

Norway: History

The first humans came from Siberia at the end of the Ice Age, 11 000 years ago with the earliest archaeological finds dating from 9 200 BC. These hunter-trappers were the Sami forebears and became hunter-fisher-herders. As the ice receded, other hunter-gatherers with a Germanic language migrated from central Europe into southern Scandinavia. Several prehistoric sites have been found. Around 2500 BC, these people were seafarers using stone tools, who then traded amber for bronze from mainland Europe. By the time of the Roman Empire when the area was called Thule, they were trading for iron, fabric and pottery from Rome; the iron implements allowed them to clear trees for farmland and build bigger boats. By the 3rd century they had a runic alphabet, seen on stone slabs today.

The Viking Age ran from the 8th to the 11th century. At its start, the many small independent kingdoms were overpopulated; young men sought their fortune overseas and farmers settled the Orkneys and Shetlands. Raiders plundered the Lindisfarne monastery in 793 and were feared in Scotland, Ireland, northern England, the west coast of Europe as far south as Spain and eastwards to Russia and the Middle East. They established further settlements in the Faroes, Hebrides, Dublin, the Isle of Man (with the world's oldest parliament), N England and Normandy (named after Norse men). After a civil war, Harald Hårfagre (the fairhaired) united the petty Viking kingships into a single realm around 885, commemorated at a site in Haugesund alongside the Norvegen strait which gave its name to Norway; about 20 000 opposing Vikings fled to Iceland. King Olav II converted the country to Christianity and introduced the Latin alphabet around 1000 when the population was about 150 000; he was martyred in 1030 and is Norway's national saint. As adventurous seafarers, Vikings crossed the Atlantic. Erik the Red visited Greenland from Iceland and according to sagas, in 1001 his son, Leif Eriksson, explored the North American coast naming it Vinland. In 1066, King Harald Hardråde was killed at the Battle of Stamford Bridge and Viking power began to wane. Ironically, the Viking descendants in Normandy conquered England later that year. The Viking legacy can be found in place names in the north of England (eg York = *Jorvik*, Whitby = *Hvit by*) and many English words derive from Old Norse (eg *myr*, meaning marsh, gave us moor and mire).

The first capital was Trondheim (then called Nidaros), founded in 997. There were many civil wars until a peaceful period when Bergen (*Bjørgvin*) became capital in 1240 and was a major trading port of the Hanseatic League of merchants. Greenland (in 1261) and Iceland (1262) voluntarily joined the Kingdom of Norway; the Hebrides and Isle of Man were sold to Scotland in 1266. In 1299, Oslo, founded by Harald Hardråde in 1050, emerged as the centre of power and became capital, there was a period of prosperity until the royal line died out in 1319 and Norway and Sweden united. In the mid 14th century, bubonic plague wiped out over half the population, followed by severe famine. In 1397, Norway, including the Færoes, Iceland and Greenland, the Orkneys and Shetlands, was absorbed with Sweden into the Kalmar union with Denmark, followed by 200 years of decline as an impoverished backwater Danish province. Danish became the language of administration, church and education; written Norwegian died out but the spoken language survived in many dialects. The Danes gave the Orkneys and Shetlands to Scotland in 1469 and Sweden separated in 1523. In 1537, Denmark replaced the Catholic faith by Lutheran Protestantism with Danish-trained pastors, a Danish bible and hymns. A series of wars with Sweden, from 1563 to 1720, lost some Norwegian areas to Sweden. From the late 16th century, the timber and shipping trades developed with a gradual return to relative prosperity. Oslo was destroyed by fire in 1624 and rebuilt in brick and stone by King Christian IV who renamed it Christiania (it reverted to its original name in 1925). The first census was held in 1769 with the population at just over 723 000.

In the Napoleonic Wars, Denmark sided with France and after Napoleon's defeat, the 1814 Treaty of Kiel ceded Norway to Sweden, but Denmark retained Iceland, the Faeroes and Greenland. On 17 May 1814, a defiant Norway asserted its independence with its own

constitution (derived from those of France and the USA, but more democratic) giving the vote to all landowning men and the right to choose a king; however, it was quickly defeated by a Swedish invasion. Norwegians were allowed to keep their constitution and elected national assembly (*Storting*) with an independent judiciary on condition they accepted the Swedish king. Between 1825 and 1932, rural poverty led to widespread emigration of over 850 000 Norwegians throughout the world, most to the USA and Canada, but about a quarter of these subsequently returned. In the mid-1800s, written Danish was adapted to represent the different Norwegian pronunciation and grammar, becoming *bokmål*, and, separately, spoken dialects were used to reconstruct what the written language might have looked like before it died out, this version becoming *nynorsk*. In 1875, the currency of 1 *specidaler* = 120 *skilling* was replaced by the *krone* with 30 *skilling* becoming 1 *krone*. Parliamentary government was introduced in 1884, reducing the king's role, and both versions of the language were officially adopted in 1885. A nationalist movement led to a peaceful secession from Sweden on 26 October 1905. Norwegians voted in a referendum for a monarchy instead of a republic, and parliament selected Prince Carl of Denmark (of the House of Glücksburg) as king. He took the title Haakon VII and renamed Alexander, his son, as Olav to reflect the ancient Viking past; his wife was Maud, daughter of Edward VII of Britain. Hydro-electric power was first harnessed in 1895, new industries and increasing exports began to relieve Norway of poverty, but the Great Depression reversed this. By 1932, nearly half the adult population was unemployed. Voting for women was introduced in 1913 and the first woman was elected to the Storting in 1922; the first woman in government office was in 1945 and the first woman prime minister in 1981.

Norway is famed for its explorers Roald Amundsen (1872 - 1928) who charted the Northwest Passage between the Atlantic and Pacific and led expeditions to both North and South Poles; Fridtjof Nansen (1861 - 1930) who was a champion skier and skater, led Arctic expeditions, then became a diplomat and Nobel Peace Prize winner; Otto Sverdrup who led further polar expeditions and later Thor Heyerdahl (1914 - 2002) who investigated migration of ancient peoples by crossing the Pacific on the raft Kon-Tiki and later the Atlantic and Arabian Sea in primitive boats.

In World War I, Norway was neutral and in 1920 joined the League of Nations. Despite reasserting its neutrality at the start of World War II, Germany invaded on 9 April 1940. King Haakon set up a government in exile in England and placed the Norwegian merchant fleet of over 1000 ships under Allied command. The fascist Vidkun Quisling (1887 - 1945) headed an unpopular collaborative government under the Germans. There was an active resistance movement in Norway but their actions resulted in many brutal reprisals against the civilian population. In 1943, a small Norwegian force parachuted onto the Hardangervidda plateau and blew up the Vemork heavy water plant at Rjukan, preventing Germany from developing an atomic bomb. This action is celebrated in the film *The Telemark Heroes*. Retreating from Russian forces at the end of the war, the Germans torched and razed almost every town and village in northern Norway. After the war Quisling and 24 other Norwegians were tried for treason; Quisling was executed. There was a post-war surge in rebuilding, hydroelectric power and industrial development.

The royal family returned in 1945. King Haakon died in 1957, succeeded by Olav V, a popular reign until his death in 1991. Olav's son Harald V is the current monarch.

Norway is a charter member of the United Nations and a founder member of NATO in 1949. In 1960, Norway joined EFTA, the European Free Trade Association, but has twice rejected closer ties with Europe due to concerns about farming and fishing. A referendum in 1972 was against joining the then EC and another in 1994 rejected EU membership. Current opinion polls show around 56% wish to remain outside the EU. Norway often takes a humanitarian and peace brokering role in world conflicts rather than contributing armed forces.

Books: The Viking World, by James Graham-Campbell (Frances Lincoln 2001 ISBN 978 071 121 800 0) £16.99, Viking history.
The Oxford History of the Vikings, by Peter Sawyer (OUP 2001 ISBN 978 019 285 434 6) £15.99
In Their Own Words, by Solveig Zempel (University of Minnesota Press 1991 ISBN 978 081 661 859 0) £11, collection of letters from Norwegian immigrants in the USA.
Nansen, by Roland Huntford (Abacus ISBN 978 034 911 492 7 2001) £14.99