

A Timeline of Norwegian History – Brief Highlights

500 B.C. – The Iron Age comes to the Scandinavian Peninsula, as the linguistic-cultural "big bang" centered on the southern part of the peninsula and the present Danish island of Zealand sends Germanic-speaking peoples to various parts of Europe. Tribes like the Goths begin migrating to eastern and central Europe. Others, such as the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, by about 400 A.D. end up on the western coasts of modern-day Denmark and the Netherlands, and help form the western group of Germanic languages. Tribes spread throughout Scandinavia, and they develop the various dialects that form the Northern Germanic language group, collectively known as Old Norse. While groups, such as the Saxons in the Low Countries and the Norse-speaking Scandinavians to the north could communicate quite well with each other in 400 A.D., by the beginning of the Viking Age four centuries later, Anglo-Saxon's living in England and Norse-speakers raiding from across the North Sea could no longer understand each other.

Evidence from the early part of the Iron Age suggests that contacts with as far-away cultures as the ancient Greeks, had been ongoing for centuries.

793 A.D. to 1100 A.D – Scandinavia enters the Viking Age (some historians fix its end to correspond with the Norman invasion of England in 1066). This period features the rapid expansion of Scandinavian culture through trade, devastating raids, and settlement. The rather precise date of 793 for the start of the Viking Age is based upon the first recorded raid on Anglo-Saxon England – the sacking of the Lindisfarne Monastery on the North Sea coast of Northumbria. The destruction of Lindisfarne was the 9-11 of Medieval Christian Europe.

The term "Viking," which is typically used as a noun in English, comes from Anglo-Saxon (Old English). In the Northern German pattern of speech used in Scandinavia, the word is actually a verb (or more precisely, a *gerund*); such as, "this season, our warriors plan to *go viking*." Viking is based upon the root word "vik," which is a cove. So part of viking, or raiding, was hanging out in coves and ambushing merchant ships as they passed by. Such raids were enhanced by the technological development of the *long ship*, which – with its thick keel and thin "clinker" style construction of overlapping planks – offered both ruggedness while navigating the open seas and the versatility of negotiating the shallow European river systems. Historians today believe that Viking raids, invasions, and settlement of foreign countries were as much about the lack of arable land in Scandinavia due to rapid population growth as they were about seeking treasure.

Swedish Vikings tended to operate in the eastern Baltic. One such tribe, known as the *Rus* (sometimes referred to as *Varangians*), traded along the river systems of Russia as far south as the Black Sea and on to Constantinople. The Rus founded the great city-states of Novgorod and Kiev, which eventually evolved, as these Scandinavians inter-married with the native Slavs, into Medieval Russia.

In the west, after the decline of Roman Britain but before the beginning of the Viking Age, people from Norway settled the northern half of the Kingdom of Northumbria

(which was called Bernicia). The Scandinavian people developed the written form of their language rather late in historical terms (they used "runes" mainly for accounting); therefore, accurate records from the period are few and far between. As such, historians tend to lump the western exploits of Norwegian Vikings together with their Danish "cousins" to the south. Nevertheless, it is believed that Vikings from Norway established kingdoms in the Orkneys, the Shetland Islands, and parts of the Scottish highlands. Norwegian Vikings also founded the Irish ports of Dublin, Wexford, and Waterford; and they colonized lands as far west as Iceland and Greenland.

Danish Vikings (to the south) were evidently the main protagonists fighting the Anglo-Saxons and occupying large portions of England during the age of Alfred the Great and his successors; and they were probably the Vikings responsible for conquering and developing other European principalities, such as the Duchy of Normandy and the Kingdom of Sicily.

The Viking age came to an end over the course of the 11th Century, as the more powerful Scandinavian *Jarls* began forming small kingdoms and converted their people to Christianity in order to increase their local power and foster greater access to Christian Europe to the south.

Much of what we know today about Viking culture and their Norse religion comes from the *Icelandic Sagas*, written down during the Middle Ages by Norwegian story-tellers living in Iceland, such as Snorri Sturlusson.

1349 – The Black Plague spreads to Norway, killing off half of its population by 1400.

1360 – German merchants representing the interests of the Hanseatic League are invited to revitalize the suffering Norwegian economy by establishing a commercial base in the west coast city of Bergen. Trading mainly in cod (which was harvested and dried by Norwegian fishermen in the north of the country), the Germans remain in the Bergen suburb of Bryggen until the end of the Seven Years' War in the 1750s. They keep the rest of Europe fed with dried fish for almost 400 years.

1380 – Olaf Haakonsson inherits the thrones of both Denmark and Norway. The co-kingdoms remain tied together politically and culturally until the Napoleonic Period. Norway is the junior partner in the relationship, with the government in Copenhagen calling most of the shots.

1397 – Queen Margaret I expands the dual kingdom to include Sweden by creating the "Kalmar Union." Sweden later separates from the Union in 1523.

1537 – Denmark and Norway convert to Lutheranism during the initial wars of the Protestant Reformation.

1813 – Ending up on the wrong side of the Napoleonic wars (Denmark sided with France), Denmark cedes Norway to Sweden.

1869 – Separate parliamentary sessions by the Norwegians are permitted by the Swedes.

1905 – The Norwegian Parliament votes to dissolve the "union" with Sweden. There is little resistance from Stockholm. The new Norwegian government invites a member of the Danish royal family, Prince Carl, to become the Norwegian King, Haakon VII. Norway become a "constitutional monarchy" along the lines of the United Kingdom.

1940-1945 – Norway is occupied by the forces of the Third Reich.

1949 – Norway becomes a founding member of NATO.

1994 – Norwegians vote to stay *out* of the European Union. While today, Norway is involved in many EU-sponsored fora, it remains out of the Eurozone and maintains its own currency, the Norwegian Kroner (Crown) or NOK.

2014 – Today Norway has a population of over 5 million. About 80 percent speak *Bokmal*, a Norwegian written standard that is very close to modern Danish. The remainder, about 20 percent of the population (located in remote regions, such as coastal towns), speak a variety of dialects related to Old Norse, called *Nynorsk* (New Norsk). The vast majority of Norwegian citizens living today are fluent in English.

- Bruce (15 April 2014)