



PART ONE — ROAD TO AMERICA

Chapter I

Chapter I — A GLANCE AT THE MARITIME GENIUS OF THE NORSE — Character. — Shipbuilding. — Life and funeral of the King of the sea. — Piracy. — Virgins of the Shield [Les Vierges du Bouclier]. — The Norse are predestined to play a great role in the discovery of the world.

In Norway, says Depping, [1] the rivers roll up onto a magnetic sand which arises from the residue of oxidized rocks, and men drink there, which is to say the iron with the water, which must have an influence on their energy and their character.

One is struck by this note from the knowledgeable historian when one remembers the adventurous journeys made by the Norse, without maps or compasses, across the Ocean, in quest of glory, pillage, and unknown lands.

Norway was poor and populous, and it had to demand a notable part of its domestic consumption from the outside, even as it does today.

The thousands of islands along the coast make a picturesque border but one dangerous to navigators.

The fjords, or branching gulfs, which hollow out long and deep valleys, with the rivers and mountains contribute to the isolations of villages, to the difficulty of communication, and to the continual use of boats.

The poverty of the Norwegian land and a sea full of fish — a vagabond character, the habit of war and the worship of brute force — the love of glory and riches, contempt of danger, and religious beliefs born of the clash of combat make the Norseman first an intrepid fisherman, then an audacious pirate, finally the King of the Ocean.

He swore by his ship and gave it, as to his sword, a name capable of inspiring terror: *Jarnbardan*, the iron phallus, *Ognar brandur*, the Bloody Sword.¹

¹ Torfaeus, [2] *Historia rerum norvegicarum*, cap. XLIV, LVII. - Jal, *Archéologie navale (Naval Archaeology)*, t. I, mém. 2, p. 139. Paris, Bertrand, 1840. — Depping, *Histoire des expéditions maritime des Normands et leurs expéditions en France au Xe siècle (History of Norse maritime expeditions and their expeditions to France in the 10th century)* Book I, Chapter II, pp. 42-45, Paris, Didier, 1844, 8 volumes.

Norse ships were made of oak, well-decked, and allowed boarding both fore and aft, like those of the Swedes admired by Tacitus;² always ready for defense, they had only to make a half-turn to present a ram.

Under a practiced hand, of one who know how to profit from atmospheric variations and to predict quick temperature changes,³ they glided on the waves, fast and graceful, like a duck or a swan, whose form they borrowed.⁴

Chieftains held the honor of having ships of the greatest dimensions which they named *Snekkar* or *Drakar*, Serpents or Dragons. The *Long-Serpent* of Olaf Tryggvason, built by the carpenter Thorberg and celebrated in the annals of the North, had 32 ranks of oars and carried 90 men. Earl Hakon had a dragon-ship of 40 benches, Canute one of 60. Saint Olaf had two that could carry 100 men.⁵

Multicolored animal figures, real or fantastic, embraced the keel with their legs and their wings and supported, on long necks, hideous and menacing heads. These monsters appeared more than once on the coasts of France. A monk-historian saw in the appearance of a fleet bristling with masts: "A troop of savage beasts in the middle of a forest."⁶

When piracy became profitable, these figures were made of metal, enriched with gold and silver. The ships of King Canute carried on their sterns either a golden lion or a dragon of polished bronze, or a raging bull with gilded horns. Torfaeus⁷ [2] describes a brilliant golden dragon of an incomparable grandeur. Speaking later of four magnificent vessels, he says of one of them that it seemed to be gold and reflected splendid rays like the sun across the whole Ocean.

According to Robert Wace, [3] the ship that took William the Conqueror to England had on its stern a leather Archer [Sagittarius].⁸

When Guinemer or Wimmarr, vassal of the Counts of Boulogne, went to the Holy Land (1096), his ships, which carried 20,000 men, had their masts gilded and their sails made of precious fabrics.⁹

With their figures and dragons, archers and bulls, with the polished shields of the soldiers and the gilding that decorated their sides, the Norse ships shone in the sun like meteors and struck terror in the hearts of the enemy.

² Tacitus, *de moribus Germanorum*, 44, 45.

³ Forster, *Histoire des découvertes et des voyages faits dans le Nord (History of discoveries and voyages made in the North)*, trans. Broussonnet, t. I, pp. 127-129.

⁴ Jal, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁵ Depping, *op. cit.*, Book I, Chapter II, p. 44. — Jal, *op. cit.*, t. I, p. 134.

⁶ Depping, *op. cit.*, Book I, Chapter II, p. 44. — Jal, *op. cit.*, t. I, pp. 131, 144.

⁷ Torfaeus, *op. cit.*, cap. XLII.

⁸ *Le Roman de Rou et les ducs de Normandie (The story of Rou and the dukes of Normandy)*, Rouen, E. Frère, 1827, t. II, p. 146, verses 11595-11599. — Jal, *op. cit.*, t. I, p. 143.

⁹ Paul Riant, *Expéditions et pèlerinages des Scandinaves en Terre Sainte au temps des croisades (Expeditions and pilgrimages of the Norse in the Holy Land at the time of the Crusades)*, Paris, 1865, in 8e, p. 134.

The *King of the Sea* [4] spent his entire life on the Ocean, “never searching for refuge under a roof, never draining his drinking horn besides any home,” On his death, his body and his arms were laid on a ship that was launched onto the sea and set on fire. So the audacious pirate slept his last sleep in the depths of the element whose caprices and furies he had learned to brave from his youth.¹⁰

Piracy was allowed only to men of noble birth. It was a career of honor and fortune. The ancient chroniclers glorified famous pirates as our historians glorify great generals. For a long time after the conquest of England by the Normandy of the Norse, the names *pirate* and *arch-pirate* were still given to naval officers whom we call captains and admirals.¹¹

For the sons of kings and great lords, piracy was a way to distinguish themselves and to commend themselves before the nation. When a prince reached the age of eighteen or twenty, he asked his father for vessels to carry out glorious exploits. The father would publicly praise his request, which he considered a sign of courage and grandeur of soul.¹²

Women did not shun this bellicose rage. He who hoped for love had to be bold in the midst of the clash of arms.¹³

They began to admire pirates, then crossed the line which separates admiration from love. As Prosper Blancheman [5] says in his magnificent language:

*“Seule, accoudée aux crénaux de la tour,
Le Blond enfant du Koning de Novége,
Les Yeux rêveurs, penchait son front de neige,
Vers l’Océan qui grondait a l’entour.”*

“Alone, leaning on the battlements of the tower,
The blond child of the King of Norway,
With dreaming eyes, thought in his head of snow,
Facing the Ocean, which rumbled around him.”¹⁴

To anxious thoughts that bring on the clamor of tears is joined the

¹⁰ Depping, *op. cit.*, Book I, chapter I, p. 19; chapter II, p. 41.

¹¹ Fréville, *Mémoire sur la commerce maritime de Rouen (Memoir on the maritime commerce of Rouen)*, Rouen, Le Brument, 1857, t. I, p. 47.

¹² Mallet, *Introduction à l’histoire du Dannemarc (Introduction to the history of Denmark)*, t. I, pp. 215, 216.

¹³ “He who looks for love among young ladies must be intrepid in the midst of the clash of arms.” (*Chant de la mort d’Erik Blodoxi (Song of the death of Eric Blood-Axe)*, translated by Ampère, *Litterature et Voyages (Literature and voyages)*, Paris, Didier, 1863, p. 469).

¹⁴ *Poésies (Poetry)* of Prosper Blancheman, t. III *Idéal*. — *Le Roi de Mer (King of the Sea)*, Paris, Aubry, 1866, p. 145.

enthusiastic songs of the skalds [storytellers]; the blond girl of the North dreams of tempest and combat, wishes for violent emotions from them, ends by abandoning her peaceful retreat for the bridge of a ship, her linen cap for a steel helmet; the mantle of the warrior covers her shoulders, the polished shield protects her breast; she brandishes a lance and battle-ax, fights with courage and audacity along with the men. Women fought at the terrible battle of Braavalla [6], in which the skalds say caused the Norse gods to intervene most strongly. Alongside the adventures that recall the great days of chivalry is the marvelous and poetic history of the Virgins of the Shield¹⁵ [7].

But woe to the man of the people who dares to distinguish himself at sea! The kings punish him with an ignominious death.¹⁶ The same thing in the Middle Ages, in France and the greater part of Europe, the lords hung, as thieves, commoners who allowed themselves to follow the lords' example, to rob travelers on the great roads.

By their character, the Norse were predestined to play a major role in the discovered of the world.

Another reason, which pertains to physical geography, favored their attempts: the narrowness of the Atlantic channel at 60°, and the Orkneys, the Shetlands, the Faeroes, and Iceland, which are placed like steppingstones between the two continents.



¹⁵ Wheaton, *Histoire des peuples du Nord, ou les Danois et les Normands* [History of the People of the North, or the Danes and the Norse] trad. Guillot; Paris, Marc-Aurel, 1844, Chapter VII, pp. 184-186. — Depping, *op. cit.*, Book I, chapter I, pp. 31, 32; chapter II, pp. 49-51.

¹⁶ Depping, *op. cit.*, Book I, Chapter I, pp. 19, 20.

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Notes

[1] **Depping** Georges Bernard Depping, 1784–1853, born in Münster, a German-French historian; went to Paris in 1803, where he lived as teacher and writer; wrote a *History of Normandy*, also on the trade of Europe with the Levant, and on the Jews of the Middle Ages.

[2] **Torfaeus** Thormodus Torfaeus, 1636-1719; Icelandic historian, educated at the University of Copenhagen; lived and worked most of his life in Norway; appointed royal antiquary of Iceland in 1667, and Royal Historian of the Kingdom of Denmark in 1682; translated several Icelandic works into Danish and wrote *Historia Vinlandiae Antiquae* in 1705; *Groenlandia Antiqua* in 1706; and the four-volume *Historia Rerum Novegicarum* in 1711, the first comprehensive history of Norway since Snorri Sturluson's *Heimskringla (History of the Kings of Norway)*.

[3] **Robert Wace** About 1100 to sometime after 1174; Anglo-Norman poet of two verse chronicles, *Le Roman de Brut* (1155), and *Le Roman de Rou* (1160-1174), named respectively after the supposed founders of the Britons and the Normans; *Le Roman de Rou*, commissioned by King Henry II of England, was a history of Norman dukes from Rollo the Viking (after 911) to Robert II Curthose (1106); sometime after 1169, King Henry secured a canonry at Bayeux in northwestern France for Wace but in 1174 transferred his patronage to another poet, and *Le Roman de Rou* was never finished.

[4] **King of the Sea**

[5] **Prosper Blancheman** Prosper Blanchemain, author and poet writing in the mid- to late 19th century; works include *Les Nouveaux Satires (New Satires)*, 1872; *Les Nouveaux Satires et Exercices Gaillards d'Angot l'Eperonniere (New Satires and Strapping Exercises of Angot the Spursman)*(1877); and *Poètes et Amoureuses du XVI^e Siècle (Poets and Lover of the 16th Century)* (1877).

[6] **Battle of Braavalla** Legendary battle at Oestergoetland (Denmark) , approx. 710-770 AD, in which several kings, including Harald Hildetand, were killed by Odin; sources include *Saxo Grammaticus Historia Danica*, 1514, and the Icelandic

Sagas.

[7] **Virgins of the Shield** *Les Vierges à Bouclier*, or the Valkyries, young women with long, golden hair, wearing coats of mail, whom Odin sends to find heroes fallen on the fields of honor; they are armed and formidable warriors who ride in the air mounted on superb black stallions; according to legend, valorous combatants (Einherjars) join Odin and Freya in Valhalla.