Acknowledgments

This book aims to provide a general introduction to Danish history since the Viking Age, suitable for general readers as well as university students. The book originally appeared in Danish as *En danmarkshistorie · Fra vikingetid til nutid* edited by Thorsten Borring Olesen and Bjørn Poulsen (Aarhus University Press 2021; second edition 2022). Most of the authors are historians based at the Department of History and Classical Studies at Aarhus University, with contributions from Søren M. Sindbæk of the Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies, also at Aarhus University, and Carsten Porskrog Rasmussen of Museum Sønderjylland. Few revisions have been made to the original Danish text, with the exception of a new introduction and an updated epilogue in Chapter 9. The suggestions for further reading appended to each chapter have also been expanded to include relevant literature in English (and in some cases German) for readers without knowledge of Danish.

The translation of any historical work inevitably raises many questions of terminology. Where possible we have tried to adopt standard translations used in international research literature, but there is not always agreement on these. We have tried to be consistent, but in the end it should be acknowledged that there can be no authoritative translation of terms that may also have changed in meaning over time. To avoid confusion, therefore, we have throughout the text included the modern Danish equivalent for terms where there was any doubt. Place names present further difficulties. We have decided to use the English names Copenhagen (København) and Jutland (Jylland), as these will be familiar to most readers, but note that the Danish names are used for the islands Fyn (Funen) and Sjælland (Zealand).

The Danish text is freely available online at Aarhus University's site danmarkshistorien.dk, with links to extra material including short films, quizzes, sources and articles. The text from this book and a number of short films with the authors is also published as a free open online course at www.danmarkshistorien.dk/en/ooc.

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MARY HILSON, PHD, PROFESSOR

Introduction

What is Denmark?

Among Denmark's many historical tourist attractions is the site known as 'Kongernes Jelling – Home of the Viking Kings', operated as part of the National Museum. Since 2015 visitors have been able to learn about the Viking Age in an experience centre at Kongernes Jelling, but the site is best known for the two rune stones erected during the second half of the tenth century by the kings Gorm the Old and his son Harald, later known as Bluetooth. According to the National Museum's website, 'the Danish nation was born and created in Jelling', given that these stones mention the name Denmark. For this reason, the Jelling rune stones, together with the adjacent burial mounds and church, were added to UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1994.

As a myth of national origin the story is a compelling one. The larger of the two rune stones has been referred to as 'Denmark's baptism certificate', marking the end of paganism and the establishment of the kingdom within the context of 'European Christian civilisation'. It suggests, moreover, a kingdom of remarkable longevity, possibly even one of the oldest in Europe. As with all such national stories, however, the reality was much more complicated than this. To be sure, the term 'Danes' to describe a distinct group of people appeared in sources from the ninth and tenth centuries, or even earlier (see Chapter 1). But as this book will show, there was no unbroken line of descent from the time of Gorm and Harald to the present day. 'Denmark' has meant many different things, contingent upon time and place.

If there is any element of continuity, it is probably the maritime nature of the territory that is now known as Denmark. Consisting of the Jutland peninsula together with about eighty inhabited islands, and with only one land border, shared with Germany in the south of Jutland, Denmark was and is an archipelago, strongly affected by the sea. This is important in two respects. First, despite its relatively northerly location in a global

Satellite image (c. 2004) of the Danish realm: Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Denmark. *Photo: NASA Worldview*

Satellite image (c. 2007) of Denmark. The image shows the strongly maritime nature of the Danish territory, including the Jutland peninsula and the many islands, from Læsø off north Jutland to Bornholm to the east. Nowhere in Denmark is very far from the sea. The Øresund – the narrow strait between the large island of Sjælland and Skåne in what is now southern Sweden – has had a very important role in Danish history. *Photo: NASA Worldview*

context, situated as it is between the latitudes of approximately 54.8 and 57.8 degrees north, Denmark has a largely temperate and variable climate. The landscape is mostly depositional and thus also relatively low-lying and only gently undulating. In this respect the territory of Denmark had many more similarities with that of the north German plain, of which the Jutland peninsula was an extension, than with the neighbouring territories of Sweden and Norway.

Second, the position of the Danish archipelago, situated as it is between the Baltic and the North Seas, meant that maritime trade and connections have had a fundamental influence on Danish history. Especially significant was the ability of the Danish monarchs to control the Øresund – the narrow channel that connected the North and the Baltic Seas – and to exact tolls from the shipping that passed through it. But equally influential were maritime connections across the North Sea, and beyond that to the Atlantic. The historical legacy of such connections meant that in 2023 the Kingdom of Denmark (*Rigsfællesskabet*) included the north Atlantic territories of Greenland and the Faroe Islands, albeit with various degrees of self-governance.

In the modern era, the Danish national self-image has been that of a small state, internally united around its shared language and culture, but vulnerable to political and cultural threats from outside its borders. With a population of over 5.9 million in 2023, Denmark was certainly much smaller than European states like Germany, France, Italy or Spain. It was by no means a micro-state, however; rather, it belonged to a significant group of medium-sized European states with populations in the range of 5–11 million. Among these were Norway (population 5.5 million), Finland (5.5 million) and Sweden (10.5 million), which together with Iceland and Denmark constitute the Nordic region or Scandinavia. Although its economy was tiny in comparison with that of global giants like the USA or China, by any per capita measurement Denmark was undoubtedly one of the world's wealthiest countries, and in common with the other Nordic countries, the majority of its residents enjoyed exceptionally high standards of living and material comfort. Indeed, by Eurostat's measurement of GDP per capita in purchasing power standard (PPS), Denmark ranked third among the EU-27 countries in 2022, behind Luxembourg and Ireland.

Early modern Denmark was a much larger state, which reached its full extent in the seventeenth century. The historic grandeur of its capital Copenhagen bears witness to this, as do the names of parts of the city's

harbour, referring to Greenland, Iceland and the West and East Indies. Although the Early Modern Danish monarchs were never quite as powerful as their Habsburg counterparts in Austria, another formerly extensive state which had become severely truncated by the twentieth century, the Early Modern Danish realm could nonetheless be counted as a medium-sized European power. By the end of the nineteenth century this was no longer the case, following territorial losses in 1658, 1814 and most traumatically in 1864, when defeat by the Prussian army severed the historic links between the Danish kingdom and the duchies of Slesvig (Schleswig) and Holsten (Holstein). The current southern border was established in 1920 following Germany's defeat in the First World War.

As in most European states, history writing has played a significant role in the establishment and consolidation of the Danish state and Danish national identity, especially during the nineteenth-century era of nation-building. Indeed, the tradition of *danmarkshistorie* (Danish history, or history of Denmark) is exceptionally well established, with the present volume merely the latest contribution to the genre. As with all national histories, it is also a tradition characterised by disagreement, shifting perceptions and even contradictions. This brief introduction lays out the broad chronological lines of Danish historical development and sets them in context. It then sums up some of the main points of consensus in Danish history, while also highlighting some of the major controversies.

Periods of Danish history

The periods of Danish history presented in this book follow the logic of political history. The account charts the emergence of the Danish kingdom during the so-called Viking Age from the late eighth century, and its territorial consolidation during the Middle Ages. From 1397 until 1523 the three Scandinavian kingdoms were united under the same monarch in the Kalmar Union, albeit governed according to local laws and customs. The territory covered by the union was extensive, ranging from the Karelian peninsula in the east to the western Norwegian fjords, from the North Cape to the river Elbe, and including Iceland and the north Atlantic archipelagos of the Faroe Islands, Shetland and Orkney. The personal union between the three crowns came to a violent end in the early 1520s (see Chapter 3), and for the next one hundred and fifty years the Baltic Sea was dominated by the rivalry between two Scandinavian kingdoms centred around Stockholm and Copenhagen respectively. During the Early Modern Era one can therefore speak of an 'East

Norden' – the Swedish realm, which had its capital at Stockholm and included Finland and territories south of the Gulf of Finland – and a 'West Norden', the Danish realm ruled from Copenhagen.

The Early Modern Danish monarchs ruled over a fairly extensive entity known as a 'conglomerate state'. In Danish, this is referred to as *helstaten* – perhaps 'Greater Denmark' would be the most appropriate translation – to distinguish it from Denmark as a nation state, established during the nineteenth century. In addition to the core of the kingdom – Jutland, Fyn, Sjælland and the smaller islands – Greater Denmark included the territories of Blekinge, Skåne and Halland, which were ceded to Sweden in 1658; Norway; the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein; Iceland; and the Faroe Islands. By the eighteenth century it had also acquired overseas colonies outside Europe. The earliest of these was established in the 1620s at Tharangambadi, or Tranquebar as it was known in Denmark, on the Coromandel coast of India. This was followed in the eighteenth century by trading posts at Serampore in West Bengal; the Nicobar islands in the Indian Ocean; and a series of forts and trading posts on the 'Gold Coast' of West Africa, now part of Ghana, which formed a base for the capture and transport of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic. Denmark was thus an active participant in – and beneficiary of – the notorious north Atlantic triangular trade, which reached its peak in the late eighteenth century, and included the three Caribbean islands that made up the Danish West Indies: St Thomas (acquired by the Danish West Indian Company in 1672), St John (1718) and St Croix (1733). Finally, there was also Greenland. The rich animal resources of the Arctic – fish, whales and fur animals – attracted Danish and Norwegian interest from the Late Middle Ages, but Greenland's status as a colony of the Danish crown became formalised following the start of missionary activities in the early eighteenth century.

The consolidation, expansion and subsequent decline of Greater Denmark has to be seen in relation to other historical developments in Europe. From the tenth century, with the conversion of the Danish kings and their subjects to Christianity, the Danish realm was drawn firmly into the sphere of the Roman Catholic Church, with its bishops and abbots connected to the political and cultural networks of European Christendom. The Lutheran Reformation in the sixteenth century severed the ties with Rome, but strengthened those with the German-speaking centres of the new faith. The Swedish defeat of Denmark in 1658, and subsequent annexation of the provinces of Skåne, Halland and

Blekinge, followed the upheavals of the Thirty Years War, which consolidated the power of the Swedish kings. Swedish dominance in the Baltic was relatively short-lived, however, for the founding of the city of St Petersburg in 1703 set the scene for the emergence of Russia as a significant Baltic power, and the wars that followed marked the decline of Swedish aspirations to great power status. The most serious territorial losses for Denmark came as a consequence of the Napoleonic wars of the early nineteenth century. Following the Treaty of Kiel in 1814 the Danish realm was amputated, as the kingdom of Norway became part of a personal union with the Swedish crown, albeit under its own constitution. Arguably more significant in terms of national identity, and certainly more traumatic in national accounts of Danish history, was the military defeat by the Prussian army in 1864, which led to the loss of Schleswig and Holstein. Subsequently, Germany's defeat in the First World War enabled a new border to be drawn across the southern part of the Jutland peninsula in 1920, following a plebiscite.

The Danish Caribbean islands were sold to the USA in 1917, since when they have been known as the US Virgin Islands. The current boundaries of the Nordic region date from the upheavals of the Second World War, namely the Finnish cession of territory to the Soviet Union in 1944, and the proclamation of the Icelandic republic in the same year. Iceland had gained significant constitutional rights in 1918, but remained in a personal union with the Danish crown. This did not completely sever the north Atlantic ties however, for in 2023 the *Rigsfællesskab* still included the Faroe Islands and Greenland. The Faroe Islands had gained home rule in 1948, while a constitutional reform in 1953 changed the status of Greenland from that of a colony to that of an *amt* (local government district). Subsequent changes in 1979 and 2009 significantly increased Greenland's autonomy from Denmark, while at the same time awareness of cultural differences and post-colonial legacies also increased. In 2023, therefore, the Faroe Islands and Greenland remained within the *Rigsfælleskab* under self-rule, but it was by no means certain that this arrangement would persist.

The contexts of Danish history

As already mentioned, two geographical factors were especially significant for the historical development of the Danish realm: first, that it was an archipelago, with easy access to the sea; and second, the position of these territories between the North and the Baltic Seas. Denmark's historical development has thus been shaped by influences from the north