

THE VIKING AND HIS SHIP

BY AXEL N. RAHM

DURING our itinerancy in Europe last year, among the number of cities visited was Christiania, the capital of Norway. This ancient city is situated about 75 miles from the sea at the head of the Christiania fjord, an estuary of Skagerrack. The modern part of the city was founded about 300 years ago by a Danish king, but the "Old town," now a suburb of the city proper, the first-while rendezvous of pirates and freebooters, is nearly 1000 years old.

There exists many facts and evidences as well as sagas and traditions which conclusively and positively prove that in this secluded sheltered spot many Vikings gathered to repair their ships and to refit and prepare for new and perilous exploits. But besides these there were undoubtedly, in the minds of those ancient highwaymen of the sea, other substantial reasons for making this fjord their trying place, reasons which appealed more directly to their human nature.

Human nature does not materially change in a thousand years, and it is very probable that the prototype of the modern Jack Tar held the same views as the latter in regard to the rules which govern the moral and physical being of the seafaring man. While at sea he is capable of enduring almost any hardship and privation without murmuring; there he is a Spartan and a stoic. But from the moment he puts his foot on terra firma or on an island, as the case may be, provided the necessary conditions exist, he is an epicurian and a cynic.

His desiderata are few but urgent. His desires, whatever their name may be, must be satisfied regardless of consequence. Moral and physical laws are thrown to the winds, and in the hey-day of shore leave Jack is the prey of all that is evil.

Such, also, was the Viking, only tenfold more vicious and bloodthirsty. There was nothing to restrain him but physical force and he dearly loved opposition of this nature. His first and last demands, and the first and last demands on him in life were combat.

There is, however, one essential difference between Jack Tar of the present day and the subject of this brief sketch, for while the former, as a rule, cares little or nothing for things celestial, the Viking never for a moment doubted that he would land on the golden shores of Walhalla, provided he died, as befitted a warrior, in battle or by the sword. If perchance he should live until old age made him unfit to carry shield or sword in deadly strife against an adversary, it was the custom that his brother-at-arms or his armor-bearer should administer the death-thrust. In the event no friend was at hand to render assistance in the bloody finality, it was considered full proper for the aged warrior to plant the hilt of his sword in the earth and by throwing himself upon its point thus perish. The portals of Walhalla would open, the waiting Valkyres would receive him and conduct him to the hall where dwelt the warriors over which Odin, (or Woden), presided.

It is thus apparent, according to the sagas, that the belief in a life after death was a necessary adjunct to enter the abode of the blessed, but to my knowledge an intermediary is never mentioned.

I have stated that there were undoubtedly other reasons for the Viking's making the Christiania fjord his home besides that of repairing his ship and doing other necessary work. It is a well known fact that the climate of the southern part of Norway is comparatively mild, the average winter temperature being about 24° Fahrenheit, and there are many adjacent fertile valleys, which, though naturally of inaccessible size individually, yet collectively were capable of giving sustenance to a large population.

Petty kings were as numerous in Sweden and Norway when history began as colonies are today in the United States, and the former's claim to royal purple are certainly easier established than the latter's to the epaulettes supposed to follow their titles. Each king kept a court of his own and employed as large a number of retainers as the finances of his realm admitted. He often had numerous feudatories, who often lent their presence to swell the number of his courtiers as well as fill the ranks of his warriors.

Thus it was that the returning Viking, perhaps himself a king, laden with plunder from foreign parts, was certain to receive a royal welcome, and often the long Northern winter evenings were spent in carousing and debauchery. To be able to drink large quantities of liquors, principally mead (miod) and wine, was considered as much of a warrior's requisite as was the wielding of the sword. Horns of the ox or wooden tankards were commonly used for drinking purposes, while on one side had a row of pegs placed vertically one above the other; by these pegs the amount drunk was registered and he who could lower the liquor a peg or more below a former drinker was considered the best man.

To this custom of the ancient Odin worshippers is traceable the common saying "to take a person down a peg or two," that is, to humiliate a person. This barbaric manner, or test one's endurance in drinking bouts, obtains not among the lower classes in the Scandinavian countries, though the tell-tale "peg" was discarded long ago.

The north coast of Europe, that is to say, from the western end of the English channel to the southeastern coast of the Baltic, besides what at the present day constitutes Great Britain naturally suffered most from the deprivations of these Northern buccaners, but, if memory serves me rightly there is mention made of them in ancient Roman writings, which would indicate that they extended their predatory voyages even to the sunny clime of the Mediterranean sea.

Of course, the Christiania fjord is not the only place where remains indicative of the Viking have been found. In the vicinity of my former home on the west coast of the southern part of Sweden, there is a small river, which empties into a bay or vik, (hence the name Viking). This river is navigable for smaller craft quite a distance from the sea and flows through a stretch of level country, which for fertility and agricultural resources is unsurpassed in the world, as far as I have had opportunity to compare it. In the banks of this river there have been found metallic remains of weapons and household fixtures that clearly indicate the time in which they were in use, namely, the latter Iron age, at which time the Viking flourished.

Great battles have also taken place here, battles which history does not record. From this and several other similar instances one is forced to con-

clude that the Viking was not exclusively a man of nautical habits, but also a well developed faculty to choose for his home localities where his labor as a husbandman would richly reward him.

It is not probable that agriculture, in the sense in which that word is applied to present day methods of tilling the soil, was practiced by the Viking, though evidences are not lacking that some of the common cereals were grown to a considerable extent, even at a much earlier date than the one now under consideration. Barley was probably the "staple" cereal of that period in the Scandinavian countries, but when we take in consideration that the race of people which then, as now, inhabited Northern Europe, originally came from that part of the globe of which the eye is a native it is more than likely the last named cereal was a well known and appreciated aliment. As my time, and the Glacier's space I presume, does not permit a more comprehensive view of the man, I shall proceed to give a short description of his ship, as we saw it in the museum of Archaeology at Christiania.

Near the small town and watering place of Sandefjord, situated at the west side of the mouth of the Christiania fjord, lies the village of Gokstad, not far from the coast. Here was a large mound known throughout the district by the name of Kongshaugen, (the king's mound), where King Acco, according to traditions, was buried with all his treasures.

On the strength of this tradition the inhabitants of the place began to excavate the mound early in the year 1880. The work was soon put a stop to by order of the Antiquarian society, which desired to make a thorough investigation of the mound on its own account. This work was commenced in the summer of 1880, and superintended by the Antiquarian society. It was of unusual interest, being made, as the mound was found to contain a tomb in a ship in a state of excellent preservation, thanks to the potter's clay in which the ship had been imbedded to a depth of about four feet, around which the bottom of the mound had been thrown up.

In two months the vessel was successfully excavated, put aboard a large barge and towed to Christiania. The vessel's length of keel is 96 feet five inches and 78½ feet between stem and stern posts, outside measure. In the middle it is nearly 17 feet wide and is therefore remarkably sharp, and has a fine run. Its length is considerable in proportion to its width, more so than on the modern coasting vessels in Norway.

Its sharp build, with its considerable length of keel, undoubtedly made her a fast sailor and the flat bottom a very steady boat at sea. It is clinch built, oak, 16 strakes high. The 17 frames which are set three feet apart on the keel run only up to the 11th strake at which point the beams are fastened and joined to the ship's sides by knees. The seams are caulked with three-threaded pine.

The ship had been made both for sailing and rowing. About midship is placed a keelson for the mast to rest upon. There is a plain capstan in the forehold, which, no doubt, served to raise and lower the mast as well as to hoist the anchor. The mast was probably fitted with a yard and a large sail. A few spar heads were found on the vessel of which one undoubtedly is a yard, another the top part of the mast.

That the ship was propelled by oars as well is proved by the existing oars, and likewise by the openings for them made in the third strake from the bow. There are 16 such openings on each side and the strake in which they are made is somewhat thicker than the rest. There is an incision in the afterpart of the opening for the blade to pass through when the oars were to be used. Four well preserved shields and fragments of many others were found along both the water ways, showing that the ship when buried, as at other times when adorned for festive occasions, had been decorated with shields on both sides. Four shields appeared to have been painted alternately yellow and black.

There is an erection of timber in the middle of the ship, this is the sepulchral chamber. That this lofty part in the middle, projecting from the potter's clay, has been preserved, is owing to its having been built of huge blocks of timber and covered with several layers of birch-bark. The timbers of the sepulchral chamber are placed like a roof against a roof tree, the lower ends resting on timbers placed alongside the bulwarks.

Inside of the sepulchral chamber were found relics of the tomb itself. They are, however, nothing but fragments, the sepulchral chamber having been plundered in bygone years. The Scandinavian Sagas frequently tell of breaking into old mounds in the time when Paganism was on the verge of decay. Owing to this plunder everything was found in a confused heap and only a few fragments were left of the costly weapons and trinkets which had accompanied the buried chief to his grave.

The ship evidently had been an open vessel. Under certain circumstances it may, however, have been covered with some sort of cloth. A few pieces of homespun, which were found are, no doubt, remnants of a tent. There are small square holes all along inside the water way, which would indicate that nearly the whole length of the ship may have at times been covered with a tent, and the above mentioned holes utilized for fastening the lower edge. Some planks with horses' heads carved on them and used to fit in each other have served as tent poles. The sepulchral chamber may be said to have been made in the shape of such a tent, only framed of more solid material. It has been calculated that the ship had a crew of 40 hands. Fully equipped it has had a draft of nearly five feet, and the waterway would then have been about three feet above the water. The vessel's carrying capacity was about 30 tons.

On the starboard quarter is the rudder in its original position. It has the shape of the blade of a large oar and has at the upper end been fitted with a tiller pointing athwartship. It is secured to the latter part of the middle ages that rudders were placed on the stern post. In the forehold fragments of five bedsteads were found, all of them made to be taken to pieces, but only two could be completely put together. Inside the sepulchral chamber were found the re-

maine of a sixth bed of a slightly different shape. It is doubtful whether the size of the ship has had any special ornaments, it may, however be taken for granted that there had not been a dragon's head or such like. The dragon ships described in the sagas written several centuries later, were of larger dimensions than this vessel, although probably of similar build. The gang plank was there. It has a hole in one end by which it was fastened to the ship and it is also provided with steps cut into it. The planks of the ship are beautifully planed and rounded off on the edges. The vessel throughout exhibits an extremely skillful workmanship, proving the highly advanced knowledge of shipbuilding attained by the ancient Scandinavians.

The vessel could not have been very old when buried in the mound as the openings for the oars do not show traces of having been very much used.

During the excavations were found bones alongside the ship of at least 12 horses and six dogs, which animals evidently had been killed in order to follow their master into the mound. In the forehold of the ship were also found fragments of three smaller boats, but in so many pieces that none of them could be put together and yet so numerous that a correct idea may be formed of their build. They show in this respect great conformity to the vessel itself the deviations being such as arise from the difference in size. Pieces of the ship's oars and a few perfect ones, and also oars for the smaller boats were found. The oars of the ship were from 18 to 20 feet long, made of spruce and had evidently been handled by one person as the blades are rather small.

Wooden plates and fragments of other wooden utensils, a large copper kettle and the chain by which it had been suspended when hung over the fire were found inside the ship. Various articles were found in the sepulchral chamber, of which may be mentioned pieces of gold-wrought silk, some dark woolen stuff, a partly decayed leather purse, ornaments and harness mountings of gilt bronze and of lead, some feathers of a peacock probably brought home from foreign parts by the owner. In a glass case may be seen the bones of the buried chief, also found in the sepulchral chamber and from the size of these bones it may be concluded that he was a very tall, powerfully built man.

In conclusion I will add a few words in regard to the manner in which the burial is supposed to have taken place. When the man was dead and a spot for his mound had been chosen near the sea, his ship was drawn up to the beach and then imbedded partly in the potter's clay with the stem of the vessel toward the sea. The next thing was to make the sepulchral chamber which was built of timbers, whereupon the vessel was drawn up to a level with it and the man put into the chamber, lying on his bed, dressed in his best clothes, with his weapons and possibly some other valuable possessions. Then the sepulchral chamber was closed and covered with birch-bark.

Inside the ship's inventory certain of the man's possessions, which, according to the ancient Scandinavian cult, were considered necessary for his comfort and rank in Walhalla, were also placed in the ship. His horses and dogs were killed and placed alongside, only his peacock, a memento of his foreign travels, had a place in the ship itself.

Then the whole of the ship, except the sepulchral chamber was covered with potter's clay with layers of moss and twigs on top, upon which the mound was raised. The metallic ornaments discovered have determined archaeologists to fix the time of the burial at the 8th century. At this period a burial in a ship or boat was no uncommon occurrence.

It has been found in many mounds, when opened, that the dead man, whether cremated or not, had been placed in a coffin made of birch bark, and, however, being completely or mostly decayed except this one, at Gokstad and one other, but much smaller boat found at Tune. In both these mounds the potter's clay and preserved the woodwork.

Who the buried man was is not known, but the size of the mound and the unusual grandeur of the burial proves him to have been a man of distinction, a chief.

AXEL N. RAHM.

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