

Thyra Danebod Queen of the Danes in the Viking Age

Gunivortus Goos

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Introduction

The events that are described in the following text occurred in Denmark or in some of its regions, which are shown on the following map:



However, this is not about today's Denmark, but about the area in the 9th and 10th centuries. At that time there existed no stable state structure, there were several independent small kingdoms, which were gradually annexed by the more powerful neighboring princes. It would be a long time before the present kingdom was formed.

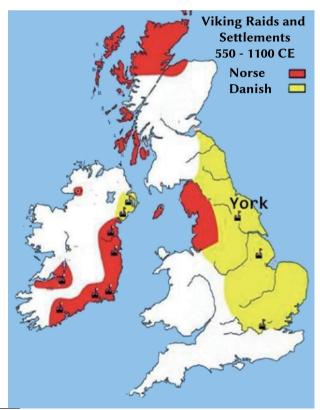
Thyra's husband Gorm (more about both of them below) probably first ruled over roughly the territory indicated on the map around 900; he conquered some areas and the couple's son, Harald Bluetooth, continued the conquests, according to the map showing the situation around 970. The dynasty of 10th century kings is called the House of Jelling after their residence at the place of Jelling.



In Jutland a petty kingdom with Jellinge as centre emerges.



Harold Bluetooth reunites Denmark.
He also conquers southern Norway and Slavic
areas in northern Germany



The greatest threat to the slowly expanding realm of the House of Jelling came from the south, where Otto I the Great (912-973) continued to expand his domain. This even led to the aforementioned Harald Bluetooth acknowledging the supremacy of Otto I in 948, allowing himself to be baptized and subsequently founding several monasteries in his kingdom, thus beginning the Christianization of Scandinavia.

The Vikings, for their part, established settlements in Ireland, Scotland and England, and there were connections between these kingdoms up to the royal level, including through marriage.

The history of the Vikings tells of bold seafarers and brave warriors such as Rollo, Leif Eriksson and Knut the Great. However, recent research of the rune stones discovered in Jutland, in particular the two Jelling stones named after their place of origin, show that women played a more important role in Viking Age Denmark than previously assumed. Writings from about a millennium ago attest to a powerful queen named Thyra. Her father may have been a Jarl¹ Haraldr, whose territory is variously described in the sources: Jutland, Sjælland or Holstein. In any case, he was a relatively powerful man.

Thyra herself is mentioned in several ancient sources. First, the historian Sven Aggesen (around 1140 to 1150-1186) wrote about her some 250 years after her death, followed by Saxo Grammaticus.² Other sources include the Heimskringla (a collection of sagas about Swedish and Norwegian kings) and the Saga of the Jomsvikings; a longer passage from the latter source follows now.

Jomsviking Saga – Thyra

Haraldr was a Jarl who ruled over Jutland and was called Klakk-Haraldr. He was a wise man. He had a daughter named Thyra. She was the wisest of all women and interpreted dreams better than other people. She was also very beautiful. The Jarl was of the opinion that the entire government of the country depended on his daughter. That is why he allowed her to decide everything together with him. He loved her very much.

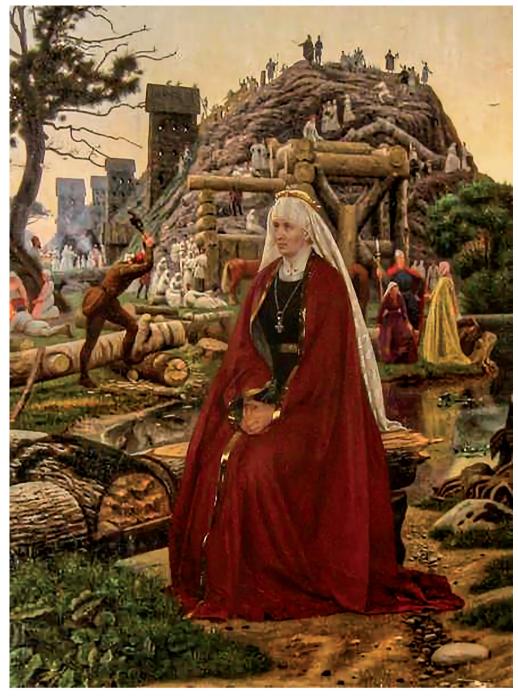
When Gormr of Jelling had grown up and taken over the Danish kingdom, he left the country and wanted to marry the daughter of jarl Haraldr. If he did not marry her to him, he thought, the Earl would have to suffer war at his hands.

When Jarl Haraldr and his daughter Thyra heard of King Gormr's campaign and his intentions, they sent men to him and invited him to a sumptuous feast. He accepted and sat there in honor. When he explained his cause to the Jarl, these replied that she would have to decide for herself "for she is much wiser than I am". When Haraldr brought the matter to her, she replied, saying:

That will not be decided on this occasion. You can go home now under these conditions with beautiful and honorable gifts: If your courtship of mine means much to you, you must, as soon as you returned home, have a house built large enough for

¹ Jarl, related to the English "earl", corresponding to the German Graf, was a princely title in the Nordic countries from the Germanic Iron Age (375 CE) until the High Middle Ages. Jarls were either independent petty kings or were appointed by the king as territorial administrators. For a long time, the title was not hereditary and the independent Jarl was appointed by his people.

² Saxo Grammaticus (around 1160-after 1216) was a Danish historian and cleric. Because of his polished, correct Latin, which was no longer common in the High Middle Ages, Saxo was given the <u>3</u> nickname "Grammaticus", according to the mid-14th-century Jutland Chronicle.



Thyra Danebod. Oil painting by Christen Dalsgaard, 1869

you to sleep in. It shall be in a place where no building has ever stood before. And you must sleep there for a total of three nights from the first night of winter. Then you should remember whether you dreamed anything. If so, send men to me to tell me about your dreams. Then I will explain to them whether you can continue the courtship or not. If you don't have any dreams, you don't need to continue our connection.

After the exchange of gifts, Gormr stayed at the feast for a short time and then returned home with great honor and valuable gifts. Once there he put her wisdom and instructions to the test. He arranged everything as she had told him: the house was built and he entered it as he had been told. Three fully armed men were placed outside in front of it to keep watch without sleep, for he thought it might be a trap. And then he lay down on the bed that had been set up inside and slept and dreamed. This went on for three nights.

King Gormr then sent his men to see Jarl Haraldr and his daughter Thyra to tell them of his dreams. When they arrived, they were warmly welcomed. Then they presented the king's dreams to them. When Thyra had heard the dreams, she said:

You may stay as long as you like. And you can tell your king that I will accept him.

When the men had returned home, they told the king what they had learned. He was very pleased.

Shortly thereafter, the king left home with a large retinue to meet the bride and attend the wedding. He arrived in Jutland in high spirits. Jarl Haraldr had heard of his journey and had prepared a great feast and reception for Thyra. Thus began their marriage and the great love between them. And during the feast, Gormr told of his dreams, which she then interpreted.

The king told what he had dreamed on the first night of winter and the following two nights while sleeping in the new building. First, he thought he was standing outside looking over his entire kingdom. He saw that the sea had receded so far from the land that he could hardly see it. The tide was so low that all the islands and fjords were dry.

And then this happened: He saw three white oxen come up out of the sea and run onto the land near him, biting off all the grass near the ground where they came from. And then they went away. In a second dream, he had the same experience again: he saw three oxen coming out of the sea, which were red and had big horns. These oxen also tore up all the grass from the ground, just like the oxen in the first dream. After a while they went back into the sea.

The third night, he continued to dream and had another similar dream. Again the king thought he saw three oxen coming up out of the sea. This time they were black and had huge horns. They stayed for a while and then went back into the sea. And there was a loud explosion that went through his marrow and bones, and he thought it must be heard all over Denmark. But he saw that the sound was coming from the sea, for it suddenly returned to the land.

And now I wish, my queen," he said, "that you would interpret the dreams to entertain the people and show them your wisdom.

She agreed to interpret the dreams. She began to explain the first dream, saying

Where the oxen came up from the sea to the land and were white, there will be three barren winters, and so much snow will fall that there will be famine in all Denmark. And where you thought that the second three oxen came up out of the sea and were red, there will be three more winters with little snow, but still not little, for you thought that the oxen had chewed up all the grass from the ground. And where three black oxen came up out of the sea, there will be the third three winters. They will be so bad that everyone will say that there has never been such a thing. And that such a black drought and misery will come upon the land that it will be hard to find another example. The fact that you thought the oxen had big horns means that many people will be robbed of everything they own. And the fact that they, the oxen, all went back into the sea as they came out, and that you heard a great crash as the sea fell on the land, means that important men are fighting and facing each other in Denmark. Here they will have great battles and fights. I also think that some of these men who will be in this conflict will be related to you. If you had dreamed on the first night what was in the last dream, then the conflict would have happened in your lifetime.

I would not have accompanied you if your dreams had been as I had previously suspected. But I can do something about all this dreaming about the famine.

After the feast, King Gormr and Queen Thyra prepared to return to the kingdom of Gormr. They had many ships loaded with grain and other goods and sailed back that same year. From then on, they sailed the same trip every season and continued to get food and other goods until the time of the famine they had predicted.

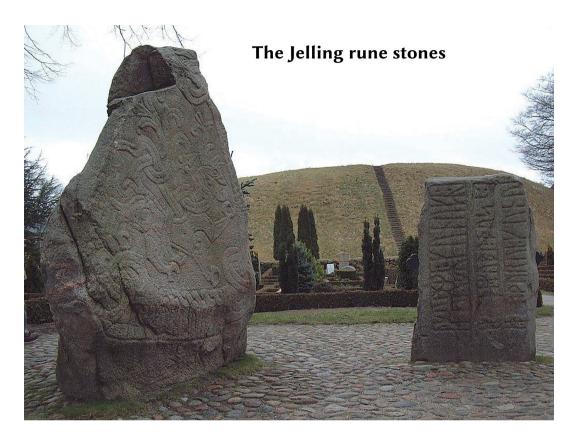
When the famine came, thanks to these preparations, they had enough to eat and were also able to help the people around them in Denmark, sharing much of the food and good things they had stored with their fellow countrymen.

And Thyra was described as the wisest woman who ever came to Denmark. She was even called the jewel of Denmark.

This story is based on the English translation of "The Saga of the Jómsvikings" by Alison Finlay and Þórdís Edda Jóhannesdóttir, but is not a literal translation.

The Thyra Runestones

On September 28, 2023, Heritage Daily, an English-language online scholarly journal devoted to world heritage and history, published an article entitled: "Archaeologists identify runesmith who carved the runes of the Jelling Stones."



The Jelling Stones, Jellingstenene in Danish, are two large rune stones from the 10th century; they are located in the town of Jelling on the Danish island of Jutland.

One of the stones was erected by King Gorm the Old (before 900-ca. 958/964, he reigned from 936 until his death) in honor of his wife Thyra, while the other, larger stone was erected by Harald Bluetooth (ca. 910-985/987), a son of Gorm and Thyra, to commemorate his parents and his achievements unifying Denmark and Norway. It also commemorates the introduction of Christianity to the Danes. The runic inscriptions on these stones are among the most famous in Denmark.

The stones are located next to two burial mounds, the older of which dates back to 958/59. The church at Jelling was built between these burial mounds around 1100. This entire complex was officially recognized as Denmark's first UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1994.

The rune stone of Gorm the Old



The smaller and older rune stone from Jelling, side 1



The smaller and older rune stone from Jelling, side 2

The inscription on both sides of the older and smaller of the Jelling stones reads: King Gormr has erected these monuments in memory of Thyra, his wife, the salvation (or: the strength, the adornment) of Denmark.

The name "Thyra" is the translation of the Old Norse *Pyrvé*, as it is written in runes on the stone and also in most of the old Norse sources from the late early Middle Ages.

The rune stone of Harald Bluetooth



The later rune stone from Jelling, side 1

The larger of the two stones is inscribed with runes on three sides. The full inscription reads, translated:

King Haraldr has erected these monuments in memory of his father Gormr and his mother Thyra; Haraldr, who conquered all of Denmark and Norway and made the Danes Christian.

The name Thyra (*Þyrvé*) is thus mentioned on both Jelling stones.



The later rune stone from Jelling, side 2



The later rune stone from Jelling, side 3

The Læborg rune stone



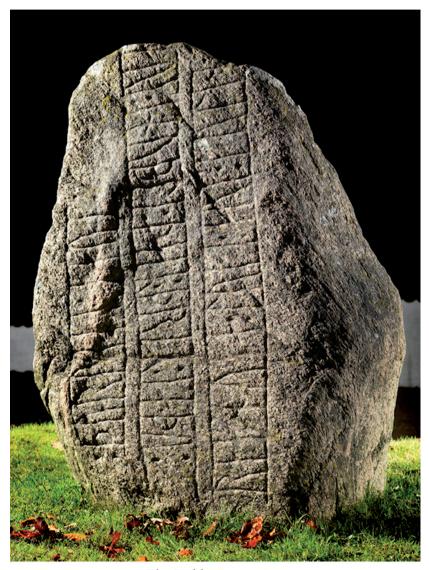
The Læborg Runestone

There are two other rune stones with their names carved into them, the first is the Læborg rune stone, named after the Danish municipality of Læborg in the Syddanmark region of Jutland.

The inscription on both sides of this stone reads, translated:

Tófi, of the line of Hrafn, made these runes in memory of Thyre, his queen.

The Bække-1 Rune Stone



The Bække 1 rune stone

The fourth rune stone is known as Bække-1, named after the town of Bække in southern Jutland. The inscription reads, translated:

Ravnunge-Tue and Fundin and Gnyple, these three formed Thyra's burial mound.



It is believed that the name Thyra on all four rune stones refers to the same woman, which is more than to any other person in Viking Age Denmark. This is particularly remarkable as rune stones erected in honor of women are already rare. The publication mentioned at the beginning tells of the search for the 'rune smith' who carved the runes into the Jelling stones. Research has revealed that this is the same man mentioned in Bække-1: Ravnunge-Tue. Lisbeth Imer, an employee of the National Museum in Copenhagen who led the research team, writes in the article:

"It is an absolutely incredible discovery that we now know the name of the rune maker behind the Jelling Stone, but what makes the discovery even wilder is that we know Ravnunge-Tue's boss. It's Queen Thyra of Jelling, Harald Blåtand's mother, there can be no doubt about that now..."

The Danish journalist Sanne Wass wrote about this on September 28, 2023 at the information services, news and media company Bloomberg:

Queen Thyra probably came from a more noble and older family than Gorm, whom the Danes usually regard as their first king, said Lisbeth Imer, runologist and lead researcher behind the study. "This is incredibly interesting to understand the balance of power and how Denmark was shaped as a nation at the very beginning," she said.

"In fact, Gorm was probably only king because he was married to Thyra," Adam Bak, the director of the museum where the Jelling Stones are on display, told local media. "The museum is now prepared to devote more space to the queen in upcoming exhibitions, he said".

However, other historians still have doubts.



Queen Thyra

King Gorm of Jutland managed to arrange a marriage with Thyra, a princess from the kingdom of the Danes in Zealand (Sjælland) and Skåne. They had two sons. The eldest was given a name from the royal line of the Jutes, namely Knut (several old sources also write 'Knud'), while the younger was given a name from the royal line of the Danes, namely Harald. But Knut died on a Viking campaign against Ireland or England, and Harald became later king, first in Jutland with the royal seat in Jelling; later he "won all of Denmark and Norway", because his mother was the respected Danish princess Thyra, but also under the danger of the threat from the emperor in the south.

Thyra, is one of the few women to be highlighted in both legend and historical records. The aforementioned Sven Aggesen and Saxo Grammaticus describe her as a wise and resilient queen who oversaw the construction of the Danevirke³ (Daneworks), a rampart designed to protect Denmark from invaders from the south.

While Saxo identifies Thyra as the daughter of an English monarch (i.e. Æthelred I, c. 837–871, King of Wessex and Kent), she is described in the Jómsvíkinga Saga and Snorri's Heimskringla as a descendant of the semi-mythical Harald "Klakk" Halfdansson (c. 785–c. 846). He was king of southern Jutland from 812 to 814 (the town of Haithabu was part of his kingdom), and probably also of other parts of Denmark at that time, such as possibly Funen, Zealand or Lolland. If this origin of Thyra is correct, then, Thyra being the aunt of the Norwegian Queen Ragnhildr (a granddaughter of Harald Klakk), wife of King Halfdan the Black, the House of Jelling was connected with the Norwegian royal line.

Regarding Saxo's claim:

Thyra was the daughter of the English king Æthelred of Wessex, who also had a son named Æthelstan. Æthelstan was neglected in his father's will in favor of Harald Bluetooth. The Norwegian king found it appalling that such a fool should receive such a reward and attacked England, where Æthelstan immediately surrendered. Shortly afterwards, both the Norwegian king and Æthelstan died, and Norway and the related part of England passed to the late Norwegian king's son – Håkon.

Saxo's reports fit well with the English king Æthelstan the Glorious, who reigned from 924 to 939. However, he was not the son of Æthelred of Wessex (865 to 871), instead of Edward the Elder (899 to 924), but was raised by his father's sister, Æthelfled, who was married to another Æthelred, the Earl of Mercia, who as such was Æthelstan's foster father.

³ The Danewerk, called Danevirke in Danish and danæwirchi in Old Danish, is a complex system of Danish border fortifications built in the early Middle Ages to protect Denmark's southern border. It is located in northern Schleswig-Holstein, which is now part of Germany, and consists of ramparts with defensive moats, an artificial plateau called "Thyraburg" (Thyra fortress) and a sea dike in the Schlei area. Over the centuries, the Danewerk was continuously expanded.

When Edward died, Æthelstan was recognized as king of Mercia and later of Wessex after his father's sister. The king of Norway, Harald Haarfager's son Håkon, was brought up at Æthelstan's court as part of a peace treaty, so he also fits in well with the stories told by Saxo.

Whether Harald Klakk was the father of Thyra or an English king remains uncertain; in any case, she is not usually counted as one of Klakk's children. Harald was married to Sigrid Helgesdotter (800–854). Their presumed children are named as follows: Gottfried Haraldsson (c. 820–c. 856), Guthorm of Haithabu (825–854 in Friesland) and Gisela (Gisla) (c. 830–c. 870), who married Erik (Horik) III of Haithabu.

In book 9 of his "Gesta Danorum" Saxo denigrates Thyra's husband, Gorm the Old. First he scolds him for not being a Christian:

After him, Gorm reached the pinnacle of power. He was always malicious towards the true faith and wanted to eradicate the toleration of Christians, as if they were the most evil of men. He tormented those who kept their commandments with all kinds of injuries and never ceased in his efforts to hunt them down with all kinds of slander. Moreover, in order to restore the original worship of the shrines, he treated a church that had been built by a religious community on a plot of land in Schleswig as if it were a godless dwelling of impiety, had it torn down to its foundations and punishing those he could not get his hands on with the torment of demolishing their holy chapel.

And then he accuses Gorm of weakness of character:

Though he was considered a towering figure, his mind hardly matched his physique. In his conduct he confined himself to the gratification of domination, so that he was glad to maintain his authority without extending it; he believed that it was more satisfactory to protect his own property before invading that of others, and was more anxious to protect his gains than to increase them.

Saxo tried to present his country very prominently and did not shy away from rewriting history to suit his purposes. A relatively peaceful king may not have suited his intentions for a powerful Denmark.

In the Knýtlinga Saga (c. 1250), a brief comment is also made about Thyra's husband, Gorm the Old, in a somewhat derogatory way in a remark about King Knut the Great (c. 995–1035):

He was not very wise, as less as King Sven, to whom he was related, or Harald and Gorm before him, who were not very wise either.

In the Heimskringla, a work on the history of Norwegian kings written around 1230, Harald 17 Klakk is also named as Thyra's father. A short quote from chapter 5 states:

King Hálfdan saw them crossing the ice of the lake, for he had very good eyesight. He saw the covered wagon and felt certain that Hárekr and his men's mission must have turned out as he wished. Then he had his table set and men sent round many parts of the district and invited many people to come and there was that day a great and splendidly prepared banquet, and at this banquet King Hálfdan married Ragnhildr, and she was afterwards a powerful queen. Ragnhildr's mother was Pyrrni, daughter of King Klakk-Haraldr of Jutland and sister of Pyri Danmarkarbót (Denmark's Betterment or Enhancement), who was married to Gormr inn gamli (the Old), king of the Danes, who was ruling the realm of the Danes at that time.

Finlay-Faulkes translation

In the saga "The Tale of Ragnar's Sons" (Old Norse: *Ragnarssona þáttr*), an Old Norse tale about Ragnar Lodbrok, Swedish king and his sons who lived in the 9th century, Harald Klakk is named as Thyra's father. This is told in chapter 4 of the saga:

Gorm took over the kingship after his father. He married Thyri, who was called "Denmark's savior", the daughter of Klakk-Harald, who was king in Jutland. But when Harald died, Gorm also took Harald's entire kingdom under his rule. King Gorm marched with his army over the whole of Jutland and abolished all the petty kings as far south as the Schlei, thus conquering a large part of Wendland, and he fought great battles against the Saxons and became a mighty king.

Peter Tunstall translation

With regard to the suggestion that Thyra's parents were Anglo-Saxon, it has also been suggested that Gorm the Old was wrongly identified with another Danish king named Gorm or Guthram, who was active in England at the time of King Alfred the Great, and in this context a story has been invented linking Gorm's wife Thyra to the Wessex dynasty. None of this is more than speculation.

Another consideration is the custom of the sons of kings choosing wives from other peoples and nations. Harald Bluetooth and Sveyn Forkbeard married Slavic princesses, Canute the Great married Emma from Normandy. If Thyra was given the epithet "tanmarkar bod" on her rune stone, it was probably because she came from that 'Denemearce' which, accord-

⁴ Gorm, refers to his wife Thyra as "tanmarkar bod", the "pride (adornment) of Denmark". This ancient name for Denmark is often considered the "birth certificate" of the country. The most common etymology of the name Denmark sees it as a combination of the name of the people, the Danes (tan-), and the word "-mark", which means 'border'.

Furthermore, it is assumed that the name Denmark was coined from a German perspective. The Germans would see Denmark as a borderland inhabited by Danes, and this interpretation could be supported by the fact that Denmark is referred to as marca vel regno danorum in a charter of Otto II from 865. However, there is also the less common view that it was a border area from the Swedish point of view. Later, before it was given its present name, it became "Danmaurk" (pronounced as "Danmaurk")

ing to Alfred's Geography⁵, consisted of most of the Danish islands and Skåne together with Zealand (Sjælland) as its center. The later form of the byname "Danebod" could have meant an improvement or restoration of Denmark, although "bod" is still often translated as "adornment", i.e. "Denmark's adornment".

Bent Hansen writes on dandebat.dk (translated):

Thyra was apparently a princess of the Denmark described by Ottar and Wulfstan, whose main island was Sjælland (Zealand). A king who ruled the entire Danaland around the mouth of the Baltic Sea into the western ocean should necessarily be located on this venerable island, just as an ancient emperor should necessarily rule from Rome.

Be that as it may, the accounts of Thyra's ancestry are all from later times, contradictory and in some cases chronologically dubious.

In any case, she is considered to be the progenitor of the Jelling dynasty, which reigned until 1378, and also the ancestor of the Danish royal family, which still reigns today.



Queen Thyra Danebod with her still young sons, Knud (left) and Harald at the Daneworks.

⁵ This refers to the work "King Alfred's Anglo-Saxon version of the compendious history of the world", a reworking of the Historiae adversus paganos by Paulus Orosius (around 417). The Old English version of the corresponding work by Orosius, written in the West Saxon dialect around the year 900, was composed by an anonymous author who was possibly encouraged or inspired by King Alfred the Great (848 or 849-899). The translator actively reshaped Orosius' narrative by deleting superfluous details, adding explanations and dramatic speeches, and inserting a long section on the **19** geography of the northern European world.

Thyra remains a figure shrouded in mystery because our direct knowledge of her is actually limited. However, if we make certain assumptions, we can piece together some information about her life. For example, if we assume that her son Harald Bluetooth was about 60 years old at the time of his death in 986–87, we can conclude that Thyra gave birth to him around 926. It is also assumed that Thyra was about 20 years old when she had this second son. This estimate suggests that she was born somewhere between 905 and 910.

Another detail we know about Thyra is that she predeceased her husband Gorm. The large burial chamber of the north mound in the stone nave at Jelling (see below) was probably intended for both spouses, and dendrochronological analysis of the wood used in its construction suggests that it was felled in 958. This means that Thyra lived at least until that year, possibly even longer, as the preparation of the tomb could have taken several years. Given the time period, it is plausible that Thyra reached a relatively old age of 50 to 60 years, which was quite remarkable for the time.

It is uncertain whether or not Thyra Danebod was a Pagan, but it is plausible that she was. While there is no concrete evidence of her religious beliefs, her husband is known to have been a practicing Pagan, as were most Danes at the time. Interestingly, some later legends suggest that she was a Christian, contradicting the sources which indicate that her husband, Gorm the Old, actively sought to expel all Christians from his kingdom. It would be strange indeed for her to marry and have children with someone from a culture she supposedly rejected, especially when there were many Pagan women around her. Furthermore, her son, Harald Bluetooth, was not brought up as a Christian, because according to Adam of Bremen, he was forcibly converted to Christianity by the German King Otto I.

Adam of Bremen also reports that Archbishop Unni of Hamburg traveled to Denmark in 936 and met with the Danish king there. Adam wrote:

At that time the Danes were ruled by Hardecnudth Worm, a very bloodthirsty dragon, I must say, and not a little hostile to the Christians. Since he undertook to completely destroy Christianity in Denmark, he drove all the priests of God out of his country and had many of them murdered in agony.

It is assumed that the word *Filius* (Latin for 'son') was forgotten or not included in the report Adam received about this journey, and that the Danish king was "Hardecnudth filius Wurm", i.e. Wurm, son of Hardecnudth. Adam's text exists in various manuscripts, in two of which the word *filus* is recorded:

Abud Danos eo tempore Hardecnudth Vurm [addition in manuscripts B and C: filius Hardewigh] regnavit ..."

"At that time Hardeknut Vurm [son of Hardewigh] ruled over the Danes ..."

Adam of Bremen I, 55.

Hardecnudt is King Knut I, the father of Gorm the Old. Archbishop Unni's journey may **20** have been an inaugural visit for the new king Gorm, who was enthroned that year.

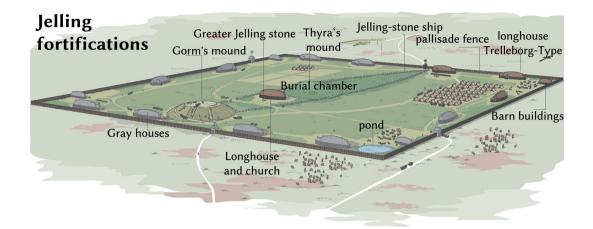


Thyra died before Gorm, who then had a memorial stone erected to Thyra in Jelling, describing her as the "pride" or "adornment" of Denmark. Gorm and Thyra were buried under one of the two large burial mounds in Jelling and later reburied in the first Christian church there. This was confirmed when in 1978 a grave with their remains was excavated under the eastern end of the present church.

Modern sources often refer to Thyra as a Viking queen. The Vikings were a seafaring people originally from Scandinavia (present-day Denmark, Norway and Sweden) who raided, pirated, traded and colonized parts of Europe from the late 8th to the late 11th centuries. There must have been such men in the land where Thyra was queen, but they were only a small part of the population. Calling her a Viking queen today is therefore probably more a matter of journalism to give the articles written about her a first attractive eye-catcher.

The Jelling stone ship

The Stone Ship of Jelling is located in the Danish town of the same name and was probably commissioned by King Gorm the Elder in the first half of the 10th century. It is about 350 meters long and was built around a small hill where the Thyra burial mound is located today. It is believed that the smaller of the two rune stones at this location, the rune stone of Gorm, 21 is connected to the stone ship, as are other rune stones from the first half of the 10th century.



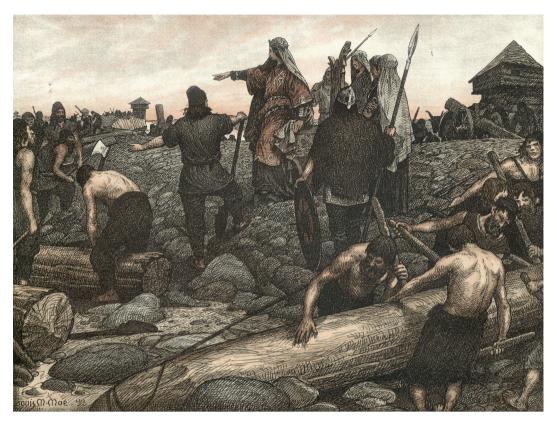
The Stone Ship is no longer visible in the landscape; it is possible that many of the stones have been reused for other purposes over the years. However, its location is marked on the site by white rectangles.

The ship's setting is an important archaeological site and is located close to the royal monuments of the Viking Age in Jelling. Based on a number of finds over the last 200 years and the interpretation of earlier excavations, it is believed that the stones found belong to a 356 meter (1168 ft.) long stone figure in the shape of a ship. This 'ship' is dated to the early phase of Jelling, which ended with the death of King Gorm the Old (died around 958). The site is by far the largest of its kind and almost four times larger than those at Gammel Lejre and Vejerslev on Sjælland.

King Harald Bluetooth built a monumental burial mound in the area of the entire complex, which is considered to be the largest in Denmark. It was built over an existing Bronze Age burial mound and was used to house the remains of his father, Gorm the Old. He later had an even higher mound built to the south of it, which was identified by a rune stone placed by Gorm as the grave of Harald's mother, Queen Thyra. One end of the stone ship has been preserved under this southern mound. Between the two mounds, Harald placed a larger rune stone as a memorial to both his parents, while the smaller stone now stands next to it. Today these stones can be found in the cemetery on the south side of Jelling Church.

Folk traditions

One related legend can be found in the Jomsvikings Saga, see above. According to this, Thyra is said to have gathered grain every summer to avert a famine (see above). And Emperor Otto 1 is also said to have been both Thyra's lover and her enemy after he subjugated Denmark.



Queen Thyra founds the Daneworks. Illustration from "Danmarks Historie i Billeder" (Denmark's History in Pictures), 1898.

Both Aggesen and Saxo Grammaticus describe Thyra as a wise and determined queen who commissioned the construction of the Danework, an earthen rampart to defend Denmark against invaders from the south, and in particular to prevent the German emperor from expanding his territory. While the first construction phase of the fortress predates Thyra's reign and some of the trees within the fortress were felled as early as 737, the subsequent expansions lasted until the 12th century. Nevertheless, the "Chronicon Lethrense" mentions in the middle of the 12th century that King Dan had built the Danewerk against Emperor Augustus. The extension of the wall by Queen Thyra Danebod in the 10th century is first mentioned by Sven Aggesen around 1185 and later by Saxo.

There is archaeological evidence to suggest that Thyraburg Castle, which may have been extended during Thyra's lifetime around 940, and the connecting rampart were built during Harald's reign from 964.

Yet, it is unlikely that Thyra actually commissioned the expansion of the Danewerk and <u>23 is</u> probably only part of the folklore. Despite extensive research, there is currently no evi-

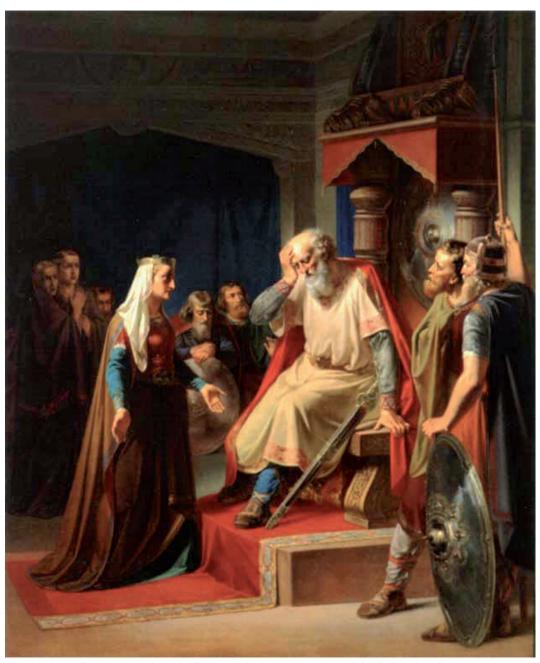
dence that Thyra or Gorm commissioned the construction of specific ramparts. However, it is generally assumed that their son Harald had the 'Kovirke' (part of the Danewerk) built. According to a later historical account from the High Middle Ages, Harald Bluetooth fortified the Danewerk on his mother's advice.

According to quite another folk tale Thyra's daughter was captured by trolls and taken to a kingdom in the far north beyond Halogaland and Biarmaland (i.e. beyond the Arctic Circle).



The 'Kovirke' (part of the Daneworks)





Thyra Danebod informs King Gorm the Old of the death of their son Knud

The Romantic Era

The Romantic Era, also called Romanticism, is a cultural and historical epoch in Europe that lasted from the end of the 18th century until well into the 19th century. The exact dates of the beginning and end of this period vary.

Like the rest of Europe, a wave of national romanticism swept through Denmark in this period. The focus was on history and famous personalities, especially after the defeat against Prussia in 1864, when large parts of Jutland were lost. Queen Thyra was a shining example of the ideal woman of the time - mother and queen at the same time, courageous defender of the kingdom and (supposedly) of the Christian faith.

During this period, several paintings were created depicting Thyra Danobod, such as the one on the previous page. Also a statue was erected in this period. The sculptor H. W. Bissens (1798-1868) created in 1853 a plaster statue of Queen Thyra. Today this statue can be seen at the Royal Jelling Museum.



Queen Thyra Danebod. Plaster statue by H. W. Bissen (1853)

Shortly after the Romantic period, the German writer, journalist and critic Theodor Fontane (1819-1898) wrote in 1864 his world-famous ballad "Gorm Grymme", in which Thyra is also mentioned several times. The second verse reads:

And the Earls gathered to feast at the Yule,
Gorm Grim-Eye sits in his pride;
On ivory throne his own wedded wife,
Thyra Dannebod, by his side.
The hand of each one the other's seeks,
The face of each one is bright,
A smile in the eyes of each lies hid-Gorm Grim-Eye, how gentle to-night!
Free translation by Marian Parker Whitney, 1908

The eldest son of Gorm and Thyra was called Knut Danaast (Danaast: loved by the Danes). He was killed in 947 on a Viking expedition in Ireland. With him was his younger brother Harald, who later became King Bluetooth. Knut was shot at night by an arrow from an Irish archer. In his last moments, Knut is said to have ordered his men to continue their efforts as if nothing had happened. This strategy was intended to deceive the Irish and make them believe that the death of their leader had not weakened their siege activities. The news of Knut's death finally reached Thyra in Jelling, but she was reluctant to share it. According to the legend, Gorm had sworn to kill whoever brought him the news of Knut's death. Instead of saying anything, Thyra hung black curtains over the windows and dressed herself in black. When Gorm asked her if she wanted to tell him about Knut's death, she replied: "You tell me, not the other way around".

According to the legend, Gorm died of grief shortly after his son Knut's death, or even took his own life, leaving Thyra a widow.

The latter, however, does not correspond to the historical evidence. Thyra must have died before Gorm, because as a widower he erected a rune stone in her honor in Jelling.

In any case, it was Knut's death that served Theodor Fontane as a model for his ballad "Gorm Grymme". But as described above, in reality it was the son Knut who died, while in the poem it was his brother Harald who was killed, who was also wrongly named as the "only child". These two things do not fit together. Therefore, the ballad is a free artistic dramatization of the tale.

Closing remarks

The frequent references to Queen Thyra on different rune stones suggest her significant role in the establishment of the Danish kingdom during that period. Notably, neither her renowned son Harald Bluetooth nor any other individual in Viking Age Denmark is as prominently featured on these runic inscriptions. This highlights Queen Thyra's exceptional importance in laying the groundwork for the state. Despite the brevity of the texts on the rune stones, they serve as the sole written records from Viking Age Denmark, emphasizing the immense political influence wielded by Thyra during her era.

The sources, whether medieval or modern, occasionally contain contradictory information, a feature evident in certain sections of this article. No effort has been made to reconcile these contradictions to form a coherent narrative. Such contradictions are common in historical accounts because they contain not only factual details but also subjective accounts of events. Moreover, later scholars interpret these accounts through the lens of their own perspectives. While this reality is sometimes difficult to accept, it also adds an intriguing dimension to the study of history. This observation also applies to Thyra Danebod.

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Illustrations

- p. 1: This map was based on the map on https://urlaubaer.ferienwohnungen.de/reiseziele/daene-mark/daenemark-bornholm/, but was changed by the author to match the article better
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- p. 25: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Gorm-the-old.jpg
- p. 26: http://jelling.natmus.dk/en/about-jelling/gorm-thyra-and-harald/the-myth-of-queen-thyra/resourceful-and-loved/ Queen Thyra Danebod. Plaster statue by H. W. Bissen (1853) for The Queen's Staircase in architect C. F. Hansen's Christiansborg. Photo: Jesper Stub Johnsen.

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