 to 980), and its Christianization.

Jelling also sports two monumental earthworks: a cenotaph 77 meters across and 11 meters high, and a burial mound 65 meters across and 8.5 meters high, the largest in Denmark. When excavated, no remains, only rich grave furnishings, were found, male and female. When Harald eventually became Christian at about A.D. 970, the mound was carefully opened and his parents' bones were apparently removed to the Jelling church. Traces of this wooden stave church were excavated in the 1980s, yielding the disarticulated bones of an elderly man, clearly in secondary context, perhaps those of Gorm.

Unification of the state can be seen archaeologically. At the transition between the reigns of Harald and his son, Svein Forkbeard, a system of fortified military and administrative centers was established all over the kingdom, dated dendrochronologically to A.D. 980. These so-called Trelleborg fortresses indicate the extent of royal authority at the turn of the first millennium (fig. 2). Likewise, rune stones in a centralized style called "after-Jelling" cover the same geographic range. Also established were so-called magnate sites, estates of high-level elites who oversaw the



king's business. Central structures, 25–40 meters long with slightly curved walls, are called "Trelleborg" houses, since they are nearly identical to the large elite houses found at the Trelleborg administrative sites; so similar, in fact, that some suggest they were designed and built by a royal master-builder. Several have been excavated; in addition to large houses, there is evidence of attached crafts specialists, especially in metallurgy, and extensive barns and stables for many cattle and horses.

ECONOMY AND TRADE IN THE VIKING AGE

Although the Viking Age is traditionally associated with the sack of towns and monasteries in continental Europe and England, archaeologists studying Viking activities in global perspective conclude that they came not from innate hostility toward Christians or outsiders but rather were part of a much larger economic cycle. It is useful to divide Viking contacts with the rest of the world into phases. In early Viking Age expeditions, local chiefs sought wealth during a period of political change: at home, new, centralized rulers were gaining power, so local leaders sought new means of legitimation, wealth, and fame. Over the course of the eighth to tenth centuries, raiding and trading were predicated mostly upon the economic booms and busts of the Arabian caliphates and the Byzantines, seen in the composition of coin hoards from different eras. During boom periods, chiefs gained wealth by trading to the east. When these sources failed, they gained wealth by both trading and raiding to the west. Kings, charged with ruling at home and defending the borders against the Franks—who were actively trying to conquer Denmark in the first quarter of the ninth century—had little or nothing to do with these opportunistic raids.

In the Middle Viking Age, exiled or defeated royal pretenders sought new territories to overtake and rule, eventually settling in Scandinavian enclaves in Normandy, Ireland, York, the Faeroes, and other northern islands, bringing both conflict and trade with them. Finally, in the Late Viking Age, legitimate Danish kings conquered whole nations,



bringing them under Denmark's imperial sway. While collectively lumped together and called the Viking Age by historians, these phases represent very different strategies and circumstances motivating Viking activity.

The domestic economy consisted of mixed agriculture in the fertile islands, Scania and Halland, whereas husbandry predominated on Jutland. These products were important to the state, but one of the most important props for newly emerging rulers was their ability to control or administer trade. Even after Rome's fall, rulers maintained short-distance trade in luxuries to reinforce their rank in local society, and Jutland lay on sea-trade routes. Beginning around A.D. 700, proto-urban centers called "emporium," with permanent craftspeople and traders, arose to serve as both

import and production sites. Precious metals and gems, tableware and glass, wine, textiles, and weapons came from all over western Europe, while local people worked iron, bone, glass, bronze, clay, and many other materials that are found archaeologically. Extensive workshop quarters have been excavated at sites such as Ribe and Hedeby. Cattle trade is seen in strata consisting primarily of dung from beasts penned for market. In these commercial centers, elites built fortifications, churches for Christian traders, and collected taxes and tolls; in return, merchants could expect protection from thieves, repair and maintenance of harbors and wharves, officials to witness agreements and transactions, and enforcement of the laws of fair trade. The taxes and revenues Danish rulers collected are explicitly referred to in Frankish texts: a series of massive earthworks, collectively called the Danevirke, were constructed by Danish rulers as a defense against the Franks over the course of the eighth and ninth centuries, but these walls also aided taxation on trade by controlling movement across the border.

Between the mid- and late tenth century, many new towns were founded: Viborg, the national thing where kings were still "elected" by the people; Ålborg, guarding the inland waterways of the Limfjord; Lund, the Dane's bishopric in Scania with its cathedral; Odense; Roskilde; and others. Just after the millennium, kings extended their power to collect taxes and conscript more military service, and they conferred more power on the growing church. Knut the Great ruled a large empire including England, Denmark, and parts of Norway. All was not quiet at home: several provinces rebelled, hoping to regain autonomy, but the state, forged from the conflicts and resolutions of the Viking Age, had become too powerful to resist. Knut's empire saw the largest extent of Viking Age Denmark; his sons lost their grip on this realm, and by 1042, the last Viking king, whose reign spanned the transition to the Early Middle Ages, was Sven Estridsen, who ruled a Christianized, centralized, and mostly unified Denmark. Sven made a final and unsuccessful attempt to reconquer England in 1069–1070, but with his passing in 1074, the Viking Age was truly at an end.

See also [Emporia](#) (vol. 2, part 7); [Pre-Viking and Viking Age Norway](#) (vol. 2, part 7); [Pre-Viking and Viking Age Sweden](#) (vol. 2, part 7).

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TINA L. THURSTON

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