CHAPTER ONE

BY ROCK AND ICE

> 'I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched c-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in the rain.'
>
> Roy Batty, *Blade Runner*

I imagined myself a Viking. I daydreamed wonders I might have seen during a life lived a thousand and more years ago: sea unicorns fencing with corkscrew horns in the ice of the High Arctic … motes of incense in shafts of sunlight through windows in the dome of Hagia Sophia … snarling, wrinkled lips on the faces of marble lions on Delos … the aurora borealis pulsing across the dark, welcoming me home … and best of all, no explanations for any of it.

I might have been the first of my kind to see the sun setting in the west behind the American continent, watched icebergs calving from Greenland's glaciers in a springtime long ago, or served in the private bodyguard of a Byzantine emperor. The possibilities kept coming but there was a sadness about it all – because the chance to live a life like his or gaze upon a world such as he knew was long gone.

We know the sea unicorns are only narwhals. The Church of the Holy Wisdom of God is just another museum in Istanbul. Only seven of Apollo's lions remain on their terrace at the heart

of the Cyclades, smoothed and blinded by time – the rest robbed away as trophies of war – and now we understand the magical curtains of light in northern skies are no more than particles and atoms colliding in the thermosphere. Tears in the rain.

For over 200 years between the end of the eighth century and the middle of the eleventh, some of the peoples of Scandinavia became the greatest adventurers the world had yet seen. Perhaps they were the greatest there will ever be. In elegant timber long ships powered by oars or by sails, they put to sea. Mastery of simple but effective navigational techniques would grant them a territory stretching from Iceland in the north to the Mediterranean Sea in the south, from Newfoundland in the west to Constantinople and the Caspian Sea in the east.

In *Civilisation* the historian Kenneth Clark acknowledged that while the Vikings were 'brutal and rapacious' they nonetheless played a crucial part in shaping the destiny of the western world. In so doing, he said, they won for themselves a place in the greater story of European civilisation: 'It was the spirit of Columbus,' he wrote. 'The sheer technical skill of their journeys is a new achievement of the western world; and if one wants a symbol of Atlantic man that distinguishes him from Mediterranean man, a symbol to set aside the Greek temple, it is the Viking ship.'

They are still among us – ghosts and shadows, fragments and fingerprints – in all sorts of different ways and in many different places. One October evening in 2011 the top story on Britain's national news was about the discovery in Ardnamurchan, a remote peninsula on the north-west coast of Scotland, of the first undisturbed Viking boat burial ever found on mainland Britain.

A thousand years ago a revered and respected elder was laid to rest inside the hull of a timber boat, one crafted with the so-familiar sweeping prow and stern. His shield was laid upon his

chest, his sword and spear by his side. He also had a knife and an axe, together with an object archaeologists believe to be a drinking horn. The boat had then been filled with stones and buried beneath a mound of earth.

Initially overlooked as nothing more than a clearance cairn – a pile of rocks gathered from the land by a farmer keen to spare his ploughshare from damage – it was not until 2011 that excavation of the mound began to reveal its secrets. The timbers of the boat had long since decayed but their lines were clearly visible, impressed into the subsoil upon which they had lain for a millennium. At just 16.5 feet long by five wide, it seems on the small side for journeys back and forth to Scandinavia. But the fact that its sole occupant was deemed worthy of such treatment in death suggests he was of the highest status – and no doubt a seasoned traveller in life. Also found alongside him were a whetstone of Norwegian origin and a bronze ring-pin fashioned by an Irish craftsman.

I try and picture the scene on that day when his family, friends and followers dispatched him on his final journey. First the sleek little craft was hauled into position out of reach of any tide. The location of the grave was no accident either, no random selection: archaeologists had already found other dead nearby, from other times. Those close to that deceased Viking had decided his mortal remains would lie for ever near both a 6,000-year-old Neolithic grave and one raised during the Bronze Age. Here was an unlikely fellowship of death. Then they placed him on board, accompanied by all they thought he might need wherever he was going, and sent him on his way.

Ardnamurchan is still a place reached more easily by boat than by road. It feels remote now but there was a time when familiarity with the water would have meant it was close to busy seaways. Whether that Viking was a permanent resident or a passing chieftain visiting his relatives may never be known

– but my fascination with him lies at least in part in wondering what he really meant to those who saw fit to say their farewells that way. Did they fill the hull with ballast with a view to fixing him in place in a landscape that plainly mattered to them? We cannot ever know, and why should we? He is not ours.

In June 2008 archaeologists were called in to excavate a large swathe of land in Dorset earmarked for the building of a new road to improve access to Weymouth and the Isle of Portland. In what proved to be a mass burial pit they found the remains of 51 Vikings – all of them decapitated and butchered. Their bones revealed multiple wounds including defensive injuries to hands and arms. There were separate piles of skulls, ribcages and leg bones. Two heads were missing, prompting the archaeologists to suppose those might have been kept as trophies – perhaps displayed on spikes. Scientific analysis showed they were all men, aged from late teens to mid-twenties. Their tooth enamel proved beyond doubt they had grown to adulthood in Scandinavian countries and radiocarbon dates revealed they met their deaths sometime between AD 910 and 1030.

Taken captive by the local Anglo-Saxons, they were stripped naked and messily executed. Perhaps they were raiders caught in the act, or would-be settlers made unwelcome in the most extreme manner imaginable. Either way, their dismembered remains recall a time when the men from the north were often regarded more as foe than friend. These were travellers who lived and died by swords and they were not always on the winning side.

In 2006 I took part in a television project called *The Face of Britain*. Using samples of DNA collected from volunteers all over England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, a team of scientists sought to find out how much the genetic make-up of the modern population had been affected by migrations and invasions during thousands of years of history.

While people came forward claiming all manner of inheritances – Celtic, Pictish, Saxon, Huguenot, Norman and many others – the largest single group of volunteers were those believing (or at least fervently hoping) they were descended from Vikings. For many it was based on no more than a family trait of blue eyes or fair hair. Some, however, had a claim based on altogether more intriguing physical characteristics. Dupuytren's Contracture is a deformity that causes the fingers of the hand to curl towards the palm. The condition is also known as 'Viking Claw' and several people came to the trial certain their hands carried proof of ancient Scandinavian ancestry. But despite the nickname, the condition is relatively common all over northern Europe and by no means limited to those whose families hail from Denmark, Norway or Sweden. Even more interesting than the scientifically provable reality, though, was the passion with which so many people clung to their hopes that the blood coursing in their veins was that of Vikings.

There was a time too when every British child learnt the names of at least a few Viking heroes – real men once, but made so famous by their exploits they seem more like figures from bedtime stories or nursery rhymes: Eirik the Red and his settlement of Greenland … the voyage of his son Leif Eiriksson to Vinland, presumed to be some or other part of the Newfoundland coastline … and Cnut, King of England, Denmark, Norway and parts of Sweden, and famed for an audience with the incoming tide.

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday – four out of our own seven days – are named for the Viking gods and goddesses Tyr, Odin, Thor and Freyja. Whole swathes of Britain's place names are Viking too. Any ending in 'by' – like Ferriby, Whitby, Grimsby, Selsby and Utterby – recall homesteads established by the incomers. Anywhere with 'thorpe' or 'thwaite' is Viking too. Then there's 'beck' for stream; 'fell' and 'how' for hill; 'holm' for

island; 'kirk' for church and 'slack' for stream – the list goes on and on, marbled like fat through the flesh of Britain.

Caithness, Scotland's northern quarter, is the way Vikings described the head of the cat. The Great Orme above Llandudno remembers how they saw the headland there like a giant worm swimming out to sea, and just about every village, town, hill, headland, waterway and bay on the islands of Orkney and Shetland bears a Norse name.

Make your way along the passageway of the great burial mound of Maes Howe on Orkney Mainland and your breath will be snatched away first of all by the wonder of the Neolithic architecture in the chamber at its end. Spend a little more time inside, however, and faint lines and shapes etched into stones here and there might catch your eye: a dragon-lion, a knotted serpent, a walrus. These were cut by Vikings 4,000 years and more after the last of the monument's builders were dust on the wind.

Then there are the runes – at least 30 sets identified so far. Some are just boyish graffiti like: 'Thorni bedded Helgi', or 'Ingigerth is the most beautiful of all women' (the latter beside a rough etching of a slavering hound). At least a few are more enigmatic, though, like: 'It is true what I say, that treasure was carried off in the course of three nights.' Even the runic letters themselves – all straight lines suitable for slicing into wood or stone with sharp swords and daggers – conjure images of the sort of men who made them, men who sheltered from hellish storms there from time to time, surrounded by the shadows of ancient and forgotten dead.

In the twelfth-century *Orkneyinga* saga – a history of the Orcadians – the scribes tell of one Earl Harald and his men travelling from Stromness when the worst of winter weather forced them to beach their boat. Reluctantly by all accounts they took shelter beneath the mound they called *Orkahaugr*

– Maes Howe – and as flames flickered and winds howled, two of their number went insane with the terror of it all.

In Stirling, where I live with my family, the town coat of arms features a snarling wolf. It seems there were Vikings here too once, right at the heart of Scotland, or at least very nearly. The accompanying legend recalls another dark winter's night, this one in the ninth century, when a sentry tasked with guarding the sleeping town fell asleep at his post. While he snored, a war band of Vikings made their stealthy approach, no doubt bent on rapine and thievery – and, as luck would have it, disturbed a sleeping wolf. The beast howled, waking the dolt, and the town's defenders were roused in the nick of time. The Vikings were driven off and the howling wolf was granted a place in immortality.

High on a wall of one fine building in the town is a niche holding a sculpted wolf. A verse below it, in golden copperplate, reads:

Here in auld days
The wolf roam'd
In a hole of the rock
In ambush lay.

A narrow escape from Vikings, remembered for a thousand years.

In towns on Shetland the locals mark the darkest depths of winter with a party they call Up Helly Aa. By the evening of the last Tuesday in January each year the finishing touches have been put to the centrepiece and focus for the whole affair: a stunningly authentic-looking dragon-headed Viking long ship erected in a park near the centre of Lerwick, the principal town on the islands. The street lights are extinguished and all at once the place is plunged into velvet darkness. For the next hour

or so the only illumination is that provided by hundreds of flaming torches carried in procession by marching, costumed Shetlanders. At the head of the line and in pride of place is a 'squad' of 60 or so men extravagantly and expensively turned out as Viking warriors, with helmets, chain mail, shields and swords and led by their 'Jarl' or Earl.

In a surreal twist all the rest of the torch-bearers are garbed not as Vikings but in all manner of fancy dress – cartoon characters, superheroes, reality-show contestants and the like. Children squeal and adults cheer as the marchers weave their way down crowded streets, preceded always by their own long, flickering shadows. In the absence of the clinically cold, sulphur-glow of street lights, the faces of marchers and spectators alike are bathed only in the unmistakable warmth of living flames.

As a finale the whole horde gathers in a great circle around the long ship in the park. Soon the pack is 20 or 30 deep, the heat from their torches almost frighteningly intense and casting bizarre shadows through the children's swings and climbing frames nearby.

The Vikings step forward first and to deafening roars they launch their flames into the ship. An inferno rages almost at once and now the rest of the squads add their own torches. It is a stunning sight, with flames rising tens of feet into the black night, quickly devouring the mast and sail. Soon the air is thick with a veritable storm of sparks and flaming fragments – hot enough to burn holes in clothes and singe hair – and all too quickly the whole ship, the work of months of careful craftsmanship, is reduced to nothing.

Any outsider watching the spectacle would be forgiven for assuming Up Helly Aa was a thousand years old or more – that it recalls the moment when those first Viking invaders decided to burn their boats and remain on the island as landlords. In

fact, the truth of the matter is altogether different. Far from an ancient tradition, it is an almost entirely modern concoction.

There are records of some fairly rowdy goings-on in wintry rural Shetland in the early decades of the nineteenth century. In the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars there were veteran soldiers on the islands. Having seen a bit of the wider world, they had developed a taste for the wilder kind of Christmas party and there are reports from the 1820s of singing, dancing, drinking, fighting and the firing of muskets and pistols long into the night. By the middle years of the century some of them had taken to filling barrels with buckets of tar, setting them alight and dragging them through the streets of villages and towns, including Lerwick. It seems it was very much an affair of young working-class men and in time the aspirant middle classes grew tired of all the wildness – not to mention the presumed danger to life and property posed by barrels of molten, burning tar dragged through darkened streets by young men the worse for drink.

By 1870 or thereabouts a new movement had taken root in Lerwick at least, and a few of the town's residents – those with a taste for history and pageant – managed to take control of the winter festivals. Having banished the tar barrels they came up with a new name for the festivities – Up Helly Aa – and ordained that the islands' Viking past be grafted onto what had hitherto been little more than an excuse for drinking and fighting. Almost at once a tradition was born and by the later decades of the century the 'guising' – short for disguising, or dressing up – had become a key element, along with the burning of the long ship, known locally as the 'galley'. Only in the early twentieth century was the honorary role of 'Jarl' created, and now, in the twenty-first century, the festival is designed to bring together the whole community during those darkest and coldest days in the Shetland calendar.

For anyone looking for Vikings, then, even an event as convincing as Up Helly Aa has only a vague connection to those warrior travellers of a thousand years ago. Around and among us they may be, but the truth about them remains strangely elusive.

The real Vikings appeared for the first time in AD 793, at the Church of St Cuthbert on the tidal islet of Lindisfarne – for long the intellectual as well as spiritual heart of the kingdom of Northumbria.

In The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle it was recorded that: 'In this year terrible portents appeared over Northumbria, and miserably frightened the inhabitants: these were exceptional flashes of lightning, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air. A great famine soon followed these signs; and a little after that in the same year the harrying of the heathen miserably destroyed God's church in Lindisfarne by rapine and slaughter.'

The Holy Island of Lindisfarne is quite literally a dot on the map – just two square miles of dry land – and, since low tide reveals a causeway linking it to the mainland, it is not even truly an island at all. It was St Aidan who founded a Christian house there, in AD 634, and it was from within his community that the conversion of the local pagans was successfully undertaken during the seventh century. Geographically insignificant – dot or not – by the end of the eighth century Lindisfarne shone out of the map of the Christian world like a lighthouse on a lonely shore.

Such was the fame and importance of the place that word of the attack soon spread the length and breadth of Europe. The news reached the Northumbrian-born scholar Alcuin, at his desk in a centre of learning set up in Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle) by the Frankish ruler Charlemagne. The outrage of the homesick cleric echoes down the years: 'The pagans have contaminated God's shrines and spilled the blood of saints in

the passage around the altar, they have laid waste the house of our consolation and in the temple of God they have trampled underfoot the bodies of the saints like shit in the street.'

The Vikings resisted Christianity longer than any other people in Europe; and that such unclean hands, the worst and the last, should have pawed at the bones of saints was unforgivable and unforgettable.

In 794 it was the monks at Jarrow, on the Tyne, who felt the Vikings' wrath, and then the following year similar treatment was meted out to religious communities on the islands of Iona, Rathlin and Skye, off the west coast of Scotland. Having made their entrance, the seaborne pagans showed no signs of returning to the shadows. The age of the Vikings had begun.

But their story hardly starts on Lindisfarne – or indeed in the eighth century – any more than the story of America starts in 1492 with a Genoese sailor called Christopher. The truth of the matter is that by the time a marine raiding party from Hordaland in western Norway was so purposefully and so dangerously on the move towards an islet off the east coast of England, they and their fellow inhabitants of Scandinavia were already in their adulthood as peoples (at the very least they were in the throes of a troubled and ill-tempered adolescence).

The populations inhabiting the lands we know today as Denmark, Norway and Sweden were, by the end of the eighth century, the descendants and inheritors of those European tribes that had already contributed to and been part of a much longer narrative. Before we can understand and appreciate the actions of those peoples of the north we need to hear the backstory, the first scenes of which had been written tens of thousands of years before, by rock and ice.

In a very real sense we have been subject to one long Ice Age for the last three million years (for as long, in fact, as there has been any sort of upright ape abroad on the Earth). There have

been periods – sometimes very long periods – when the glaciers have retreated to the poles and warmth has returned to much of the planet, but always the ice has come back. For the last three-quarters of a million years the cold *glacials* have been markedly longer than the warm *interglacials* that punctuate them. Those cold periods have in turn been more severe, more intense.

Our ancestors' ancestors were driven to find boltholes in the south. In those warmer climes – in Spain or northern Italy perhaps, or around the Mediterranean Sea – they made new lives and told their children about a lost world far to the north. Given their eventual return, it seems all was not forgotten. But while some part of them was bound, as though by Ariadne's thread, to the world left behind, for thousands of years it had to wait. For millennium after frozen millennium the wind howled; ice and rock screamed and cracked, grumbled and moaned and for the most part there was no one to hear it.

Scandinavia's experience of the Ice Age was more extreme than most. Geologists estimate that for a period lasting from one and a half million years ago until the start of the Holocene approximately 12,000 years ago, the lands that would become Norway and Sweden knew no respite whatever. Always the ice stayed in place, crushing the terrain there beneath sheets and glaciers a mile and more thick. Relief came first to a swathe of dry land containing the territories that would one day be Jutland and Denmark, and by 13,000 or so years ago there was virgin territory there for Stone Age hunters to explore and exploit.

The first Norwegian impact on British shores came 7,000 years before the Vikings. It was not warriors, but a great and unstoppable wave of water. On one spectacular day around 8,000 years ago an undersea landslide off the coast of Norway – an event known to geologists as the Storegga Slide – unleashed a tsunami. When thousands of cubic miles of seabed jolted suddenly into the deep, along a shelf 200 miles long, the wall of

water generated by the shudder ripped across the North Sea at hundreds, or even thousands of miles an hour. Much of the eastern seaboard of the land that would become Britain was briefly submerged, and by the time the wave withdrew the map of northern Europe had been redrawn.

Until that awful moment, 'Britain' had been a peninsula of north-west Europe, a part of the mainland. That single catastrophic instant – the greatest natural disaster in northern Europe since the end of the Ice Age – had changed everything. While the east coast of Britain was under water for a few moments, elsewhere the effects were permanent. What had been a huge landmass linking the south-east of 'England' to the Continent was drowned for ever beneath tens of metres of seawater. A territory referred to as 'Doggerland' by archaeologists was, now and for ever, seabed. Dutch fishermen would subsequently find that the shallow waters of that southern quarter of the North Sea offered especially rich pickings. Since their trawlers were called 'doggers' they would name the fishing ground Dogger Bank.

It was not until about 10,000 years ago that the whole of Norway and Sweden were open for exploration by pioneer hunters and by then a total Scandinavian territory of around a third of a million square miles was there for the taking. Those incomers were the men and women who lived and died during the thousands of years known to archaeologists as the Mesolithic – the 'middle' Stone Age of the hunters, that lasted from the end of the last glacial until the advent of farming.

There had been human beings in northern Europe before the ice returned 25,000–30,000 years ago, two species in fact. The Neanderthal people were coming to the end of a long tenancy by then. While Homo Sapiens forged themselves in Africa – from around 200,000 years ago – our Neanderthal cousins had Europe and elsewhere to themselves. By perhaps 50,000 years ago modern people had spread north into Europe as well, so

that both versions of humankind – the elder and the younger – were forced to share the same hunting grounds, at least for a while. Whether that mingling was happy or not will never be known, but the fact remains that while both species were alive in Europe when the last Ice Age started, only one survived the exodus. When the ice finally retreated, and the time came to explore the virgin woodland of a northern hemisphere made anew, only people like us were available for the return. The time of the Neanderthals was, by then, long past.

It must have seemed we had the world to ourselves – each band bound only by family ties – and yet the places touched then by those handfuls of hunters bear their fingerprints to this day. In the case of Scandinavia, the Mesolithic arrivals were the last colonists of note. No subsequent folk movements had those places for their destination and so the men and women who made their way onto the land that would one day be Denmark – and then, over the succeeding millennia, into Sweden and Norway – were the forefathers not just of the Vikings but of the mass of the population living there now. New ideas washed across the land from time to time, but no new people.

The countries there are hardly populous even today. As a whole Scandinavia is home to just 17 million people – five million in Denmark, four million in Norway and the balance, about eight million people, in Sweden. Those are still hard territories from which to win the stuff of life, and were surely infinitely more challenging 10,000 years ago. Hard though it may be to believe, however, these were not empty lands when the new hunters arrived. They were not even empty of people.

Although the ice had driven life before it, not every man, woman and child had loosened their grip upon that most demanding territory. The incoming hunters established themselves first of all in the southern, less hostile parts of Norway

and Sweden. But in the northern reaches – in the sub-Arctic and Arctic zones – were people known today as the Lapps, or more correctly the Saami.

We do not know for certain whether they once occupied the south of the peninsula as well, only to be dispossessed by the more numerous new arrivals. But the Mesolithic hunters who penetrated the landmass of Scandinavia 10,000 years ago encountered a people who had ridden out the storm of ages. Just as Emperor Penguins remain behind to endure the Arctic winter, when all other warm-blooded creatures flee southwards, so the Saami had stubbornly retained a toehold on their demesne throughout the period of the last glacial.

Genetic science still has questions to answer but it seems the Saami are a separate people. They are closely linked by culture and language to the natives of Finland and of the Arctic regions of Russia, but appear to be genetically different from both, and they are certainly not related to their southern neighbours in Norway and Sweden.

The Saami stayed put during the Ice Age, perhaps by clinging to the coastal zones and finding ways to survive around the unfrozen rim of the northern ocean. In any event it seems they developed independently of any other European groups for thousands of years. Cut off from all the human populations that had moved south – and kept from them by the ice for as much as 15,000 years – they became a folk apart. The debate about their origins is ongoing. Some ethnologists believe that the ancestors of the Saami must have come once upon a time from some part of Asia. Many of the modern Saami living there now have physical characteristics – darker skin and hair, wide Mongoloid facial features – that make them appear similar to populations further to the east. But there are also those with paler complexions and more Caucasian faces. There is a strong argument that says the Saami developed their unique and

separate personality and characteristics in the very territories they still occupy today.

Their isolation was such that even when the incomers arrived the resident population remained apart. While the ancestors of the Vikings continued upon their own path – one that would lead eventually to a life of farming, and of ocean-going adventure – their northern neighbours were already set in their ways. There was always contact between the two – mostly cordial, judging by the written sources – and the Vikings, and their ancestors before them, would come to rely upon the skills of the Saami hunters when it came to acquiring the most sought-after pelts.

Sometime around AD 890 a Viking chief called Ottar – or Othere – arrived in the court of King Alfred the Great, of Wessex, with tales to tell of his homeland. Among other things he said the Saami (in his own tongue, the *Finnas*) lived on the borders of his own realm, mixing and trading with his own folk. It seems the wealth and prestige of men like Ottar depended, to a great extent, upon the furs obtained by the hunters and handed over in the form of 'tribute'.

According to the account recorded by Alfred's scribes, each of the Saami chiefs paid Ottar 'according to his rank'. 'The highest in rank has to pay fifteen marten skins, five reindeer skins, one bear skin, ten measures of feathers, a jacket of bear skin or otter skin and two skip-ropes, 60 ells long.'

The Romans were the first people to write about the Saami, during the centuries either side of the birth of Christ, and it is clear their ways seemed primitive and alien to outsiders even then. In his work *Germania*, completed in AD 98, Tacitus made the very first written observations of the tribes living at the top of the world. He labelled them the *Fenni*, and his amazement and fascination are apparent even now:

> In wonderful savageness live the nation of the Fenni, and in beastly poverty, destitute of arms, of horses, and of homes; their food, the common herbs; their apparel, skins; their bed, the earth; their only hope in their arrows, which for want of iron they point with bones. Their common support they have from the chase, women as well as men; for with these the former wander up and down, and crave a portion of the prey. Nor other shelter have they even for their babes, against the violence of tempests and ravening beasts, than to cover them with the branches of trees twisted together; this a reception for the old men, and hither resort the young. Such a condition they judge more happy than the painful occupation of cultivating the ground, than the labour of rearing houses, than the agitations of hope and fear attending the defence of their own property or the seizing that of others. Secure against the designs of men, secure against the malignity of the Gods, they have accomplished a thing of infinite difficulty; that to them nothing remains even to be wished.

Five centuries later, the northernmost dwellers on Earth were still provoking strong language from observers. Procopius of Caesarea was born and raised in Palestine. Remembered by history as one of the great Byzantine scholars, he accompanied General Flavius Belisarius during his campaigns on behalf of Emperor Justinian I. In his *History of the Wars* he found space for a description of the same people who had so appalled and captivated the Roman half a millennium before:

> But among the barbarians who are settled in Thule [the end of the Earth], one nation only, who are called the Scrithiphini, live a kind of life akin to that of the beasts. For they neither wear garments of cloth nor do they walk with shoes on their feet, nor do they drink wine nor derive anything edible from

> the earth. For they neither till the land themselves, nor do their women work it for them, but the women regularly join the men in hunting, which is their only pursuit. For the forests, which are exceedingly large, produce for them a great abundance of wild beasts and other animals, as do also the mountains that rise there. And they feed exclusively upon the flesh of the wild beasts slain by them, and clothe themselves in their skins, and since they have neither flax nor any implement with which to sew, they fasten these skins together by the sinews of the animals, and in this way manage to cover the whole body.

The visitor from the shining city of Constantinople referred to the Saami as 'Scrithiphini', a Greek word that translates as 'the skiing Finns', revealing that a mode of transport so familiar today has been relied upon in the north for thousands of years.

The Mesolithic hunters making inroads on Scandinavia from the south were therefore in the vanguard of a northward movement that had lasted for many generations, slowly reclaiming the land while the ice retreated. Much of Europe had been treeless for thousands of years before the newcomers' arrival and instead of forest, a variety of open habitats had evolved ranging from tundra around the fringes of the ice itself to steppe lands of grass, mosses and herbaceous plants further south. Great herds of mammoth, woolly rhinoceros and bison had drifted across those vast expanses, migrating back and forth as the seasons demanded. There were wild horse and reindeer then as well, all prey to the hunters who went before: the men and women who lived and died during the latter millennia of the long period known to archaeologists as the Old Stone Age – or, more specifically, the 30,000 or so years of the Upper Palaeolithic.

While the ice sheet was at its most advanced – and the climate at its worst – humanity had mostly retreated into the territories

described, rather grandly, as the Last Great Maximum Refugia, in places like the Balkans, Italy and parts of the Iberian peninsula. But from around 16,000 BC, as the climate began to improve, forest and open woodland spread northwards.

Again this process lasted for thousands of years and all the while as the trees grew, the human populations evolved new hunting traditions. The mammoth and the woolly rhino had dwindled and then disappeared, driven to extinction. Other plains-loving species like elk and reindeer were pushed north in pursuit of the snow and ice – and, more importantly, the open, treeless spaces – that better suited them. In their place, finding shelter and cover in the dappled shadows of the woodlands, were red and roe deer, wild pigs, and also aurochs, the towering ancestors of modern cattle. It was all these beasts that were now the focus of human attentions. Away to the north, deep into the tundra of the Arctic and sub-Arctic, the hardiest of the hunters went in search of the bears, Arctic foxes, lynx and pine martens that provided valuable and sought-after furs.

Cold-climate trees like aspen, birch, juniper and willow had colonised the empty territories first, followed eventually by those species that prefer it slightly warmer, like alder, elm, lime and oak. Gone into the realm of folk memory were the wide-open steppes and the great congregations of animals that once thronged there. Now it was a question of stalking creatures that concealed themselves in the shadows and undergrowth, and the hunting parties that reached as far north as Denmark and the rest of Scandinavia were of precisely the same stock that walked dry-shod into the peninsula that would become the British Isles.

Strange though it may seem, the new forests and woodlands were home to far fewer animals than had inhabited the steppes, and even the tundra. While the migratory herds had been colossal in number, the deer, cattle and pigs taking refuge

among the trees were far fewer and further between. Likewise the Mesolithic hunters were not only living in a different way to their Palaeolithic predecessors, and in a wholly new environment – they also amounted to a much smaller population.

When I imagine the life of the Stone Age hunter, I always prefer to picture myself in a forested environment. Accustomed as I am to living most of my life indoors and beneath a roof, I take comfort from the thought of leafy branches overhead and tree trunks in all directions to distract me from the vastness of the outside world. But the truth is, woodland and forests have their limitations when it comes to keeping a family or a hunting group supplied with the stuff of life; they demand from their human customers a considerable amount of discipline and forward-planning.

The principal problem, with the deciduous forests at least, is the way they shed their leaves and go to sleep during the winter months – that time of year that is hardest anyway. Human population levels were therefore restricted by the amount of food the forests could provide. Even with due attention paid to laying down stores of dried fruits and nuts, smoked fish and meat, the woodland of the European Mesolithic likely supported a smaller, more widely scattered population than had the grasslands and tundra inhabited by the peoples of the Upper Palaeolithic.

And so it was, for the men and women making their way further and further west and north across the European mainland between 12,000 and 6,000 years ago. The ancient ancestors of the Vikings were hunters of wild game and gatherers of wild foods for thousands of years. For some few of them the pickings in the virgin territories of Scandinavia were rich enough – towards the end of the Mesolithic period at least – to permit the establishment of relatively permanent settlements.

For long periods before, the people had been entirely peripatetic, moving along the coastlines of Denmark, Norway and

Sweden, or penetrating the river valleys. All of their movements were dictated by the seasons – by the expectation, in different places at different times, of shoaling fish, or ripening fruits, of nesting birds or land-locked sea mammals. Fish, shellfish, seabirds, marine mammals like seals and walrus, together with the larger fauna that roamed the woodlands nearby were all there to be exploited.

Archaeologists, like all scientists, are on the lookout for patterns – for similar behaviour shared by people spread across wide areas and existing at more or less the same time. Once they find such clusters, suggestive of many people living the same way, they generally round things up and call it all a 'culture'. In the case of the later Mesolithic in a zone taking in northern Germany, the northern Netherlands and southern Scandinavia, the culture in question has been named *Ertebølle* – after the so-called 'type-site' where finds, beside the shallow sound of Limfjord, in the part of the Jutland peninsula that connects Denmark to mainland Europe, amounted to extensive traces of human occupation lasting several generations. It seems people thereabouts had grown accustomed to – even semi-dependent upon – the plentiful supplies of shellfish available for harvesting at low tide.

Where they occur in vast quantities, and year-round, winkles and periwinkles, cockles and mussels are a useful source of food. They are not, however, particularly nutritious – especially compared to red meat and fish – and must be consumed in considerable quantities if they are to keep body and soul together. Harvesting of enough shellfish to feed a family takes time and not even a bountiful supply of oysters is enough to prevent such a diet becoming downright mundane unless other foods are available to supplement the endless supply of slimy seaborne snails. The people practising the lifestyle that would, in the twentieth century, be labelled the 'Ertebølle culture', were

therefore using their permanent or semi-permanent settlements on the coastline as bases from which they could roam inland in search of variety.

It was the mounds of empty shells that first drew the attention of archaeologists. The mound, or 'midden', at Ertebølle is over six feet high, 460-odd feet long and nearly 70 feet wide. It represents generations – perhaps hundreds of years – of near-continuous occupation. Secure in the knowledge they could always fall back on a reliable (if dreary and relatively labour-intensive) food supply, the hunters could roam far and wide in search of a staggering variety of more interesting alternatives: seals, dolphins, porpoises and the occasional beached whale; all manner of seabirds as well as other airborne migrants like swans and geese; fish from both salt- and freshwater locations. And in among the glamorous and exciting targets was a whole array of tasty lesser morsels ranging from birds' eggs to seasonal fruits and from seaweeds to nuts, seeds and tubers. Taken together, the marine and inland sources of food provided the later Mesolithic populations of Scandinavia with a veritable smörgåsbord. They lived in nature's fridge-freezer – but it was well stocked.

Denmark, Norway and Sweden are, anyway, hardly uniform in terms of the habitats and environments they provide. Those pioneers spreading ever northwards were confronted both with opportunities and with obstacles as they penetrated further and further into the peninsula. All three territories were quite different, one from another, and each prompted distinct responses from her human inhabitants. Those who would in time become Danes, Norwegians and Swedes were separate peoples, with their own ways of doing things.

Denmark is by far the smallest of the three countries, the land mostly low-lying. When first encountered by hunters 10,000 years ago the interior there would have been a patchwork of

deciduous woodlands dominated by birch, bogs and marshlands, lakes, rivers and streams. Relatively modern farming techniques – principally effective drainage – are responsible for the modern expanses of arable fields, and until three or four hundred years ago much of the country's interior would have been dishearteningly soft and wet underfoot. Strongly on the plus side, however, compared to its neighbours further north, Denmark has the gentlest climate – much more akin to that of the rest of northern mainland Europe.

Sweden is the largest of the three, with an interior dominated by gentle, fairly low-lying contours cloaked in the main by coniferous forest. While it is true her eastern border is on territory as mountainous as anything in Norway, the landscape of most of central and southern Sweden has much in common with that of Denmark, in that it is low-lying and flat. By the time the technology of farming penetrated the country it was there, around the lakes of Mälaren, Hjälmaren and Vättern, in the valley of the Göta River and on the flatlands of Halland, Skåne and Östergötland, that it took permanent root.

To my mind it is Norway that presents the landscape most people visualise when they hear the word 'Scandinavia'. Here is the vast curl of near-impenetrable mountains and glaciers that people living further east in the peninsula would in time call the *Norovegr* – literally the 'north way' leading down to the softer lands of Denmark and the rest of the south, with its wildly and deeply indented 15,000 miles of coastline. The most northerly third of Norway is within the Arctic Circle, and while the coastline itself is comparatively hospitable and ice-free for much of the year, bathed as it is in waters warmed by the Gulf Stream, the interior is mainly mountainous. The jagged outbreak of peaks reaches, for the most part, well above the tree line – creating a barrier of naked rock and ice that presumably made land travel as near-impossible 10,000 years ago as it still does today. There

is good upland pasture to be exploited; but while it is capable of supporting livestock in the summer months, it is unsuitable for crops. Settlements would eventually take hold in the small patches of low-lying land clinging to the sides of the fjords or forming at their necks, but the country was never going to be capable of supporting many people, and never did. Norway certainly offered the toughest upbringing of the three lands, and her children would learn early on that what their mother could not give them they would have to get for themselves.

Scandinavia is also a land of many islands – and some of their populations developed their own ways of doing things, setting them apart from whichever place actually claimed them as satellites. While Swedish Öland is close by the coast of its motherland and shaped by the mores of the mainland, Gotland is far enough out into the Baltic to be almost a place apart. When the shipping lanes mattered more than now, Gotland's position at the heart of the sea gave it a primacy and strategic advantage that would gift the island power and wealth disproportionate to its size. Likewise the largest of the Danish islands – Bornholm, Fyn and Sjælland – developed characteristics that were sometimes at variance with or in contrast to those of Denmark itself. Islanders are a breed apart, and never more so than in the case of the inhabitants of the islands of the Baltic. One site on the island of Fyn and attributed to the Ertebølle culture offers a hint of the behaviour that eventually carried the Scandinavians into legend.

Thanks to sea level rises since the end of the last glacial, the human occupation site known as Tybrind Vig lies submerged beneath approximately 10 feet of seawater, 250 yards or so off the western coast. During the latter part of the Mesolithic, perhaps 5500–4000 BC, it was a base for people skilled in the business of fishing. Any traces of the settlement itself have been completely eroded away by the millennia of inundation by the sea

but, fortunately for archaeologists, those fishermen had been in the habit of throwing their rubbish into a waterlogged area on the edge of a lagoon that sheltered their homes from the sea. By the time the people abandoned their settlement in the face of rising waters, their soggy midden was already preserving much of the fishing gear they had thrown away.

Tybrind Vig was first spotted by recreational divers in 1975, and excavated between 1978 and 1988. By any standards it has been a rich find: fish hooks made from the rib bones of red deer; wooden points from specialised fish spears called leisters; evidence for the technology of net-making, in the form of traces of textiles woven from plant fibres; hazel stakes used in the building of fish weirs as well as wooden points for barbing fish traps – all have been recovered in varying states of preservation. Better yet was the discovery of three seagoing dug-out canoes, at least one of which was more than 30 feet long, each carved from the trunk of a lime tree. As well as the canoes, the archaeologists found parts of no fewer than 10 paddles, made of ash and with elegant, heart-shaped blades, four of which had been carefully decorated. A large stone, possibly used as ballast, was found inside one of the canoes. Best of all, hearths shaped from clay and pebbles had been set into two of the hulls.

The excavations at Tybrind Vig were led by Søren Andersen and his possible explanations for the undoubtedly perilous practice of lighting fires inside wooden craft at sea conjure up emotive images. At the very least they suggest the fishermen were accustomed to being at sea for long journeys, during which they needed more than furs to keep them warm; perhaps they even went so far as to cook some of their catch while still on the water. But Andersen has also suggested the fishermen may have needed fire when travelling from place to place so they could keep alive the warmth from one home while en route to the next.

The canoes are surely too slight and too vulnerable ever to have been used for voyages into the open sea, far from land. But is there a glimpse in those journeys from hearth to hearth – with flames carried over water, symbolic of life itself – of the spark of an idea for far greater seagoing adventures?

Since my days as an archaeology student my imagination has been haunted by a site discovered on the Danish island of Sjælland in 1975, in advance of building work. While the intention had been no more than the digging of a few foundations, what was eventually unearthed there, at a place called Vedbæk, was a Mesolithic cemetery containing the remains of more than 20 men, women and even babies. Artefacts found in the graves enabled archaeologists to categorise those hunters, in the way archaeologists do, as part of that now-familiar Ertebølle culture. In any case radiocarbon dates returned by tests on some of the bones revealed the people buried there had died sometime around 4000 BC.

The occupants of the Vedbæk cemetery are humbling and breathtaking. Stone Age hunters seem as distant as dinosaurs. It can be hard to make them real, more substantial than ghosts. Ironically their mourned dead are easiest to reinvest with life, because they have so obviously been loved. Some of the adults were laid down with their heads or feet resting in cradles formed by the carefully placed antlers of deer. What were the intentions of those burial parties? What was the honour bestowed? Was it thought those dead had been blessed in life with speed and strength and grace, like stags … or did such grave goods imply the hope of good hunting in another life?

(Vedbæk is by no means the only Late Mesolithic cemetery in Scandinavia. At Skateholm, in the Skåne district of southern Sweden, archaeologists found not only graves of men, women and children, but also of dogs – suggesting that by the fourth or fifth millennium BC, those animals had been domesticated

and were being viewed as members of the family, even worthy of an afterlife.)

But one story suggested by Vedbæk bothers me more than all the rest. Whenever I wonder how we got to where we are now I find myself, in my imagination at least, standing by one graveside in particular. I have thought about its occupants, off and on, for a quarter of a century and when I began thinking about where the Vikings came from I ended up back there yet again.

That grave contained the skeleton of a young woman. I like to imagine she was lovely. Around her neck was a string of red deer teeth – collected from as many as 40 different animals. Such a keepsake, made of trophies from 40 separate kills, speaks of a great and skilful hunter. It is not much of a leap to see it as a gift given only to the most important person in his world, his daughter or his wife. Buried beside her was a newborn baby laid upon the wing of an adult swan, the bones as light as a bundle of straws. By the baby's hip was a little knife knapped from a piece of flint.

We cannot ever know but it seems at least likely the woman died in childbirth and her baby with her. The passing of 6,000 years does not lessen the tragedy, or its impact. Someone grieving for them saw to it that they went to their grave together, she wearing the necklace he had made for her, and their baby nestled on the wing of a white bird. For hunters – of all people the most sensitive to the ways of animals – the comings and goings of the great flocks of migratory birds might have captured their imaginations like nothing else. They represent the journey, the voyage without end.

The classic image of the Viking long ships, which came thousands of years later, has those vessels shaped and styled to suggest dragons, or sea serpents. Powered by oars or by sail, they could fairly fly across the waves. Maybe some of the inspiration for those elegant craft had come from another memory

and long ago, from hunters watching long-necked birds beating their way from horizon to horizon. Travellers who demonstrated, year after year, it was possible to leave and also to return.

Any sense of separation from the people of the Stone Age – by anything more than time – is brushed away by witnessing their approach to death. Just as we try to accept and understand that transformation today, so the ancestors struggled with the same challenge tens of thousands of years ago. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote: 'For life in the present there is no death. Death is not an event in life. It is not a fact in the world.' It seems that as a species we have understood this for the longest time, perhaps always – so that the dead had to be put away somewhere safe, somewhere else.

Out of the shadows then come all the most distant ancestors of the Vikings, their names as mysterious and unfamiliar as the cast of a Bergman film. Before the people of the Ertebølle culture were an earlier marque of hunter classified, by the few belongings collected from another site on Sjælland, as members of a group called *Kongemose*. What little is known about them includes their apparent skill at making all manner of tools from long blades of carefully worked flint. By snapping those blades into angular fragments the knappers could make awls, arrowheads, drills and scrapers, or assemble them as rows of barbs and serrations mounted in wood to make barbed points, or saws. From other stones they shaped axes, and they found use too for objects they made from horn and bone.

If it was people of the Kongemose culture in parts of Denmark and Sweden around 6000 BC, then in Norway at about the same time it was the *Nøstvet*, where geological circumstances coaxed men and women into shaping their tools from quartz as well as flint. Like everyone else they hunted and fished, trapped seabirds and collected their eggs, made shelters

of saplings and skins. Earlier than the Nøstvet (and a kindred culture nearby called the *Lihult*) were people whose traces go into museum cases labelled *Fosna* or *Hensbacka* (if only to differentiate their leavings from the bits and pieces left behind by everyone else). Whoever they were, they eked existences, of a sort, along the western and southern coasts of Norway. In Denmark and southern Sweden the earliest of the hunters are called *Maglemosian*, after finds in the *magle mose* – the 'big bog' – at a place called Mullerup, in western Sjælland. Those last were among the first arrivals after the retreat of the ice, and seem to have lived their lives towards the end of the ninth millennium BC.

The traces of human occupation, found in scores of locations scattered all across the peninsula, are slight in the extreme and the many dates difficult to interpret. Perhaps it is most helpful just to imagine generations of people living off the land, exploiting natural resources and hunting and foraging whatever the habitat and the seasons provided. It was a period lasting thousands of years during which little changed for the tiny human populations making lives for themselves in the forests, around the lakes and along the coastlines of Denmark, Norway and Sweden.

Hunting provided a good living in the varied environments of much of Scandinavia – so appropriate in fact it apparently kept at bay the world-changing technology of farming for a millennium and a half. The Neolithic – the New Stone Age – is characterised by the appearance either of animal husbandry, crop cultivation or a combination of the two. The technology had developed first in the so-called 'Near East' of Mesopotamia, the fertile lands sandwiched between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, by around 11,000–12,000 years ago.

Its push westwards was as slow as that of any glacier but by around 5500 BC there were farmers at work right across the

European mainland. In the lands to the south of Scandinavia, on the southern side of the Baltic Sea, were settlements comprising great longhouses with wattle and daub walls erected around frameworks of upright timber posts. The farmers grew crops like wheat, barley and flax and kept cattle, sheep, goats and some pigs. They also made pottery and decorated it with patterns of lines cut into the clay while it was still damp. It was this decoration, and this alone, that encouraged German archaeologists to label all this as proof of yet another culture – of a people spread across thousands of miles yet apparently united by thought, language and behaviour. The label applied to all of it was *Linearbandkeramik*, or LBK for short.

Quite why the peoples of Scandinavia abandoned hunting as their mainstay when they did, around 4000 BC, and embarked upon the relentless cycle of sowing and harvesting, is still being debated; but there are good reasons for believing a relatively rapid rise of sea level may have been a deciding factor. If access to the familiar supplies of fish, shellfish and sea mammals was suddenly disrupted by the emergence of a new coastline, erstwhile hunters in the most adversely affected areas may have seen the wisdom of changing their ways. In any event, there was then a quite rapid uptake of farming in those parts of Denmark, southern Sweden and south-east Norway best suited to agriculture and the keeping of domesticated animals.

After countless generations of nomadic, or at least semi-nomadic, life, people began establishing permanent settlements – living in houses, in one place for all of their lives and, most conspicuously, building great tombs of stone for their dead. As well as placing the mortal remains inside the tombs, the bereaved marked the passing of their loved ones by holding feasts – behaviour revealed by the discovery of pottery vessels, whole and in fragments, left behind both inside the tombs and around the entrances.

The job of clearing and maintaining the land, sowing and harvesting crops and looking after animals required a different and more diverse toolkit than had been made and used by the hunters. Farmers needed axes for felling trees, sickles for reaping wheat and barley.

Settled agriculture led also to a steady rise in population. The life of constant toil, working from dawn until dusk to provide a repetitive diet of much cereal and little meat, may have lacked the excitement and satisfaction of the hunt – but it was generally more reliable when it came to putting food into hungry mouths. It was also a lifestyle that took on a momentum of its own: more food provided for larger families; more people could clear and tend more land; more land would provide more food, and so on. Eventually there might even be food surplus, so that not all hands were required in the fields but could be set aside to perfect other skills, like tool-making.

Those people in a position to control the extra food might be able to offer it to others from time to time, thereby placing them in debt. The commitment to farming also made the cycle of the seasons a preoccupation of mankind – in a way it had never been before. The crops had to be sown during spring … the summer sun must ripen them … the animals should be slaughtered as autumn turned to winter … As the time and the year passed by so the world turned and the sky spun overhead. Those few who watched and then understood the phases of the moon, the tracks of the stars, the lengthening and shortening of days, might acquire knowledge. Once they could predict celestial events, rather than just bearing witness to them, then that knowledge might become something else. It was by means as simple as these – control of the stuff of life, acquisition of learning – that some men and women gained influence, even power over their fellows.

Powerful people often like to look and dress like powerful

people, and acquire tastes for luxury items unavailable to the common folk. In the Neolithic of Scandinavia, as in the rest of Europe, the rise of powerful, special people is testified to by the appearance in graves of polished stone axes and other refined weaponry that declared the elevated status of their owners.

After around 1,000 years of farming in Scandinavia some of the people, in Denmark and elsewhere, began to take a new approach to the treatment of their dead. Whether farming had arrived in the heads and hands of immigrants, or only as a set of persuasive ideas communicated from person to person and community to community, is still unclear. What is certain is that once people began staying put in one place, clearing and tending fields, they became possessive of the land upon which their futures depended. Claims on the home turf were passed from parents to children, generation to generation, and so the ancestors – those who had worked the same land before – became a proof of authority and entitlement. What better way to advertise ownership of a territory than by storing the bones of some of the previous incumbents in highly visible stone tombs that declared to all comers: 'This land is mine, because it was my father's, and his father's and his father's …'

But during the third millennium BC in parts of Scandinavia – as elsewhere in Europe and in Britain too – there was a general abandonment of the great communal tombs of the past, in favour of burying people in single graves. Rather than ancestors and connection with the past, what mattered was the individual and the here and now. Fashion further demanded the inclusion in the grave of axes, and also of fired clay beakers – usually decorated by having had a cord wrapped around them while they were still soft. Archaeologists take such finds as proof of a culture that reached right across northern Europe. They call it the culture of the Corded Ware Beaker. In Scandinavia this tradition took root first of all in Denmark and, having found

acceptance there, persisted unchanged for well over a thousand years.

There were no metal objects in Danish graves until around 1700 BC; but that is not to say metal was unknown to the people living there before that date. Spectacular flint artefacts recovered from some of the last of the Stone Age graves reveal the local artisans were well aware of the magical new material – and skilled enough to set themselves in competition with the best efforts of the metal-workers. Flint daggers shaped in imitation of those being cast in bronze elsewhere in Europe at the same time are testament to the levels of expertise reached after thousands of years of refinement of the techniques of flint-knapping.

Stunning or not, the flint daggers were nonetheless a last hurrah for their makers. By the time of the Late Neolithic they were appearing in Danish graves in place of the stone battle-axes that had been the earlier symbols of status. But between 1800 and 1700 BC, the Bronze Age arrived in Denmark and then it was metal objects that were increasingly in use, appearing in graves or in hoards placed in special places like rivers, bogs and lakes as votive offerings. Given the extremes of geography, metal objects – and the technology of their production – took longer to penetrate the more northerly territories of Scandinavia. But penetrate they did, so that tools and weapons of uniform types are eventually found all over Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Apart from anything else this spread shows there were networks of trade connecting the scattered populations. Presumably the peoples further north exchanged their natural resources – animal skins and furs, seal oil and pine resin – for either the raw materials of bronze production or the finished objects themselves.

Connections between Denmark and Jutland and the rest of Scandinavia are not only revealed by the trade goods. Especially evocative are the numerous rock carvings – made during the

second millennium BC – of what can only be described as long ships. Such imagery is particularly common in southern Sweden but also found in Denmark and Norway. The creation of rock art there seems to have been a preoccupation for hundreds of years and subjects include people, animals, weapons, unidentified symbols and shallow circular depressions known as cup marks. Most common, however, are depictions of seagoing vessels with high prows and sterns, crewed by a score and more rowers. They appear again and again, pecked into outcrops of bedrock – sometimes single ships but often entire flotillas.

Given the mountainous, forested interiors of countries like Norway, it would always have made more sense to move people and goods around by sea. But set aside the practicalities and it is impossible not to feel the imagination stirred by those artworks made during the Scandinavian Bronze Age. That the ship is so prevalent in the imagery is surely indicative of the importance attributed, in those distant years, to the ability to make voyages across the water. No doubt the wherewithal to commission, own and crew a ship was the mark of an important individual. By between 4,000 and 3,000 years ago, then, the ship was already deeply rooted in the psyche of the men who would be Vikings.