

THE NORSEMEN AND THEIR SAGAS.



It is late in the eighth century before the Northman or Norseman appears on the stage of history. From the day when Cæsar's victorious legions brought the Gauls, the Germans, and the Britons under the sway of the imperial city, these nations of Western Europe are never again entirely lost to history. But Scandinavia and the countries round the Baltic remained unknown to Rome and to the world for long centuries afterwards. "There nature ends," one of the Roman writers has said, when speaking of these northern lands. This brief yet expressive sentence well indicates how completely outside the Roman world lay the countries which were the cradle of our race.

There is another side to all this, which we find it difficult to picture clearly in our minds. To the inhabitants of Scandinavia and the lands round the Baltic, the southern parts of Europe were equally unknown. We find in a Scandinavian writer of the ninth century a description of an expedition which was made by one of the Viking chiefs to this unknown world. In the course of his travels he came upon a city which to the Norseman seemed mysterious and dread—a city of Niflheim, the under-world.

This city, as we learn from contemporary Western writers, must have been Paris. Paris, now the gay capital of Europe, and even then a city of importance and of fame, was so unknown to the Norsemen of the early ninth century that it was deemed a part of Niflheim, the under-world !

During the period when the northern nations were hidden from the eye of history, many changes must have been going on among them. The building and management of ships could not have been learned in a day, and even when we first catch sight of the Norsemen they were the finest and most daring seamen in the world, and their ships probably the most perfect hitherto seen. Many voyages among their own islands and in the Baltic must have preceded the longer voyages to Britain, to Iceland, to Greenland, and to America. Numerous wars there must have been, quite unknown to history, before the northern warrior became the terrible fighter of the Viking Age.

We can imagine the delighted wonder with which the northern warriors first gazed upon the rich and fertile shores of South-Western Europe. We can imagine how they contrasted the fair fields and great cities of the south with the bleak and sterile shores of the north from which they came. What motives first led to their leaving their native shores it is difficult to say. Thirst for adventure, the pinch of poverty at home, the desire of possessing gold and treasure, all conspired to make them seek their fortunes in the wide and unknown lands which lay beyond the sea. When the first adventurers brought home accounts of the lands which they had seen—the fruitful fields, the great cities, the rich

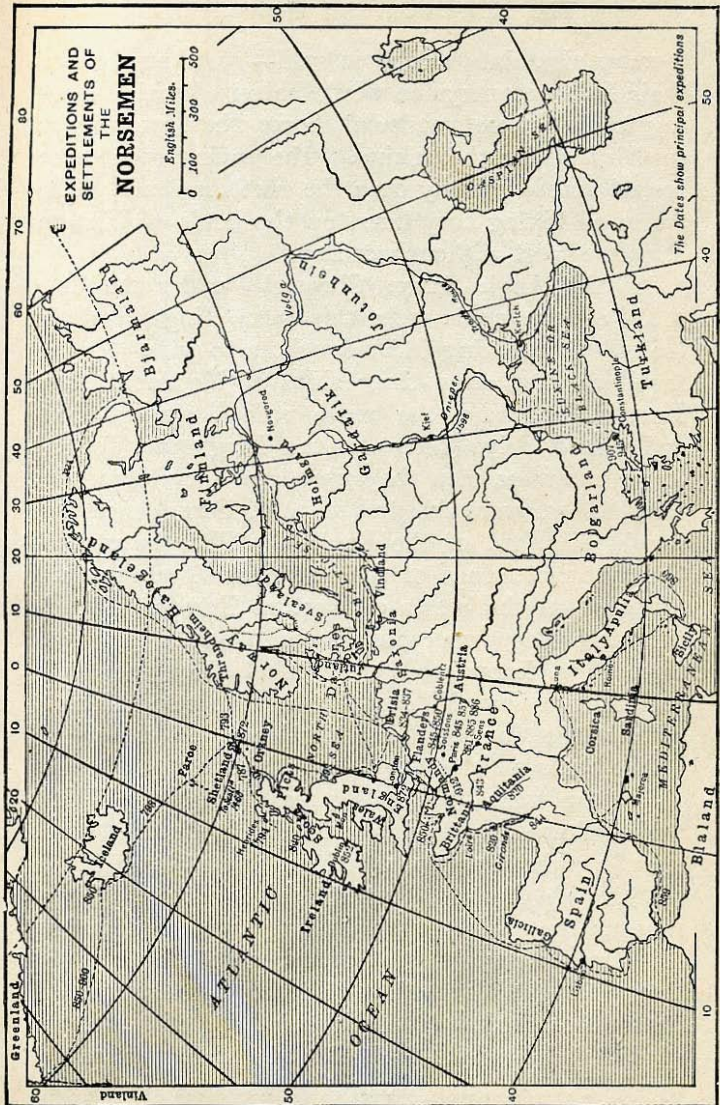
merchandise, and the yellow gold—great numbers of their fellow-countrymen would be seized with a longing to visit those wonderful shores where wealth was to be had for the taking. The roving spirit once roused spread rapidly over the northern lands. The storm of Viking fury burst on the lands of Western Europe almost without warning.

In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, under the date A.D. 787, we read: "In this year King Beorhtic took Eadburh, King Offa's daughter, to wife. And in his days first came three ships of Northmen from Haerethaland, and the reeve rode down to them and would drive them to the king's *vill*, for he knew not what men they were, and they there slew him. These were the first ships of Danish men that sought the land of the English." Thus we read of the first mutterings of the storm which was so soon to burst on the coasts of Western Europe. During the succeeding two centuries and a half the English learned to know well what men these were who came out of the wild north-east. The monks' litany, "From the fury of the Northmen deliver us, O Lord!" tells us what *they* thought of them.

We can trace two distinct roads which the Viking raids followed. One, traversed chiefly by the Danes, led along the shores of Northern Europe to England, the English Channel, France, Spain, and the Mediterranean; the other, traversed chiefly by the Norsemen, led straight across the North Sea to the Orkneys, thence along the west coast of Scotland, to Ireland and the west of England. The islands lying off the coasts of Scotland, England, Ireland, and France were seized by the invaders, and from these as bases their raids

EXPEDITIONS AND SETTLEMENTS OF THE NORSEMEN

English Miles.
0 100 200 300 400 500



The Dates show principal expeditions

extended far and wide. Monasteries felt the utmost fury of their attacks, for there they knew they would find abundance of spoil. At first the invaders confined themselves to plundering expeditions. The Norsemen early turned their attention to settlement and commerce; the Danes, on the other hand, remained for a longer period intent on plunder alone.

Civil wars in Western Europe had rendered the nations there incapable of effective resistance to the ruthless invaders. The Vikings descended now at one point, now at another. When they met with a more stubborn resistance than usual, they merely retired to their ships with whatever plunder they had seized, and sailed away to make an attack somewhere else. They wintered on the islands which they had seized, and as soon as spring was come they descended once more on the devoted lands. Ireland suffered severely at their hands. The Orkneys and the Hebrides became nests of Vikings; in fact, colonies of them must have been established there at a very early date. In these islands they were safe from all interference—a law to themselves; for as yet there was no arm in Europe long enough and strong enough to reach them. Nowhere could a more convenient base have been found for Viking raids on the British and Irish shores.

The first half-century of the Viking Age saw the Danes settled merely in outlying parts of the east coast of England. The Norsemen, on the other hand, had already seized on Orkney, Shetland, the Hebrides, and large tracts of Eastern Ireland. The first fifty years of the Viking Age may be called the first period of Norse colonization in the west.

It would be a great mistake, however, to suppose that the Norsemen were merely turbulent sea-robbers, or that the only result of their migrations was to hinder the progress of civilization in Western Europe. As settlers in other countries, they brought new strength and vitality to the land of their adoption; but instead of remaining separate colonies, they were soon absorbed into the native population, and had no further history of their own.

Yet there were two great settlements abroad which left a deep mark on European history. The one was the colonization of the north of France, afterwards called Normandy. There the Norsemen soon adopted the language and the religion of the country, but retained so much of their native characteristics that the subsequent Norman Conquest of England may be regarded as really a Norse inroad of a specially successful type. The other settlement was that in the south of Italy and Sicily, later known as the kingdom of the Two Sicilies, which occupied an important place in history during the Middle Ages.

Even the British settlements for the most part had only a brief period of separate history, and soon became merged into the general stream of national life. In Orkney and Shetland, however, where there was probably no native population at the time of the Norse invasion, the colony developed along its own special lines, and has left behind it a history which for centuries remained distinct from that of the rest of Great Britain.

The history of the Orkney Islands during the period of the Norse occupation is preserved for us in the Icelandic *Sagas*. Iceland was one of the earliest and

most important Norse colonies, and there the old Northern language was preserved better than anywhere else. The Sagas are stories which, in the times of long ago, were told around the fires in Iceland and other Norse colonies to while away the long winter evenings. At festivals and merry-makings, during long voyages, or by the winter fireside, the Norseman listened eagerly to the recital of deeds done by his kinsmen in other times and in other lands. Story-telling was a popular pastime, and the man who knew many Sagas was ever a welcome guest.

Many of the Sagas have now been translated into English, and all of these are well worth reading. The greatest of all the Sagas is generally thought to be the Saga of Burnt Njal. It is one of the noblest stories to be found in any language, and it is besides nobly told. In this Saga we find the best account of the great battle of Clontarf. Among the other great Sagas are the Saga of the Settlers on the Ayre, the Saga of Laxdale, the Saga of Egil the son of Skallagrim, the Saga of Grettir the Strong, and the Saga of the Volsungs. The two last are mythical Sagas; they do not tell of real historical personages, but are paraphrases of old songs and legends which have come down from a more distant past. The Anglo-Saxon Saga of Beowulf tells some of the same stories, and is not a real Saga in the sense of a true story told by the fireside.

The stories of the earls and chiefs of Orkney form part of the great store of Saga literature, and these have come down to us in the form of the "Orkneyinga Saga." It must be remembered, however, that this is merely the summary of a great number of stories

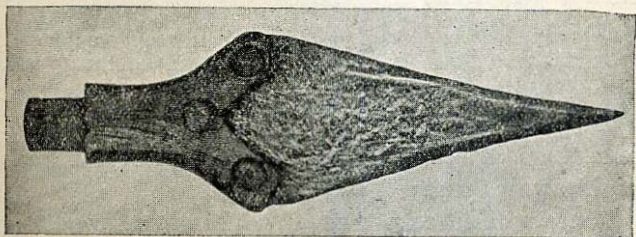
which had been told long before by men who had no doubt taken part in the events related. It was a Saga-man's pride to tell the truth—at least as it was told to him—and so we may in the main rely on the Orkney Saga as a true account of events which happened, although sometimes it may be exceedingly difficult to assign the correct dates. The Orkney Saga is not usually reckoned among the great Sagas. It partakes more of the nature of a general history than of a single and complete story. This Saga is the chief source of our knowledge of the history of our islands during Norse times.

The Orkney Saga consists of several parts, each of which might be called a separate Saga—the Earls' Saga, Magnus's Saga, and Rognvald's Saga. The first relates the history of Orkney from its conquest by King Harald Fairhair of Norway down to the death of Earl Thorfinn, about the time of the Norman Conquest of England. The second relates the lives of Thorfinn's sons, Paul and Erlend, but more especially of the holy Earl Magnus, of his murder, and of the wonderful things that happened afterwards through his holiness. The third part tells of the earls after St. Magnus, chiefly Earl Rognvald the Second, and the great Viking, Sweyn Asleifson, of Gairsay, generally known as "the last of the Vikings." The whole history given in the Orkney Saga includes the events of the three centuries from 900 to 1200.

In addition to what we learn from the Orkney Saga, we glean a few facts about the history of our islands from other Sagas, such as the Sagas of the Kings of Norway, usually called the "Heimskringla." There are also many Norse poems which scholars say

must have been written in Orkney, or in some other of the western Norse colonies, and from these we can learn much about the life of the people, their thoughts, and their beliefs, though very little about the actual history of the islands. We do not know who were the authors of these poems, but some of them were really great poets, greater, perhaps, than any then living in any other part of Europe.

Finally, there are occasional glimpses of our Norse ancestors to be caught in the pages of the chronicles and histories of the nations. Unfortunately, these references are so often distorted by fear or hatred, or so confused through scanty and imperfect knowledge, that they add very little to what we already know from Norse records. One good purpose, indeed, they serve: they show that the Saga-men were in the main truth-tellers, so that we can place reliance on their stories, even where these are not found in the records of other nations. The Saga-men also fill up many gaps in the history of those countries which the Norsemen visited, and thus they render our knowledge of the Viking Age more complete, more detailed, and more accurate, even as regards countries which were to them foreign lands.



Ancient Bronze Spear-head ; Horn Mounting still preserved.