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NORÐVEGR — NORWAY: FROM SEA KINGS TO LAND KINGS

Abstract: Along the West-Scandinavian coast agrarian settlements are found along fjords and in valleys which are separated from each other and from the lands to the east by high mountains. Thus, seafaring was the main communication mode from the Stone Age onwards. Unlike the coasts of Britain, Ireland and continental Europe, this 1,000 kilometres long coastline is littered with thousands of islands, islets and reefs which create a protected coastal sailing route — the *Norðrvegr* — from which the kingdom took its name.

The naming of the kingdom reflects how it was created. The reason that Denmark, England and numerous other Germanic kingdoms have names composed of an ethnonym and a term for 'land' is that they are based on control of territory. Because of the unusual topography, the lands along the west-Scandinavian coasts could be subdued by taking control of the sailing route. If local chieftains wanted to move their people and products out of their territory, they would need to be in the grace of the king that controlled the sailing route. While most kings at the time were land-kings, the king of Norway was a *sjó-konungr*, a sea-king, as reflected in the name of the country.

A few sites along the coast are better suited for control of the sailing routes than others — Avaldsnes at Karmøy near the town of Haugesund being one of them. Although the climate is rougher and the land less fertile than along the fjords, many of these sites have prominent archaeological monuments from the first millennium AD, some even from the Bronze Age. This long history of seafaring being the main transport mode and naval warfare being a necessary skill for political dominance makes out a backdrop for the Viking incursions in Britain, Ireland and the Continent c. 790–1050.

Keywords: Kingship, Viking, Scandinavia

In the mind of the average contemporary Norwegian, the country is divided into four regions, northern, southern, eastern and western. However, the perception was rather different two centuries ago, when the country was viewed as divided into *nordafjells* and *sønnafjells*, that is, 'north of the mountains' and 'south of the mountains'[1]; the

[1] *Helle K.* Ei soge om Vestlandet // A. Lillehammer, A.E. Tryti, K. Helle, O. Grepstad, E. Sunde (eds). Vestlandets historie. Bergen, 2006. Vol. 1. S. 12

‘mountains’ in this context is the range which runs south-south-west from the very north of the Scandinavian peninsula.

From a strictly geographical perspective this terminology is clearly incorrect, as some regions ‘north of the mountains’ lie further to the south than the regions ‘south of the mountains’. Rather than being derived from compasses and maps, the terminology probably grew from a widespread consciousness of unity based on communication routes, landscape-type and living conditions within each of the two regions.

This division of western Scandinavia, which has ancient roots, was reflected in the way people identified themselves and each other. As late as the nineteenth century people from the west coast were called *Nórdmenn*, ‘men from the north’, by their countrymen on the other side of the mountains. To add to the confusion, those who lived ‘south of the mountains’ were called *Austmenn*, ‘men from the east’[2].

This terminology can be traced back through the High Middle Ages to the Viking Age (c. 790–1050). Ohthere, around 890 AD, described to King Alfred of England the voyage from his homeland in northern Norway to the town Kaupang, by the mouth of the Oslofjord, and on to the town Haithabu near present-day Schleswig in Germany. Ohthere stated that he lived furthest north of all the Northmen and that *Norðmanna land*, ‘the land of the Northmen’, was narrow in the north and broad in the south. In some translations of Ohthere’s account, *Norðman* is understood to mean ‘Norwegian’[3], but this is inaccurate. Evidently, when using this term Ohthere was neither referring to a country nor a kingdom and its inhabitants, but rather he was identifying himself in the same manner as the people from the west and north still did a hundred years ago. He was referring to a geographic zone where the people, in addition to their many local identities, shared one: they were Northmen, because they lived in the land ‘north’ of the great mountains. At that time this was a geographic zone, not a political entity.

Before the Kingdom of Norway was formed in the tenth and eleventh centuries there were several smaller polities within

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[2] Ibidem. S. 12–14.

[3] E. g., *Bately J.* Text and translation: the three parts of the known world and the geography of Europe north of the Danube according to Orosius’ Historia and its Old English version // J. Bately & A. Englert (eds.). Ohthere’s voyages: a late 9th-century account of voyages along the coasts of Norway and Denmark and its cultural context**.** Roskilde, 2007. S. 44, 46–47

Norðmanna land. In "Getica", Jordanes' mid-sixth century history of the Goths, twenty-eight tribes are listed in Scandinavia[4]. By comparing the names of these with more recent records of the names of districts and regions, the lands of several tribes may be identified. For instance, in "Getica", the following names are listed: "*Granii, Augandzi, [...] Rugi, Arochi*". They correspond to the prefixes in the following regional names that are still in use: *Grenland*, *Agder*, *Rogaland* and *Hordaland*. These are neighbouring regions lying from the east towards the west along the southern coast of present-day Norway. Three of these regional names carry the suffix *-land*, which indicates that Grenland was the land of the *Granii*, Rogaland was the land of the *Rugi*, etc. In addition to the names listed in "Getica", several other regional names have their roots in the names of tribes, such as *Sogn* (*Sygnafylki* in the Middle Ages), the land of the *Sygni*.

Not only do Jordanes' tribal names fit the regional names, but these regions also correspond very closely with tribal areas in south-western Norway that professor Bjørn Myhre[5] identified on the basis of his analysis of various high-status categories of archaeological finds from the Late Roman and Migration periods (c. 300–550 AD). The centres that he identified lie in the lands of the *Granii, Augandzi, Rugi, Arochi* and *Sygni*. As illustrated in Figure 1, the centres of these tribal areas are not located on the exposed coastline, but rather in the much more fertile areas of the fjords and inlands.

How *Norðvegr* became Norway

In early-medieval Europe there was a general development from numerous small polities to fewer larger ones. Normally a large polity was created by the dynasty of a polity taking control of neighbouring ones and forming a kingdom, some of which endured into the modern period.

The creation of the western Scandinavian kingdom, however, seems to have been of different character. This is evident from its name. Many European countries have a prefix that denotes a tribe and a suffix that means 'territory'. For instance, Denmark means 'the

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[4] *Lund A.A.* De etnografiske kilder til Nordens tidligere historie. Århus, 1993. S. 282–285; *Svennung J.* Jordanes und Scandia: kritisch-exegetische studien // Kungl. humanistiska vetenskapssamfundet i Uppsala Skrifter. 1967. Vol. 44:2A.

[5] *Myhre B.* Chieftain's graves and chiefdom territories in south Norway in the migration period // Studien zur Sachsenforschung. 1987. Vol. 6. S. 169–188.

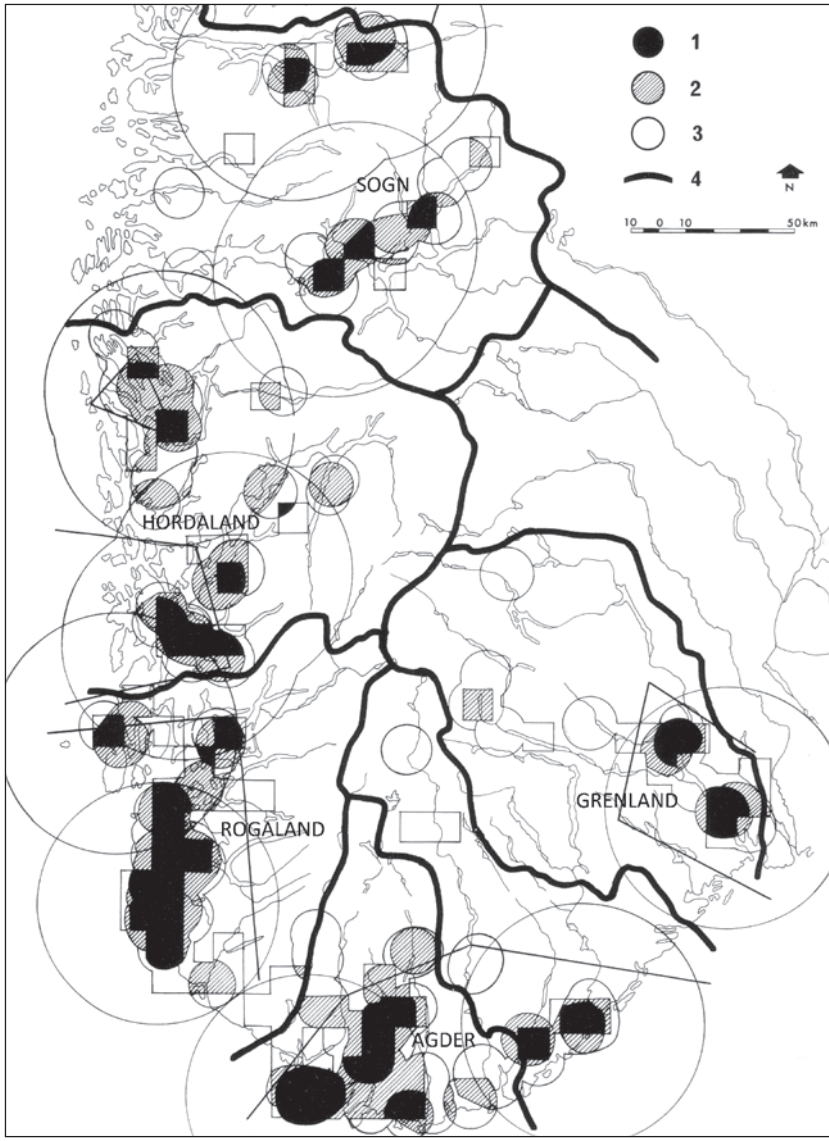

Figure 1. Professor Bjørn Myhre's map of high-status grave-finds — that is, those that contain bronze vessels, glasses and items of gold — from the period c. 300–550 AD. Each find has been mapped as a square or circle, and where three or more overlap the shading is black (1). Where two overlap the shade is hatched (2), and no overlap is marked as a white circle or square (3). Present-day county borders are marked (4). For bibliographical reference, see note 5.

mark (land) of the Danes', England means 'the land of the Angles', etc. But the Old Norse name of Norway, *Norðvegr*, is composed differently. The prefix simply means 'north', while the suffix means 'way'.

This 'way' is no doubt the sailing route along the coast of western Scandinavia, running for more than 1,000 kilometres from Rogaland in the southwest to Lofoten, which lies well north of the Polar circle. The route is, for the most part, sheltered by thousands of islands, islets and reefs. Even when the open sea outside is rough and the wind terrifying, it is safe to sail along the sheltered route. The name of this sailing route was *Norðvegr*, 'the Northern way', and it binds together the lands 'north of the mountains' where the Northmen live.

Thus, the West-Scandinavian kingdom actually took its name from a communication route, the only such case in the world known to the author. The name's background is that, unlike the many kingdoms that were based on control of a territory, the kingdom of Norway was based on the control of the sea. The king of the sailing route was the king of the land. This is mirrored in the location of the five earliest royal manors, Urnes, Avaldsnes, Fitjar, Alrekstad and Seim (Figure 2), all of which are mentioned in skaldic poetry and sagas in connection with the first king of Norway, *Haraldr hárfagri*, who came to power in the late ninth century and ruled until c. 930. These manors are all located on islands or in bays along the sailing route, not on the fjords where Myhre's wealthy graves were found.

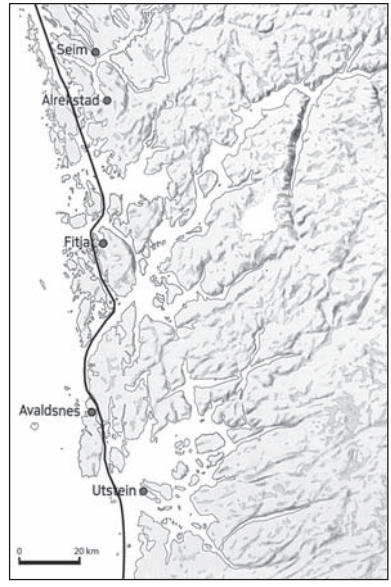

Figure 2. The five manors that are mentioned in the Old Norse literature in connection with Norway's first king, Haraldr hárfagri. As can be seen, they are all located near the main sailing route along the coast, marked by the black line. Redrawn by the author.

The outer coastline and the islands outside are rather rough and rocky, with good pasture and arable land being located in only a few places. These few places are where the royal manors are situated. In the fjords, just a few kilometres inland, the landscape opens up and

large stretches of fertile land with deep soil occur, sheltered from the wind by surrounding mountains. Here the climate is much more favourable for farming than on the outer coast. Further inland are valleys and, eventually, mountains, with resources of timber, game, fur, etc. As the distribution of the wealthy graves testifies, this is where the tribal aristocracies had their land and people. Their manors occupied the most fertile spots, surrounded by their people on neighbouring farms, from where they had access to the rich resources in the valley and mountain areas. Each tribe could live along the same fjord, as in Sogn, in valleys, like the *Granii*, in neighbouring and connected fjords and valleys, like the *Arochi*, or on a fertile plain, like most the *Rugi* did on the plain of Jæren.

Overland transport between the tribal areas was hindered by the mountains, and the most convenient way to travel was by sea. As a consequence, anyone travelling with some cargo outside of their tribal area would need to sail along the *Norðvegr*. This means that in this landscape a convenient key to gain authority over the tribal aristocracies would be to settle on the strategic points along this route with sufficient ships and men to be able to halt passing ships and make them pay homage, perhaps also duties. The king who could establish himself on several of these locations would be king of the *Norðvegr*, and thereby king of the land. While most kings at the time were land-kings, the king of Norway was a *sjó-konungr*, a sea-king, as reflected in the name of the country.

The most important of the five earliest royal manors was, undoubtedly, Avaldsnes (*Qgvaldsnes* in Old Norse), near the southern end of the sailing route. The manor is frequently mentioned in the sagas, and the archaeological finds from there are remarkable, spanning three thousand years from the earliest Bronze Age to the High Middle Ages, when King *Hákon Hákonarson* had a magnificent church built on the manor. This is where, according to Snorri Sturluson, the author of the most elaborate of the Kings' sagas, the first king of the Kingdom of *Norðvegr, Haraldr hárfagri*, settled in the late ninth century following his victory over rivals[6]. Chieftains and petty-kings were associated with the area before him, but what seems to be

[6] Avaldsnes (*Qgvaldsnes*) is mentioned in the following chapters of Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla*: *Haralds saga ins hárfagra*, ch. 38, *Hákonar saga góða*, ch. 19, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, ch. 63–64, and *Óláfs saga ins helga*, ch. 118–121. In addition, Snorri describes in detail the place close to Avaldsnes where *Haraldr hárfagri* was buried (ch. 43 in *Haralds saga*).

novel is that he also possessed the four other royal manors along the southern part of the sailing route *Norðvegr*. Consequently he was in a position to guarantee safe passage along that whole stretch to those who submitted to him. The five royal manors seem ideal for this. The local agricultural resources are sufficient to feed numerous people; they all have good harbours from where one can swiftly sail north and south. The five manors are located from Hordaland in the north to Rogaland in the south (Figures 1 and 2). This seems to be the core of the kingdom from which he had some authority further north and east through allied petty-kings.

Avaldsnes and the other royal manors played a decisive role in the period when the Norwegian kingdom was expanded and consolidated — the tenth and eleventh centuries. But in the twelfth and in particular the thirteenth century they lost their significance as royal strongholds to the towns, notably to Bergen — the High-Mediaeval capital of Norway. At that time kings resided in towns and controlled both lands and seas from there.

Polities and ships before the Viking Age

Archaeological finds testify that some manors along the sailing route *Norðvegr* were in the possession of kings and chieftains many centuries before the time of *Haraldr hárfagri*. For instance, the Avaldsnes area has exquisite finds spread over a period of 3000 years before the Viking Age. The top-quality finds occur at times when there also was a leap in ship construction.

This indicates that in this part of the world a close connection existed between naval technology and political authority through the Bronze and Iron Ages. In-depth studies of this connection may reveal how and why warriors from these coasts over the centuries could build up the expertise in maritime warfare which allowed them to raid with such efficiency the coasts of Britain, Ireland and Francia from the 790s onwards. Such studies are ongoing in the Avaldsnes Royal Manor Project which conducted excavations at Avaldsnes in 2011–2012. In the following some preliminary results from these excavations will be considered in the context of the naval history of Scandinavia.

The Scandinavian-type ship deviates from the Mediterranean and the Continental ones by basically being a soft shell supported by some inner constructions. While most other European ship-types are

constructed by first building a stiff skeleton and then covering the outside with planks, the Scandinavian ships were built by — from the keel — adding one plank to the other. As the hull was shaped, some inner constructions were added to supply stability. The Continental so-called carvel-built ship is stiff, while the Scandinavian clinker-built ship is flexible and much lighter. Such ships and boats are still being built on traditional shipyards along the coasts of Norway.

One can draw a straight evolutionary line from this type of ship and back to the simple dugouts of the Stone Age, hollowed out from a single log using stone axes. The first step along that line was taken c. 4000 years ago, when the first bronze axes arrived in Scandinavia. Using them, one could split logs into planks, and one could shape the planks into slim and flexible ship boards. Such boards were sown onto the sides of the dugout, thereby creating a more seaworthy vessel that could carry more cargo and cross open waters more safely. Numerous ships of this type are depicted on Bronze-Age rock carvings.

Around the time when the first bronze axes arrived in Scandinavia, the first extraordinary finds found their way to the rocky and windy Avaldsnes area. Three hoards of precious flint tools have been retrieved from the soil — an extraordinary density. One of these hoards is the largest found in Scandinavia. Flint does not occur naturally in Norway, and these items are obviously quarried and shaped in the flint mines in Denmark and then shipped to the West-Scandinavian coast. Avaldsnes was apparently a place where such items were stored before they were shipped on further north. This trade must have been controlled by the local aristocracy.

The likely reason why these rich flint finds should occur at Avaldsnes is the site's location by a narrow passage near the southern end of the sailing route *Norðvegr*. Their occurrence there should probably be connected to the contemporary development of plank-built ships. Such ships created a sufficient power-base for an aristocracy to establish itself on this island which supplied perfect opportunities to control the sailing route. Richly furnished graves in huge mounds from the following centuries demonstrate the presence of this aristocracy. 14 such mounds arranged in a straight line were built at Reheia, c. one kilometre west of the Avaldsnes manor site.

The next leap in ship technology happened around 200 AD. After having been paddled for more than 2000 years, ships were now rowed. The longer ores allowed a higher freeboard; therefore ships could carry more cargo and cross rougher waters. The best preserved

example of such a ship is the c. 20 meters long Nydam ship excavated from a bog in southern Jutland.

At the time when ores were introduced, in the third century AD, a petty-king was entombed in the so-called Flaghaug at Avaldsnes. The 5 meter high grave-mound, 40 meters in diameter, was excavated in 1834, revealing fantastic finds. The grave is considered to be one of the richest male graves from the Roman Iron Age in Scandinavia. It contained several Roman bronze vessels, exquisite weaponry, drinking horn, several gold rings; and the finest piece of them all — a neck ring weighing 600 grams. It is without hinges and has been bent around its owner's neck to stay there, even into the grave (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The neck ring of solid gold found in 1834 in the male grave in Flaghaug, Avaldsnes. It weighs c. 600 grams and has been fixed around the owner's neck. Copyright: Terje Tveit, Archaeological Museum, University of Stavanger

The quality of the weaponry in the grave has few parallels. The only in Scandinavia is that which has been identified as belonging to the commander of an army of several hundred men which, probably after suffering defeat, had their weaponry and personal belongings sacrificed in a lake in Illerup Ådal near Århus, eastern Jutland. This parallel may give some indication as to the political position the man buried at Avaldsnes may have retained.

The recent excavations at Avaldsnes revealed several elements in what appears to be a high-status settlement from the period c. 200–600

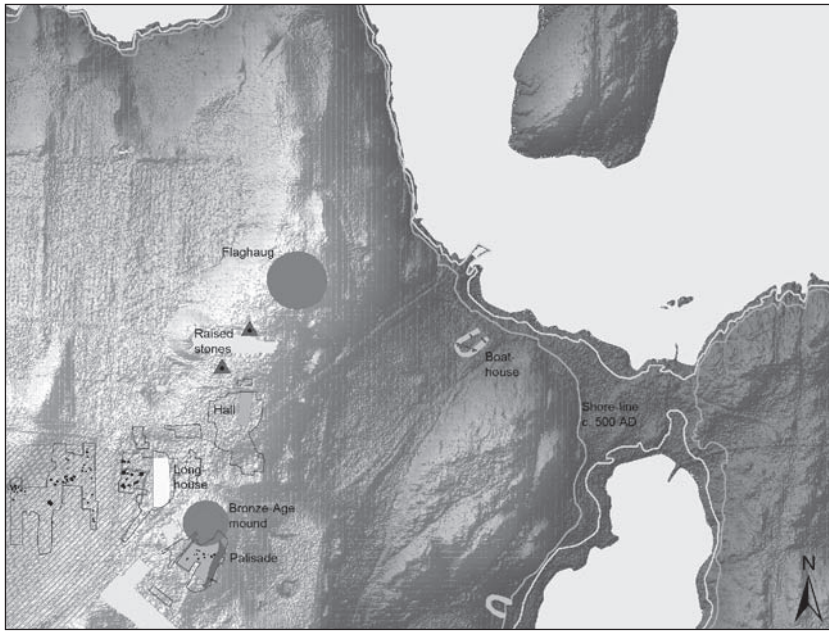

Figure 4. The main archaeological features from excavations at Avaldsnes. All the named features date from the period c. 200–600 AD, except for the Bronze-Age mound. Copyright, The Avaldsnes Royal Manor Project, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo

AD (Figure 4). C. 50 meters south of Flaghaug were unearthed the remains of a hall-building. In such buildings chieftains and petty-kings resided with their retinue. Both the mound and the hall lay on the edge of a plateau c. 20 meters above the sea, and therefore clearly visible from every ship that sailed the *Norðvegr* — an unmistakable display of power.

Adding to that, at least two raised stones, the remaining one c. 8 metres high, stood between the mound and the hall, equally visible for travellers. These stones, among the highest in Scandinavia, cannot be dated more closely than to some time in the period 200–600 AD. The second mound, from the Bronze Age, lay c. 50 meters south of the hall. And just south of this mound, what is believed to be the remains of a fortification — a palisade — were found. Such fortifications have been found in great numbers, creating secure refuges on uninhabited hilltops. But until now, in western Scandinavia, they have not been found on Iron-Age settlement sites, like at Avaldsnes. In eastern

Scandinavia some 50 such fortified settlements have been identified.

While all these features were meant to be seen from ships sailing by, the multifunctional longhouse located further west of the plateau would be more or less unseen from the sea. Also rather hidden was a boathouse from the same period found in a sheltered bay just beneath the plateau. Neither the longhouse nor the boathouse were preserved in their full length, but other features show that both were of dimensions that support the impression of Avaldsnes being a high-status settlement in the period c. 200–600 AD.

The Avaldsnes excavations also identified settlement remains from the Viking Period, but they are much more fragmentary than those from the previous few centuries. Until they are further analysed, we must rely on earlier grave-finds to supply evidence for the site's significance in the Viking Period.

Recently new light has been shed on Avaldsnes some decades before *Haraldr hárfagri* established his kingdom; that is, in the decades leading up to the first Viking raids on the British Isles and Ireland. Some hundred years ago two ship-graves were excavated just north of the Avaldsnes settlement site, the so-called Storhaug and Grønhaug ships[7]. These were preserved in a much more fragmentary state than their better-known counterparts excavated in Vestfold, the Oseberg and Gokstad ships. Vestfold is located by the Oslofjord, that is, *sønnafjells*, 'south of the mountains'. Recent dendrochronological investigations demonstrate that both of the Avaldsnes ships date to the same narrow period: the Storhaug ship was built around 770, and buried in 779, while the Grønhaug ship was built around 780, and buried c. 790–795[8].

What is even more interesting is that dendrochronological data from the Oseberg ship, the construction of which took place c. 820[9], have now been compared to those from the Storhaug and Grønhaug ships. The outcome is that the three ships were built in the same precise region. That this may be identified as the Avaldsnes region is strongly suggested by the fact that the wood from a small boat in the Storhaug mound, as well as from a stretcher-plank used during

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[7] *Lorange A.L.* Storhaugen paa Karmøen // Bergen Museums Aarbog. 1887. S. 3–17; *Shetelig H.* En plyndret baadgrav // Bergen Museums Aarbog. 1902. Vol 8. S. 3–14.

[8] *Stylegar F.-A., Bonde N.* Fra Avaldsnes til Oseberg: dendrokronologiske undersøkelser av skipsgravene fra Storhaug og Grønhaug på Karmøy // Viking. 2009. Vol. 72. S. 149–168.

[9] *Bonde N., Christensen A.E.* Dendrochronological dating of the Viking Age ship burials at Oseberg, Gokstad and Tune, Norway // Antiquity. 1993. Vol. 67. S. 575–583.

the construction of this mound, also originated from the same region as the ships. They have hardly been transported over long distances before being buried.

From these facts, and from the distribution of oak in the Avaldsnes region, it is evident that each of these three ships — a rowing vessel, a sailing vessel, and one which cannot be firmly identified as either — were built in the fjords a few kilometres inland from Avaldsnes within a period of fifty years duration. It seems very likely that the development of Viking-age sailing ships, which made raiding in the British Isles and Ireland feasible, took place in this region some time around 800.

Epilogue

The warriors that swarmed ashore from their ships, ravaged and plundered monasteries and settlements overseas, benefited from expertise developed through three millennia of naval warfare along the western Scandinavian coast. Their highly developed tactics, like that of moving fast before a counter attack could be mustered, was fully integrated with the properties of their ships, e. g. their light weight and swiftness. Sites like Avaldsnes demonstrate that for many centuries the sea had been the Northmen's most important arena for gaining power and honour, during which they developed shipbuilding, seamanship and naval warfare to a level that was difficult to match for anyone in northern Europe. Ships were at the core of their military tactics and their identity as warriors.

The long history of a close connection between naval warfare and political power also forms the background for understanding the way the Norwegian kingdom was formed and named in the late ninth and tenth centuries. Saga authors of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries claimed that the roots of the Norwegian kingdom lay in Vestfold in Viken, the region that engulfs the Oslofjord. But this is evidently a construction designed to strengthen thirteenth-century Norwegian claims to Viken. What seems much more likely is that Viken was a disputed area, and that throughout the Viking Age its petty-kings developed shifting alliances with the west and south. The fact that the Oseberg ship was built in the west and ended up in Viken is probably the result of such an alliance. Indeed, it appears likely that one of the two women buried in the ship was given in wedlock to a Vestfold petty-king around 820, and the ship and its fantastic associated

material accompanied her to the grave when she died in 834. The Viken petty-kings continued to play their game of power until Viken and the rest of eastern Norway — *sønnafjels*: the region south of the mountains — was firmly incorporated into the Norwegian kingdom by the end of the tenth century.

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Дагфинн Скре

NORÐVEGR — НОРВЕГИЯ: ОТ КОРОЛЕЙ МОРЯ
К КОРОЛЯМ ЗЕМЛИ

Аннотация: Вдоль западного побережья Скандинавского полуострова, близ фьордов и в долинах, отделенных друг от друга и от лежащих к востоку земель высокими горами, разбросаны аграрные поселения. Начиная с

каменного века главным средством сообщения между ними было мореплавание. В отличие от побережья Британии, Ирландии и континентальной Европы вдоль этой береговой линии протяженностью 1000 км разбросаны тысячи островов, островков и рифов, создающих защищенный каботажный морской путь — *Norðrvegr*, — давший название всему королевству.

В названии королевства отражается и то, как оно создавалось. Причина того, что Дания (*Denmark*), Англия (*England*) и многие другие германские королевства носят имена, состоящие из этнонима и термина для обозначения «земли», заключается в том, что их основой является контроль над территорией. Необычная топография обусловила то, что землями вдоль западного побережья Скандинавии можно было овладеть, держа под контролем морской путь. Если бы местные вожди собрались вывезти своих людей и нажитое ими с их территории, им пришлось бы получить на то согласие короля, контролировавшего морской путь. Большинство королей того времени правили на суше, но король Норвегии был *sjó-konungr*, морским королем, что нашло отражение в названии этой страны.

Несколько мест вдоль побережья обеспечивают лучший по сравнению с остальными контроль за морскими путями. Одно из них — Авальднес на острове Кармёй недалеко от города Хёугесунн. Хотя климат здесь более суров, а земля менее плодородна, чем вдоль фьордов, тем не менее во многих из этих мест сохранились выдающиеся археологические памятники, относящиеся к первому тысячелетию до н. э., а порой даже к бронзовому веку. Долгая история мореплавания как основного способа транспортного сообщения и искусство ведения морских войн как необходимое условие политического господства создают основу набегов викингов на Британию, Ирландию и на континент в период ок. 790–1050 гг.

Ключевые слова: королевская власть, викинг, Скандинавия