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Undset, Ingvald Martin

A short guide for the use  
of visitors to the viking-  
ship from Gokstad

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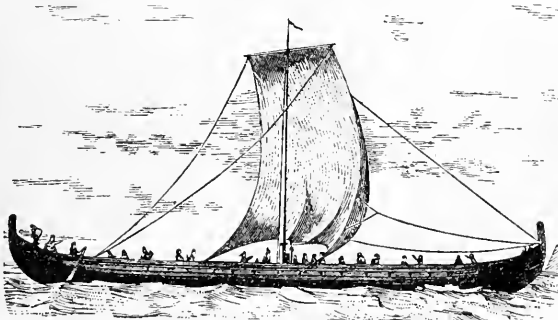
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A SHORT GUIDE  
for the use of visitors to the  
**Viking-ship from Gokstad**

by  
Dr. Ingvald Undset



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The most interesting relic of antiquity in the Museum for old Norse Archæology, exhibited in the University of Christiania, undoubtedly is the Vikingship, dating from the 9th century after Christ, and found in a mound on the Gaard of Gokstad, near Sandefjord. This extraordinary vessel, as yet unique of its kind (the ship exhibited in the museum of Kiel from the Nydamfind in Slesvic dates from another [elder] period and is therefore not to be directly compared with this), has been wonderfully well preserved. It is kept in a separate shed at the back of the centre building of the University. We propose in the following pages to give a short description of it, as a guide to those wishing to inspect the ship and its belongings.

## I. The history of the discovery.

Near the small town and watering-place of Sandefjord, situated about 150 kil. from Christiania, at the W. side of the mouth of the Christianiafjord, lie the gaards of Gokstad in the parish of Sandehered, not far from the coast. Here was a large mound, known throughout the district by the name of Kongshaugen (the

king's mound), where a king, according to tradition, was buried, with all his treasures. On the strength of this tradition the inhabitants of the place began to excavate the mound, after New Year's Day 1880. The work was, however, soon put a stop to by order of the Antiquarian Society, which desired later on to make a thorough examination of the mound, on its own account. This work was commenced in the Spring of 1880 and superintended by the President of the above society, Mr. Nicolaysen, antiquarian. It was soon ascertained that a discovery of unusual interest was being made, as the mound was found to contain a tomb in a ship in a state of excellent preservation, thanks to the potter's clay in which the ship had been imbedded to a depth of 1.26 metre\*, and around which the bottom of the mound had been thrown up. With great care, the whole of the excavation was finished in the course of two months and a half: the vessel was conveyed to the coast in two parts; towed to Christiania on a large barge; put together once more, and placed in the garden at the back of the University, where it is now exhibited in a temporary shed, close to the house containing the fragments of a smaller and similar vessel, which was dug out of a mound in Tune, Smaalenene. Both vessels will be housed in a better and worthier manner, when the plan of erecting a new building for the archaeological museum shall have been carried out: this, it is hoped, will be the case within no distant period.

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\* ) A metre is 3 feet 3 $\frac{1}{4}$  inches.



## II. Description of the ship.

On entering the house we find ourselves opposite to the stern of the ship, with the helm at our right hand side. It is advisable to enter first

**the long gallery**, running parallel with the wall at the left hand side, whence the visitor will have the best opportunity of surveying the whole.

The vessel's length of keel is 20.10 m. and 23.80 m. between stem and sternpost, outside measure; in the middle, it is 5.10 m. wide. As will be seen, it is remarkably sharp, and has a fine run. Its length is considerable in proportion to its width, more so than on the modern coasting vessels in the North of Norway. Its sharp build, with the considerable length of keel, undoubtedly made her a fast sailer, and the flat bottom a very steady boat at sea. It is clinch-built, of oak, 16 strakes high. The 17 frames which are placed three feet apart, on the keel, run only up to the 11th strake, at which point, the beams are fastened and joined to the ship's side by knees. It is peculiar that the frames are not fastened to the keel, but bound to the planking with soft roots of trees, through holes in clamps, which are cut out in the plank itself. The garboard strake is fastened to the keel with iron bolts, the upper strakes with treenails through the timbers. The seams are caulked with three thread's yarn, spun of cow's hair. At both ends, the ship is now (as will be perceived), somewhat defective, as those parts which

projected, beyond the potter's clay of the mound into the upper layers of earth, have been destroyed. It may, however, with considerable certainty be supposed, that the keel in stem and stern did run up some distance perpendicularly before being cut off horizontally, like the stem of some modern coasting vessels «Nordfarjægter».

The ship had been made both for sailing and rowing. About midship is placed a keelson for the mast to rest upon. Above this, on the beams, is a large block of oak, cut out at both ends in the shape of a fish's tail. Hence the name of «mastefisk», which is still used of the part of the deck round the mast. Through a large opening made in this «mastefisk», the mast was lowered and let into the keelson. When the mast had been raised, the after part of the opening was filled up with a large piece of oak, which at the same time served to steady the mast. When this piece was removed, there was an opening large enough to allow the mast to be lowered. The plain capstan in the fore hold no doubt served to raise and lower the mast. The mast was probably fitted with a yard and a large sail. Right in front of the mast, and, also further fore and aft are vertical beams with a gaff, on which to place the spars. A few spars were found on them, of which one no doubt is the vessel's yard; another the top part of the mast. That the ship was propelled by oars as well is proved by the existing oars, and, likewise, by the openings for them made in the third strake from above. There are 16 such openings on each side; the strake in which they are made,

is the fourteenth from the keel and is somewhat thicker than the rest. This is, also, the case with the tenth, against which the upper part of the frames and the ends of the beams are resting. There is, as will be seen an incision in the after part of the openings, for the blades to pass through, when the oars were to be used. In the fore part of the ship it is especially seen how the bottom was covered with boards resting on the beams.

The two upper boards («skvætbordene», the bulwarks) have only been partially preserved. Aft of the sepulchral chamber a part of them is, however, seen, and 4 shields have been hung on them. While the ship was being excavated, fragments of others were found along both the waterways, showing that the ship, when buried (as also at other times, when adorned for festive occasions) had been decorated with shields on both sides; the shields appeared to have been painted alternately yellow and black. While the vessel was being rowed, the shields were removed, seeing that they reached so far down as to cover the openings for the oars.

Special attention is directed to the erection made of timber in the middle of the ship, viz. the **sepulchral chamber**. That this lofty part in the middle, projecting from the layer of potter's clay, has been preserved, is owing to its having been built of huge blocks of timber and covered with several layers of birch-bark. As will be seen, the sepulchral chamber is made of blocks of timber, placed like a roof against a roof-tree: the lower ends resting on timbers placed

alongside the bulwarks, which timbers were joined with others, supporting the end-walls, made of planks. The foremost wall of the chamber rests against the lower part of the mast. Inside the sepulchral chamber, were found relics of the tomb itself. They are, however, nothing but fragments, which may be easily seen, the sepulchral chamber having been plundered in bygone years. Right opposite we perceive a yawning hole in the sepulchral chamber and the ship's side, caused by the violent disturbance which must have taken place in the olden time, when tradition could still point out the exact spot in the mound where the sepulchral chamber was to be found and where the robbers expected to discover costly weapons and other objects of value. Our sagas frequently tell of similar breaking into old mounds, in the time when paganism was on the verge of decay. Owing to this plunder, everything in the sepulchral chamber was found in a confused heap and only a few fragments were left of the costly weapons and trinkets which had accompanied the buried chief to his grave.

The ship evidently has been an open vessel. Under certain circumstances it may, however, have been covered with a tent («tjeld»), such as is often described in our sagas. Through the small square holes inside the waterway, the lower part of the tent would have been fastened to the ship's sides, whereas the top has probably rested on a spar crossing the two pairs of tent-poles mentioned below. A few pieces of homespun which were found, are no doubt remnants of the tent. Some planks, with horses'

heads carved on them, now put up on the wall to the right of the entrance and made to fit into each other have served as tent-poles. Nearly the whole length of the ship may have been covered with a tent. The sepulchral chamber may be said to have been made in the shape of such a tent, only formed of more solid materials.

It has been calculated, that the vessel had a crew of 40 hands. Fully equipped it has had a draught of 1.10 m., and the waterway will then have been about 0.95 m. above the water. The vessel's carrying capacity was about 30 tons.

It is next recommended to **walk round the vessel**, starting from the entrance, at the stern. On the starboard quarter is the rudder, in its original position. It has the shape of the blade of a large oar, and has at the upper end been fitted with a tiller, pointing athwartship. It rests against two clamps, one next to the waterway, and a large one lower down, to which it was fastened by a thick rope, which did not hinder its movements nor its being lifted by a line when the vessel was in shallow water; the line being made fast to a cramp near the lower end of the rudder. At this place, the vessel is strengthened on the inside by extra woodwork. This fitting of the rudder, as a steering oar on the vessel's starboard side, is everywhere the ancient and original method. Hence the name of «starboard». It was not till the later part of the middle ages that rudders were placed on the sternpost.

Underneath the vessel are now placed two bedsteads. In the fore hold fragments of 5 such,

were found, all of them made to be taken to pieces, but only two could now be completely put together. The officers of the ship alone are likely to have had bedsteads. Inside the sepulchral chamber were found the remains of a sixth bed, of a slightly different shape.

Following the starboard side forward, we perceive that there are no bulwarks till near the centre of the vessel. We find, however, all the openings for the oars, of which several are closed with their wooden ports. At the bow, on this side, is the anchorstock, made of oak, of the shape now in use. It was found in the fore part of the vessel, and near it fragments of the anchor, with its ring, but through decay this has lost its shape and looks like a big lump of iron.

The upper part of the stem is missing. As before mentioned, the keel must here have run up perpendicularly and been cut straight off, as on one of the modern coasting vessels in the North of Norway. It is doubtful whether it has had any special ornaments; it may, however, be taken for granted that there has not been a dragon's head or such like. The dragon ships described in our sagas, written several centuries later, have been of larger dimensions than this vessel, although probably of similar build.

If we go aft on the vessel's port side, we find the gangway plank, made of fir. It was found alongside of the vessel, near this place. In one end it has a hole, by which it was fastened to the ship. It is provided with steps, cut into it. On this side the waterway is missing on the whole part before the sepulchral chamber.

Through the opening made by the robbers of old we enter the sepulchral chamber (pag. 7) where we have an opportunity of closely examining the construction of the ship, how keel, planking, timbers and beams were joined together. In the middle is the big keelson, and the «maste-fisk», resting on the beams, in which is still wedged in, by the piece of wood before mentioned (pag. 6), a piece of the mast, at the lower end 0.32 m. in diameter. In the vessel was also found another piece of the mast, but the length of the latter cannot be positively fixed.

Abaft the sepulchral chamber the waterway is perfect, and on it are exhibited the only perfect shields, 4 in number. These have in the middle an iron boss to protect the hand when grasping the handle, consisting of a piece of wood, which the same time kept the boards of the shield together. There are also traces of a binding, probably of leather, round the edge.

We would advise the visitor to examine closely how beautifully the planks are planed and rounded off on the edges. The vessel throughout exhibits an extremely skilful workmanship, proving the highly advanced knowledge of shipsbuilding attained by our heathen ancestors. The vessel cannot have been very old when it was buried in the mound, as the openings for the oars do not show traces of having been very much used.

During the excavation were found bones alongside the ship of at least 12 horses and 6 dogs, which animals evidently have been killed in order to follow their master and owner into the mound.

Vis à vis the on pag. 7 described shields are now also placed for getting more light the glass-cases described pag. 14 f., which formerly were placed inmost in the house.

### III. Ship's Inventory.

We would next call the visitor's attention to the numerous articles found in and near the ship, and now exhibited on the walls of the shed. The vessel was placed in the mound with full equipment. As the greater part of these articles of a ship's inventory etc. have no parallel among our other objects of antiquity, a peculiar value is given to those found in the ship. On the walls to the left of the entrance, as far as the door in front of the vessel's stem, are placed the fragments of 3 smaller boats found in the fore hold of the ship, in so many pieces that none of them could be put together, and yet so numerous, that a correct idea may be formed of their build. They show in this respect great conformity to the vessel itself, the deviations being such as arise from the difference in size. In many details they remind us of the boats now used on the north-western coasts of Norway. Next to the entrance are seen pieces of their planks and oars, in the middle of the long wall to the left their keels, respectively 7.7, 5.4 and 4.1 m. long. The stems and sternposts of the boats are not raised so much as those of the ship. Higher up on the wall, are the 3 rudders, of the same shape as that of the ship. These small



boats have had no openings for the oars, but the latter have been fastened by eargrummetts to small wooden knees (keiper), fixed on the gunwale. A few such «keiper», nicely carved, will be found next to the long wall we have been following; here will also be found bottom floors and pieces of planking of the small boats.

On the walls on the right hand side of the shed are the articles found in the large ship, together with its inventory. On the narrow wall near the stem are bottom floors of the ship, also at the upper end of the right hand long wall (where are likewise yards and masts of the small boats), pieces of the ship's oars and a few perfect oars for the boats and the ship. The oars of the ship have been from 5.30 to 5.80 m. long; they are made of spruce and somewhat lighter than those generally used at present, the blades being comparatively small. They have undoubtedly been handled by one person only.

On this wall, at the lower end near the entrance, some smaller articles, found in the ship, are placed on shelves. Next to the window are some wooden plates, an iron chain belonging to the large copper kettle on the floor below it, evidently the cooking utensil of the crew. It could not be used on board, cooking being only possible whenever the vessel was moored to the shore.

On the shelves are a few pieces of a wooden sledge, below some bosses of shields and other articles of iron, with some remnants of wooden utensils. On the wall are suspended a few wooden spades, evidently used

for making the mound, also some shutters for covering the openings for the oars. Worthy of special attention is a carved piece of wood which appears to have been the tiller, the fore part has an admirably designed animal's head, painted in several colours.

On the narrow wall near the entrance are the 4 planks mentioned above, with carved horses heads, painted in various colours, at one end, which would seem to have been placed at the gables of the ship's tent. Close to the door are two short pieces, similarly carved, the side pieces of a high seat or throne.

In the glass-case are some of the bones of the animals mentioned on pag. 11, a few pieces of turned wooden cups and plates, some specimens of the yarn spun of cow's hair, with which the ship was caulked, also of the soft roots of trees and ropes made of thin bark, some pieces of homespun, belonging to the tent, which has been white, with red stripes sewn on to it, some feathers of a peacock, then a rare bird in Norway, probably brought home from foreign parts by the owner and consequently having to be buried with him. Also various articles found in the plundered sepulchral chamber, of which may be mentioned pieces of gold-wrought silk, of dark wollen stuff, probably of an upper garment, of a leather purse etc. — In the sepulchral chamber were likewise found some interesting ornaments and harness mountings, of gilt bronze and of lead. These articles, with a few small, well preserved objects of iron are exhibited in the first room of

the archæologic museum, in glass-case nr. 42 close to the entrance.

In the glass-case on the wall are the bones of the buried chief, found in the sepulchral chamber, from which may be concluded that he was a very tall, powerfully built elderly man.

These glass-cases are now for getting more light placed to left from the entrance, vis à vis the shields hanging on the boards of the ships.

#### IV. The manner and time of the burial.

In conclusion, a few words with regard to the manner in which the burial must have taken place:

When the man was dead and a spot for his mound had been chosen near the sea, his ship was drawn by his horses up on the beach and then imbedded partly in the potter's clay, with the stem towards the sea. The next thing was to make the sepulchral chamber which was built of timber, whereupon the mast of the ship was cut off on a level with it and the man put into it, lying on his bed, dressed in his best clothes, with his weapons and possibly some other valuable possessions. Then the sepulchral chamber was shut and covered with birch-bark. Besides the ship's inventory, certain of the man's possessions which were to accompany him, were placed in the ship. His horses and dogs were killed and placed alongside, only his peacock, a memento of his foreign travels, had a place in the ship itself. Then the whole of the ship, with the exception of the sepulchral chamber, was

covered with potter's clay, with layer of moss and twigs on the top, upon which the mound was raised.

The metallic ornaments discovered determine us to fix the time of the burial at the 9th century. At this period, the latter iron age (the age of the Vikings), a burial in a ship or a boat was no uncommon thing. It has been found in many mounds, when opened, that the dead man, whether cremated or not, had been placed in the mound in a vessel, the latter being, however, completely or mostly decayed except this one at Gokstad and the one found in Tune in Smaalenene. In both these mounds the potter's clay had preserved the woodwork. There does not however exist so perfect a vessel from the age of the Vikings as the one from Gokstad.

Who the buried man was, is not known, but the size of the mound and the unusual grandeur of the burial proves him to have been a man of distinction, a chief.







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