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## BACKGROUND BOOKS

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### NORWAY

The long, rocky half-peninsula that is now Norway could not be populated until it had thawed out. "If we disregard all fanciful notions of people living here before or during the last Ice Age," writes Anders Hagen in *Norway* (Praeger, 1967), an overview of prehistoric Norway, "we can set the . . . earliest settlements in the period 10,000–8000 B.C."

From that time, when glaciers finally receded from Norway's southern shores, until the dawn of the Bronze Age in 1500 B.C., the tribes that had migrated from the south and east increasingly supplemented their diet of fish and game with agricultural products. The sea remained central to life. By 500 B.C., boat-shaped graves—with tall stones at either end representing prow and stern—were common.

The boats themselves, Hagen notes, were growing sturdier. Around A.D. 600, Norwegians built the first full keel—a single, arched beam, usually oak, which undergirded the hull. Ships now could survive long voyages; Scandinavia had the technology to enter the Viking Age.

Of the many accounts of the Vikings' extraordinary outward surge during the ninth, 10th, and 11th centuries, the best include Per Sveass Andersen's *Vikings of the West: The Expansion of Norway in the Early Middle Ages* (Tanum, 1971) and Johannes Brøndsted's *The Vikings* (Penguin, 1965, rev. ed., paper).

In *A History of the Vikings* (Oxford, 1968), Gwyn Jones complains that too much of the Viking literature filtered down from "European

Christian annalists and chroniclers" who turned "a many-faceted and durably important contribution to our European heritage into a sensational tale of raid, rapine, and conquest." Jones focuses on the Vikings' more constructive legacies, such as local representative assemblies and the jury of twelve, which was exported to England in the ninth century. In *Political Life and Institutions in Norway* (Univ. of Oslo, 1980), Gunnar Arntzen and Bard Bredrup Knudsen trace the "consensus-striving" in modern Norwegian politics to the insistence within Viking bands on equality and social stability.

By the end of the ninth century, most of Norway's tribes were united under King Harald Fairhair. National distinctions had emerged. The Danish Vikings headed southwest, to France, northern Germany, and what is now England; the Swedes went east, to Finland and deep into Russia; the Norwegians sailed west, to the British Isles, Iceland, Greenland, and Canada.

Jones's complaints about historical sensationalism notwithstanding, the Vikings wrought plenty of havoc. In Ireland, the Gaelic word for Scandinavian, "Lochlannach," soon came to mean "demon." And, as Jones notes, Erik the Red decided in A.D. 982 to colonize Greenland for lack of alternatives: The hot-tempered explorer had been banned from his native Norway, and from Iceland, for committing a series of murders.

The Vikings absorbed—and brought home—a new faith sometimes at odds with old Norse traditions. Christianity taught that the

meek shall inherit the earth, whereas Norse mythology reserved Valhalla for those who died bravely in battle. "Christianity and classical civilization had an unquenchable vitality which in the end subdued the invaders," Karen Larsen writes in her excellent, if overly romantic, **A History of Norway** (Princeton, 1948). The Norsemen were tamed.

In 1397, familial ties among the Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian monarchs led to the unification of Scandinavia. But Sweden seceded in 1523. Norwegians were now expected not only to pay taxes to Copenhagen, but to provide soldiers for Denmark's periodic wars with Sweden. Peasants rioted in Telemark and Trondelag during the late 1500s. As Ronald Popperwell observes in **Norway** (Praeger, 1972), the best book on Norway's past and present, "It did not . . . take the Danish kings long to discover that Norway had to be governed in her own way."

The Swedish kings were similarly enlightened. In 1814, after Denmark delivered Norway to Sweden as part of a peace settlement, prominent Norwegians met at Eidsvoll and drafted what is now the second oldest written constitution in the world, after the U.S. Constitution. The Storting, which it established, governed with little interference from Sweden until Norway won complete independence in 1905.

As Norwegians forged a political

identity, they sought to revive their cultural identity. The peasant, long overshadowed by Danish-dominated city life, was now deified by Oslo intellectuals as the guardian of genuine Norse culture—a turnabout thoroughly examined in **National Romanticism in Norway** (Columbia, 1933; AMS, 1968) by Oscar Falnes.

The realities of peasant life were less glorious. Hundreds of thousands of Norwegians immigrated to America, a saga best covered by Ingrid Semmingsen in **Norway to America: A History of the Migration** (Univ. of Minn., 1978, paper only).

The literature on Norway's harsh World War II experience includes firsthand accounts, such as **I Saw It Happen in Norway** by C. J. Hambro, and the more detached **The Bitter Years** (Morrow, 1974) by Richard Petrow.

Hilary Allen, in **Norway and Europe in the 1970s** (Universitetsforlaget, 1979), provides a chronicle of "what was probably the hardest fought political issue in the country [in] this century"—the decision not to join the European Economic Community. In **A History of Modern Norway 1814–1972** (Clarendon, 1973), T. K. Derry suggests that social and economic trends may yet reverse that decision. "In the nature of things, [Norway's] society and way of life on the outskirts of Western Europe are indissolubly linked with events at its center."

—Terje I. Leiren