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DITHMARSCHEN
A MEDIEVAL PEASANT REPUBLIC

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William L. Urban

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PREFACE

This book was written primarily for the general public. Medievalists and Reformation era historians may wish to read it because it is the only survey of Dithmarschen history in English. However, except for the footnotes, this slim volume is not principally aimed at an audience of scholars.

Writing popular history of the medieval period presents writers with an imposing problem. In contrast to the evolutionary, orderly unfolding of ancient or modern history, the medieval era is chaotic. From the blood feuds of the Merovingians to the pageantry of chivalry, from the firesides of the Avars to the cloisters at Cluny or Citeaux to the solid burgher homes of Hanseatic merchants, from St. Boniface to John Hus, all were part of the varied tapestry of medieval life. Many writers fasten upon those aspects of each era which are most widespread and which had the greatest impact on modern history as the keys to understanding that world.

This is the "western civilization" approach—adhering to the main themes (usually the growth of institutions and the actions of great monarchs) and firmly resisting temptations to wander off into local history or specialized studies. The virtue of this method is that it is intelligible; the vice is that it is misleading. Simplifying the complexity of medieval life so that it can be easily understood implies that the stereotype was the universal practice, when, in fact, the stereotype is an amalgam of common practices followed in many different places but which may never have existed together anywhere in a *pure* form.

How does this approach work in practice? Historians have a difficult enough time making the Middle Ages clear to themselves. To make that world intelligible to those unfamiliar with the period, they must simplify a complex range of rural life styles to a few basic forms: serfs, free farmers, herders, bailiffs, nobles, priests, monks, and so forth. To make these fit within the space available in a textbook, medievalists often reduce these groups to an even simpler formula: nobles, peasants, and clergy. As a result, the vast majority of Americans not only find medieval life

dull, but they believe that it was uniform, unchanging, and backward. However, it was diversity rather than uniformity which distinguished the period.¹

Europeans understand a particular community to have individual character. They are proud of the special characteristics of the geography, culture, and *personality* of each community. In fact, each region is unique, but some regions are *more interesting than others*. What this book will attempt to do is to describe one unique peasant community and, in the light of its history, to examine some of the problems faced by all peasant communities throughout medieval Europe.

The community known as Dithmarschen was no ordinary community. Its society and form of government violated nearly every generalization made about the medieval period in American textbooks. In some ways it is even a somewhat modern state, especially in the formation of institutions for building dikes, for self-defense, and for self-government. In other ways it was quite backward. For instance, Dithmarschers allowed inheritance through the male line alone into the sixteenth century, whereas the Franks and Burgundians had abandoned that practice a thousand years earlier.

Not every medieval community diverged from the normal development pattern of western civilization as much as that of Dithmarschen, but many deviated significantly. The exceptions were probably the rule.

Historians today find over-simplification less of a problem than it was a generation ago, when textbooks concentrated more on politics than on societies. (The *Annales* school has made an impact on the writing of social history.) Even so textbooks rarely mention Dithmarschen and the other North Sea peasant communities. This is a deserved omission, perhaps; these settlements were not particularly important in the overall scheme of European history. With two notable exceptions (the battles of Bornhöved and Hemmingstedt), their actions were of no more than local significance. Even contemporaries who had heard of Dithmarschen knew little about it. Nevertheless, Dithmarschen is not without interest for us. It was there, when the trend was moving in the direction of despotism, that free men learned to govern themselves. When peasant militias elsewhere were almost useless in combat, Dithmarschers defended themselves successfully. This circumstance provokes questions: Why did Dithmarschen succeed politically and socially as long as it did? Why did it eventually go under? Was blind fate opposed to all free communities? Was there only one future for medieval society: the great despotic monarchies, which did in fact triumph?

The origin of this book

In a very real sense this book was begun at the University of Hamburg in 1964-1965 when I met a retired schoolteacher named Maria Krüger. Of Dithmarscher extraction, she often entertained my wife and me for tea, with cookies and tales of her native land. At her suggestion I later read some of the local color novelists in

the library of the University of Kansas. Thence I went to the works of the serious historians, where I discovered that the novelists' descriptions of Dithmarschen and its people were not exaggerations.

I was fortunate to have travelled in the lands north of the Elbe. After bicycling the length of Germany three times, I lived for almost a year in Hamburg and in the neighboring town of Ahrensburg. That gave me the confidence to write a very rough draft of this manuscript before turning to the revision of my dissertation which appeared in 1975 as *The Baltic Crusade*. That same year I received a **Fulbright-Hayes Research Grant** to study at the **Johann-Gottfried-Herder-Institut** and **Philipps University** in Marburg/Lahn. Opportunities arose for me to visit Dithmarschen twice that summer and again in 1976. In 1976-77 the **University of Chicago** awarded me a part-time faculty fellowship for research at the Regenstein Library and to discuss my resulting manuscript with Prof. Karl Morrison. In the fall of 1982 Monmouth College provided me with a student assistant, Janet Fox, who typed the manuscript into the computer for editing. In the summer and fall of 1983 I was again in Marburg/Lahn with the aid of a stipend from the **Deutscher Akademische Austauschdienst** and a Sabbatical from **Monmouth College (IL)**. At that time Professor Walter Lammers was kind enough to read the manuscript and discuss it with me in his home. His hospitality and friendship were much appreciated. In January of 1988, I began a two year editing process with the assistance of my wife and a new student typist, Kris Wang. Hardly a sentence survived unchanged. Finally, having been instructed in the use of PageMaker by Daryl Carr and Marta Tucker, I prepared the manuscript for publication during my Spring Term Sabbatical. In June of 1990 my wife and I made an auto tour through Dithmarschen to visit sites I had missed previously. In the fall of 1990 Monmouth College provided yet another small grant to assist in covering the costs of preparing the manuscript for publication, and Erik Midelfort (with whom I had discussed the Dithmarschen project several times in the past) responded to my request for a final reading with several helpful comments on the text.

Many people and several institutions have contributed to this short work: universities in Hamburg, Marburg/Lahn, and Chicago; Monmouth College; friends, relatives, academicians, and students. Most helpful of all was my wife, Jackie, whose careful editing in the spring and summer of 1990 made it possible to complete the final manuscript. I wish it were possible to acknowledge my debt to all the individuals who have assisted in one way or another. However, through the years they became so numerous that now I cannot possibly name them all.

William Urban
Monmouth College (Illinois)

The communities bordering the North Sea



INTRODUCTION

Climate

The sea formed the land, and the land formed the people. This rephrasing of a native proverb, *God created the sea, the Frisians created the coast*, is an accurate summary of the history of the people who lived along the coast of the North Sea from the tenth century to the present. The proverb properly contains a bit of the somewhat impious boasting of a provincial bumpkin who has achieved more than he or anyone else expected of him. Nevertheless, the image of the Dithmarscher as a *hick* would not offend every Dithmarscher. They are proud of their primitive roots and often see no need to change anything. The one exchange they always make willingly is that of wealth for poverty, which they have done effectively over the centuries, dealing blow for blow with those who would tax or steal their hard-earned bounty.

The sea they faced was the North Sea. Its winter storms have always challenged man's efforts to survive along the coast. It is a sea of changing moods—now calm, pleasant, and rich in fish and commerce—now vengeful and destructive. The coast is largely marsh—salty, forbidding, and everchanging under the lash of storm and tide. The land can be either fruitful or barren, depending upon man's skill, ingenuity, and daring, but even at its best it has never supported a large population of either men or animals. The products of the coastland—cattle, horses, and people—have always been renowned for quality rather than quantity.

The climate has proved to be both friend and foe to every person who has lived along that coast. The winters are long and dreary. Rain and fog cover the low-lying landscape for months at a time. A cold wetness penetrates the stoutest covering. The meadows can become seas of mud. Winters are often a succession of terrible storms, breaking dikes and overwhelming the work of decades and generations, taking retributive toll in men and beasts. However, springs and summers redeem the other seasons. At that time the meadows and marshes blossom forth in magnificent abundance, but even then the threat of storm is present. The level marshes and fields offer little resistance to the tides and waves of the sea, and polar influence on the

weather is never absent. Nevertheless, so exhilarating is the combination of sun, sand, sea, and salubrity that urban man today flocks to the North Sea beaches for recreation. He comes in such numbers that he changes briefly but thoroughly the quiet, calm, and unhurried pace of the summer days. Sunbathers intent on their tans ignore the summer showers. Meanwhile, the farmers are cutting hay and fodder and gathering it into huge barns to feed their livestock during the next winter. Summer days are long in this land which lies almost as far north as Labrador. Everyone rises and retires in daylight. Everyone blesses each warm day. No one forgets that in winter the sunlight lasts for only a few hours and often breaks through the clouds for no more than a few minutes each day.

The wind is ever-present and powerful in ways that only sailors and inhabitants of the Great Plains can understand. No great woods, no quiet valleys exist. Instead, there is a feeling of unlimited space and open skies which thrill the native and the romantic with an intensity as strong as the shudder of fear and awe felt by the overly-civilized stranger.

Life on the North Sea coast was once laborious. The fertile fields and prosperous farms seen in West Germany today belie the toil by which they were wrested from the sea. The history of the struggle has even passed into the folklore of landlocked countries. Who has not heard the story of the brave Dutch boy who stuck his finger into a leak in the dike and saved his community? Danger was part of life. It was a price everyone paid for exploiting fields nature had meant to be covered periodically by storm and flood. It is no accident that Goethe had his hero Faust spend his final years directing a reclamation project of impressive scope. Such a feat, combining technical skill and the love of one's fellow citizens, made Faust truly worthy of the salvation he had despaired of achieving.

The Frisians

The motto of the Frisians already quoted above, *Deus mare, Friso litora fecit*, was no empty boast. This ancient people were known to Tacitus and Pliny. They were among the few Germans who did not wander into strange lands as the Roman Empire disintegrated. They remained in their swamps along the North Sea, where the water and mud provided protection from attack. They defended themselves there against Frank and Viking—not always with success, but always tenaciously. Otherwise, there was nothing particularly remarkable about the Frisians until about the year AD 1000, when they began their war against the North Sea. Along the coast from Holland to Denmark, generation after generation of Frisians began building dikes along the rivers and streams to protect fresh-water marshes from the high waters of floods. Their first primitive efforts did not always meet with happy results, but the occasional failure only spurred them on to greater endeavors. Eventually, they had not only mastered the technique of protecting the marshes from river floods but had also learned how to keep the tides from bringing sea water into the coastal marshes. The

next step was to flood the marshes with fresh water to remove the salt. Neighboring Saxons and Dutchmen copied the Frisians' methods and opened their swamplands to settlement. These hard-won skills in diking and draining made Frisians, Saxons, and Dutch highly prized as colonists in lands to the east, and during the Middle Ages many thousands of them migrated to the Baltic Coast to found new communities in the marshlands there. Ultimately they spread their customs and dialects for hundreds of miles into lands formerly held by Slavs and Balts.¹

Their skill as sailors also made the Frisians and Dutch famous. When Alfred the Great founded his British navy, he had no Englishmen with sufficient knowledge of the sea to man his ships. He turned to the Frisians across the Channel to keep the Vikings from his shores as they had done to keep their own lands safe. Frisians later took fleets on crusade to the Holy Land and to the Baltic to fight against the pagans there. However, their role in commerce declined in the high Middle Ages after the Hanseatic League became the dominant military and economic power in the area of the North and Baltic Seas. At that time the Frisians became confined to agriculture and fishing.

The Frisians remain a distinct people even today, cherishing their own language, customs, and way of life. As a result, they share many of the popular stereotypes fixed upon rural folk everywhere. In the early 1970's, when Americans were telling *Polish jokes* and Poles were telling *Ukrainian jokes*, Germans were telling *Frisian jokes*. Every example of this particular type of humor is interchangeable: for example, "How many Frisians are required to milk a cow?" Answer: "Five; one to hold the teats, and four to lift the cow up and down." In reaction to this disparagement, there was a resurgence of pride and awareness of tradition among the Frisians and Saxons and a renewed confidence in their importance to the modern world. They made efforts to discover their roots and to find real meaning in their way of life. The flourishing signs on display, *We speak platt*, reflected accurately the growing sense of self-assuredness in a society long under assault from mass production, mass communications and mass movements of peoples—east to west at the end of the Second World War and since then in the migration of young people from the country to the city.

The Saxons

The origin of the Dithmarschers was not Frisian but Saxon. They are proud of their separate identity among the Lower Saxons and often have thought of themselves as a special race. Although their concept of race may not be taken seriously by scholars today, it was a widely-held doctrine in the nineteenth century and became state policy in the 1930's under that most un-Aryan Austrian, Adolf Hitler. Many believed that North Germans were tall, blond, noble, high-spirited, warlike Aryans of unspoiled Nordic ancestry, an impression that is still carried away by many visitors. The most superficial observer is struck by the validity of Ricarda

Huch's comment that "In Lower Saxony even now there are tall men with light blond hair and blue eyes that confidently look through space and bodies with their seaman's gaze."² Huch was a popular historian and as such had a good eye for an obvious fact that could be overlooked in library research. In these northern coastal regions it is easy to imagine oneself in Scandinavia.

Racial ideas took firm hold in Dithmarschen and Holstein. Indeed, some of their neighbors call the people here *the old Nazis*. It is true that in the north some of Hitler's doctrines struck a responsive chord without finding a resounding echo among Hamburg workers.³ How much this reputation is deserved today is a topic for debate. However, one thing is certain: conservative habits and an open pride in race and nation are noticeable in Holstein. This is especially true in Dithmarschen. Even those individuals who are not conservative sometimes confirm the stereotype. The Quaker woman mentioned in the *Preface* had a comfortable job as a teacher in the United States when Hitler came to power. She went home to Dithmarschen "because somebody had to fight him." As I came to know that wonderful person better, I saw that not all of her principles came from her religion. She taught me much about her homeland and countrymen. Not everything she said was flattering to Dithmarschers, but she gloried even in her people's imperfections.

Centuries ago a chronicler remarked, "These Dithmarschers live without princes or rulers, doing whatever they want Moreover, the Dithmarschers are strong men, daring and skilled, commonly tall, without much flesh on them, and always ready to keep their land and free country."⁴ This statement remained valid not only for Dithmarschen, but throughout the lands along the North Sea coast until the late Middle Ages, indeed, to the Reformation, so that the story of this coastal people is the story of freedom. It is not a story unique to the marshland, but also to the mountain and forest. Eileen Powers says that it is the story of the frontiersman, whatever his guise:

From the social point of view reclaimed land and frontier land is free land. If freedom dwells in the mountains, she likewise flourished in marsh and forest, because no man will bring them under cultivation save for an inducement and there are no inducements more potent than freedom and cheap land. The *hosti* who reclaimed Brittany after the ravages of the Northmen, the settlers on the Jura plateau, the Flemings who drain their own flats and those of the colonial East, the wild clansmen of Dithmarschen, the backwoodsmen and cowboys of the Eastern frontier, the Catillan behetrias who settled the lands reconquered from the Moor and have the right to change their lord up to seven times in one day, are all free.⁵

That free men abuse their freedom is not a new story. The reader should expect to find gross and cruel acts intermingled with noble and generous ones. The history of the north German peasant republics has both its repugnant and its inspiring moments. The story of free men who struggle for existence against man and nature is not always for the squeamish or tender-hearted, but it is never colorless.⁶

PART ONE
THE CLAN GOVERNMENT

CHAPTER ONE THE ORIGIN OF DITHMARSCHEN

The origin of the clans

A *clan* is a group of households united by descent from a common ancestor or common interests. It is larger than a family, smaller than a tribe, and in many cultures it is the fundamental social unit.

The Germanic clans which were described in Roman literature two thousand years ago survived longer along the coast of the North Sea than they did inland. This was due partly to the ingrained conservatism of peasant communities, but even more to a conscious awareness of the clans' role in diking and defending the coastal lands against the onslaughts of nature. These North Sea clans not only survived for a much longer period of time than those elsewhere, but they reflected medieval economic, political, and religious conditions which had not been present at the time of Caesar and Tacitus. Therefore, the historian must take care not to equate medieval clans to those of earlier times, because the resemblance is often only superficial.¹ Roman clans were important for extending family land holdings and consolidating political influence. They operated through marriage alliances to pool the resources of allied clans for winning elections and passing legislation. They gathered only for ceremonial occasions, such as funerals and weddings.

The historian Tacitus emphasized Germanic courage, chastity, and honesty as foils in order to condemn the corruption and decadence he saw in contemporary Rome. Although Tacitus may have sensed a connection between Roman virtue and clan identification, he mentioned Roman clans only briefly and almost only by implication. He had no intention of attempting to revive an expiring social institution which had no significant role in his era. His concern was for morality, and his purpose was to shame civilized men into behaving at least as well as barbarians. No matter what Tacitus' intent was, he became the major source of our knowledge about the Germanic clan system, which existed for mutual protection, for assisting fellow clansmen to pay fines and to secure inheritances.

In Germanic society of that time strong laws were needed against crime. Unfortunately, in the absence of a strong central government, those could be enforced

only through royal or private threats of violence. German freemen were usually armed, even during the drinking parties which were an important aspect of hospitality during business affairs and political discussions. These banquets were of such vigor and length as to eclipse even Roman orgies. Not surprisingly, these drinking parties often ended in quarrels and bloodshed. The drunkenness and gambling, fighting and boasting, indolence and acquisitiveness which characterized Germanic tribesmen were vices which not only balanced but also confirmed their virtues of courage, forthrightness, pride, and honesty. Unfortunately, the willfulness of the individual warrior combined with the weakness of the government to create a system ripe for exploitation by bullies and gangs of ruffians. A free man who did not wish to be humiliated, maimed, or killed needed friends who would support him unconditionally in situations of violence or crime; he needed relatives who would care for his family if he were killed or wounded. Clans met such needs. However, the threat of group revenge on wrongdoers was hardly effective if the group stood in fear of the criminal's kinfolk. The expansion of the clan to a size that it could retaliate effectively against the criminal's relatives was an effective remedy, but experience soon demonstrated that this reliance upon martial prowess led to an endless series of feuds which cost too many innocent victims their lives. It was better for everyone to establish tribal courts which could judge disputes and impose fines on the guilty parties. The fact that such a system of justice came into being tells us much about this society, but especially about the values which were considered most important. Clearly, free males were considered the most worthy members of society. The fines were sufficiently high to satisfy the relatives of the victim and to discourage premeditated crime. In fact, it was so obvious that no man could pay a fine from his own wealth, that every one of his clansmen were assessed for a share of the payment. Thus, the system of justice was based on the self-interest of the criminal's relatives, who would restrain their most violent members from assaulting others and cast common thieves out of the clan, to live without honor or protection.

The function of the clan system in early Germanic society was not limited solely to maintaining law and order. They also served to regulate marriages and inheritances. Sometimes clansmen (and even entire tribes) enrolled in the Roman army together. For the leaders this meant an opportunity for fame and wealth; for the ordinary clansman it meant an escape from poverty and boredom. For the Romans it meant a new type of soldier, one not rooted in Roman culture and civilization. Mutinies and rebellions in this army represented more than the traditional personal ambitions of generals or disagreements about policy or complaints about pay and special honors; these revolts also reflected clan desires for revenge for real or imagined insults.²

Ultimately, Germanic tribes occupied the western half of the Roman Empire and created a new society, half-Roman, half-Germanic. Romans subsequently assisted in compiling those collections of laws, letters, and monastic chronicles which provide information about the changes the Germanic clans underwent in

subsequent centuries. In fact, Merovingian and Carolingian society cannot be understood without some familiarity with the clan system. However, technological changes made it possible for some men to equip themselves as true cavalry and fight from horseback. Such warriors were so superior to the traditional mounted infantry-men, who rode to the battlefield, then fought on foot, that they supplanted that class in royal favor. In time, as kings gave these cavalrymen grants of land and required the rest of the people to help pay for the expensive chain-mail and warhorses, this group of men evolved into *knights* —a new class with important political and social functions. Subsequently, the military and social role of the clansmen vanished.

Although the clans lost their importance in the feudal era, they were not forgotten. They survived in folk tales and epic poetry. Later, during the Renaissance northern scholars studied Tacitus closely in order to contrast the primitive virtues of Germanic pagans to the corruption and sin which prevailed in Rome. A few scholars began to collect oral information and documents relating to medieval clans, from which they hoped to learn something about the classical world. This provided modern scholars with a great deal of information about medieval- and renaissance-era peasant life in Frisia, Dithmarschen, and Eiderstedt. However, it is important to remember that these sources described the clans in the Renaissance, at their twilight, not at their beginning. Therefore, we can approach an understanding of these clans during the medieval period only through the unsatisfactory and indirect means of surveying clan functions in war and peace among all Germanic peoples between 50 B.C. and A.D. 1000. This method has severe limitations: we must be wary of drawing conclusions regarding practices in one place from our understanding of practices elsewhere. There are numerous variations in the regulation of disputes, the distribution of inheritances, and the selection of marriage partners. We must be especially aware that the best written records are those of southern tribes which had considerable contact with the Romans, while the northern Germanic tribes had more in common with those tribes which immigrated to Britain and established the system of common law which still survives in the British Commonwealth and the United States. There is a dangerous temptation to see in modern institutions the fruition of early practices and to *read backward* our cultural evolution until we can describe Anglo-Saxon society and culture. Unsophisticated efforts to dig out the roots of Renaissance-era clan practices in northern Germany can result in fundamental misunderstandings of earlier clan functions there. It is better to admit our ignorance of the complete truth than to rush headlong into errors, especially this error of *anachronism*. Nevertheless, there are some statements we can make with reasonable confidence.

Characteristics of clans

The very earliest clans were a reflection of the smallest natural unit of society—the family. The patriarch of the family and his descendants traveled together into new countries and fought together as a military unit. The death of the

patriarch in no way diminished the needs of his offspring for mutual support. Instead of dissolving into new patriarchal units, the original family became a tribe composed of clans representing the offspring of sons and grandsons. In time, even as the memory of the common ancestors dimmed, even after no one could provide a genealogy that adequately explained the relationship binding together thousands of people, clansmen continued to practice complex rules of kinship such as exogamy and endogamy (whether one had to marry outside or inside the clan). Although the rules governing social behavior varied in detail from tribe to tribe, they were sufficiently uniform that after reading Tacitus one can distinguish easily between Germanic practices and the customs of other cultures.

Romans had been familiar with Germans long before Tacitus wrote about them. There had been Germanic invasions of the Roman territories just before 100 B.C., during Caesar's conquest of Gaul (58-51 B.C.), during the reign of Augustus (30 B.C.-A.D.14), and during the lifetime of Marcus Aurelius (A.D.160-180). Finally, Romans became quite familiar with Germanic habits after A.D. 410, when several tribes settled permanently inside the empire and, in fact, ruled Africa, Spain, and much of Gaul and Italy. Tacitus' descriptions came roughly mid-way in this long history, in the year A.D. 98.

Tacitus naturally knew only the Germans who lived on the borders of the Roman Empire, Germans whose customs were dictated by particular social, economic, and military needs which might or might not be shared by the Germans living along the northern coasts. Moreover, the customs of the Germans changed in the centuries between the time of Tacitus and the fall of the Roman Empire. The southern tribes participated in the *Völkerwanderung*, the migration of Germanic peoples into Russia, then into the Balkans, and finally into the Roman Empire. As their primitive slash-and-burn agriculture exhausted the soil, these tribes searched for new fields and hunting grounds. They expelled or subjugated the previous inhabitants of the regions they entered; then they divided the land among the free warriors. The clan was the principal military and settlement unit; it was essentially self-governing, subject only to the authority of the tribal king, who was often considered to be of divine lineage and thereby above clan identification. Such was the clan system in practice between A.D. 400 and 600.

In addition to providing rules for intermarriage, inheritance, and religious duties, the clans existed to provide protection to individuals. This was a result of the early Germanic tribes having had no *state* in the modern sense. Even the concept of kingship was not fully developed. With weaker tribes subject to domination by the stronger (partly because the population was so scattered over vast regions of forest wilderness), tribal affiliation was weak. The clan became the basic unit of society, each clan adopting whatever strategy seemed most likely to help it survive. Some clans crossed tribal boundaries to join in military expeditions and migrated into distant regions, an action which further accentuated the process of tribal disintegration. Even when great kings arose to rule over vast numbers of Germans, Italians, and

Gallo-Romans (who lived in France, Belgium, and parts of Germany), the clan could not rely on a distant monarch to take note of its problems. As we have seen, when kings came to rely increasingly on mounted warriors they preferred that the ordinary soldier contribute toward the upkeep of a horseman rather than serve as infantry. As a result, clans which had once also served as a government in the forest clearings and as the basic military unit now lost those functions. However, this process took several centuries. Meanwhile, the clan retained an important role in protecting its members from assault and murder. As described briefly above, the clan provided a means of taking revenge upon enemies who dared to injure any of its members. Because the strength of a clan depended on its ability to kill enemies, it had to have numbers equal to or superior to those of other clans. Thus, there was an incentive to offer clan membership to individuals and groups who were not related to the clan by blood. When a clan grew sufficiently powerful that it felt capable of standing up to previously dominant clans, it usually had to fight a deadly *feud* to prove its right to equal status. In this process, the evolution of the feud parallels that of the modern nation-state, and it came to an end only when all parties realized that the system threatened to destroy everyone.

To control the feud, the kings established the principle of *wergild*, a payment of money from the clan of the guilty party to the victim's clansmen. This fine was to be shared equally with the royal judge, who thus acquired an economic reason for risking his life by intervening in what had hitherto been considered a private affair. This became the basis of the royal criminal process based on common law.

Gallo-Romans, in contrast, remained under Roman law except when involved in legal processes with Germans. Then the royal judge rendered justice according to Germanic law. The Gallo-Romans soon began to notice a pattern of discrimination. Not having any clan to protect them, Gallo-Romans were no threat to the judge. Even when the judge was impartial, the guilty party paid only half the *wergild* assessed for injuring a German (because only the judge had to be paid, there being no clan to receive the rest of the fine). This implied that a Gallo-Roman's life was worth less than a German's. When free Gallo-Romans began to seek adoption into Germanic clans or to organize clans of their own, the concept that a Roman society could survive inside a Germanic kingdom was doomed. Within a few generations of the Germanic conquest of Gaul and Spain, Roman nobles and freemen disappeared from the legal record. This process occurred repeatedly, even in areas where Germans were so few in number that they were linguistically assimilated by Gallo-Romans. Although the Germans lost their superior legal status, all that remained of the old Roman society were serfs, the descendants of the Roman laboring class. Since every man had become a *German*, Roman law and Roman traditions fell into disuse.

Renaissance scholars who tried to understand Merovingian institutions through a reading of Tacitus fundamentally misunderstood the role of the clans in the early Middle Ages. Medieval Germanic clans were not ancient groups reflecting blood

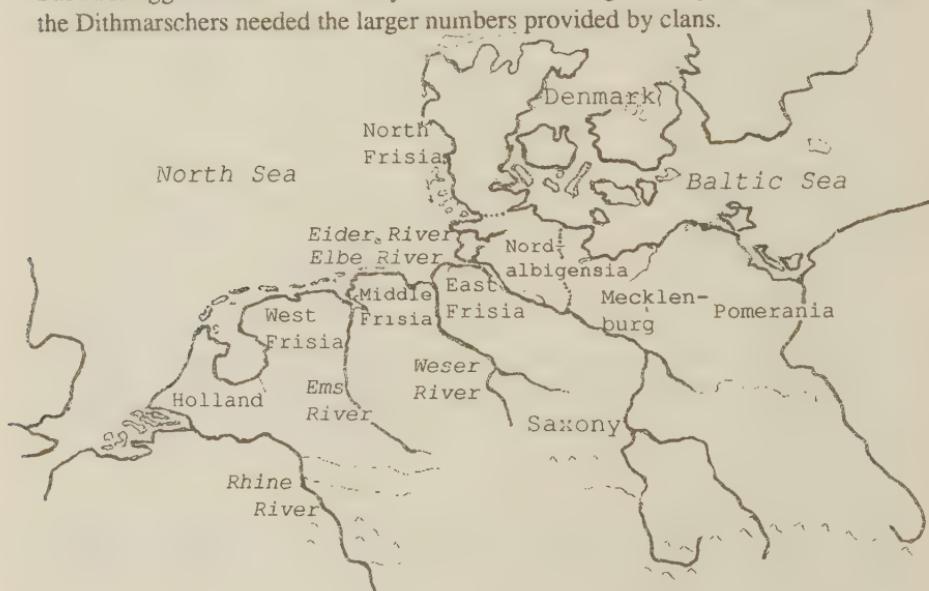
ties, but were an innovation which provided protection for individuals and families in an era of lawlessness.

North Sea coastland

In a similar fashion the clans in the north of Germany assumed new forms when diking was introduced about the year 1000. This changed not only the economy but also the social patterns along the North Sea coast.

Friscians in Holland were the first to build primitive dikes. What the Friscians could do, so could the Saxons. In the year 1000 the last independent Saxons were living in the swamps north of the Elbe, defending themselves against emperor, Viking, and Slav alike.³ Fiercely independent, they were rugged barbarians who refused to conform to the institutions and ideas prevailing in the lands round about them. They martyred the first Christian missionary to come to them, because the social system of nobles ruling serfs seemed to them to be an essential requirement of Christianity. Looking upon themselves as freemen, even nobles, they held to a primitive clan system which guaranteed for themselves personal freedom and the possession of private lands. What they needed from their neighbors they took: tools and techniques through borrowing, cattle, ships and wealth by force.⁴

Saxons living between the mouths of the Elbe and Eider rivers were the ancestors of most Dithmarschers.⁵ Exhibiting a notable courage and tenaciousness, they developed their innovative society on the basis of their struggle with the sea and on the desire to shelter marshland from the worst winter storms that Europe knows. Such a struggle could not be won by individuals or a single family. For such a contest, the Dithmarschers needed the larger numbers provided by clans.



Building dikes

As best we can tell, the unique Dithmarscher characteristics began to develop among the people living on the meadows below the Geest (land naturally above the water level). Holstein was divided into three zones, west to east: marsh, Geest, and "mountain." The Geest (pronounced "Gayst") began at the ancient shore line and was sharply marked by a line of cliffs protruding a few meters above the marsh. This had once been the shoreline. The Geest consisted of rolling hills which rose slowly toward the east and merged into the "mountains" which ended with the high cliffs on the Baltic Sea. Originally the Saxons lived on the Geest and sent their cattle into the lower meadows for summer pasture, withdrawing them before winter or threatening storms. Inevitably some individuals were drawn to the green islands (Wurten) lying along the coast and among the rivers. There they drove stakes into the ground, heaped up new earth, branches, and grass and then cemented the mass together with cattle dung to raise the height of the islands to a level high enough that they could withstand summer storms. As time passed and entire families threw their strength into the venture, these isolated points multiplied. The more daring individuals finally began to winter there and built their shelters even higher to protect themselves and their cattle. Families may have been numerous enough to raise small dikes which could hold back summer tides and to dig canals which brought fresh water for the cattle. But they were not numerous enough to build dikes which would be secure against flood and storm. The need for community effort seems to have led to the formation of small



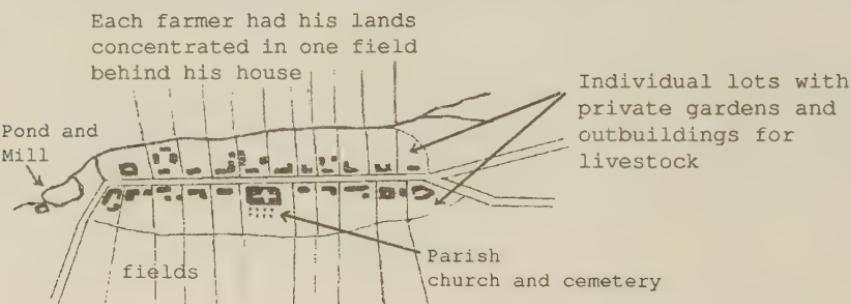
clans. Finally, after higher dikes sheltered the islands from the storms, entire communities move down to the islands and enlarged them. Ultimately, they lived more on the islands than on the Geest. At that point the Dithmarschers became an entity separate from the other Saxons.⁶

It was a development which took centuries. The communities around Wöhrden succeeded in closing the gaps between their dikes only in the twelfth century. It was another two or three centuries before these communities were able to join their complex to those of their neighbors. Büsum remained an island until relatively recent times, and only in the past few centuries have all the islands been brought within the system of dikes that now shelters them from the sea.

Once the island settlements in the west were protected and linked together by dikes, the Dithmarschers moved back into the marshes lying between them and the Geest. It is important to remember that the settlement pattern moved from west to east, and not from the Geest outward, because of the important changes in Dithmarschen society that resulted from it. The old family clans, which may have proven

adequate for the settlement of the islands, were not equal to the challenge afforded by the marsh. Historians believe that the family clans merged into larger *agnatic* clans (inheritance through the male line only) based on ties of mutual economic assistance. These new associations diked and drained the marshes and then divided up the reclaimed lands among their members. Inevitably, the clansmen came to ask one another for support in legal disputes. In time mutual protection became more important than economic motives in binding the clansmen together.

The early settlements are marked by recurring name suffixes (-stede, -wurt, -büttel, -buren, -fleth) and were protected by a mere few miles of dikes. Inside the narrow ring of dikes the settlers laid out *Strassendorfer* and *Marschhufendorfer*, a regular division of plots along the clearly marked roads and canals so that each farmer had his farmstead on his land and farmed it alone or with the help of his nearest relatives. These *Marschhufendorfer* are not as geometrically organized as in Holland but are cut by many smaller canals and streams which closely follow natural drainage patterns. Later the area of cultivated land was increased as the clans opened new stretches of marsh and divided them among their members.⁷



Dithmarscher clans

As the clans grew in power, they began to usurp the duties of the local officials appointed by the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, and by the end of the thirteenth century, the new clan system had spread across Dithmarschen onto the Geest and to supplant the authority of the local nobility there. This process will be described more fully in Chapter Three.

There is some doubt that an authentic nobility had existed in the lands north of the Elbe. Historians are not in agreement that specific laws gave any group special legal advantages, a precondition for defining a feudal nobility. What passed as nobles in this region were the wealthy men who could afford weapons and horses, usually filling the local government offices and thus qualifying for a higher *wergild*. In the course of time such men came to regard the office and *wergild* as theirs by right, and eventually these men attained a legal status equal to that of nobles elsewhere. By 1300

these wealthy families in Dithmarschen had become as much important as the clans, and everyone realized that either they or the clans would have to give way. As we shall see, the clans won the armed struggle and forced the nobles to make a choice between joining the clan system or being exiled. Thus, on the one hand some nobles founded the powerful Vodiemannen (*Vogdemannen*, literally *advocate*) clan and on the other some noble families (such as the Reventlows) emigrated to eastern Holstein.

These new clans based on settlement and mutual protection differed from those Germanic clans described by Caesar and Tacitus, in that they were not necessarily close associations of blood relatives, just associations of many families uniting for mutual advantage. These clans absorbed weaker families and even allowed new families to purchase membership, because each acquisition increased clan power and prestige. This meant that the influence of any single clan might not be limited to a single geographic area or a single parish. As a result, clans quarreled over supremacy wherever their membership overlapped geographically. However, once clan membership had stabilized, as it did quite early, each clan became an agnatic brotherhood, i.e., all males of each smaller division (*Vorschlacht, Kluft*) became a member of the clan (*Geschlecht*) as well. Moreover, these new clan members were not necessarily related originally; they gradually considered one another blood relation and acquired the right to share in the inheritance of land—a right which was denied to any female relative. It was only very much later, and only on a restricted basis, that property was allowed to pass by inheritance to female descendants. Strengthened by ties of male solidarity, the stronger clans dominated entire parishes and were able to conduct feuds, make treaties, and organize local governments to their liking.⁸

First in the marshes and later on the Geest, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries this clan system came to dominate local governments everywhere. In essence the clan existed to protect its members against outsiders and to revenge themselves for injuries suffered, which could, of course, involve the clans in endless blood feuds with one another. To prevent such senseless bloodshed the clans refined their system of *wergild* (the compensation for injuries, with each offense having a corresponding money payment).⁹ Since there was no king or duke to impose a fine upon the guilty party, the community took upon itself the responsibility of collecting the *wergild* from the clan of the offender. In two senses this resolution of the situation was preferable to that of having a noble lord act as judge: the community could interpret common law itself and the payment for the judge could be reduced or even totally eliminated. Nor was a more powerful clan able to ignore the claims of a weaker one. All clans had an interest in seeing that justice was done, for someday they might have to call on the other clans for aid; therefore, formal and informal alliances brought parties not directly affected by a dispute into the judicial process. Since each clan wanted to protect its members and its prosperity against the day it was challenged by a powerful foe, all clansmen saw that unless everyone in the community was protected against injustice, no one was safe. Moreover, the individual warrior could

see the difficulty that he would meet in attempting to pay a heavy wergild alone; therefore, his membership in a clan was a form of insurance. Moreover, he also acquired personal and financial motives to demand that all judicial proceedings be conducted fairly. Another virtue of the system lay in the vested interest of all clansmen to restrain their fellows from violence or crime so they would not have to assist in paying wergild to the relatives of the victims. In all these ways individual interests were bound together to create dependable social bonds which could maintain law and order.

The social obligations of the clansmen, however, applied only to crimes against fellow Dithmarschers. A neighboring chronicler was to remark that the Dithmarschers were very quick to demand payment of wergild even from strangers but were very reluctant to make such payments themselves.¹⁰ However that may be, the system worked well in regulating blood feuds inside Dithmarschen.

The code of the clansmen was harsh, but it set acceptable limits to the violence that was such an integral part of the society. Within the community, everyone became so accustomed to telling the truth that they were poor liars in court. Honest men did not expect to encounter difficulties in deciding the guilt or innocence of their fellow citizens. Dithmarschers were pious, too. They believed that anyone who swore a false oath would go to hell—swiftly. They could rely upon the testimony of the parties involved because it rested upon a solemn oath that they were telling the truth. There was such reluctance to tell a lie, both because of the religious consequences, but also because one's reputation was at stake, that the oath-taking itself was sufficient to resolve most conflicts. Not only were the principal figures in the lawsuit

Typical farmhouse, today part
of an open-air museum



required to swear oaths that they were telling the truth, but their friends and clansmen as well had to swear oaths to that effect. This put the salvation of otherwise innocent men on the line, a risk no one wished to run unless the cause were very grave indeed.

The reluctance to testify in legal matters was a sufficiently great problem that when the parish later came to supervise justice, the elected officials made a public call for every individual with knowledge either of the case or the character of either party to come forward and testify. However, until that time the legal system rested on a system called *neme de*. By alternately proposing and challenging witnesses, a jury was formed of the most trusted men from each clan to swear to their conviction about or knowledge of the matter at hand. This offset the fear of perjury by any individual. A local chronicler stated that an honest man should be able to find ten men to swear that they believed him. Such was the ignominy of proven perjury or common crime, that clansmen punished guilty members swiftly and terribly, often strangling them to death. At the least, they purged lawbreakers from the clan, leaving them to the mercy

of their enemies. Among the pre-Christian Saxons, adulterers were burned at the stake, and pregnant girls were thrust under the ice or burned alive by their nearest relatives. Similar punishments were continued by the Dithmarschen clans. Such a strict code of justice often conflicted with the recommendations of the church, and the partial

Farmhouses were constructed of half-timber, half-brick or wattle, almost always with a thatched roof. These roomy buildings housed both family, animals, and fodder. This example is found in the open-air museum.



disestablishment of the clans was one result of the Reformation. Nevertheless, violations of the law were common—as everywhere in medieval Europe and today—and the profits of justice were a rich source of parish revenue.¹¹

Clans and Liberty

The clan system seems to have created in Dithmarschen a separate culture from that of its Saxon neighbors during the thirteenth century. At least, the unusual character of Dithmarschen society went unnoticed by chroniclers until that time. It may be that since the early chroniclers rarely had reason to mention Dithmarschen except in conjunction with Wagria and Stormarn, they had no reason to insert any comments into their sparse accounts of conversion efforts and wars. Or, it may be that Holstein itself was changing so rapidly—and in a contrary direction—that the contrast between the societies had not been significant previously.

As we shall see in a later chapter, the Dithmarschers were not the only Germans to inhabit the northern marshes. Nor were they the only people to retain their personal freedom for many generations. This was partly due to the fact that before 1200 there was no legally defined nobility north of the Elbe such as had developed throughout the rest of the Holy Roman Empire at a far earlier period. In fact, in northern Germany the line between a rich peasant and a noble was to remain difficult to define as late as the fourteenth century.¹² Although this problem of definition is not the point in question here, it is important that upward social mobility was still possible. Moreover, we must ask ourselves why it was that the population of every marshland thereabouts, whether it was of Frisian, Jute, or Saxon ancestry, contained a higher percentage of free men than other parts of Germany.

Why was this so? The prominent French social historian, Marc Bloch, gave this answer:

Where men of all ranks were able to rely for support on other forms of strength and solidarity than personal protection—kindred groups, especially among the Frisians, the people of Dithmarschen and the Celts, kindred groups again among the Scandinavians, but also institutions of public law of the type common to the Germanic peoples—neither the relationships of dependence peculiar to territorial lordship, nor vassalage and the fief invaded the whole of social life.¹³

CHAPTER TWO THE EARLY YEARS

750-1147

As we open the earliest chronicles of north German history to the ninth century we find the Dithmarschers struggling against two threats. The first was Wendish invasion. The second was domination by nobles. The priority of the threat was clear: the Wends were the more immediate danger and probably could not be resisted successfully without the military and governmental skills of Saxon lords. In such a situation it was not easy for peasants and fishermen to escape domination by lords who could plausibly call upon their *subjects* (as they often considered them) to provide them taxes for their support. Nobles could not live without revenues, nor could they train for war if they were expected to earn a living by labor or trade. Therefore, they expected payments and services from the people they had rescued. The choices were not simple ones for any rural community. Rejecting noble aid meant the loss of an invaluable ally against a dangerous foreign foe. On the other hand, accepting help meant agreeing to more privileges for nobles than they really wanted to give, since such an action was likely to make these nobles their rulers.

The Wendish foemen the Dithmarschers found so formidable were related to West Slavs (Poles, Bohemians, Sorbs) but were not identical to them. They had migrated the farthest west of all the tribes during the great Slavic migration of the seventh century, moving out of the Russian steppe into lands left almost empty by Germanic tribes moving west and south into the collapsing Roman Empire. The Wends seem to have driven the remaining Germans across the Elbe into Saxony.

A Germanic reaction occurred generations later, during the reign of Charlemagne (764-814), when the Franks conquered the Germanic tribes between the Rhine and the Elbe and subjugated all the Saxons except those north of the Elbe. Christianization was an important aspect of this Frankish imperialism. When imperial power passed to the Saxon dynasty in the next century, those emperors turned this new unity based on language and religious zeal against the pagan Wends east and north of the Elbe River.

The Saxons in Nordalbigensia (literally *the lands north of the Elbe*, especially Schleswig and Holstein) were converted to Christianity by Saint Ansgar, whose mission began with the establishment of the archdiocese of Hamburg in 831. His success was rewarded by a papal grant to all future archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen of the right and the duty to supervise religious life in northern Germany and Scandinavia. This carried with it immense political authority. However, it was easier for the archbishops to claim authority in Nordalbigensia than to exercise it. Nordalbigensia was divided into four districts: three inside the *Limes Saxoniae*—Dithmarschen, Holstein, and Stormarn—and one outside, Wagria, then inhabited by Wends. South of Wagria lived the Polaben. To the east lived the Abrodites, Wends associated with Mecklenburg rather than Nordalbigensia.

In the tenth century Saxon dukes advanced across the Elbe and subjugated some of the Wends to imperial rule. Their overlordship was not demanding. They required the payment of taxes and tribute but did not exercise direct jurisdiction over the lives of the people; hence, they were unable to watch or control them closely. Nor were they in such constant contact with the Wends that they engaged in significant trade or even much intermarriage. This loose Saxon administration was even weaker than it seemed because it depended on fear induced by the presence of a strong emperor, and the emperors of this era were usually far away. In 1002 the Wends threw off their forced allegiance and attacked Saxon communities across the old frontier. The Saxons retaliated. This terrible war was especially intense in Nordalbigensia. Saxon and Wendish villages in Wagria and Stormarn were the scenes of massacres and even the relatively distant communities of Dithmarschen were not spared. Ultimately the Wends gained the upper hand. Thereafter they used raids in Saxon lands to demonstrate that they were the major power in the north.

Happily, raids into Dithmarschen were rare. The most dangerous was in 1030, when a Wendish army penetrated to Burg in southern Dithmarschen before local resistance turned it back. However, because the Dithmarschers had to take the danger of invasion seriously, they could not do without allies. This opened the way for some noble ally to make himself ruler over them. The first record we have of such an effort is that of two adventurers, Counts Dedo and Etheler (successive husbands of the countess of Stade), who offered the Dithmarschers protection against the Wends in return for the peasants' recognition of them as lords. Apparently this arrangement was not entered into willingly, nor did it last. The counts met their deaths in 1040 and 1044 at the hands of their supposed subjects.¹

Without imperial help or noble leadership, Saxon peasants enjoyed few successes against the Wends in the next decades. In fact, over the long run it appeared that nothing could save them from the numerically superior and better-organized Mecklenburg Wends. These Slavs held strategic posts on the border and relied on the reputation they had earned through their victories over southern Saxons and Danes to overawe the northern Saxons. One after the other, the Wendish princes—Uto, Ratibor, and Gottschalk—overran and terrorized Holsaten (Holstein), Stormarn, and

Dithmarschen until the natives there surrendered. Afterward, perhaps to universal surprise, the Wendish princes adopted the religion of their new subjects and ruled justly. By 1050 Gottschalk could rely on Saxon help against other Slavic enemies. Unfortunately, when Gottschalk was murdered in 1066, he left quarreling sons to divide his inheritance. Once again war raged across the North.

When Holsteiners, Stormarners, and Dithmarschers hurried to support Gottschalk's Christian son, Butue, against his pagan brother, Kruto, they found themselves surrounded by adversity. They had expected help from the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, but after the mighty Archbishop Adalbert was overthrown in 1066, nobody had been able to take his place in organizing the Christian forces into an army. The northern Saxons fought on alone until they were trapped at Plön by a stronger enemy force and starved into surrender. As the men emerged from the island fort two by two, they were disarmed, led out of view and slaughtered. The chastized Nordalbigensians subsequently gave up all hope of escaping pagan domination on their own. They paid tribute to the Wends as long as Kruto lived, until the year 1093.²

One result of these events was that neither the archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen nor the counts of Stade exercised any influence north of the Elbe at the end of the eleventh century. Nevertheless, Wendish power was declining and the Mecklenburg dukes found it necessary to pay tribute to the duke of Saxony. Attempting to refuse, their armies were crushed by Saxon forces in 1110. Afterward, they paid tribute and ceded lands north and east of the Elbe not only to the duke of Saxony but to other German dukes as well.

There is a temptation to exaggerate the importance of these conflicts between German and Slav, because although our scanty sources provide no more than an outline of these wars, they mention almost nothing else. Nineteenth-century historians, who were only just beginning the study of social and economic history, faced the unhappy choice of either writing about petty wars or hurrying past this era as quickly as possible. Moreover, the influence of nationalism and Darwinian thought made them believe that war was the central aspect of human affairs. However, this view of the eleventh and twelfth centuries was essentially inaccurate. The wars were not continuous, and each people had other problems at least as important as their conflicts with one another. The Wendish dukes, for example, were as much threatened by Scandinavian pirates from Rügen as by Germans. In 1111 a Wendish-Saxon force defeated a Rügen invasion, then the next winter crossed the ice to the pirate base. This Slavic-German army annihilated pagan Vikings who had been rampaging along



seacoast for many decades. (Moviegoers may recognize *Conan the Barbarian* in this episode of northern history.) Dithmarschers participated in these campaigns, fighting apparently willingly alongside their supposed enemies, the Wends.

Shortly after this Adolf I (d. 1130), count of Schauenburg, took advantage of the 1110 war to throw the Wendish collectors of tribute out of Holstein and Stormarn and make himself ruler there. This was a remarkable achievement: Schauenburg lay far to the south, so that it was not easy for the count to bring military forces north to defend his new lands. Adolf remedied this situation by bringing settlers north of the Elbe and giving them farms in areas which had been depopulated by war. Adolf's rule was not effective past the *Limes Saxoniae* into Wagria, but as the population of his lands grew rapidly (partly due to new methods of agriculture and the conversion of marshlands into fields and pastures), he soon began planning an advance further eastward. His new subjects were numerous and aggressive. Some thirsted for revenge and booty; others merely followed Adolf's lead. But by himself Adolf could not make war on the Wends.

When the duke of Saxony, Lothar (1125-37), became Holy Roman Emperor in 1125, Adolf received the help he needed. Lothar had lived most of his life in the north and knew all the principal political and religious leaders personally. Although Lothar could not concentrate his energies on Nordabligensia for several years, he supported the efforts of Canute of Schleswig (+1131) to make himself independent of the Danish crown by expanding eastward along the Baltic coast. Canute captured the Abodrite princes, Niklot (+1160) and Pribislav, and held them in chains until his assassination by Danish rivals in 1131.

With the collapse of his plans to make Schleswig the major vassal state of the empire in the north, Lothar intervened personally. Faced by impressively numerous hostile forces, he abandoned his plans to invade Denmark and accepted a token fine from Canute's murderers. To forestall the Danes from moving into the political vacuum, he enfeoffed Niklot with Mecklenburg and Pribislav with Wagria. However, the Slavic princes failed to cooperate with the missionaries as Lothar had hoped. Therefore, in 1134 Lothar built a large castle at Segeberg, founded several churches and cloisters in the neighborhood, and gave full support to Vicelin's missionary efforts among the Slavs. Niklot and Pribislav understood the nature of the threat to their own ambitions, but they did not dare challenge the might of the empire while Lothar lived. Immediately upon his death, however, they renounced their allegiance to the empire and stormed across the frontier at numerous points in an effort to drive away the Saxon settlers who had occupied formerly Wendish lands. They destroyed Segeberg and sent Adolf, his monks, and many settlers fleeing westward.

By this time Adolf II (d. 1164) had ruled in Holstein for seven years already. Fluent in Wendish, he understood the Slavic fears concerning the oncoming flood of settlers. Yet he saw in the immigration from the west the only hope of populating the region quickly. There were too few Slavs to fill the country and those still living in his territories were unwilling or unable to pay higher taxes. Saxons, having adopted

a somewhat more productive system of agriculture, could afford the taxes more easily; moreover, these taxes were less than what they had been accustomed to paying previously. This handful of immigrants appreciated the opportunities open to them

in their new homes. Although they fought the Wends primarily for self-preservation and to avenge ancient wrongs, they were also aware that victory would open the way to improving their conditions economically.



It was fortunate for Adolf II that he had enthusiastic and lasting support from his people, because he was unable to obtain any significant aid from the Holy Roman Empire. The new emperor, Conrad III (1138-52), was a Hohenstaufen from Swabia and was consequently primarily concerned

with southern politics. His principal interest in northern politics was to use local conflicts there to undermine the ability of his Welf rival, Henry the Proud of Bavaria, to defend his newly-acquired possessions in Tuscany (see map, p. 42). Conrad saw that Henry had a claim upon the Duchy of Saxony through his wife, who was Lothar's daughter, but he chose to recognize the rival and equally valid claim of Albrecht the Bear of the Nordmark. While Albrecht invaded Saxony, requiring Henry the Proud to hurry to its defense, his vassal, Henry of Bardewick, entered Holstein, first driving away Adolf II, then raising the local militia and inflicting a decisive defeat on the Wendish forces. However, he had hardly captured Segeberg before Henry the Proud's army retook the fortress and expelled him from Wagria.

Although Henry the Proud prevailed in Saxony, he lost Bavaria and Tuscany to the imperial forces. Moreover, his victory was incomplete, more due to his opponent's numerical weakness (the Nordmark had not yet been populated with a sufficient number of immigrants to provide the duke with a large army) and when Henry died suddenly in 1139, his hold on Saxony was not secure. His young heir, Henry (1129-95), earned his sobriquet, *the Lion*, by defeating Albrecht again.

The ensuing war lasted until 1142. Henry made some initial compromises. By temporarily abandoning Bavaria and permitting his mother to marry the new duke, he obtained a truce with the Hohenstaufens. The Lion led Adolf II back into Holstein, accepted the fealty of counts appointed by Albrecht in Ratzeburg and Lauenburg, and took Stade from the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen. When Henry began a campaign to recover Bavaria, Adolf undertook the resettlement of Holstein with the help of St. Vicelin. The 1143 founding of Lübeck on the Trave River allowed German merchants to sail directly onto the Baltic Sea and challenge the Frisian-Danish monopoly of trade based in Schleswig; unfortunately, it also challenged Henry's emporium at Bardewick.

The confusion of the wars allowed the Wendish princes to save themselves temporarily. By ceding land and making lavish promises, they retained Mecklenburg

and Pomerania, but they were fully aware that the land-hunger of the German lords was not satisfied. With Henry the Lion to their southwest, Albrecht the Bear to the south, and the Danes to the north, they could not rest easy. Their choices were limited. Unless they could achieve a swift military victory while the Germans were

still fighting a civil war, they would either have to find a means of making their subordinate status permanent but secure or lose everything. They chose to bide their time, waiting for a moment when they might attack with some hope of victory.



Aftermath of the Wendish Crusade

The Wendish Crusade of 1147 was an event which occurred almost by accident. Bernhard of Clairvaux (from modern Luxemburg) had been preaching the crusade in France to recover cities recently lost in the Holy Land. Before he came to Germany, Bernard had known that the Holy Roman Empire had long suffered from the feud between the Welfs (with Henry the Lion holding Saxony and having strong *Guelph* allies in Italy—*most notably the pope*) and the Hohenstaufens (with Emperor Conrad having his base in Swabia and an alliance with the *Ghibellines* in Italy), but he had hoped that his eloquence would cause them to put aside their quarrels temporarily in the service of the cross. However, he soon saw for himself that there was no hope of his recruiting a single united German army to attack the Moslem forces. He could not persuade the Hohenstaufen adherents to travel to the Holy Land alone, because these lords and knights were concerned that the Welfs might attack during their absence. Understanding that he had to arrange either for both parties to go to war in different campaigns or to go without any of them, Bernard concluded that he had to find another religious enemy for the Welfs.

This rationale was the basis for his decision to preach the holy war against Baltic pagans (primarily Wends), if the Hohenstaufens would agree to journey to the Holy Land while the Welfs were busy in Mecklenburg and Pomerania. At first this proposal was hardly a pleasing suggestion to Count Adolf II (1130-1164), who had just made arrangements with Prince Niklot of Mecklenburg to avoid further bloodshed. However, Bernard's proposition won the approval of Henry the Lion and Albrecht the Bear as well as the King of Denmark, all rulers who understood the possibilities of enriching themselves personally by participating in an aggressive war against outnumbered enemies. Moreover, they could defeat a dangerous, traditional enemy and earn salvation at the same time.

When Prince Niklot saw the dangerous coalition of Welfs, Hohenstaufens, and Danes building up against him, he decided to strike first against the weakest of his opponents—Adolf II of Holstein. In June his raiders sailed to Lübeck. Although they failed to capture the castle, they found the inhabitants of the town too drunk from a riotous celebration to prevent them from burning the town and harbor. This was the provocation the crusaders needed. Count Adolf asked Henry the Lion and King Waldemar of Denmark to bring their crusaders to the rescue. The result was as Bernhard had foreseen—the Germans and Danes were far too numerous and powerful to be repulsed by Prince Niklot and the other Slavic rulers, no matter how courageously their subjects fought. Once the Danish king and the German princes had won the war, they allowed Niklot and his nobles to retain their lands only on condition of becoming their vassals and converting the Wends and Pomeranians to Christianity.³

Again, we must be cautious about overestimating the hatred this defeat engendered. Within a few years Count Adolf and Prince Niklot were allies. Their shared fear of the Welf prince, Henry the Lion of Saxony (and, after 1156, of Bavaria), and of Waldemar I of Denmark was to be more important than their ancient hatreds over mutual atrocities and betrayals.

The Crusade of 1147 greatly increased the German dukes' wealth, self-confidence, and appetite for conquest. They saw the extension of Christianity over the Wends as a justification for their policy of expansion. Naturally, they looked upon their free neighbors as appropriate future victims. In this sense, we may discount their religious motives: the desire for booty and future taxes were greater lures than heavenly rewards, and their victims included Christians as well as pagans. Their campaigns were thought out with more concern for conquering strategic locations and forestalling Christian rivals than with spreading the Gospel among the heathen.

The Wendish princes survived by accepting the inevitability of being minor princes. For several years they served Henry the Lion, accepting without complaint his enfeoffing new counts in Schwerin and Dannenberg on lands they had once possessed, and later served the King of Denmark faithfully. They assured their own survival by adopting the strategy of their opponents: if creating new settlements of Saxon farmers was the price of economic growth and military success, they would do that as quickly as any German prince. Within a few decades the settlers invited to Mecklenburg had "Germanized" that territory to a considerable extent, but Niklot's policy assured the survival of his dynasty, his vassals, and his subjects. Niklot's grandson became a model of assimilation. After he married one of Henry the Lion's illegitimate daughters, he was accepted as an equal by all the German princes.

Count Adolf II of Holstein was by no means the prince who benefited most from the crusade. Beyond confirming his possession of lands he had won earlier, he obtained almost nothing from the peace settlement. His consequent dislike of Henry's grasping policies caused him to drift into the Hohenstaufen camp—a tendency Henry punished a decade later by demanding half of the profitable city of

Lübeck. Adolf's refusal to comply proved to be a costly mistake: the emperor was too involved in Italy to protect a distant vassal in the heart of Welf territories. Henry arrogantly took *the lion's share* (the entire enterprise) for himself. Adolf II was, nevertheless, not left destitute. His reward came later, the result of inviting yet more peasants from the west and south to farm fields left vacant by massacred Saxons and retreating Wends. Within a few decades Adolf's settlement policy made him rich and comparatively powerful, one of the great lords of the Holy Roman Empire. The granting of fiefs to immigrant knights resulted in his successors having some *noble vassals* in addition to *ministeriales* to supervise the local government in Holstein proper. This action stood in strong contrast to the policies pursued by most other important lords in Germany.⁴

The Counts of Stade

The success of the count of Schauenburg in Holstein had not gone unnoticed, nor had the count's difficulties. Count Rudolf of Stade, who had recently changed allegiance from the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen to Henry the Lion, decided that this was the moment to assert a right to rule Dithmarschen which had been claimed in vain by his father and grandfather. In fact, his action may have been suggested by Henry—the archbishop was the duke's main opponent for hegemony in Saxony; if Rudolf could take any territory from the archbishopric, however small, the prelate would be that much less dangerous to Henry.

No matter how obscure the origins of Count Rudolf's motives may have been, the implications of his rebuilding the Viking-era castle at Stellerburg (west of Weddingstedt) were very clear. He filled the castle with a strong garrison and demanded the payment of heavy taxes. As was to be expected, the peasants resisted

View west over Dithmarschen from Burg



at first, but eventually they settled into what Rudolf took for disgruntled resignation. He erred. One day in 1144, when the taxes were due, the peasants sent two wagonloads of grain to the castle accompanied by men to load and unload the sacks. The guards at the gate inspected the first wagon, checked the sacks, then ordered the farmer and his daughter driving the wagon to proceed. Unknown to the garrison, the second wagon contained armed men hiding in the sacks. As soon as the first wagon



Remains of the Bockelburg castle at Burg

was inside the gate, it stopped. This prevented the garrison from lowering the portcullis while the men in the second wagon cut their way out of the sacks and handed weapons to their fellows. Meanwhile, more peasants came running from the rear to join in the attack. This happened so quickly that the rebels were inside the defenses before the guards could react. The soldiery, caught without arms or armor, fought bravely but without hope against the growing numbers of attacking natives.

Count Rudolf, seeing that the situation was hopeless, took advantage of the confusion to hide in a secret cave within the castle. He abandoned his troops and even left his wife behind. The Dithmarschers, having massacred the garrison, tortured the countess. They cut off her breasts, nose, and ears, and finally threw her into the stream to drown. Knowing that the count could not have escaped, they waited for him in the castle. Three days later, when his tame magpie betrayed Rudolf's hiding place, the Dithmarschers took a terrible revenge on him as well.⁵

Retribution did not come quickly. Henry the Lion was busy elsewhere. However, three years later, in 1147, his forces invaded Dithmarschen and thoroughly devastated the land. The Dithmarschen leader, Etheler, sought refuge with Count

Adolf of Holstein but was unable to persuade him to intervene. Henry the Lion gave authority over the cowed inhabitants to a vassal. Later, when Hartwig, the younger brother and heir of Rudolf, became archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, it appeared that Stade would be incorporated into the archbishopric. Since Henry did not want such a strategic territory in the hands of a potentially dangerous opponent, he again raised his own claim to Stade on the grounds that a fief should revert to its overlord upon the death of the vassal. Henry then offered a compromise whereby he gained control of the strategic and wealthy city of Stade while Archbishop Hartwig obtained the lordship of Dithmarschen. Hartwig had little choice but to accept. This arrangement made little immediate difference, however, because the Dithmarschen administrator, Count Reinold, had fallen in battle against Mecklenburg in 1161, whereupon the Dithmarschers had destroyed his castle and expelled the foreign garrison from the land.⁶

Archbishop Hartwig had no opportunity to make himself master of Dithmarschen because he was involved in a long conflict against Henry the Lion. Meanwhile, to the north the kingdom of Denmark was coalescing into a great power. When German unity distintegrated again during the revived Welf-Hohenstaufen dispute, the Danes pushed south.

Danish domination

Denmark had expanded during the Crusade of 1147 to become a great naval power once again. King Waldemar I (1157-1182), having made friends with formerly hostile churchmen, had extended his influence onto the mainland in Mecklenburg. In the following years the Wendish dukes restored their shattered military strength through a policy of attracting German knights and peasants to immigrate to Mecklenburg. The Wendish princes eventually became a mainstay of the Danish empire.⁷

When Frederick Barbarossa drove Henry the Lion into exile in England, he distributed the Welf lands in the north among Hohenstaufen supporters. In this complex realignment of forces, Count Adolf III (1164-1225) acquired Dithmarschen as an imperial grant. However, when Adolf tried to assert his rights in 1187, King Canute (1182-1202) of Denmark objected. Count Adolf was unable to obtain any military support from the empire because Emperor Frederick Barbarossa (1152-1190) could raise large armies only in southern Germany and he was not willing to send these forces to the north. Frederick Barbarosa was so much more interested in Italy that he offered Adolf III little beyond encouragement and not much of that.

The Danish king was well placed to threaten Adolf: his realm bordered Holstein on the north; his vassals in Mecklenburg were to the east; and the political situation to the south and west was so disorganized by the recent conflicts that Adolf could not hope to find military assistance there. Moreover, he had an excuse for war against Adolf: a short time before, the Dithmarschers had called on the archbishop

for assistance against Adolf, but when they discovered that Hartwig was only interested in collecting taxes from them himself, they turned to the bishop of Schleswig—who fancied himself the proper ruler of Denmark and believed that if he accepted an invitation from unhappy canons in Hamburg-Bremen to become archbishop, he would be better placed to fight Waldemar for the throne! When the bishop sent troops to occupy Dithmarschen, he brought that people into a Danish civil conflict which confused the situation locally. Count Adolf III and the Archbishop Hartwig became, in effect, Waldemar's allies. Their armies drove away the Schleswig forces, then occupied Dithmarschen and forced the natives to promise a large indemnity.

Afterward Adolf and Hartwig sought to reestablish their ties with the Hohenstaufen party by joining Frederick Barbarossa on the third crusade—an action which also placed their lands under papal protection. Consequently, they were absent when Henry the Lion returned suddenly from his exile in England with help from Richard the Lionheart (whose sister had married Henry's son Otto) and reestablished himself in Saxony. It seemed for a while that the Lion would overturn all the recent political changes: his chief enemies were away on crusade; his principal enemy, Frederick Barbarossa, had drowned in Turkey; he could rely on the political support of his Danish sons-in-law, Canute and Waldemar; and many minor nobles of Saxony disliked their new overlords. However, when the Hohenstaufen forces marched north, Henry fled once more to England and died a short time later.

Adolf and Hartwig argued for a Hohenstaufen advance across the Elbe to drive the Danes out of Germany, but the new emperor refused to commit troops to such a project—he needed every knight available for the conquest of Sicily. The result was a political vacuum in the north which Canute filled. When Canute's forces occupied Dithmarschen, he effectively surrounded Adolf III—every fortification in Holstein lay within the range of Danish forces.⁸ There was little doubt that Canute required the Dithmarschers to pay the same taxes as his own subjects—a new 4% exaction on land value as expressed in rent—a heavy tax, in their estimation.

Even though the Danish grip on Dithmarschen seemed unbreakable, Archbishop Hartwig and Count Adolf did not give up their hopes of recovering the land for themselves. When they were together at the imperial court in 1195 they agreed upon a division of Dithmarschen should they have the opportunity to take it from the Danes. However, since King Canute was too powerful at that time for Adolf III to anticipate a swift change of fortune, he left for the Holy land with the crusading expedition of 1197. When Emperor Henry VI died suddenly in 1198, leaving his empire to an infant son, Pope Innocent III urged Henry the Lion's son Otto to return to Saxony from England and claim the imperial throne. This caused the war between the Welfs and Hohenstaufens to resume. As German nobles left to fight in Italy, Canute pushed into Holstein on behalf of "Emperor Otto IV," as he now styled himself.

Adolf III fought against the superior Danish and Wendish forces doggedly. When his castles fell, he raised new troops in Schauenburg and resumed the contest. In 1201, after capturing the main Danish fortress at Lauenburg, he invaded Dithmarschen, plundering and murdering without mercy. As a result, the surviving peasants learned to fear and hate him. Their desire for revenge later played an important role in Danish and German history.

Shortly after achieving these successes, Adolf's army was routed by the Mecklenburg dukes. The Danish army, led by Canute's brother, Waldemar, then invaded Holstein. The Dithmarschers needed little urging to contribute their mite to this effort, and soon Adolf had fled back to Schauenburg. Waldemar was earning the nickname *the Victorious*. When Adolf made a daring return to the north in November, seizing Hamburg and other important points along the Elbe, Waldemar hurried south, summoning his followers in Mecklenburg, Holstein, and Dithmarschen to join him at Hamburg. Besieging the city until the waters of the protective lake, the Alster, and the Elbe River froze to a thickness sufficient to support an attack across the ice, he captured Adolf and promised to allow him to go free if the count could persuade the garrison at Lauenburg to surrender.

When the Dithmarschers in the besieging army heard that their enemy might be set free, they formed a mob of rioters and tried to kill Count Adolf as he was being held captive in the camp of Henry of Schwerin (1174-1228). Only quick action by the king saved the count. When Adolf was subsequently unsuccessful in his efforts at Lauenburg, Waldemar allowed him to retire to Schauenburg in return for renouncing Holstein in favor of Waldemar's son-in-law, Albert of Orlamünde. When Canute died soon afterward, Waldemar became king of Denmark.

Little is known about the Danish administration of Dithmarschen other than the method of taxation: after the 1213 revision of the Danish tax code, taxes were reckoned at 1/24 the amount of seed grain used on each plot of land. Since most harvests produced only two to four times the amount of seed grain used, this tax on seed grain was a heavy burden. Some historians hold this type of tax responsible for a fourteenth-century decline in the number of free peasants in Denmark from 75% of the total population to 10%. If the seed tax was threatening to turn a similarly high percentage of the free farmers in Dithmarschen into serfs, the taxpayers must have been very dissatisfied, indeed.⁹

Although the nobles of Saxony appealed to both Otto IV and his Hohenstaufen rival, young Frederick II, to drive the Danes out of Holstein, neither had forces to spare for such an undertaking. Even after 1215, when Frederick II at long last became undisputed Holy Roman Emperor, he did nothing which might interfere with his ambitions to dominate Italy. In fact, to secure stability in Germany—where Pope Innocent had so cleverly played his enemies against one another—Frederick formally ceded the lands north of the Elbe to the Danish king and allowed Otto's heir to retain Braunschweig-Lüneburg. King Waldemar tightened his hold on northern Germany by expelling potential rebels from their lands and replacing them with elo-

quent and active men who defended their new lord's actions at the imperial court. Moreover, the Danish king was too powerful to resist. His successful military adventures in the Baltic, especially in conquering Estonia, earned him a great reputation. Then the unexpected happened. In 1223, when Count Henry of Schwerin returned from crusading in the Holy Land with Frederick II, he was angered to discover that the king had seized half his estates on behalf of a royal grandson. Being clever enough to disguise his true feelings, Henry accompanied the royal hunting expedition to the island of Lyö where in a daring night attack, Henry kidnapped Waldemar and the crown prince from the midst of their retainers. Placing his prisoners in safe confinement in the fortress of Dannenberg, Henry persuaded the minor princes of northern Germany to join together in a coalition against the leaderless Danes. In 1225 these princes defeated and captured Albert of Orlamünde. After they had "liberated" Holstein, they were ready to ransom Waldemar for a huge sum of money and his promise to renounce his German lands and depart on crusade.

Once freed in 1227, Waldemar obtained a papal nullification of his oaths and prepared to recoup his losses by force. One of his first acts was to send an army into Dithmarschen to recruit a large body of warriors for his army. He then moved to Bornhöved to intercept the princes' army as they advanced north. Bornhöved, even today an important road crossing, was the best place in Holstein to intercept an army moving north. In fact, there was no good alternative route—an army marching from Segeberg to Kiel via Bornhöved followed the high ground between the swamps to the west around Neumünster and the lake district to the east. The Danish king assembled the royal levy of cavalry and large numbers of militia in a camp overlooking a broad lake. He was soon joined by armies led by his bishops and the Welf count of Braunschweig-Lüneburg. Not long afterward his enemies arrived: the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, the duke of Saxon-Lauenburg, the counts of Holstein and Schwerin, and the citizen army of Lübeck. Both armies arrayed themselves on a broad front with little or no reserve force, each planning a classic cavalry attack along the entire line. The role of the infantry, including the Dithmarschers, was to provide a secure refuge for the cavalry to regroup after each engagement. They were to form a line of spearmen who would allow friendly knights through their ranks then shelter them from hostile pursuers. In short, although the militia forces were not expected to strike significant blows against the enemy, no cavalry army could fight effectively without them.

This meant that the Dithmarschers' retreat from their position covering the cavalry's rear was the decisive moment of the battle. The archbishop's knights were just moving forward toward the Danish lines when the Dithmarschers fled noisily and



precipitated a general retreat of Waldemar's militia. When some Danish knights followed them, the battle turned into a rout. King Waldemar tried valiantly to rescue the situation, but no display of personal courage could rally his army. He lost an eye in combat and all his possessions south of Schleswig.¹⁰ He never regained his political influence or military power, and it was more than a century before any of his successors were able to do so.

Legend quickly changed the story of the Dithmarschers' contribution to the battle from one of retreat into one of active fighting against Danish oppressors. Whatever the truth of the matter may have been, everyone in the victors' army agreed that the Dithmarscher contribution had been significant. The Dithmarscher forces made arrangements with the archbishop to acknowledge him as their lord while retaining such autonomy as to be practically self-governing. Then, as the archbishop's subjects, they assisted in the destruction of the Danish castle at Lin, on the Baltic coast. Meanwhile, the citizens of Lübeck occupied the royal castles in the city and at Travemünde. The year 1227 thus marks the birth of independence for two powers, Dithmarschen and Lübeck, which were long to be allies against the encroachments of the Danish and Holstein rulers.

By 1250 the Dithmarschers had become so confident of their future that they tore down the Carolingian-era church at Meldorf and began to replace it with a building that was popularly known as the *Dom* (cathedral) of Dithmarschen. Although it was obviously not a true *Dom*, because there was no bishop, the brick structure, when it was finished around 1300, was larger than any other church in the region, larger than any in Holstein, Schleswig, or Jutland. With its fortress-like tower and thick walls, the three-aisled basilica was perfectly suited for the ceremonies and pageantry associated with governmental functions. From 1265 on, Meldorf was the seat of the Dithmarschen government, the *Terrae Universitatis Dithmarsiae*.¹¹

View of southern Dithmarschen from Burg,
looking west from the Geest onto the Marsh



CHAPTER THREE THE FREE STATE

Ambitious nobles, arrogant prelates

The decades following 1227, the year when Dithmarschen became independent, were filled with political unrest in the Holy Roman Empire. To a certain extent this reflected the processes by which the Saxon dukes, the German emperors, and the Danish kings were losing control over their vassals—and the failure of the vassals to develop effective parliamentary institutions which could formulate and implement national policies. This feudal anarchy made it difficult for any local ruler to pursue an active foreign policy beyond taking sides in the life-and-death contest of Emperor Frederick II and his uncrowned successors against the strong-willed popes of this era. Consequently, most political debate outside that wearysome struggle concentrated on resolving specific local problems by compromise; unless a matter was vitally important, neither rulers nor vassals had the resources or energy to enforce a ruling against those nobles or clergy who refused to accept a decision adverse to their individual interests.

Surprising in view of Germany's previous history, the weakness of the monarchs did not slow the growth of international trade. In the twelfth century merchants had relied upon the support and protection of powerful rulers. But now the overseas markets already existed and the tremendous growth of the German economy was sufficient to sustain the momentum of expansion by itself. Most importantly, cloth produced in central and eastern Europe was so inferior to English and Flemish products that merchants and nobles who lived along the Baltic Sea or the rivers which flowed into it welcomed those German adventurers who banded together for mutual protection and made their way to them by land and sea to peddle their wares. Such was the demand in central and eastern Europe for products from overseas that merchants found boycotts and blockades to be effective means of assuring themselves access to markets, assistance against pirates and robber barons, and guarantees of just treatment in the marketplaces and courts of the host countries. Later, to assure that their common interests would be defended, the cities most involved in overseas trade formed the Hanseatic League. Prominent in this league were the three cities

which had the greatest interest in preserving Dithmarschen's independence: Bremen, Hamburg, and Lübeck.

As trade increased in volume, the states lying to the east of Germany found it more difficult to pay for the western products they wanted. The furs, wax, and silver no longer sufficed to provide a balance of trade, and there were too few peasants and artisans to produce excess grain and goods for exchange. Some rulers resolved their dilemma by inviting German peasants, merchants, and minor nobles to settle in their lands. This made it possible to produce some of the desired commodities locally and to buy the rest with the taxes paid by the newcomers. The rulers who were swiftest to act quickly rose in importance.

Also rising in importance were those German princes who could tax the merchants in their lands. This was not a new phenomenon: rulers had always collected taxes and tolls from merchants. However, through most of living memory the income had been limited by the low volume of trade and imperial restrictions on tolls. Now trade was expanding rapidly and imperial authority was absent. Those German nobles who had been on crusade in the Baltic had personally observed the mercantile bonanza in which they might well claim a share. Count Adolf IV of Holstein (1227-1261) was among these ambitious princes. He began to require stricter obedience from his vassals, to exact more cooperation from the clergy, and to extend his authority over the towns and cities—especially the right to levy tolls on road and river traffic. This was not an easy task. Lübeck and Hamburg realized their danger and resisted Adolf's every effort to make himself "protector-advocate" of the city (*Schirmvogt*), a customary office by which a local noble provided knights and soldiers for defense and escort duty in return for an annual fee and served as a judge for important cases. An additional difficulty was provided by competing princes, most particularly Archbishop Gebhard (1219-1258) of Hamburg-Bremen, who supported the cities against Adolf while cynically awaiting an opportunity to dominate the merchant communities themselves. Lastly, the emperors and popes gave such aid and encouragement as they could to the cities—usually through charters declaring them *free cities*—hoping thereby to better their own political and financial situation and to weaken those nobles whom they deemed most responsible for the feudal anarchy and who, by adhering to the opposing party, impeded their efforts to give leadership to a divided land.

This combination of factors made it impossible for Adolf IV to accomplish quickly his dream of subjecting the free cities to taxes and direct government. Therefore, he turned to less ambitious projects which would attract little attention. He began to consolidate his scattered lands, to establish new villages and markets, and to require existing settlements to pay taxes and accept the advocates he appointed. Wherever he met resistance, he was ready to use military force.

How could a small community of free farmers and fishermen survive in this situation? Dithmarschen's topography provides a partial answer to this question. With the sea to its rear, Dithmarschen faced only two princes—the count of Holstein

and the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen—each of whom had difficulties of his own hindering a determined attack on the peasants' liberty at this time. In 1239 Adolf IV sailed away to Livonia on a crusade. Upon returning to Holstein, he entered a Franciscan monastery and gave his sons, John and Gerhard, lands around Kiel and Itzehoe respectively. He left the general direction of affairs to his son-in-law, Duke Abel of Schleswig, but that proved unsatisfactory, especially after Abel became King of Denmark and sought to restore the earlier Danish dominion over northern Germany. Peace returned after Abel's death at the hands of rebellious Frisians in 1252, but the counts of Holstein had little interest in Dithmarschen. The community lay too far from the lands of John of Kiel (+1263), who, in any case, had divided his lands between two sons, Adolf V of Segeberg (+1308) and John of Kiel (+1321), with the result that neither was able to raise enough knights to threaten his neighbors. Gerhard I of Itzehoe (+1290) was not only an inactive person, but he, too, divided his territories among his sons, Gerhard II (+1312) of Plön, Henry I (+1304) of Rendsburg, and Adolf VI (+1315) of Pinneberg and Schauenburg. This division of the county, the numerous alliances based on marriages, and the ecclesiastical appointments held by younger brothers made it difficult to bring Holstein's military resources to bear when the opportunity arose to conquer Dithmarschen.

Such family conflicts rarely disturbed ecclesiastical states such as the archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen, the second neighbor bordering on Dithmarschen. However, Archbishop Gebhard zu Lippe was more interested in peasants south of the Elbe River than in a community which could be attacked only with the active cooperation of the merchant community in Hamburg. Such cooperation could have been purchased only by Gebhard's sacrificing such little authority as he still possessed in the city; and his ultimate goal remained the ultimate subjection of the merchants and artisans in Hamburg and Bremen. As a result, the archbishop looked elsewhere for potential taxpayers. He believed that he found them in the Weser river



settlements around Stedingen, where for decades the people had taken advantage of the archbishops' political crises to avoid paying taxes or tithes. As Gebhard saw his situation, his best hope for future greatness hinged on his ability to suppress resistance against the payment of taxes on the part of the people of Stedingen. In 1229 he sent an army commanded by his brother, Count Herman II zu Lippe, into Stedingen. However, the peasants there proved themselves to be more dangerous opponents than the archbishop had ever imagined. Count

Herman fell in battle and his forces were routed. This was more than a personal defeat for the archbishop—it was a disaster for the ambitions of the entire zu Lippe family, which had hoped to dominate Saxony and Westphalia and perhaps even distant Livonia within a few years. However, Gebhard did not despair. He offered to share his winnings with an ally, the count of Oldenburg, if he would invade Stedingen. This was a dangerous tactic, because the count was hoping to make himself master of East Frisia and, therefore, might be difficult to dislodge from any conquests he made. However, Gebhard never had to face that challenge—the count of Oldenburg lost his life in battle as well. The archbishop was now thoroughly frustrated. In the course of these campaigns he not only had failed to improve his situation but he had worsened it by hiring the citizens of Bremen to transport his armies to Stedingen and he had acquired other heavy debts to pay the mercenary soldiers he had hired.¹

Gebhard, like many contemporary prelates and nobles, found it difficult to raise further armies in the absence of a general threat to the common well-being. Such men as he could summon for service in arms were peasant officeholders and militia who lacked enthusiasm for a war which would benefit only the archbishop's private ambitions. Nor could he hire larger mercenary armies because burgher resistance to tolls and taxes kept him poor. Although he could recruit a few knights who were willing to serve as crusaders without pay, and he could persuade some neighboring rulers that it was in their general interest to assist in crushing rebellious peasants, in order to transport those forces across the swamps against the rebellious peasants he had to hire ships from the citizens of Bremen—who were properly suspicious of his motives and, therefore, reluctant to cooperate. However, having committed himself too fully to the Stedingen campaign to back off now, Gebhard decided to risk everything on one last invasion in 1234. He gave the Bremen burghers full freedom of self-government in return for their aid against the peasants.

Gebhard's crusade against Stedingen will be noted again in chapter six. What is important for the decades after 1234 is that the archbishop was unable to collect as many taxes from the survivors of the ravaged Stedingen communities as he had anticipated.² Although Gebhard may have once contemplated attempting to tax the Dithmarschers more heavily, his Stedingen experience made him understandably reluctant to provoke another peasant war. The Dithmarschers, for their part, were equally hesitant to provoke him into organizing a crusade against them. Therefore, it was relatively easy to bring the two parties to a compromise: Dithmarschen recognized the nominal overlordship of the archbishop and paid a small contribution to him in return for guarantees that they would be permitted to practice the self-government they believed to be essential to their way of life.

Local administration by advocates

It is important to understand that the archbishop's officials were not the nobles or knights who appear in English and French history. Eleventh-century

German emperors had attempted to consolidate imperial authority and reform the Church at the same time by replacing hostile nobles who were corruptly administering ecclesiastical offices with more honest men who were dependent upon the imperial will. This reflected the wide-spread belief that churchmen should not personally collect taxes, supervise secular courts, or make war; ideally, these duties should be performed by secular agents. This concept took into account the fact that the Church possessed vast lands with prosperous cities, industrious peasants, and strategic fortresses. Some of these possessions dated from the foundation of the dioceses, when Germany was a great wilderness and the Church needed vast estates in order to pay for the support of even a handful of priests in a few churches. Some lands had been donated by pious believers, and some were gifts from emperors who thus avoided giving the lands to secular vassals. Through the appointment of kinsmen and loyal supporters as bishops and abbots the emperors hoped to retain control of strategic points in Germany while posing as a church reformer. However, the emperors had a very limited number of relatives and major vassals. Therefore, they concentrated on replacing local administrators, seeking out knights who would obey the emperor rather than the local duke, count, or bishop. Unable to find many such individuals, the emperors introduced innovations into the already loosely-structured German feudal system.

Feudal practices in the Holy Roman Empire were much more complex than one might expect from an American *Western Civilization* textbook—which usually describe a simplified version of French and English feudalism. German feudalism included an important knightly class which was not of noble origin. These knights were called *ministeriales* and were warriors whose ancestors had been promoted from the ranks of the serfs and the free farmers. Being of servile or common origin, they could not claim the rights of nobles, especially not an hereditary right to administer lands and offices. Ministeriales who were incompetent or uncooperative could be removed at the emperor's pleasure; those who proved competent could be promoted over the heads of their fellows without provoking the strong objections which vassals would raise. Most importantly, ministeriales (sometimes called *serf-knights* although most of them rose from the ranks of well-to-do peasants) had more reason to be absolutely loyal to the emperor than did vassals, since their own fate was tied to the success of imperial policy in the disputes with secular vassals and the popes.

The practice of using ministeriales as local officials did not long remain an imperial monopoly. German secular and ecclesiastical rulers quickly saw the advantages inherent in having ministeriales administer estates rather than giving them out as fiefs to noble knights. In fact, after defeating the imperial effort to centralize the administration of the Holy Roman Empire through the use of *serf-knights*, they often retained the ministeriales in their own employment. In Holstein as well as in the archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen ministeriales were soon far more numerous than knights who could trace their lineage back to an older nobility.

The ministeriales usually held the office of advocate (*advocatus, Vogt*), the administrator who supervised local justice, collected revenues, and trained the militia for military service. Sometimes they were local petty nobility, sometimes only rich peasants who purchased or rented the office for a set period of time. Occasionally they were outsiders recruited by the lord to oversee the creation of new settlements by immigrants. Nowhere were the advocates' powers extensive, nor was the period of holding office long—as it was in the lord's interest to make new appointments from time to time. Consequently, the communities the ministeriales governed retained much of their earlier freedom and self-government. At first the advocates usually lived in relative poverty from the revenues of their scattered small estates and relied on the income they received as tax collectors and judges and from booty in war to purchase their expensive weapons and horses. In time they were able to persuade their lords that it was practical or even necessary to pass each office on to relatives of previous advocates. Eventually the ministeriale families came to look upon the holding of specific offices as a traditional right. Whenever a vacancy occurred, they exerted all the influence they could to assure that the next appointment was given to a relative. Long tenure, of course, created traditions by which the advocates increased their authority and power. By the thirteenth century they had become sufficiently wealthy and influential as to think of themselves as noble and to intermarry with older, somewhat impoverished knightly families.

The growth of the advocates' claims to be an independent nobility was aided by the fact that the archbishops and counts of Holstein were weak. As we have seen, the Schauenburg dynasty had divided Holstein among several heirs—and the revenues of each count were correspondingly small. The successors of Archbishop Gebhard were unable to make good the disasters of his reign—in fact, they were so pressed by debt that they leased some territories south of the Elbe to the counts of Holstein. The weakened position of the rulers of Holstein and Hamburg-Bremen provided an opportunity for the advocates and their families to increase their authority as well as their power and wealth. They did this, of course, not only at the expense of the counts and archbishops but of the free peasantry as well.

This process by which this upstart nobility was increasing its own authority had apparently proceeded extensively throughout Dithmarschen and the other marshland settlements along the Elbe River during the second half of the thirteenth century. Tension grew between the ministeriale families and the peasantry as the advocates exploited the weakness of their hapless lords to demand revisions of traditional practices in ways which would increase their own power.

The center of the archepiscopal government of Dithmarschen was at Meldorf. By tradition the archbishop appointed five advocates, one for each of the *old* parishes (which no longer corresponded with the contemporary ecclesiastical organization), with the chief advocate residing in Meldorf. The duties of the advocates were limited at first, since the Dithmarschers had few obligations to their lord. In theory, there were no taxes. Rather there was a *free gift* to each new archbishop, a share of the fines collected from lawbreakers, a percentage of the hay crop from an island, and

a few other unimportant incomes. Ecclesiastical jurisdiction lay in the hands of the prior (dean) of Hamburg, who journeyed to Meldorf twice a year to meet with the priests. At this time he collected his share of the tithe and other incomes, levied and raised the banns, and conducted such rituals as were necessary for the proper operation of the Church. Thus, the prior was an absentee administrator who relied on the advocates and priests to carry out his policies as best they could.

There was an *assembly* of advocates, knights, and senior citizens or councilors from each parish which came together at Meldorf once a year to make laws for the entire land. Although everyone recognized this assembly as the seat and source of legitimate power, its authority was severely limited by the fact that it met so rarely and that relatively few problems could be addressed in any one meeting. The advocates stepped into this governmental vacuum to provide the services required for effective law enforcement and administration on a daily basis. Subsequently, as time passed, the advocates came to believe that they alone should govern the land for everyone's benefit. The authority of the archbishops and the assembly declined steadily while that of the advocates grew correspondingly until a countervailing challenge arose from the clansmen who were building the dikes and organizing communal labor.

Some ministeriale families foresaw the approaching conflict and emigrated eastward. The Reventlows, for example, donated their Dithmarschen lands to the cloister in Itzehoe in 1272—perhaps disposing of claims to lands which they could no longer defend and were in danger of losing to hostile clans. Other families chose to stay and fight.

Clans versus advocates

Toward the end of the century the counts of Holstein became aware of the trend toward an independent-minded class of ministeriales and took steps to rein in their advocates. These efforts provoked the petty nobles in the Elbe marshes, Holstein, and perhaps Dithmarschen to join together in 1285 with Archbishop Giselbert of Hamburg-Bremen (1273-1306) to defend the power they had gained. They created a *Schwurbund* (an alliance based on an oath) to protect their rights against the counts. This action implicitly extended their jurisdiction over peasants and clansmen, who subsequently began to look upon the counts as protectors—at least for the time being. The subsequent alliances of advocates, clansmen, and counts were so complex that we can make out but few of the details, but it is certain that there were shifts and reverses of policy at all levels—many probably reflecting personal influences rather than class interests.

This was not the first time the advocates and the clans had clashed over authority. There had been conflict when the clan system first spread from the islands back to the Geest. Some ministeriale families died out; others emigrated; and a few were expelled. Such crises, however, were minor compared to the struggle which seems to have occurred at the end of the thirteenth century.

Expulsion of the ministeriale nobility

Considering the importance of the event, it is surprisingly how little is known about the expulsion of the ministeriale families from Dithmarschen. We cannot even fix the year in which it occurred with certainty, although 1283 is a commonly mentioned date for its beginning. Equally obscure are the immediate causes of what must have been a decisive schism in Dithmarschen society. The nineteenth-century historian Friedrich Christoph Dahlmann suggests that the change took place shortly after the so-called Rabbit War (*Hasenkrieg*), probably in 1289. His theory is based upon a somewhat earlier treaty between the Dithmarschen assembly and Count Gerhard II (1290-1312) of Holstein-Plön. Unlike other contemporary treaties, this one is not easy to explain. Dahlmann asked who was a potential enemy to both Gerhard II and Dithmarschen? Even though Count Gerhard II was probably feared for his ambition to reunite Holstein even while his father lived (Gerhard I would die only in 1290, but he seems to have been already unimportant politically), Gerhard II had no known quarrel with his relatives at this moment, nor were the other counts of Holstein particularly hostile to Dithmarschen. Archbishop Giselbert was too weak to be dangerous alone: he had recently lost the Haseldorf Marsh to Holstein—moreover, the treaty specifically exempted him as a potential enemy because, theoretically, he was the lord of Dithmarschen and the Dithmarschers could not make war on him. Given the lack of reasonable alternatives, Dahlmann argued that the treaty was directed against the ministeriale nobility of the respective lands, against those advocates who in 1285 had sworn an oath of mutual support with the archbishop.

Dahlmann notes that the minor nobles in the Elbe marshes had placed themselves under the protection of the distant counts, John of Holstein-Kiel (+1321) and Gerhard's younger brother, Henry, who possessed estates in Stormarn. Espousing one of those quibbles so frequent in medieval society, the nobles were arguing that they were willing to serve any proper lord gladly when they had the choice of refusing his orders, but they would never serve under compulsion. Gerhard II, naturally, saw this as being but one step from anarchy and two from treason. Dahlman asks if the Dithmarschen nobles, already quarreling with the clans about their newly-acquired prerogatives, had joined with the rebels in Holstein to defend their common class interests. Both groups saw themselves as essentially autonomous vassals of the archbishop, who by rights should rule over the peasants in their regions. If the Dithmarschen nobles had offered aid to friends and relatives in the Elbe marshes in return for a promise of later help, that was a policy certain to provoke the clans into action. Dahlmann's theory lacks corroborative evidence, but subsequent historians have failed to offer more persuasive explanations as to why Gerhard II and Dithmarschen became allies.

The historian is left with numerous problems concerning this era. An alliance of an overbearing count and restive clan chieftains would be understandable, but why

was it never mentioned in later chronicles? Who were the councilors who signed the treaty for Dithmarschen? Were they nobles or clan chiefs? And what caused the end of the alliance? In short, there are few facts and much speculation. What is certain is that Counts Henry and John invaded Dithmarschen in 1289 on the pretext that the land belonged to them and that Count Gerhard II remained neutral while Archbishop Giselbert sent experienced warriors to command the Dithmarschen forces.

The invading army was apparently composed largely of advocates and minor nobles and could not have been very large. Otherwise the Dithmarschen clans would never have dared to offer battle on a meadow near the border. This probably had an important psychological effect on the Holstein army as well, because the troops seemed to be expecting a defeat. That, at least, is the best explanation we have for the ensuing events. As the Holstein nobles were forming their units of horsemen and peasant infantry into a line of battle, a rabbit ran across the field between the two armies. Without thinking, some Holsteiners shouted out the rabbit hunting cry *lop, lop, lop*. The infantry, still arriving at the battleground, heard this cry, assumed all was lost, and took to their heels. This desertion on the part of the infantry left the horsemen without protection. The Dithmarschers and archepiscopal cavalry took immediate advantage of the situation and attacked. The result was a spectacular victory which decimated the minor nobility of Holstein and seemingly ruined Henry and John's political ambitions.

The counts of Holstein benefitted more from defeat in the Rabbit War than they might have profited from a victory—they were able to assert more authority over their surviving vassals than would have been the case if the advocates had acquired new estates and greater self-confidence through the conquest of Dithmarschen. Unexpected turns of the wheel of fortune subsequently made Henry I rather than Gerhard II the dominant figure in Holstein. Certainly his swift marriage to a niece of the archbishop was important in his later successes, but more important was the fact that Gerhard went blind and could no longer be as active politically as Henry. By the time of his unexpectedly early death in 1304 Henry had subdued his relatives and crushed rebel nobles, thereby creating a strong government with dependable revenues and loyal vassals. In short, the Rabbit War had prepared the way for great changes in Holstein.

Significant alterations of the political system appeared in Dithmarschen as well during the decade following the Rabbit War. Dahlmann suggests that when the clans expelled some potentially traitorous petty nobles, others sold their lands and migrated east. A few exiles became mercenaries in Lübeck's service, while others apparently went to the Holstein counts and offered themselves as vassals.

Not all nobles left Dithmarschen. Those who chose to remain abandoned their pretensions to political authority and were absorbed into the clans; some were no doubt admitted into the ranks of the councilors (*Ratmänner*), thereby giving additional prestige to that body. A significant Frisian immigration could have made this transition from an assembly-oriented state to a council-oriented association even

easier, since they brought with them a tradition of community leadership through elected and hereditary chieftains.

Dahlmann's theory, unfortunately, does not resolve all the historian's problems. The fact remains that most of the nobles were not expelled immediately after the Rabbit War but almost a decade later, approximately the same time Count Henry crushed his rebellious nobles—1303. The eighteenth-century historian, Johann Adrian Bolten, attempted to explain this occurrence by connecting it with the so-called Kehdinger War. In 1304 Archbishop Giselbert once more attempted to tax the peasants on the south bank of the Elbe. When the Kehdinger peasants won a military victory over the forces of the archbishop and the duke of Saxony, the rebellion spread across the river to Haseldorf, where the archbishop had sought to end the ancient dispute over possession of the area by selling or leasing several estates to Count Henry. The situation was complicated by the activities of the petty nobles, who were encouraged by Henry's unexpected death to claim their former privileges from his twelve-year-old son, Gerhard III. Most importantly, they took for themselves the right to escort Hamburg merchants on the Elbe, thus depriving the young count of an important source of revenue. It was 1306 before Count Gerhard could persuade his remaining vassals, officials, and relatives of his abilities. Demonstrating in the most vivid fashion that he could not be intimidated, he declared war on his rebellious subjects and summoned his loyal vassals to join him in an invasion of Haseldorf. The Dithmarschen assembly, viewing this situation with a combination of growing alarm and enthusiasm, offered its support to the rebels.

The Dithmarschen and Haseldorf forces awaited the Holstein invasion on the river bank at Utersen, a seemingly invincible position. However, Gerhard daringly led his horsemen into the water, swam across the stream, and routed the Dithmarscher units with heavy losses. He then tied the Haseldorf commander to horses and tore him to pieces. He deprived the advocates and nobles of their offices and estates, replaced them with men of his own choosing, and then reorganized the government of all Holstein. During the following years he constantly improved his position inside Holstein, forcing all his relatives to obey his orders. He intervened in the politics of Schleswig (uniting it with Holstein in 1326) and Denmark so often and so successfully that he earned himself the title "Gerhard the Great" (1304-1340). He was assisted in this greatly by Hartwig Reventlow, who in 1315 murdered Count Adolf in his bed and kidnapped Adolf's father, John II of Kiel. Gerhard tolerated whatever actions were necessary to carry out his wishes.

Bolton suggests that the expulsion of the Dithmarschen nobility occurred during these crisis years 1303-1306. Perhaps some of the Dithmarschen advocates anticipated that the Holstein counts were invincible and that the only way to save themselves was to surrender. If this were true, the assembly would have been rent by such dissention that unity could be restored only by expelling the advocates and their families. The strongest evidence Bolton presents is the fact that from 1305 on

there is no mention of the nobility in Dithmarschen documents, while the names of several Dithmarschen nobles appear later in Holstein records. Unfortunately, the chronicles of the era contain so little information that no one has been able to produce further corroborating evidence or prove Bolton's thesis false. We are left with a mystery. As a class the nobles disappeared, but they cannot have ceased to exist as individuals.

Whatever lay behind the "expulsion" or "disappearance" of the Dithmarschen nobility, it is likely that the crisis resulted in the formation of the two strongest clans in all of Dithmarschen: the *Wollermannen* on the northern Geest was formed by Saxon peasants to protect their interests; and the *Vodiemannen* on the coast and the Elbe River represented the former ministeriales and added Frisian elements. The Wollermannen represented the dominant political grouping through most of Dithmarschen's subsequent history and their relationship with the Vodiemannen was often strained.

Although modern historians cannot agree as to the exact means by which the shift in social and political power inside Dithmarschen and Holstein took place, there is no question that the power of the minor nobility north of the Elbe declined drastically between 1289 and 1306. In Dithmarschen it ceased to exist at all. The clans held power now.³

Local government

Within a few years the clans wrested all but the most nominal authority from the archbishop. First they forced him to choose his advocates from among their own number. Then, in 1329, they won a new system of taxation: they would pay each new archbishop five hundred Marks at the time of his election. They would then wish him long life and have almost no other obligations. The prior of Hamburg was limited to choosing pastors from among those *presented* by the parish. Since 1281 church affairs had been supervised almost exclusively by the parish laity, who later acquired juridical powers as well. In time, Meldorf (whose traditions emphasized the authority of the advocates appointed by the archbishop) declined in importance and was superceded by Oldenwerden as the market and assembly location. Later on, the more centrally-located meeting place on the open meadow (the *Heide*) developed into the community of Heide. The change of location for the meeting of the assembly became a visible symbol of the fact that the clans now held power.

The clans exercised such autonomy in the seventeen (later nineteen) parishes that one might well consider each parish a quasi-independent state. The *Southshore* clans along the Elbe and the coast, especially the powerful Vodiemannen, often acted completely independently of the rest of Dithmarschen and were occasionally even openly hostile toward the other parishes.⁴ However, in most cases no single clan could govern a parish by itself, because the other local clans would join together to oppose it. The historian Neocorus named seventy clans, and documents have revealed the existence of thirty to forty more.

The parishes and clans were organized into five larger units, the *Döfftten* (Meldorf, the West, the Middle, the East, and the Shore). Each *Döffte* was composed of smaller units called *Klufte*, which were further divided into *Seppen* or *Temden*.⁵ The inevitable bickering among local interest groups, represented at the differing levels of organization, makes any analysis of the formal structure difficult and has presented historians with numerous problems in explaining the course of events.

Defense of the border

The Dithmarschers were united only by their common need to defend their land. They were assisted in this endeavor by the swamps and forests, for in spite of the steady gains made to tame the sea and marsh, large areas of untamed land remained. It is necessary to understand how the topography of the land affected this effort to defend the borders before we continue the story of the development of clan government.

The greater number of the population lived in the northern part of Dithmarschen, where a thick forest and swamp called the *Hamme* prevented the Holstein counts from easily attacking them (the region north of Alversdorf was so hilly it was called the Dithmarschen Switzerland—a description which seems far-fetched except in comparison with the almost unrelieved flatness of the coastal parishes). North of the *Hamme* the clansmen built dams and defensive works along the Eider River and its tributaries and surrounding swamps to provide protection for their communities as far south as Tielenbrücke, where the *Risenwold* (Great Forest) began. To preserve this natural barrier, they strictly forbade cutting down trees for lumber or collecting firewood. Southwest from Alversdorf a less-forested arm of the Geest divided the forest into two parts and extended westward to Meldorf. This natural invasion route was such an obvious danger that the Dithmarschers built canals and dikes along the streams wherever possible in order to create additional obstacles for mounted enemies. The swampy southern extension of the *Hamme* stretched from Nordhastedt to Meldorf. South of Meldorf lay extensive lowlands and muddy flats. This *Southshore* was less vulnerable than it might have seemed. One chronicler described the situation there: "That land...is so muddy and viscous that neither man nor horse can cross it, and it is not possible to reach it by boat, because when the tide recedes, the boat will be stuck in the mud." Additional protection against raids from Holstein was provided by the hilly woods around Burg.

Two parishes lay entirely at the mercy of the Holstein counts: Alversdorf and eastern Süderhastedt. The Dithmarschers could defend these only by threatening retaliatory raids against Holstein. Since this was not always an effective deterrent, the people living in these exposed parishes had to be ready to flee westward on short notice, driving their cattle into the forest and abandoning their villages and farmsteads to the enemy.

In short, to a certain extent Dithmarschen's independence resulted from the fact that the topography provided a natural fortress where mounted knights were at

a disadvantage against courageous militiamen. The few points of access to the heartland redoubt were at Tielenbrücke, located on the road from Alversdorf to Nordhastedt, the roads from Alversdorf and Süderhastedt to Meldorf, and the ferry crossings. At several strategic points the Dithmarschers built fortifications which could be manned quickly by the militia.⁶

The military tactics of the Dithmarschers were determined in part by the lay of the land, but it was also important that the militiamen were peasants. It was a practical consideration that almost everywhere in medieval Europe peasants served as militia. Farmers could not afford to buy armor, maintain a special horse for war, or erect fortified homes; they did not have the leisure time for training in order to acquire the skills required for mounted combat; and they were vulnerable to surprise attack while working in the fields. As a result, no individual peasant was a match for a knight whose entire life was dedicated to preparation for war. The additional fact that most peasants had little incentive to fight in conflicts which concerned only the nobles also helped make them poor warriors. Nevertheless, they had to fight—the nobles needed them for mass formations behind which cavalry units could rally in defeat or as infantry for assaulting fortifications in victory. Their numbers compensated for a lack of equipment, maneuverability, and training, but their main desire was to survive combat—through flight, if necessary. Consequently, most militia units were unreliable in battle and thus despised by knights, who were reliably prepared for war by the institutions of feudalism and the possession of the best weapons and mounts available.

The Dithmarschers were different from other peasants. They were free men, not serfs who had little to lose from noble domination. They also had a long military tradition of fighting for themselves without a cavalry force to support them. Lastly, they knew how to use the geography of their region to their own advantage. Although their traditions provided them the confidence they needed to meet mounted enemies on the battlefield, they did not do so foolishly. They were courageous, but unlike nobles, they were not bound by romantic codes of conduct inherent to chivalry which encouraged foolhardiness. Every man lost in battle was either a friend or a relative



and was considered irreplaceable. They consequently adopted tactics which provided them with the maximum opportunities for winning a victory at minimum cost. Dithmarschers avoided fighting on open ground where the charge of heavy cavalry was almost irresistible. Instead, whenever possible they defended river crossings or drew the knights into swampland, so that the horses would become mired in mud or hemmed in by water and forest. Once they had the knights at a disadvantage, they would attack from all sides and annihilate them. Until victory was certain, the battle cry was *Schone den Man, Schlae de Perde!* (spare the man, kill the horse); but once the enemy began to weaken, it changed to *Schlae den Man, Schone der Perde!* Dithmarscher reasoning was that if they were to lose, they did not want retaliation by nobles angry about the death of their own friends and relatives; on the other hand, once victory was assured, they could kill the nobles without any fear of being captured and could keep wanted the valuable horses as booty.

It was the ambition of counts of Holstein to expand their territories which gave the Dithmarschers the most frequent need to perfect their military skills in defense of their land, but it must be confessed that the Holstein counts were not always unprovoked. Dithmarschen was a violent land: mothers encouraged combativeness in their sons, and fathers boasted of their sons' quarrelsomeness. Dithmarschers disliked strangers—they saw them as a natural foe and a convenient prey. They habitually boarded undermanned ships on the Elbe and stole cattle in Holstein. And they defied anyone to call them to justice except in their own courts.

Summary

The creation of a unique Dithmarschen society was made possible through a combination of topography, the clan system, the weakness of nearby enemies, and luck. The characteristics of this society were strengthened by social attitudes which began in infancy and lasted into old age. Any rough-looking man walking through the streets of Hamburg as if he feared neither God nor man, armed to the teeth and keeping his full wallet in plain sight, was in all probability a Dithmarscher. Every burgher knew that should this man be attacked or robbed, no ship on the Elbe would be safe until his clan had been reimbursed. Consequently, everyone treated the Dithmarschers with a respect based on awe and fear.

At home, in daily life, the Dithmarschers were not so fearsome. They were substantial farmers who ran large farms with the help of family and occasional hired workers. They built huge Frisian or Saxon houses to shelter their numerous cattle and rich harvests from the weather. Dung heaps testified to their wealth in cattle. They were not economically independent, however. They had to sell their cattle, grain, and fish abroad in order to import tools, weapons, clothing, and the many items they could not produce for themselves. Hence, they dared not antagonize foreign merchants too much. Fortunately for them, the Hanseatic League sought markets which could not be closed by neighboring princes—and no prince could close the Dithmarschen

harbors. The tides pulling Dithmarschen toward a more civilized life were stronger than those of brute force and barbarism, but all tides ebb and flow. Even today, when secure dikes can almost make one forget the existence of tides, high and low waters still contend with one another, ultimately undermining every unwatched foundation. In those days, Dithmarschers were well aware that a combination of high tide and storm could spell disaster—as in 1436, when thousands drowned in one terrible night and a great part of the island of Büsum was lost to the sea forever.

Dithmarschers' skills in war, their knowledge of the terrain, their use of flat-bottomed spears as vaulting poles to cross canals, their ever-present knives, and their fierce independence made them doughty warriors, fierce marauders, and aggressive traders who were well adapted to that mixture of piracy and merchant skill which passed for commerce in those troubled times.⁷ During the period of clan domination the Dithmarschers were better prepared to defend their liberties than were most other peasant communities in Europe.

The wider medieval world relevant to Dithmarschen history



CHAPTER FOUR THE WARS OF INDEPENDENCE

Holstein

Holstein lay in a favorable location and possessed sufficient population and resources to be one of the major powers of Germany. Nevertheless, it had never lived up to its full potential. One reason for this failure was that the counts had failed in their efforts to dominate the two important urban centers on the periphery of their lands: Hamburg and Lübeck. A second and more important reason lay in their failure to practice primogeniture (bequeathing the lands to the eldest male child). By dividing their lands many times among numerous male heirs as each generation came to their maturity, the counts practically assured that their offspring would lack the resources necessary to impose their will upon Hamburg and Lübeck. Nor would they be able to control the minor nobility or even establish an effective administration. With their courts saddled by internal divisions and jealousies, the counts of Holstein were unable to seriously threaten Dithmarschen independence for many decades.

As we have seen, this circumstance changed just before the end of the thirteenth century. Moreover, the counts began to realize that Dithmarschen was providing an example which encouraged their vassals and peasants to demand fewer taxes and a greater voice in the government. They ignored the challenge as long as possible, but early in the fourteenth century, when the Dithmarschers began sending aid to rebels against their authority, the counts agreed that the situation had become intolerable and began to act together at last. Thus it became possible for Gerhard the Great (1304-1340) of Rendsburg to gain a leadership of the entire family. He also took advantage of his marriage into the Danish royal family to intervene repeatedly, forcefully, and successfully in the prolonged civic conflicts which wracked Schleswig and Denmark.¹

Gerhard's ruthless policy of reunifying Holstein culminated in several acts of violence. In 1313 persons unknown threw Christopher of Holstein-Kiel from a castle window into the moat. Gerhard's agents were suspected. Two years later Gerhard's chief vassal, Hartwig Reventlow, murdered Christopher's brother, Adolf, in his bed

and took the aged father, John II, into custody. This time there was such a uproar of outrage that Gerhard III agreed to give Segeberg and Kiel to the two sons of Gerhard II, but he excluded Adolf VII (1315-1353) of Pinneberg-Schauenburg from any share of the remaining inheritance—probably on the grounds that he lived too far away to be concerned with such matters or, at least, too far away to threaten him with military force, and in any case, was inexperienced in political affairs, having just succeeded his father in office. Moreover, Gerhard ignored completely the rights of John II, who could reasonably have been expected to seek revenge for the two murders.

Gerhard's assessment of the situation was too optimistic. In 1317 Adolf VII managed to persuade Gunzelin of Schwerin to join him in an invasion of Holstein, then called upon the vassals and burghers in Holstein-Kiel to rise in rebellion against the tyrannous usurpers who had wrongfully deposed their lawful lord. Among the



allies Adolf found were the Dithmarschers, who thirsted for revenge on Hartwig Reventlow for recent brutal acts of aggression against their border communities. Moreover, they welcomed the opportunity to enrich themselves at the expense of Gerhard's subjects. (Booty was always a major attraction of medieval

war.) The Dithmarschen army flooded across Holstein, burning Schenefeld, Nortorf, Neumünster and numerous villages. It was welcomed enthusiastically in Kiel by citizens loyal to John II.

The Dithmarscher units seemed to have tipped the balance of power in favor of Adolf VI. Unfortunately, the Schauenburg count did not have the patience or resources to conduct a long campaign. He especially lacked the infantry forces necessary to support the three hundred and fifty knights he had brought from central Germany and Schwerin—a major reason for his alliance with Dithmarschen was to acquire dependable infantry. Nevertheless, when Adolf saw Gerhard approaching with a smaller force of cavalry and militia, he attacked without waiting for the nearby Dithmarschen units to join him. That was a mistake: his horsemen were so impeded by the Holstein infantry that they were swept away by Gerhard's masterful counter-attack. The Dithmarschers could easily have neutralized the Holstein militia but arrived on the battlefield too late to save the day. Adolf had been captured. The contest for control of Holstein was over.

The Dithmarschers had reason to fear for their lives now. However, instead of retreating precipitously, they calmly seized the plunder from Gerhard's men and

returned to Kiel. The reception there was not what they had expected. The citizens had a better sense of political reality: they understood that the feud was over. They were ready to come to terms with Gerhard, but as long as the Dithmarschers were there, they could not begin to negotiate. In order to lure their now unwelcome "guests" out of the city, they proposed a raid on some outlying districts loyal to Gerhard. Then, once the last Dithmarschers were out of the city, they shut the gates and sent word to Gerhard that they wanted peace. The unhappy Dithmarschers began a slow journey home. Apparently not fearing any attack by Gerhard, they divided their force into two parties of five hundred men each and plundered the countryside as they went. This show of bravado was a mistake, as Gerhard was not a foe to be despised. The count gathered his forces in a wood at the Buntzing River near Nortorf and ambushed the first group of Dithmarschers. His cavalry broke up their defensive formation and drove the fleeing warriors into deep water. Those Dithmarschers who escaped being hacked or stabbed to death, drowned. Few Dithmarschers from that unit ever saw home again, because Holstein peasants willingly cooperated with Gerhard's forces in chasing down fugitives. The second unit Dithmarscher unit passed by unharmed, as Gerhard made no effort to intercept it.

Gerhard the Great

The victory at the Buntzing River was not sufficient revenge for Count Gerhard—after having defeated one Dithmarschen force so easily, he could be satisfied with nothing less than the conquest of their country. In 1319, after prudent diplomatic maneuvers ended his quarrel with Adolf VII and John II, he obtained the neutrality of the archbishop and began recruiting knights from several north German states. When he learned that Duke Henry "the Lion" of Mecklenburg and Duke John of Saxon-Lauenburg (Gerhard's brother-in-law) had been left unemployed when a feud between Brandenburg and Rügen suddenly ended, he persuaded them to join his expedition. Unable to pay them hard cash, he promised them all the booty they could take. He then required John II of Holstein-Kiel to participate with all his knights. Gerhard also summoned the militia units from the nearby districts of Holstein, but he put his trust in his invincible knights.

The Dithmarschers had no desire to meet a cavalry army on the Geest at Alversdorf, where Gerhard crossed the border. Instead, they evacuated the region, taking with them all their cattle and moveable possessions. Unfortunately, there is no record of the Dithmarschen defensive strategy other than making a vow to the Virgin Mary to found a monastery in Meldorf if they were successfully in defending themselves.

Once Gerhard had occupied Alversdorf without opposition, he could have built a castle there as a base for the remainder of the campaign, but such caution did not suit his character. Gerhard had made himself famous for audacity and surprise. Instead of raiding the closest districts of Dithmarschen, as the militia leaders

expected, he ordered an advance through the *Risenwold* into the very heart of the country. His army hurried through Nordhastedt and Hemmingstedt to Wöhrden, catching the Dithmarschers completely by surprise.

The local Dithmarschen militiamen made a stand at Wöhrden, probably at the ford, where the water and slippery bank offered hope of slowing the horsemen enough to allow footsoldiers to repel the attack. But Gerhard's cavalry charge was not to be stopped. The phalanx of spearmen broke up and fled after having suffered heavy losses. One broken unit barricaded itself in the church at Oldenwöhrden and prepared to fight to the death. Others scattered into the woods and fields. Count Gerhard then ordered one body of knights to dismount and attack the church. The others went in search of booty—it is not clear whether they dispersed on his orders or were simply those mercenaries who had come along on the promise of being permitted to enrich themselves at Dithmarschen's expense. Soon Gerhard's men had set the church afire. When the trapped Dithmarschers pleaded to be allowed to surrender, Gerhard retorted that he wanted land, not subjects. Since they were proud of their freedom, they could die as free men.

Two separate actions then changed the entire course of the battle. When lead from the melting roof began to fall around the Dithmarschers in the church, they realized that they had only minutes to live in any case. Therefore, they sallied out in what seemed like a suicidal attack, hoping that a few of them might escape in the confusion of battle. Quite by accident, however, a unit from Büsum arrived undetected just at that moment at Gerhard's rear. The simultaneous attack routed the besieging forces, most of whom apparently rode swiftly toward Holstein. Meanwhile, the Dithmarschen units which had fled the battlefield earlier had by now managed to reassemble in the woods and begun to ambush groups of knights who had been stealing cattle and burning houses. When the dispersed knights returned to Wöhrden with their booty, they found the road blocked by the victorious militiamen. Gerhard was nowhere in sight—they did not know if he was alive or dead. They were too few in number to offer combat, their horses were exhausted, and the Dithmarschers had blocked most of the other roads by opening the sluices of the canals and by digging new ditches. Some tried to ride along the dikes and lost their way in the maze of waterways. Many of these were hunted down by militiamen who used their spears to vault over the canals and block their flight. Others tried to cross the seemingly shallow marshes, only to learn that they were indeed impassible for heavy cavalry. Many of these drowned. Only those knights and Holstein militia who fled earliest survived. Gerhard was among them.

The Dithmarschers lost five hundred of their own men, but they counted two thousand enemies' bodies. They fulfilled their battlefield vow by founding a Dominican monastery in Meldorf. So severe were their losses and so great was their respect for the count, that they did not attack his lands in the ensuing years. For his part Gerhard was so occupied with affairs in Denmark and Saxony that he did nothing more than begin the construction of several new castles along the borders of Dithmarschen. His planned war of revenge never took place.²

In 1323 the Dithmarschers and Count Gerhard signed a peace treaty. Count Gerhard agreed to leave his frontier castles in their unfinished state and promised that he would not give refuge to fugitives from justice. Both parties agreed that any future dispute would be resolved by negotiations within a six month period, starting when the complaint was first made; moreover, that an oath by twelve men would serve as proof of innocence in all judicial matters, unless the accused was caught in the act. Gerhard never again threatened the existence of Dithmarschen. He was too busy defending Schleswig—a acquisition from 1326 which gave him the title of *duke* temporarily—to provoke the Dithmarschers into threatening his rear. There was tension, of course, as in 1337, when Gerhard built the *Löwenburg* (the lion's castle) to serve as his base for an invasion. However, Gerhard found it more necessary to defend his possessions in Schleswig and Jutland than to invade Dithmarschen again. In 1340 he became deathly ill and was murdered in his bed. For the next half-century Gerhard's heirs were so occupied by the need to defend their possession of Schleswig that they could only occasionally concern themselves about Dithmarschen.

Count Nicholas

Gerhard's two sons, Nicholas (+1384) and Henry (+1397), faced a difficult dilemma: they wanted to maintain the unity of Schleswig-Holstein but neither of them wanted to be disinherited. Their compromise was to rule jointly, sharing in all decisions. Undoubtedly, it would have resulted in a colossal failure if Henry ("the Iron") had not chosen to gallivant all over Europe on chivalric quests and crusades, while Nicholas stayed home more often to make war in defense of their lands against all their neighbors. In their different ways, the two brothers exemplified the highest ideals of the high middle ages: rulers were expected to be extravagant, proud, and warlike as well as Christian.

Given his role in aristocratic society, Count Nicholas had reason enough to make war on peasants who refused to acknowledge the rights of their betters to govern them. But additional reasons were heaped upon his proud head by the Dithmarschers themselves. The *canon of Bremen* indicated that the cause of conflict was not solely the fault of the count:

Count Nicholas, a sturdy warrior, had numerous conflicts with the Dithmarschers, because the Dithmarschers have the custom of taking double whatever they lose to any enemy, since they want to retain their possessions uninjured. But whenever they cause any injury to neighboring lands, they consider it of no importance, saying that not they themselves, but their allies did it.³

One day in 1340 while the Dithmarschers were raiding his lands near Tiperslo, Count Nicholas was nearby with a small force he had gathered together on short notice from Schenefeld and Hademarschen. Having asked his scouts how many Dithmarschers were in the field, they told him that there were too many of them to

attack. But the indomitable count only replied: "My God! What are you afraid of? We ought to go nearer and take a look at those people who are carrying off our property. It will be entirely our fault if they get away!"

As the Holstein cavalry approached, moving at a fast trot, the men in the Dithmarscher formation pointed all their spears toward the onrushing horsemen. They well knew that even specially trained horses hesitated to run into what appeared to be a solid wall and if they held their own formation together, the weight of the horses would not be sufficient to drive them back. This turned out to be a correct estimation. The charge slowed to a halt without breaking the Dithmarschers' line. As the fight became a meleé, the Dithmarschers surrounded individual horsemen and pulled them from their mounts. One Dithmarscher jumped upon a loose charger and dashed toward Count Nicholas, who was momentarily surrounded by militiamen trying to unhorse him, but the count was hardly at a loss: he made a backhand stroke with his sword, cutting the mounted militiaman completely in two down the middle from head to saddle, then fought his way clear of the others. In the end, neither side was victorious. The Dithmarschers escaped, but when they agreed to peace terms in 1341, they admitted Holstein had come off the better. Although the Dithmarschers were not obligated to pay new taxes or tolls on commerce, they had to make restitution for whatever damages would be caused by Dithmarschers raiding in Holstein. Four years later another treaty provided for the destruction of the Holstein castles which lay near the Dithmarschen borders.⁴

Nicholas had only one child, a daughter, whereas Henry had three sons. When the youngest, Henry, entered the clergy and became bishop of Osnabrück, Holstein came into the possession of the elder sons, Gerhard VI (1385-1404) and Albrecht (1385-1403).

Count Gerhard VI

Gerhard VI had no driving ambition to conquer Dithmarschen. As the ruler of Schleswig-Holstein, he always had pressing business at hand; moreover, he believed he had long since made arrangements for peace along the Holstein-Dithmarschen border. However, his subjects in western Schleswig were repeatedly bringing him complaints about Dithmarscher arrogance and violence. The Frisians living in Eiderstedt, the region just north of Dithmarschen, had special reasons for their anger. Although their society resembled that of Dithmarschen in many ways, the two communities were traditional foes of long standing. Eiderstedt was Frisian, Dithmarschen was largely Saxon. Moreover, Eiderstedt was so much smaller than its southern neighbor that the Dithmarschers came to assume they could do whatever they wanted without fear of retaliation. Eiderstedters, in turn, assumed that they would never be treated justly in Dithmarschen and, therefore, took every minor dispute straight to their overlord. In such a situation it was just a matter of time until a dispute arose which would force Gerhard to end the problem once and for all by war.

Moreover, Gerhard possessed more lands and vassals than any Holstein count before him had ever enjoyed and was, therefore, a greater military threat.

For many years all conflicts had been resolved through diplomacy, but in 1403 Eiderstedters kidnapped seven Dithmarschen women. This was not a matter which could wait for the diplomats: the Dithmarschers first rescued the women, then burned half of Eiderstedt. Shortly afterward, Count Albrecht's father-in-law, the duke of Saxon-Lauenburg, raided the farms on the Dithmarschen Geest, then withdrew through Holstein to his own lands, safe from any retaliation. The Dithmarschers demanded compensation from Albrecht, saying that he had violated past agreements by allowing hostile troops to use his lands as a means of invasion. Albrecht refused to accept any guilt in the matter. He said it had come about without any involvement on his part. Dithmarschers' protestations to the Hanseatic League proved effective in obtaining a hearing from Count Gerhard. However, when Gerhard summoned his brother to court, Albrecht was not humbled in the least. He swore that the raid had been a merry adventure, not a serious attack, and that he was innocent of any collusion in its planning. Gerhard accepted his word, then wrote the Dithmarschers a harsh reprimand, accusing them of having slighted the honor of princes. As far as the counts were concerned, this insult was cause enough for war.

War was not what the Dithmarschers had wanted. Now, too late, they sought to soothe Gerhard's aroused emotions, but there was no hope of reconciliation. Gerhard and his brother had already begun to assemble their forces, consisting of cavalry and foot soldiers, for an invasion.

As the combined armies of Schleswig, Holstein, and Saxon-Lauenburg gathered east of Alversdorf, the Dithmarschers withdrew into the deep shadows of the *Risenwold*. When the invaders met no resistance on the Geest, they remembered that Gerhard the Great had met disaster after having invaded Dithmarschen via Nordhastedt. Avoiding the hilly woods where the Dithmarschers lay in wait, they went southwest toward Meldorf via Süderhastedt. Many young noblemen distinguished themselves in the ensuing storm of Meldorf's inadequate fortifications, hoping to win recognition and qualify for knighthood—that was an goal as great for them as the possibility of plunder.

After Gerhard had captured Meldorf, it appeared that he held a great strategic advantage over the Dithmarschers: he could move either north or south against a divided enemy. However, he had not yet faced a major part of the Dithmarschen militia, much less defeated them. Nor was Meldorf a good base either for raids or an invasion—the roads south and north were narrow and flanked by swamps—and he was not enthusiastic about fighting a pitched battle on ground chosen by the Dithmarschers. However, he could not just stay in Meldorf—in a few weeks his feudal levies and allies would be clamoring to go home. Moreover, Meldorf's walls were too long and too weak to be held by a small garrison. In addition, the communication line back to Holstein led through some hilly country where the streams would be difficult to cross. He would have to build several forts along this road, each with a garrison strong

enough to resist a siege. After discussing the situation with Nicholas and his vassals, Gerhard realized that he lacked the manpower and time to exploit the capture of Meldorp as he had anticipated doing. Gerhard then gave the order to abandon Meldorp and build a fortress on a low hill not far from Delbrügge. He named this castle Marienburg (St. Mary's castle, presumably to spite the Dithmarschers having called upon the Virgin as the special protectress of their land).

Count Gerhard gave little thought to the comfort of his garrison—the Marienburg was built for combat. At the center of the complex was a round citadel about thirty yards across. This was surrounded by a wide, deep ditch where the horses, cattle, and probably most of the garrison lived. The main wall encircling the whole



Ruins of the Marienburg today

was easily assailable only from the east, where a high tower sheltered the gate from attack. Deep ditches and various types of primitive firearms were expected to intimidate potential besiegers. As soon as Marienburg was in a defensible state, Gerhard returned to Holstein with the bulk of his army, leaving behind a small but dependable garrison.

The Dithmarschers were not pleased with the prospect of storming such a strong position, but they could not maintain an army in the field long themselves. They lacked any type of artillery and had no experience at sieges. The best they could do was to fill the ditches as much as possible so that ladders could reach the top of the walls, then rely upon their courage, speed, and determination. The attack was a disaster. Afterward, the Dithmarscher commanders sent most of their men home, keeping only a sufficient number to threaten the castle if too many knights rode out at once to steal cattle and burn villages.

Gerhard's strategy soon became obvious. He garrisoned strongly the already existing castles at Tielenburg and Svafstede, then built a new fortress at Hanerau. He appointed Henry Ahlefeld, a prominent and experienced vassal, to lead the campaign

while he himself concentrated on affairs in Schleswig. Henry's knights sallied into Dithmarschen and attacked isolated dwellings, causing as much damage as possible with the hope of breaking the defenders' will to resist, meanwhile collecting booty to pay for as much of the cost of operations as possible.

A deadly game of cat-and-mouse began, as the knights burned and plundered ever deeper into Dithmarschen while the defenders fled to safety at the last moment, relying on the knights' fear of ambush to buy them time to escape.



It was a type of warfare likely to appeal to young and eager warriors—filled with daring attacks by small, mobile forces of knights. Nevertheless, toward nightfall even the boldest raiders made a swift retreat to one of the fortified bases. No Holsteiner counted his throat safe overnight outside the walls of a fortress. This was total war. No man who fell into a Dithmarscher ambush could expect mercy. Nor were the Holsteiners any gentler with their enemy.

In the end it was a war of attrition—Dithmarscher morale and the willingness to suffer losses of livestock, barns, homes, and

lives versus the Holstein counts' ability to pay mercenaries and persuade vassals to participate in the campaign. Eventually the counts became careless. Perhaps they had just become desperate to win the war quickly, before their financial resources were exhausted; perhaps they were running out of places to plunder. In any case their forces began to penetrate deeper and deeper into the interior, with each attack incurring greater risk of being trapped by the defender. Finally, a party under Count Albrecht ventured so far into the country that the Dithmarschers were able to raise a large force in pursuit before the intruders could escape. As Albrecht's men crossed a stream in the midst of a downpour, they were counting themselves lucky that they had sent the cattle and horses ahead along with the wagons loaded with booty. With a rising river between them and the foe, their safe return to Holstein seemed assured. All they could encounter now would be sporadic efforts to stampede the herds. However, as the horsemen passed through one especially narrow and difficult place, Albrecht heard sounds of fighting coming from the head of the column. When he galloped forward to see what was happening, his horse slipped in the mud and fell on him, crushing him inside his armor. His followers carried his body from the field and buried him at Itzehoe.

By this time the Hanseatic cities were becoming alarmed: they did not want to see Gerhard's power extended further, lest he next turn his attention to them. Therefore, Lübeck exerted its considerable influence in an effort to mediate an end to the war. At Lübeck's urging the Dithmarschers even offered to pay for peace, but Gerhard refused. He was willing to accept an annual tax—with its implication that he was the lord of Dithmarschen—but the assembly would have nothing to do with that. Therefore, the peace negotiations ultimately failed.

Meanwhile, the Dithmarschers renewed the siege of the Marienburg. Although the militiamen had little hope of successfully storming the fortress, they could not think of a better strategy. They could not continue to do nothing—as a folksong about the battle put it, "What hands can built, hands can tear down." However, once again, the attempted storm was a failure. The head of the Dithmarscher commander, Rolves Boikenson of the Vodiemannen clan, ended on a stake above the castle wall.

The following summer, in August of 1404, Duke Gerhard decided to break the stalemate by carrying the war into the northern parishes. He led his forces through Nordhastedt to Weddingstedt and on to Lunden, collecting a huge amount of plunder along the way almost without resistance. Then, instead of crossing the Eider into safety, which would have involved finding boats and then making a circuitous march home, he decided to retrace his route through Dithmarschen back to Holstein. His nobles were nervous about the retreat, because they feared that the Dithmarschers would be lying in wait somewhere in the dense woods of the *Risenwold*. The only road there was narrow and flanked by deep drainage ditches. Nevertheless, Gerhard and Henry Ahlefeld were determined to gather together cattle and plunder to pay the expenses of the war and to burn everything they could not take away, without regard for the passing time. Those who wondered why the Dithmarschers seemed to have disappeared realized that while their own leaders were wasting time, the Dithmarschers were gathering their forces along the route of retreat. When Gerhard finally gave the order to march through the *Risenwold*, his army proceeded single-file over the narrow roadway through the woods and steep hills.

Oppressed by an intense heat, the knights removed their heavy armor and loaded it on the spare horses in order to save their energy for fighting later on. That was an additional reason for concern about an ambush in the woods. In order to gain time for his knights to arm themselves, Henry Ahlefeld first sent out scouts, then a large number of peasants on horseback as decoys ahead of the main force. The squires followed at a distance, carrying the knights' shields as if on parade. Last of all came Count Gerhard VI, Henry Ahlefeld, and the knights. Ahlefeld had anticipated that either the scouts would see the ambushers and send him a timely warning or the Dithmarschers would mistake the mounted peasants for his knights and attack, thus betraying their position. However, the Dithmarschers remained so far out of sight and so quiet that the scouting units and peasants passed by without seeing them. Ahlefeld's ruse did work partially: when the Dithmarschers saw the squires with the shields, they assumed they were knights and fell upon them with a great cry. It was

not an even contest, and they quickly cut the young men down. But it gave the knights a few moments to arm themselves.

When Gerhard heard the sound of battle, he dashed forward to see what was happening, armed only with a baton. Legend reports that one Dithmarscher cried to him, "So you've come bareheaded to put on the ruler's cap of Dithmarschen. Here you have it!" and cleaved open his head with a battle axe. That was the decisive moment in the battle. Without Gerhard's leadership, all order in the Holstein ranks dissolved within minutes. Some of the knights, hemmed in by the forest and the many horses and cattle, dismounted for combat. Others rode on, heedless of the fact that they were abandoning their comrades to a sure death. In their fear and haste, they pushed those on foot into the ditches, thus depriving themselves of an invaluable infantry protection. Then, although some doubtless escaped up the narrow path, others ran into Dithmarscher militiamen, were thrust off their mounts by long spears, and killed. At each point of ambush, the cavalry found dead men and horses piled up high enough to block the road. Those who could not force their way past these obstacles and drive back the militiamen were soon surrounded, pulled from their horses, and slain. Some tried to flee through the forest and marsh on foot. Pursued by Dithmarschers who knew the land, many became lost in the swamps and emerged only later, exhausted and hungry, to be cut down without mercy.

The Dithmarschers carefully inspected the battlefield the next day, killing the wounded and leaving the dead commoners for the dogs and carrion birds. They counted the bodies of three hundred cavalrymen, including twelve knights and members of the families of the Lembeke, Pogwische, Ahlefeld, and von Siggen.

The Dithmarschers ransomed Gerhard's body to his widow for burial and allowed several widows who came dressed as nuns to claim their husbands' bodies. When they discovered a Pogwische and a Rantzau still alive under a pile of bodies, they spared them in return for promises to obtain the surrender of Marienburg. Within a few weeks the garrison withdrew from the castle and the countess of Holstein made peace. The Dithmarschers thereafter celebrated St. Oswalds Day (August 5), the date of this battle, as a national holiday.

The results of victory were not all that the Dithmarschers might have wished. Gerhard's immediate heir was his half-brother, Henry, who left his bishopric in Osnabrück to govern Holstein on behalf of Gerhard's young sons and his daughter, Hedwig, who married Dietrich of Oldenburg in 1417. When Adolf VIII died in 1459, his lands passed to Hedwig's son, Christian, who was already king of Denmark and Norway. Thus, the Dithmarschers came to face a more dangerous combination of forces than they had ever imagined—a monarch who could call on troops from Scandinavia, Schleswig, Holstein, and the coastal regions of northern Germany.

The Dithmarschers meanwhile obtained peace on favorable terms. The widowed duchess, Elizabeth, promised that no one would be allowed to attack Dithmarschen, and in the event that an attack did occur, Holstein would pay reparations. She freed the Dithmarschers from all tolls in Holstein and at the Eider and Stör ferries and

discontinued the practice by which the advocate at Hanerau collected taxes from some frontier parishes. She promised that all future disputes would be settled by the leading men of each land meeting together to find a solution.⁵

The victory on St. Oswald's Day guaranteed the independence of Dithmarschen. The Dithmarschers continued to pay the "free gift" to each new archbishop, and allowed him to appoint five advocates, but they ignored his wishes in everything else. Similarly, they were technically under the guidance of the Hamburg prior in spiritual matters, but in practice they did as they wished.⁶

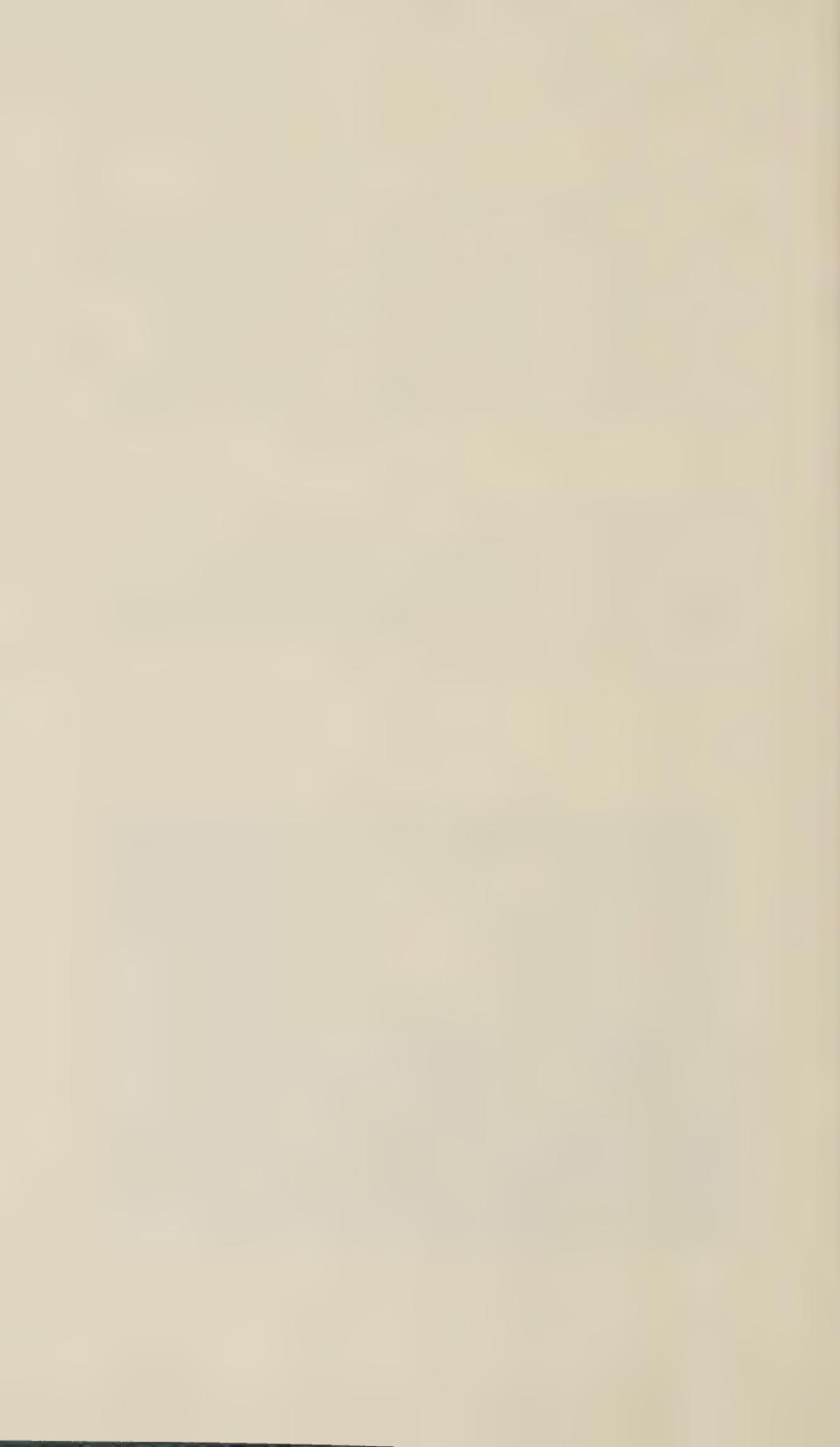
Summary

We can attribute the Dithmarschers' preservation of their independence to topography, their courage, and their unique social organization, but we must remember that theirs was not the only peasant community of the era seeking to govern itself. Because it is so easy in retrospect to see Dithmarschen as unique, we must look at other peasant communities which struggled against the twin threats of noble domination and internal anarchy. Only then can we fully appreciate what Dithmarschers had achieved by the dawn of the northern Renaissance.



Ruins of the castle at Marienburg 1990

PART TWO
OTHER PEASANT AND URBAN STATES



CHAPTER FIVE STATES WITHIN THE EMPIRE

Government by the Estates

The mid-fifteenth century was to see a new government evolve in Dithmarschen. This government was to be as interesting and unique in its own way, although not nearly as exotic or primitive as the clan system had been two centuries earlier. The Patrician Republic retained numerous features of the *universitas terrae Dithmarsae*, but it allowed a natural evolution of attitudes and practices to occur. This *Renaissance* state was to be in many ways as refined and cultivated as its *medieval* predecessor had been crude and wild, although the difference could be seen in emphasis only, and most citizens believed that the continuity of tradition and custom was not being disturbed.

The evolution of this state owed much to developments in the Holy Roman Empire. The local economy was responding to opportunities to export fish, animals, and grain via Hanseatic merchants. This development, along with new political theories and new methods of warfare, caused shrewd men among the upper class to compare their situation with that of neighboring gentry and to compare ways of improving their status while continuing to praise the concept of the equality of all citizens. In this way political and social developments in Dithmarschen reflected practices developing elsewhere in northern Europe, especially in the Germanic states of the Holy Roman Empire.

In Germany the period between 1400-1500 was the century of the *estates*. This term is perhaps more familiar in its French variation, the *Estates General*. There were three estates in France: nobles, clergy, and everyone else. (Modern journalists sometimes refer to themselves as the fourth estate.) In medieval Germany the composition of the estates varied widely. By definition, the estates were those classes which sent representatives to provincial or national assemblies. While this definition generally included clerics, nobles, and townsmen, the nobility was sometimes divided into two estates and occasionally neither the clergy nor the nobility was

represented. The towns were unequally represented, with the leading cities dominating this estate, which meant that the mercantile class alone was able to make its wishes known.

In theory, the third estate represented the peasants, too, but in the Holy Roman Empire they had a voice only in Switzerland and the Netherlands, and in nearby territories such as Tyrol and Varallberg, Kempten, the archbishopric of Salzburg, Baden, Frisia, and Mors. Even there, they were rarely able to persuade the assemblies to pass legislation favorable to their interests. In short, peasants had no direct representation at the national level, and at the local level, where they occasionally had representation, they had little influence. Their best hope was to appeal to the conscience of the ruler, to the general desire to uphold traditional common law as the protection of every individual against tyranny, and to the common sense of the representatives who had no wish to make the peasants long for radical changes in the established order.¹

The estates exercised a strong influence at the national level in Germany, where princes banded together to work for the reform of ecclesiastical and state institutions. In retrospect, we can see that a viable Holy Roman Empire was already a dream from the past which could not be revived. Some proposals for resuscitating the empire were frustrated by the opposition of incompetent or overly ambitious emperors. Others were blocked by nobles and burghers who feared that a strengthened emperor would some day threaten their liberty. Unfortunately, an emperor too weak to be a threat was also too weak to be a credible leader. Moreover, the individual territorial lords who were supposed to unite in emergencies and provide voluntary leadership were too weak themselves or, in their turn, were preceived by their weaker neighbors to be a greater threat than any emergency might be. These princes, like the emperor, were succumbing to the opposition of their regional estates.

Although the estates dominated the Holy Roman Empire and many smaller German states as well, they were not as successful in establishing the representative principle as part of national or regional government as the houses of Commons and Lords had already done in England. In failing to provide the leadership necessary for positive action, they became an obstacle to reform. Local princes eventually discovered that many of their subjects wanted an active, responsive autocracy: the lower classes wanted order and protection from their immediate lords; the upper classes feared that a weak government could not protect their status and possessions; everyone feared foreign invasion and domestic conflict. The most far-sighted of the hereditary princes did not simply dismiss the estates and rule as despots: they deflected popular dissatisfaction from themselves by “asking” assemblies for new taxes and for laws which increased the efficiency of the government. Although those princes maintained the fiction of representative government, they drastically limited the role of the estates in the exercise of real power.²

Representative government in medieval Germany failed to develop the institutions and traditions necessary for effective government. As long as territorial rulers continued to monopolize the executive departments, conduct foreign policy,

collect taxes, and spend money without supervision, the assemblies' role in government was limited to approving, advising, and vainly criticizing the rulers' policies. Moreover, representative government failed to provide a sound financial basis for national and regional government. The various estates were not yet willing to tax themselves voluntarily and submit to laws limiting their prerogatives and privileges. Consequently, representative government worked only at the local level. There it sometimes worked very well.

The principle of representative government was well understood by the Dithmarschers, and they even incorporated it into their new constitution. Because Dithmarschen was but a small rural state, facing only the ocean on the west, a large river on the south, and having a weak neighbor on the north, its people were able to concentrate their energies on a limited number of problems and to resolve them one by one. Elsewhere, in regions of greater political, economic, and social complexity, the estates were a combination of quarreling representatives from noble, clerical, and burgher spheres who were incapable of forming the united front necessary for contending with domineering lords and aggressive neighbors. A constitution suitable for a simple rural community was not practical for them.

As we have seen, Dithmarschen won its independence at a high point of feudalism in Germany, a time when nobles were generally meeting with success in forcing peasants to pay taxes and render services to them. Since feudal practices at that time did not recognize the peasants' right to rule themselves (or even defend themselves against oppressive lords), the Dithmarschers had used a legal subterfuge by accepting the overlordship of the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, although they denied him the means of exercising real power, and he lacked the military might to enforce any ruling his subjects refused to obey. This subterfuge fooled nobody. Many other free peasant communities and numerous cities throughout the Holy Roman Empire were doing the same thing. However, it was a facesaving device the nobles were willing to accept. Some of the free states were later subjugated by their nominal overlords; others withdrew their allegiance and proclaimed themselves independent of everyone except the distant emperor.

Historians who have investigated this phenomenon consider it an important part of the growth of modern states. However, these historians generally show an interest only in those states which have survived into the modern era, an understandable bias if one is primarily interested in *national* history. From today's perspective, however, the communities which failed should be of as much interest as those which succeeded. Why did some communities fail to make the necessary transformation from the medieval forms of government to the modern? Was it because this transformation involved the formation of a strong executive, the evolution of the estates into representative bodies which could do more than express the desires of special interest groups, the creation of new judicial systems and well-trained armies, and perhaps most important, some means of financing the government? Was this possible only under the rule of a strong autocrat? The lessons should be of value to the modern era, especially in the so-called developing world and perhaps even in a uniting Europe.

All too often, princes found it easy to impose change on quarreling estates or peasant communities after those groups had failed to make the adjustments themselves. However, many cities and some peasant communities did transform themselves for a longer or (more often) short period of time. Let us look at a few of the non-princely states in the Holy Roman Empire.

The Hanseatic League

One solution to the threats of anarchy and aggression was for cities to form leagues. The largest and most enduring of these was the Hanseatic League. The *Hansa*, as it was called, was a combination of north German and Baltic cities allied for trade and protection which grew out of several local alliances. The most important of these was formed in the mid-thirteenth century, when Lübeck and Hamburg agreed to police the roads in Holstein and Lauenburg, then to seek reductions in the tolls imposed by neighboring lords, and lastly, to protect their fishermen and merchants on the high seas. Merchants from other cities saw the advantages of belonging to such an alliance. At the end of the century, when the international merchant community on Gotland found itself under pressure from the King of Sweden, the merchants sent to Lübeck for safekeeping the documents guaranteeing their rights to travel and trade in Scandanavia, Livonia, Prussia, Poland, and Russia. Within a few years this organization merged with the merchant community in north Germany to form the Hanseatic League.

By the middle of the fourteenth century the Hanseatic League had become strong enough to impose its will on the King of Denmark and thus protect its interests in the Baltic Sea. The League also became the leading naval power in the North Sea, thereby protecting its trade to the Low Countries, England, and Norway. Perhaps the most significant weakness of Hanseatic League lay in the fact that it had almost no formal administration. From time to time its members sent representatives to discuss important business, the closest the member cities were willing to move toward having a permanent executive head was a general recognition that Lübeck should guide the league in times of peace and war. Whenever the citizens of Lübeck could not persuade the other cities to follow their advice, they threatened to give up the leadership of the league. This was an effective ploy: the duty was always thrust back upon the Lübeckers. Eventually their seal was commonly used for Hanseatic documents and their double-eagle coat-of-arms became the flag of the Hanseatic navy and waved over the overseas trading centers called *contors* where German merchants lived and stored their goods. In other respects the member cities jealously guarded their autonomy and prevented Lübeck from acting even on pressing matters without their being consulted. The result was that league usually reacted slowly to crises and rarely considered any strategy for dealing with danger until it stared them in the face. Even in critical moments, the assemblies were so hampered by civic and regional jealousies that united action was often impossible. Each of the three great

regions (the Livonian, Wendish, and Westphalian) ran their own affairs much as they desired, often injuring the interests of their allies. Meetings of the entire league were called only in emergencies, and were usually held in Lübeck. Although there were seventy-odd members (the number was never stable, and many were expelled or forced out by their princes after the middle of the fifteenth century), rarely did as many as thirty send representatives. This is because each city felt free to ignore any decision reached by the league and, therefore, did not see any good reason to spend money on an expensive delegation except during emergencies.

Each city valued its own sovereignty so highly that it refused to send naval forces or participate in economic warfare unless it saw such measures as necessary to its own safety or prosperity. Although willing to use economic boycotts and blockades on the league's royal enemies and raise fleets to combat pirates, the cities were reluctant to use them on one another. Once the precedent had been set, it might be used against any of them. This sentiment was especially strong in regard to taxation. The great merchant families who dominated the city government were not alone in this. The artisans and fishermen feared that in the end they would pay the greater part of any taxes. As a result, the Hanseatic League lacked that power to tax which is fundamental to the establishment of a strong government.

In spite of their differences, the merchant princes who guided the Hanseatic policies achieved some real successes in the realm of war and foreign affairs. This led them to the false conclusion that they did not need a closer political union. As a result, they were unprepared to defend their members when the princes began forcing the cities one by one to withdraw from the league. At length Lübeck, Hamburg, and Bremen were the only cities remaining free and independent.³

The Hanseatic League often cooperated with the Dithmarschers to protect the rights of merchants and fishermen, but no one suggested that this alliance become any closer than the pursuance of mutual interests. Dithmarschen was an convenient ally which had a common enemy—Holstein. Thus, the relationship of the Hansa and Dithmarschen resembled that which the Hansa had with the Teutonic Knights—friendly, mutually advantageous, but informal. The Hanseatic League recognized the advantage of having a friendly relationship with the tiny state at the mouth of the Elbe River, but it was not willing to commit money or resources to its defense.⁴ Consequently, although Hamburg and Lübeck considered themselves friends of Dithmarschen, they carefully limited the extent of their involvement with the peasant republic. They never proposed a military alliance or Dithmarschen's admission to full membership in the league. In failing to do this, the Hansa merchants missed their best opportunity to convert their league into something more resembling a territorial state.

Since no other urban combination in Germany ever enjoyed the power or prestige of the Hanseatic League, it is hardly surprising that other leagues similarly neglected the peasant communities surrounding them. To tell the truth, burghers and merchants rarely had complementary thoughts about peasants. Peasants were usually

ruled by the nobles and clerics in such a ruthless manner that they were socially and economically depressed.⁵ Nevertheless, pockets of free peasants existed in medieval Germany. Let the example of a one community of free peasants, Kempten, suffice for many others which strove to obtain for themselves the political rights which alone can guarantee social justice.

Kempten

The abbey of Kempten lay just north of the Alps in Bavaria near its border with Switzerland in the beautiful fairy-tale area of the *Allgäu*. The free peasantry (*eine freie Geburs*) there had predated the foundation of the monastery and in those days when everyone, including burghers and knights, paid an annual tax to his lord, they were in some respects on a equal legal standing with the region's nobles. The majority of the peasants were *Freizinsers*, who paid taxes directly to the abbot, a tithe for the support of the local priest, a payment to the noble lord who acted as the abbot's advocate (*Schirmherrn*), and an inheritance tax. Although the *Freizinsers* were originally exempt from military service, corvée, and other tasks customary to a peasantry, over the years many of them had come to perform those duties. This occurred most often when land was divided by inheritance laws or when individual farmers could not pay their taxes. Hard-pressed *Freizinsers* could strike bargains with the abbot's managers whereby those individuals and their descendants would remain personally free but would perform servile duties in return for a parcel of land, credit, or a loan. The result was that here, as was often the case elsewhere in Europe, it was a complex undertaking to determine a peasant's true status. A system which relied on oral history and local tradition rather than on an analysis of services rendered at the moment could be easily manipulated by the peasants affected—few individuals, however honest and upright, eagerly volunteer information which will cost them higher taxes and require them to perform more unpaid services. In this situation, names often helped establish an individual's status: a "John Freeman" stood a better chance of persuading a court that he was not a serf than did a "John Nunn" (presumably the illegitimate offspring of a fallen nun). Any serf given his freedom was sure to reinforce his new status by taking a new name, like "John Freed."



The *Allgäu* was a very complex region, politically, having been so subdivided and intermixed that it is difficult to illustrate even the boundaries of all its petty states. Little by little, the duke of Bavaria and his estates (abbots, burghers and the nobles) attempted to simplify the chaotic maze of laws, customs, and jurisdictions of the area and bring their finances into order. One means of doing this was to declare that every peasant had to establish his status formally. Since few peasants possessed

legal documents, this meant that anyone performing servile duties could be classified as a serf. Knowing that this edict could quickly make many Freizinsers into serfs, the peasants appealed to their lords' sense of honor and justice not to apply it unfairly.

Among the lords who applied the letter of the new rules rather than their spirit was the abbot of Kempten. In this he was merely following the powerful example of the nearby abbot of St. Gall who forbade Freizinsers performing servile duties from marrying free persons. This was a slow means of reorganizing the management of his lands, but it was sure. By requiring intermarriage with the serfs of his monastery, he was binding their offspring to serfdom—every child of a serf will be a serf—and thus assured his successors of a reliable supply of cheap labor. Since relatively few Kempten peasants were affected at first, they bore the outrage patiently. Then the abbot forged documents which required the serfs to pay heavier taxes and perform greater labor duties. He even levied taxes on the free peasants as well. At that point he met resistance!

The Kempten peasants had been encouraged to resist through the example of the Appenzellers of Switzerland who had fought the bishop of Augsburg to a deadlock in 1415. Secretly helped by burghers of the city of Kempten who feared the abbot's ambition to dominate the region, the peasants had called on the count of Montfort to assume the advocacy and defend them against their abbot. The abbot began a lawsuit against the count in the court of the duke of Bavaria and in Rome. The case came to a hearing at the papal court in 1423, and when the investigators questioned the abbot concerning the authenticity of his document, purportedly dating from Charlemagne, he answered that it was indeed genuine, a statement which was immediately challenged by the representative of the peasants. The abbot then swore again to the genuineness of the document and thereby won the judgment—no one dared to doubt the sworn word of such an exalted representative of God on earth. Pope Martin V then threatened to excommunicate anyone who encouraged the Freizinsers to deny their lord his lawful rights, and the abbot quickly declared that all peasants who had been performing servile duties were henceforth serfs. Aided by an additional favorable judgment from the emperor, he started to take action against the free peasants, but the fortuitous discovery of a document from 1144 substantiated the peasants' claims and won a reversal of the earlier papal decision. However, this came too late to save those who had already renounced their rights and agreed to live as serfs. In any case, the peasants had rebuffed the abbot only for the time being. They knew that new challenges to their rights would be made soon.

In 1460 a new abbot began pressing free peasants into serfdom. Again, the initial resistance by the community failed. Henceforth, the heirs of each peasant were required to deliver half of the deceased's possessions to the abbot and pay death duties out of the portion remaining to them. Moreover, only direct offspring could inherit property. By 1481 the oppressive actions had become so numerous and obnoxious that the peasants hailed the abbot before the emperor. (Surprisingly, some peasants did possess well-defined legal rights and defended them in ways which western civilization textbooks hardly prepare us to expect.) When asked to explain

his actions, the abbot responded that he was doing only what all landowners were doing. On the advice of the nobles at court, the emperor then dismissed the complaint against the abbot.

At this point the Kempten peasants had exhausted their legal remedies. They were reluctant to persist, since the abbot now had the right to use armed force against them. However, the situation became unbearable in November of 1491, when the abbot demanded new taxes. After two years of famine the abbot was undoubtedly hard-pressed for funds, but peasants had nothing to give. Moreover, the tax would become a permanent drain on peasant incomes. When the affected farmers swore to stand together in the defense of their rights and liberties, the abbot was momentarily unable to disperse them by force because his ally, the duke of Bavaria, was feuding with the cities of the Swabian League and could not spare any soldiers to fight against peasants. When the abbot heard that the peasants had already sent representatives to the cities to ask for aid, he took advantage of his own membership in the loosely-organized Swabian League to express his belief that the peasant protest was a possibly contagious mutiny. Everyone had unhappy peasants. If the cities sent aid to the peasants, the duke might feel it necessary to retaliate by encouraging the cities' peasants to stand up for their rights. In the end everybody would regret having acted on temptation to embarrass their enemies.

This argument was effective. The cities sent commissioners to Kempten with instructions to support the abbot's claims to new taxes. When the peasants asked the commissioners to reconsider the decision and offered their lives if they were in the wrong, the commissioners answered that they had come not to uphold justice, but to restore peace. The harsh warning that "they would make their wives and children widows and orphans," was sufficient. The peasants dispersed. Later they sent a spokesman to appeal to the emperor, but he was murdered by assassins before he could carry out his mission. (The son of that courageous individual was the leader of a peasant rising a generation later.) A second messenger was still at the imperial court when the army of the Swabian League struck the Kempten peasants without warning, burning villages and killing everyone who could be identified as having participated in the protest. Within a few years the abbot reduced 1200 more free peasants to serfdom. Soon afterward the first *Bundschuh* (literally, *the alliance of the shoe*) appeared. This representation of a peasant's boot became the symbol of resistance against noble tyranny. Soon *Bundschuh* meetings were being held by peasants throughout southern and central Germany.

The last and greatest attempt to reassert peasant liberties was the Peasant Rising of 1525, which followed the path of the early *Bundschuh* risings. Inspired partly by revolutionary Protestant ideas, at first the peasant armies achieved impressive military successes. However, their lack of weapons, training, discipline, self-confidence, and leadership soon became apparent. While many peasants hurried to submit to their lords after the first setback, some bands of peasants remained in arms to the end, when they were finally exterminated by avenging lords.⁶

All over Europe, whenever unorganized peasants rose against their lords, they went down before organized armies, however small such forces were. Military conflict is not decided by numbers alone, but by equipment, training, tradition, and confidence in victory. Few peasants had more than the vaguest sense of how to assault a castle, and none found effective means for holding the fortifications they did capture. Some had been coerced into joining the uprising; others were caught up in the temporary enthusiasm of the moment and acted without thinking about the consequences; a few were merely criminals taking advantage of the breakdown of law and order. Many of these peasants, sensing that they were doomed to defeat, fell into panic at the first clash of arms and sought to save themselves, regardless of the consequences to their movement.⁷

At this point, the reader might be excused for thinking that the peasant cause was hopeless. Often it was. Certainly peasants were never given rights but won them through persistence, toil, and sacrifice. Courage and resourcefulness were not enough, however, for peasants to defend that self-government which lies at the foundation of all civil, religious, and political rights. A favorable topography and luck were also necessary—those characteristics gave some communities the opportunity to organize local government before threats to their independence became too strong and too numerous. In the end only organized rural communities had any success in defending peasants' rights.

Switzerland

The freest peasant communities were in the mountain cantons (small territorial units) of Switzerland. In their use of the geographic advantages available to them, the Swiss resembled their Saxon and Frisan counterparts in the North Sea swamps. Similarly, the Swiss were intensely patriotic and warlike. Willing to sacrifice themselves for liberty, they were pitiless in victory and unrelenting in defeat. Over the years they revived the ancient and long forgotten phalanx into the most formidable military formation of the late Middle Ages. Infantry had always been able to retreat into a "hedgehog" formation—with all their spears pointed outward. Such a formation was deadly against overly-bold cavalry—and was well suited to supporting knights in pitched combat. However, a passive mass of militiamen was vulnerable to archery and was usually unable to advance or retreat under attack. A phalanx, in contrast, was an infantry formation of "seried" ranks, such as one sees today in parades by military units and marching bands. By mastering the art of marching in unison, the warriors could prevent their formation from collapsing into a chaotic mob so closely packed that it was impossible for them to wield their pikes and halberds. Swiss units were able to change fronts quickly, drive back cavalry charges, then resume their advance. Such tactics were well suited to mountainous terrain, where even a poorly-trained phalanx was better disciplined than a cavalry force hemmed in by rocks, precipices, and woods. In time the Swiss infantry became so efficient that

neighboring rulers began to hire them as mercenaries. Although many mountaineers became professional warriors, Swiss advances in the military arts did not result in Switzerland becoming an important political entity. Cantonal jealousy hindered expansion of the frontiers and assisting neighboring peasant or urban leagues. As we have seen in the history of the Hanseatic League, moments when the Swiss were willing to act in concert were rare.⁸

The Swiss had not always been respected for their military skills and their talent for achieving political concensus. In the beginning they faced the same trials as the Dithmarschers and their responses were hardly more effective. They owed their survival as a free people to the fact that their mountainous terrain had not been suited to manorial farming rather than to any other reason. Basically, the cantons were so poor that nobles had little incentive for subjecting the population to serfdom. The petty lords of the Alpine lowlands had contented themselves with an occasional collection of rents and dues from the herdsmen and woodchoppers of the higher valleys. Otherwise, they ignored them.

This situation changed in the eleventh century when the counts of Zähringen began to found towns and establish new peasant settlements in the mountains. At that time nobles everywhere were seeking to fill their lands with immigrants. In fact, the competition to attract immigrants became so fierce that the Zähringen counts found it necessary to offer significant advantages to immigrants over that which they could expect to find elsewhere. Since the Zähringen land was often less fertile than immigrants would receive in other regions, the counts promised immigrants more personal freedom than other rulers were willing to grant. It cost the counts little, since the lands were almost worthless and scarcely inhabited, and the new settlements required little supervision—but it was indispensable for populating the mountain frontier with communities of free farmers and herders. The desire for freedom is the primary reason why certain types of men and women appear in frontier regions. Money alone will not attract many individuals to settle new lands where hardships are more numerous than luxuries, but personal freedom and economic opportunity will.

When the Zähringen family died out, its lands were divided among so many heirs that none of them was powerful enough to dominate the region. Not even the Hapsburgs, who later acquired the imperial crown, possessed a sufficiently large number of territories to make their early investments worth expanding. Consequently, the peasants and townspeople retained freedoms they might have lost if their lords had been more powerful. The opening of the St. Gotthard pass did not change the situation significantly, because access to the pass was so important to everyone that neighboring cities and lords alike cooperated to hinder any noble who tried to become its master. Nevertheless, the Swiss were not completely immune to the process by which nobles gained domination over peasant communities. By the beginning of the thirteenth century nobles dominated most of the lower valleys and towns, and they required the inhabitants of the higher valleys to perform military service and pay taxes to advocates appointed by the Hapsburg family. Nevertheless,

this process still had limited scope, and nobles exercised little authority in the high mountains.

Associations of freemen called *Markgenossenschaften* had already formed in the forest cantons of Uri and Schwyz for exploitation of the common pastures. In nearby Unterwalden, on the other hand, free peasants were a minority group. As a result, Unterwalden remained politically backward and divided compared to Uri and Schwyz and joined the other cantons in the struggle for liberty a half-century after they had taken advantage of the friendly overtures of Emperor Frederick II (1215-1251) to make themselves independent. The emperor had been looking for allies who would protect the Alpine passes against his enemies, particularly against the pope. Since the pope at that time was also seeking to make friends and allies in the forest cantons, the Swiss cantons were able to play him against the emperor successfully. Uri purchased an imperial charter in 1231 from Frederick's son, King Henry of Germany, and Schwyz obtained a similar charter in 1240 after sending a volunteer unit to fight in Italy alongside the emperor in his darkest hour. Although the validity of a charter granted by an excommunicated emperor was questioned later, it was at least a charter and one granted freely.

Urban Swiss cantons were the next to seek full independence. Unlike peasant communities, which had no models to follow, the towns could draw on the experience of Italian city communes which had been thriving for centuries. However, the Swiss towns were so much smaller than Italian cities that the burghers could not have defended themselves from the encroaching Hapsburg dynasty without the help from Frederick II, and when he died in 1251 they faced a crisis. Rudolf of Hapsburg took advantage of the chaotic situation in Swabia and Switzerland to acquire new domains. By the time Rudolf became emperor in 1273, he had practically encircled the forest cantons. The hour of reckoning seemed near.



The imperial title may have been a greater burden to Rudolf than an advantage. As emperor Rudolf found himself so preoccupied with politics on a grand scale than he could not attend properly to local matters in Switzerland. Traditionally, emperors were very concerned with Italian affairs, but Rudolf came to power as a papal ally and understood that every pope became nervous whenever any imperial army entered Italy, no matter how friendly the emperor was. To maintain his friendship with the popes, Rudolf refrained from sending troops across the Alps. This

allowed him to ignore those apparently weak Swiss cantons which had seized control of the passes for the moment. It was more important for him to defend his newly-acquired duchy of Austria and deal with political challenges in Bohemia, Poland, and Hungary (see map, p. 44). Unable to spare the energy or the knights to conquer the Swiss militarily, he relied upon economic pressure to slowly extend his dominion over the strategic forest cantons, and he met such success through this peaceful aggression that the peasants and burghers saw his death in 1291 as their last opportunity to reassert their independence. Representatives from the forest cantons met in a secret conference, where they swore an oath to maintain the peace, observe a common code of law, and to defend one another against all enemies. From the oath taken at this time the association of the three forest cantons became known as the *Eidgenossenschaft*. After having seized the passes over the Alps, the forest cantons notified the merchant communities in Italy and Germany that freedom of trade could be assured only by helping them defend their independence. The thinly-populated forest cantons could not have stood alone against the Hapsburg armies. Not even their new weapon, the halbard—a combination of spear and axe—nor their crossbows (such as the one used by William Tell) could make them invincible except in the high mountains. When the herders came down into the valleys for winter, bringing their cattle, sheep, and goats with them, they would be an easy prey to an army of knights. Therefore, it was important that they make allies among those lowland burghers, bishops, abbots, and nobles who were chaffing under Hapsburg rule. The resulting confederation of forest cantons and towns was formed of mutual necessity. In time more cantons joined the alliances until by the beginning of the sixteenth century there were thirteen full members of the *Eidgenossenschaft* and numerous allied communities. The Swiss Confederation was more than a league of free peasant communities. It was composed of peasant republics, towns, abbeys, countships, and even subject states. Only the forest cantons (eventually five in number) were true democracies. Most of the others were city-states which allowed peasants little or no participation in government. As time passed, the burghers in the lowland cantons began (in a manner similar to the Kempten example) to strip their peasants of their few rights.

The rural cantons understood that Swiss independence depended on a strong army and that dissatisfied peasants were no basis on which to build a military force. Therefore, although the Swiss insisted on the autonomy of each canton in the conduct of local affairs, they interfered from time to time to protect the rights of the class which provided the bulk of the militiamen. The *Pfaffenbrief War of 1370*, for example, grew out of the mayoral family's effort to install pro-Austrian vicars in place of anti-Hapsburg priests. The cantons not only prevented this action but eventually passed a law forbidding anyone to introduce foreign priests or advocates into any part of the Confederation. Two decades later they united in codifying military responsibilities and practices, thus making it possible for generals to maneuver large armies with the confidence that each unit could perform its necessary tasks. One could say that the military reforms of 1444 were the salvation of the Confederacy,

because they created the army which defeated the Hapsburg and made possible the historic alliance with France. Swiss armies subsequently defeated the duke of Burgundy, the Swabian League, and the duke of Milan.

The reforms, unfortunately, did not end all conflict between peasant and burgher. Of the many conflicts between these groups, some of the most famous occurred in the city of Zürich in the sixteenth century. On one occasion the councilmen excluded the peasantry from any participation in the government and even began to kill the farm dogs belonging to the peasants on the pretext of protecting game for hunters. The peasants marched on the town, arrested the mayor, put him on trial, and executed him! Then they reclaimed their rights to participate in political life. The next time the Zürichers attempted to exclude country folk from the government, in 1513, it provoked the rising called the *Swiss Peasant War*. This time, however, the peasants lost.

Temporarily, city governments throughout the Confederation were dominated by a handful of prominent businessmen in the pay of foreign princes. This produced a situation where sons of Swiss peasants and artisans were encouraged to serve as mercenaries in one foreign war after the other, but the bulk of the money ended in the pockets of the rich. The peasants whose sons risked suffering and dying did not complain overloudly as long as the armies won victories and brought home good wages and abundant booty, but that changed when large numbers of Swiss fell in the Battle of Novara in 1513. Afterward the peasants of Luzern, Bern, and Solothurn marched on the cities, punished those whom considered responsible for beginning the wars, and forced councilmen to swear to abide by the law and obtain community approval for any future military commitments.

The German peasant rising of 1525 produced few outbreaks of violence in the Swiss Alps. The relative absence of serfdom and noble privilege in Switzerland meant that all citizens could discuss religious reforms without necessarily demanding a simultaneous introduction of a utopian society. Undeniably there was a connection between Protestant ideas and political democracy, but it is easy to exaggerate its importance: in Switzerland the majority of the population remained Roman Catholic and were nevertheless self-governing republics with democratic traditions. The diverse governments of Switzerland continued to function for generations with minimal change until the era of Napoleon.

The "central" government of the Confederation never threatened the autonomy of the cantons and cities. In fact, the "central" government barely existed. There was no written constitution, only a series of treaties and agreements regarding peace and war. There was no executive authority, only the Diet, and an assembly of delegates from the thirteen cantons. Almost all other government functions were left to local authority. The Confederation existed for the preservation of peace among the cantons and for mutual defense. It was effective in achieving those goals and rarely attempted to do more. Strong bonds of patriotism bound the 50-60,000-man army into a strong and well-disciplined force which rarely had to fight a "national" war and

their enduring experience as mercenaries turned the Swiss into a militant people who lived in peace.

Stories associated with the forest cantons' early struggles for freedom became the basis of a national history and mythology which reenforced those mutual interests which had originally brought the cantons together. Although the Swiss Confederation remained medieval in its thought and organization, this was rarely a disadvantage. The political institutions the Swiss developed, based as they were on traditions of limited government, practical action, and mutual toleration, serves well as a model for a united Europe and an effective United Nations.⁹

CHAPTER SIX

THE NORTH SEA STATES

The Early History

A second great area of ancient peasant communities stretched along the entire coast of the North Sea. Even when Julius Caesar's Roman legions first reached this coast, the Frisians were living on man-made mounds (terps) above the swamps and marshes, very much as the Dithmarschers lived almost a millennium later. Later, after the collapse of the Roman Empire and during the vast movement of peoples known as the *Völkerwanderung*, the Frisians were almost alone among the Germans in resisting the urge to migrate abroad. In the eighth century, they fought against missionaries and Franks, but their resistance demonstrated more vigor than success: although they martyred St. Boniface in 754, they were eventually subdued and brought within the Christian empire. As best we can tell, the Frisians were at that time still using farming techniques which had been observed by Romans.

It is from the era of Charles the Great (Charlemagne, 760-814) that we find the first dependable records, the authors of which were priests seeking to root out pagan habits and, consequently, were highly biased against the herdsmen and fishermen who lived along the sandy coast and on the islands. The missionaries made every effort to Christianize and "civilize" the Frisians, despite the obvious difficulty of preaching the gospel to the population of the small communities on a regular basis. Although the process of bringing the Frisians inside the empire was often less than gentle, Frankish rule was beneficial on the whole. Frankish officials recognized the unique character of the people they ruled and attempted to retain as much local tradition as was compatible with Christianity and imperial instructions. We are familiar with this era principally through legal records, especially through the *Frisian law* issued in 802 by officials of Charles the Great. In ensuing decades the region seems to have prospered economically. Unfortunately, even as the local economy grew, the power of the heirs of Charles's declined. By the tenth century the Frankish lords were unable to protect the coastal territories from invasions by Northmen, those Vikings from Denmark who sailed south each spring to pillage,

rape, and burn. The Frisians suffered terribly at the hands of the pagan Northmen, especially in the destruction of their once blooming coastal trade, but they were at least spared the Viking settlement which took place in Normandy and England—the poverty and isolation of their swamps protected them.

Surprisingly, it was during the terrible era of Viking raids for slaves and booty that the Frisians began to develop the techniques for diking and draining, thus increasing the productivity of their fields and creating the society which has characterized the region until modern times. Two centuries passed almost without remark by the monk-chroniclers who are our principal source of information concerning the events of this era. Our knowledge of the Frisians' progress in diking and social organization is no more than a combination of odd facts and surmises which have to be interpreted in the context of events in *Germany* and *France* (as the surviving parts of the defunct Frankish empire came to be named). There was a myriad of small states, some ruled by bishops, some by counts, others by abbots and a few by burghers. The countryside was dominated by feudal knights, who ignored the commands of their betters whenever they believed they could escape punishment for disobedience—which was most of the time.

Before the thirteenth century the Frisians had even begun to pit their dikes against the sea itself, not just against rivers and swamps. The result was to create the first of the *polders* (land lying below sea level) which are so characteristic of the region today. Once these fertile polders appeared, the chroniclers became aware of the economic importance of Frisia and never again completely neglected to take note of events along the shores of the North Sea.

The Frisians

Daily life among the Frisians who lived along the North Sea coast resembled that described earlier concerning Dithmarschen. At the onset of winter, work in the fields ceased and, except for the necessity of repairing dikes and canals, men and beasts retired into their homes and barns. These were often combined to make huge farmhouses, where fuel and fodder could be stored as well. After the ground thawed in April and standing water was drained from the fields, the farmers could begin plowing. They sent the cattle into the blooming meadows and put the horses to work, often hitching as many as six horses to one plow to work the wet, heavy soil. By summer, when the grass was two feet high, the farmers began cutting hay for winter fodder, then harvested the grain and began the fall plowing. The outdoor season generally ended in October with the slaughter of fattened animals. At that time the worn equipment was repaired and harvest festivals took place.

Cattle and sheep flourished on the meadows, fruit trees wherever the land rose somewhat higher above the flood plain. Although the purpose of agriculture was more to provide fodder and food for the winter than to sell abroad, the Frisians conducted foreign commerce as best they could. A principal handicap was the lack

of good wood for building ships. Nevertheless, Frisian sailors visiting England were so highly regarded that English kings hired them to serve in their navy and protect their island kingdom against Viking attack. In the end, however, the Frisians had to abandon the seas to the Vikings and concentrate upon agriculture.

The Frisian economy was best served by farming units consisting of extended families, each living on and working one piece of land around the individual farmsteads. The large house had to accommodate not only the family but also the livestock, the harvest, and fodder for half the year. However, the majority of Frisians did not live in these large houses but in hovels. These impoverished families eked out a living as day-laborers, scarcely daring to hope for much improvement in their plight. Even the slightly wealthier cottagers who owned small plots and a few animals or a fishing boat often supplemented their incomes in this same way. The patrician farmers formed a gentry class which worked hard in the management of their farms but hired laborers for the more difficult, dirty, and unhealthy tasks. From the modern point of view, this was a shameless exploitation of the poor, but medieval men saw the relationship of rich and poor as a natural and mutually beneficial one with features which compensated for the laborers' lack of economic opportunity. Most important among the ameliorating factors was the clan relationship which guaranteed even the poorest laborer the means of earning a living and surviving economic crises. Retaining this economic relationship must have been considered more important than embarking on social experiments: over the centuries rich and poor alike resisted all outside efforts to alter the way of life in Frisia. Even the most foolish person could see that circumstances along the coast and on the islands, however hard they were, were preferable to conditions in the interior, where the peasantry had to support a luxury-loving nobility and ambitious churchmen. There were few manors and few serfs along the coast, and the richest man spoke the same language as the poorest.

Although life in the various areas along the coast had much in common with one another, there were also characteristics unique to each Frisian and Saxon community: one settlement might have been near an important river and a flourishing city, another neighboring a powerful lord, and yet another isolated and disease-ridden. Since each region faced special problems, it is to be expected that each group of coastal communities had a separate history.

The history of the Dutch is probably the best known among all the coastal peoples. They became famous in the high Middle Ages as enterprising fishermen, weavers, and merchants, but before the year 1000 they had actually been backward and primitive. At that time, as they learned to protect their lands from their rivers' floods [especially the Rhine] and the English Channel's storms, they became wealthy. Cities sprang up as merchants exploited the water routes along the coasts, upriver to the interior, and across the seas. By the mid-thirteenth century Count William of Holland had become so wealthy from collecting taxes on trade that he was a serious contender for the vacant throne of the Holy Roman Empire. However, his efforts to subject the West Frisians living along the Zuider Zee cost him his life in

1256. His son persisted in the effort to expand his borders along the coast and finally obtained the surrender of the politically isolated peasants in 1289. A later count conquered the island communities in Zealand in 1323.

Fishing and mercantile interests were paramount in this Dutch state. Peasants were suppliers of cheap foodstuffs, taxes, and manpower—cheese and wooden shoes—but without political, social, or economic power. For this reason, they vanish from the pages of this volume, no longer of significant interest except for the lesson that unity and diversity are not incompatible qualities. The mixture of urban and rural communities produced economic prosperity and social stability, but the lesson was one which other coastal peoples failed to learn.

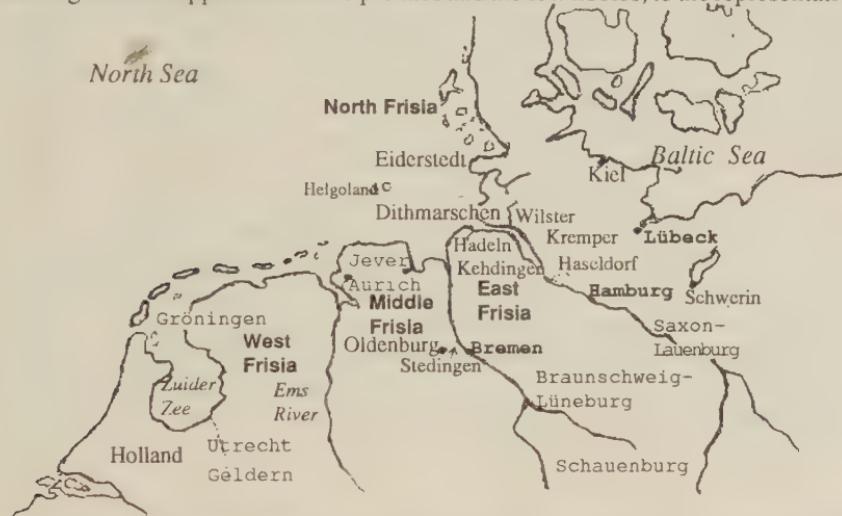
For many years the counts of Holland were unable to advance their borders further northward into West Frisia. One reason was the competition provided by the bishops of Utrecht. Even though an agreement from the year 1165 was supposed to have settled the division of the lands in this region, the counts and bishops quarreled repeatedly over hegemony, creating a military stalemate. Between 1197 and 1203 a brother of the count of Holland succeeded in imposing his rule over the sparsely populated northern fens, but the Frisians revolted when he returned south to succeed his brother. For the next two centuries the three West Frisian *pagi* (Oostergoo, Westergoo, and Zevenwolden) maintained their independence against all efforts to conquer them.

Middle and East Frisia experienced similar aggression by the local princes, especially by the archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen. However, the mutual jealousy of these princes frustrated all their ambitions. Although first one prince, then another, would achieve a temporary local victory, his rivals would assist the Frisians to rebel. As a result, most of Middle and East Frisia remained independent. At the beginning of the thirteenth century, there were no counts, almost no knights, no serfs, nor any walled cities. Although twenty-seven cloisters existed, each with an abbot ruling over the peasants roundabout, these lands nevertheless were largely populated by free peasants who governed themselves by rules which were essentially democratic.

During the struggles for Frisian independence, common forms of government organization had been adopted all along the North Sea coast. Each region (*pagus*) was divided into districts (*grietenijen*), where justice was dispensed by an assembly of elected judges. The judge, who was elected for a term of one year, was called a *Warven* (West Frisia), *Grietman* (Middle Frisia), or *Redievan* (East Frisia). He performed numerous duties corresponding to those of a bailiff in neighboring lands. In Frisia, as everywhere, carrying out justice (trials for theft, murder, breach of promise, etc.) was an indispensable function of government. Although the old Frisian law of Charlemagne was now out of date, many of its characteristics remained, especially the complicated *wergild*, whereby each crime had to be expiated by a monetary compensation as in Dithmarschen. Interestingly, the death penalty was meted out more in the nature of a pagan sacrifice to the gods than as an act of execution, so that the executioner could not be held individually responsible for carrying out his duty.

Frisian laws were not strictly enforced. The small local governments were too weak to enforce their edicts beyond the narrow confines of the *pagus*, and criminals could escape punishment by crossing any nearby border and living with their relatives. Of the various efforts to overcome the local jealousies and petty feuds which made law enforcement difficult, the most successful was the assembly at Upstalboom, near Aurich. Probably first called together in the first half of the twelfth century, the *Upstalsboomverband* attempted to mediate between contending *pagi* and to find solutions for common legal problems. However, the union was not effective and eventually disappeared.

Frisia was "democratic" at every level of society. From the simple assembly of heads of families in the village and the *grietjenigen*, to the elected representatives meeting with the appointees of the prelates and the few nobles, to the representatives



to the *Upstalsboomverband*, a simple if imperfect democracy was practiced. The limitations of this system can be clearly seen: there were class divisions as well as terrible blood feuds among the leading families. In a land where the population was sparse, there were few institutions to offset the ambitions of important clans and powerful individuals. Local feuds subsided when everyone saw the need for a united resistance against some neighboring lord but resumed as soon as the danger had passed. This system nevertheless assured the existence of men who were ready and willing to defend themselves against all comers, men whose skill and courage served to offset the disparity in troops and wealth available to the counts and bishops. Thus, for a long time the ancient and seemingly impractical and inhumane customs provided the Frisians with the means for coping with domestic dissent and foreign aggression. Necessity caused the Frisians to be warlike and distrustful of strangers.¹ However, in the long run these characteristics became obstacles to the defense of their freedom against stronger opponents. The Frisians found it difficult to unify them-

selves for mutual protection or to form permanent alliances which would discourage armed aggression.

West Frisia lost its independence when the counts of Holland came to the aid of weak parties during recurring civil conflicts. Count Albrecht's interventions in local feuds between 1396 and 1401 were without permanent results, but when Philip the Good of Burgundy (1419-1467) acquired Holland and the rest of the Low Countries, he became the most powerful ruler of the era. In 1435 his armies established a permanent foothold in the northern fens. The seemingly invincible armies of his son, Charles the Bold (1467-1477) forcibly joined West Frisia to Holland forever.

Middle and East Frisia met different fates. Although the periodic meetings at Upstalboom bore fruit in the formation of a unified law, Frisia became a political unity too late to develop a concept of nationhood. The only documentary evidence of a *United Frisia* dates from 1338, when the Upstalsboomverband signed a treaty with France in hope of assisting the West Frisians against the count of Holland. However, the seal used on that occasion is the only example which has survived. Other treaties—for example, with the Hanseatic League—have vanished or lost their seals.

The era of Frisian unity (and *Friesische Freiheit*) came to an end after 1350, when clan chieftains sought to dominate the Upstalsboomverband. Since they could not agree as to which one of them was to be most prominent, they began to quarrel among themselves. Originally probably rich farmers who governed large numbers of tenants, these chieftains had provided nearby villagers protection from the vicissitudes of local warfare. By adding the villagers' arms to their own private armies, they had been able to assume all important public offices, build fortified homes, and look upon themselves as nobles.

Diking in East Frisia



The first chieftain (*hovetlinge, capitanei*) to rise to prominence in Frisia was Edo Wimken, who led the Rüstingen community in a war against the counts of Oldenburg beginning in 1355. Edo slowly expanded his authority until his domains extended as far as Jever. This persuaded the communities between the Ems and Weser Rivers that he had become a greater danger than even the count of Oldenburg. Subsequently, many of them swore alliance to Ocko tom Brok of Aurich.

Ocko was successful in his conflict with Edo Wimken, but he found it difficult to maintain the position he had won. His authority was threatened by neighboring lords, competing chieftains, and Hanseatic cities eager to create a monopoly of trade in Frisia and stamp out piracy. In 1391, after Ocko had recognized Duke Albrecht of Bavaria and Holland as overlord of Frisia in return for his assistance against these enemies, he was murdered by outraged patriots. That was not the end of the tom Brok family, however. Five years later Widzel tom Brok gave refuge to the Vitalien brothers, Baltic pirates who had been expelled from their lairs on Gotland by the Hanseatic League and the Teutonic Knights. He had hoped that their military skills would serve him well, but by 1400, those searobbers had been annihilated and the gold of their leader, Klaus Störtebecker, was exhibited on the highest steeple in Hamburg (where a replica remains to this day).

After the death of Widzel, his brother Keno obtained aid from the duke of Gelders for an effort to make himself count of Frisia. Within a few years Keno had conquered Emden and begun to contemplate adding West Frisia to his domains. Over the decades the largely Dutch city of Gröningen had suppressed intestine warfare in its neighborhood. However, it could not control the political rivalries which brought about civil war between 1396 and 1401 nor prevent the count of Holland from exploiting the situation to his own advantage. Two parties arose: the *Schieringer* party opposed the Dutch intervention, the *Vetköper* supported it. The *Vetköper* were

Farmstead in East Frisia



triumphant at first, but when Dutch support waned, so did their position. In the end, the Schieringer not only routed their opponents, but even overawed the proud and powerful citizens of Gröningen. In 1414 Keno invaded West Frisia in support of the Veköper and inflicted a severe military defeat on the Schieringer near Nordhorn. Although Keno died soon afterward, his son's chief advisor, Focko Ukena, pressed on to the Zuider Zee, a success which prompted the Schieringer to reverse their traditional hostility to Holland and ask the count for help. Dutch forces later drove Focko from West Frisia.

Focko meanwhile had established himself firmly as ruler of all Frisians between the Ems and the Weser. His relationship with neighboring princes was excellent but his tyrannical habits toward his subjects eventually proved his undoing: in 1431 the chiefs rose and drove him into exile. Chaos followed. The chiefs fought among themselves for supremacy until Ulrich Cirksena (+1466) obtained sufficient assistance from Hamburg and the Hanseatic cities to defeat his rivals. Ulrich consolidated his position by marrying Folko's niece and awarding minor territories to his principal native allies.

In 1464 Ulrich was recognized as count of East Frisia by the emperor, Frederick III (1452-1493). This raised the question as to whether Frisia should be under imperial overlordship or subject to the rising power of Burgundy as was West Frisia. The matter was finally settled in favor of the emperor, with fateful results for Dithmarschen. In 1498 Emperor Maximilian (1493-1519) named Duke Albrecht of Saxon-Meissen (1443-1500) as guardian for Count Edzard (1491-1528), whose subjects were refusing to pay taxes. This promised to be a profitable business for the Saxon duke because he would share in any revenues he could collect. Anticipating armed resistance, he employed an effective but bloodthirsty body of mercenaries called the *Black Garde* which had been selling its services from West Frisia to Sweden. Two years later the Black Garde participated in an invasion of Dithmarschen.

The monarchical form of government prevailed in Frisia because the communities failed to suppress lawless petty chiefs. Each petty tyrant seized power without fear of punishment by a united state. The anarchic wars among the chiefs then provoked intervention by the Hanseatic cities, who wanted peace and order above all. In short, Frisia failed to remain free because its people could not maintain discipline among their own ranks and suppress piracy against their neighbors.² Historian Wilson King summarized the Hanseatic viewpoint well, saying, "With all their love of freedom, the Frisians were cruel, dishonest, and sly. They were not to be trusted." It was a fatal shortcoming.³

Hadeln to Altes Land

The board marshes between the Elbe and Weser rivers had been sparsely settled until 1106 when the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen brought the first Dutch

settlers to Stade. As we have seen, the count of Stade was already acknowledged to be the dominant noble of the region. His town was small but strategically located on a slight rise overlooking the flat countryside. It became even more important in the twelfth century after the immigrants drained the surrounding marshes and made them productive. Archbishop Hartwick carried out a systematic colonization along the Elbe (Hadeln, Kehdingen, Altes Land) so that a free and prosperous peasantry grew up along the Elbe.

Although Henry the Lion and subsequent rulers of Saxony hoped to take possession of Stade, over the years Archbishop Gebhard (1219-1258) arranged an exchange of territories and claims to lands between himself, Duke Otto of Braunschweig (1235-1252), and Duke John of Saxon-Lauenburg (1246-1286) which secured his possession of the entire region except Hadeln, which went to Saxon-Lauenburg, and Wursten, which belonged to the city of Bremen.

Hamburg was not pleased with the duke of Saxon-Lauenburg's possessing Hadeln, since that would give him the opportunity to interfere with trade on the Elbe both above and below the city. Moreover, it would allow him to threaten the vital lighthouse at Cuxhaven. Therefore, Hamburg signed a treaty with the inhabitants of Hadeln and Wursten in 1315 which guaranteed that the duke would not be allowed to station troops in that region. This presented certain difficulties, since the population of the region was insufficient to drive away pirates like Rolf Karstens. In such cases the Hanseatic League acted as the international police force. The critical moment for Hadeln came in 1499-1500, after the power of the Hansa had declined: the country was invaded by the blood-thirsty mercenary band mentioned earlier, the Black Garde. The mercenaries, having just completed a campaign in West Frisia, accepted employment from the duke of Saxon-Lauenburg for a feud against the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen. The Black Garde terrorized the archbishop's lands, burned villages belonging to the bishop of Verden, the city of Bremen, and the duke of Braunschweig-Lüneburg. When the army arrived in Hadeln, the frightened people attempted no resistance. Hadeln remained under the Saxon-Lauenburg dynasty into the seventeenth century.⁴

Stedingen

The peasant community of Stedingen on the east bank of the Weser River has already been mentioned above, because the valiant resistance of those peasants on the Weser river that convinced Archbishop Gerhard to come to terms with the Dithmarschers rather than to try suppressing their independence by force. The Stedingers were apparently of mixed Frisian and Saxon origin and, like the Dithmarschers, had made surrounding marshes into fertile farms. Theirs had been a long-standing tradition of independence. The peasants had repeatedly taken advantage of archiepiscopal difficulties to evade paying either the tithe or taxes. Instead, they provided

dependable infantry units which the archbishops used in support of their mercenary cavalry. However, in the course of events the Stedingers began using their military experience against those local knights and advocates who demanded the payment of taxes. They systematically burned their enemies' lairs until numerous castle ruins dotted the surrounding hillocks.

Unfortunately, we know little about the government of the Stedingen community. Clearly they ignored the archbishop's advocates and prieststhis was the basis of the later charge of heresy made against them. Their contempt of customary relationships would perhaps not have been important if Stedingen had lain further away from Bremen, but it was only a few miles to the west of the city. Oldenburg lay only a few miles further on. Thus the Stedingers were hemmed in by powerful, hostile neighbors who had opportunities to reflect on their growing wealth and the evil influence they might have on hitherto law-abiding peasants elsewhere.

Archbishop Gebhard was unable to act against the Stedingers as long as Waldemar II of Denmark held sway in the north because the king acted on the principle that *my enemy's enemy is my friend*: the archbishop was hostile to Danish interests, therefore, Waldemar protected the independent peasants. Immediately after the 1227 battle of Bornhöved, where Waldemar's armies were crushed, Gebhard took steps to collect the revenues he saw necessary if he himself were to take the king's place as the dominant figure in north German politics. He had already recognized in the Albigensian crusade in southern France a method he could use effectively against unlettered peasants: he declared them heretics and called crusaders to crush them. From 1229 to 1234 with papal blessing he organized expeditions of nobles from Lippe, Brabant, Gelders, Cleves, and Oldenburg to attack Stedingen.

Burial mound on
Aldenesch
battlefield



Significantly, each of these princes were dealing with peasants who similarly refused to pay taxes. In short, these nobles had reason to see any victory over armed peasants as a means of intimidating their own subjects. Although the Stedingen army routed several invading forces, they were unable to prevail at the battle of Altenesch in 1234. The elated crusaders slaughtered six thousand peasants, thus bringing an end to the prosperity of the region (and depriving Gebhard of his expected windfall of new revenues). Moreover, the example did not cast the anticipated pall of fear over the hearts of other Frisian and Saxon states along the Weser and Elbe rivers. Despite an intensive education campaign which portrayed the Stedingen peasants as godless pagans, the inhabitants of the surrounding communities failed to develop much enthusiasm for obeying the archbishop's officials and paying heavy taxes.⁵

Sadly, some modern farmers of Stedingen believe the medieval propaganda which defames the motives of their ancestors.

The Elbe Marshes

The Saxons and Dutch living along the north bank of the Elbe River shared characteristics of the Stedingers and used their marsh defenses to strive for an autonomy similar to that which had been won by the Dithmarschers. However, the odds were against them. The inhabitants of the Haseldorf, Wilster, and Kremper marshes were no less courageous than their fellows elsewhere, but they were not numerous and their homes lay along too broad and too narrow a front to be defended easily against attack from Holstein.

The Elbe marshes were actually moors which had been created by the river depositing silt during floods. This phenomenon was responsible for the existence of natural embankments which protected the lands closest to the river from continuous flooding and also made settlement along the Elbe easier than along the Dithmarschen coast, where tide and storm prevented the formation of natural banks. As a result, it was not necessary for the population of the Elbe marshes to form settlement clans as was the case in Dithmarschen. Even so, the communities were distinctively different from their neighbors on the Geest. Since less silt reached the meadows below the Geest during floods than was deposited along the river, swamps separated the moorlands physically from the rolling hills of the interior. This assisted greatly in forming distinctive societies in the Elbe marshes.⁶

Prior to the beginning of the twelfth century these moorlands were largely unpopulated. Perhaps along the Stör in the Wilster and Kremper marshes and in the Haseldorfer marsh at Höhenhorst some Saxon communities had surrounded small areas with primitive dikes to protect themselves and their livestock from flooding. They probably used techniques similar to the early efforts of the Dithmarschers and Frisians. More significant efforts to dike and drain the swamps had to await the arrival of settlers brought in by Vicelin, the most important missionary of the period. In 1146, four years after Vicelin received his first grant of lands, a second grant by

the archbishop of Bremen mentioned the existence of a Dutch settlement there.⁷ The immigration from Holland continued for decades, until large stretches of marsh were brought into cultivation. It should be noted that this settlement was developing at the same time that Saxons were moving from western Holstein into the recently conquered regions of Wagria. Thus landowners were impelled to seek Dutch immigrants not merely because they wanted marshes developed but because the general manpower shortage was affecting their revenues. Saxon communities had constructed sluices, dikes, and canals, but their method of laying out fields and villages was less regular and orderly than the Dutch practice. Indeed, the Elbe marshes exhibited the expected orderliness only in those areas where Dutch immigrants are specifically known to have settled. Judging by the physical evidence, the other marsh settlements were established by Saxons who had adopted Dutch techniques as best they were able. The farmers in all these settlements paid no more than a regular tithe and a small tax. Each farmer dwelt on his own land, and each house was located along the road or dike in a long *Marschhufendorf* (see p. 10).

In the early thirteenth century three parties strove for hegemony in this region: the count of Holstein, the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, and the peasant communities themselves. Each claimed the rights which had formerly belonged to the defunct countship of Stade. In addition, the monastery at Neumünster had considerable holdings in the Wilstermarsch.

It was in this period that a local petty nobility first appeared. A lord of Haseldorf was mentioned early in the century; one died on crusade in Livonia in 1236, and his son became bishop of Dorpat several decades later. Many other local nobles appear in documents as ministeriales of the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen. Apparently most, if not all, of these knightly families were once peasants wealthy enough to equip themselves to fight as cavalry, which is the essence of a knight's service. Many received financial assistance in the form of an advocacy to help them maintain their status as mounted warriors. These families could not have been very wealthy, for at the beginning of the century we find no fewer than nine of them serving the three marsh communities—too many for such a small area to support lavishly. Although some of these families disappear from the records, others take their places, so that in all about twenty different families in the Elbe marshes seem to have been considered *noble*. Some may have been knightly immigrants, but all were apparently of old Saxon origin: areas settled by Dutch immigrants were required only to send a certain number of warriors whom their neighbors helped to equip, whereas Saxon communities were commanded by advocates selected from these "noble" families. Although the difference between *noble* and *non-noble* in Holstein was often difficult to define, a rich peasant patriciate had grown up in the Elbe marshes which looked upon itself as essentially noble.⁸

The presence of archepiscopal *ministeriales* with fortified homes in the marshes was disliked by the counts of Holstein, who took advantage of every opportunity to bring them under their own control. About the middle of the thirteenth

century, at a time when the archbishopric was torn by a contested election, the counts of Holstein temporarily forced the advocates in the Haseldorf marsh to offer homage to them. Late in the century the counts again occupied the region, thus precipitating that confused and poorly understood conflict which was closely connected to the expulsion of the nobility from Dithmarschen.

After Holstein was divided among the several lines of the Schauenburg dynasty the number of advocates multiplied until there were seven of them: one for each of the three counts, one for the archbishop, and at least three for the abbey of Neumünster. The result of this proliferation was that people of the region did not form a single political unit, but many, each opposed to the others whenever their lords quarreled. It was this diversity that first assisted, then hindered the people there in their quest for independence at the beginning of the fourteenth century. The diverse interests of the princes not only made it difficult for them to suppress unrest but it made coordination of oppressive measures impossible. Thus, when the archbishop imposed new taxes on the Kehdingen land, the inhabitants there could compare their situation not only to their own past experience but also to the more favorable rights enjoyed by peasants across the Elbe—this encouraged them to demand equality of treatment. Nor did the archbishop's princely neighbors hurry to his support as quickly as the inhabitants of the Elbe marshes gave aid and comfort to the Kehdingers. In the end, however, the interests of the peasants and advocates diverged too greatly for either group to trust the other fully and the various regions were not equally willing to provide troops to fight against Count Gerhard the Great's army. In 1306 the Dithmarschers sent a force of militiamen to fight alongside the army raised from the Elbe marshes, but the defeat at Uttersen at Gerhard's hands spelled the end of Dithmarscher hopes that a sister republic could come into being on the north bank of the Elbe.⁹

The inhabitants of the Kremer marsh had participated less fully in the insurrection than their neighbors. This perhaps stemmed from the fact that the original settlement of the marshlands had been organized by the count's ancestors, and the personal relationship between the ruling dynasty and the people had never been broken. The Kremer population did not remain neutral in the war but assisted the count of Schauenburg sufficiently to merit rewards.¹⁰ So much for class solidarity.

North Frisia

The North Frisians had settled on the islands lining the east coast of modern Denmark in the seventh or eighth centuries. About 1100 they began moving onto the mainland in large numbers, having been invited by the kings of Denmark and the bishops of Schleswig to establish colonies on vacant lands. With the passage of time, royal authority diminished and the parishes (*Harden*) began to go their own ways politically. They lent assistance to one another only in military affairs and only as far as mutual interest demanded—usually to resist royal efforts to collect taxes.

One reason that the North Frisians did not fair as well in their struggle for independence as the Dithmarschers did, under outwardly similar circumstances, was the close relationship of the bishops of Schleswig with the Danish monarchs. Ecclesiastical pressure worked for the king, not against him, whereas the Dithmarschers could usually rely on moral support and occasionally some money and troops from the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen. Even so, no Danish king found it easy to conquer the North Frisians. When King Abel invaded the country in 1252 to collect back taxes, he ironically faced people he had originally encouraged in their rebellion against high taxes. At that time, as duke of Schleswig, he had been fighting for his own survival against his royal brother. Once chance made him king, however, he took a different view of the matter: he saw the necessity of putting an end to armed resistance to royal authority before the insurrection spread throughout the kingdom. Abel brought a huge force against the North Frisians in the hope that he could overawe them without fighting. The royal fleet, however, became stuck in the mud and the royal army found itself surrounded by warlike farmers. Abel fled for his life, but a wheelwright killed him, cleaving his head with an axe, thus ending for decades Danish efforts to establish authority over the region. Even the Danish fortress at Mildeburg was torn down in response to Frisian demands that Abel's successors demonstrate their intention to keep the peace in the future.

Once the Danes no longer attempted to collect taxes, the Frisian communities began to drift apart. This development was fatal for them. In 1286 Schleswig and Holstein were joined through inheritance and in 1332 the king pawned the North Frisian communities to Gerhard the Great of Holstein. This was the beginning of a long struggle for possession of the region.

Gerhard the Great occupied the Geest Harden of North Frisia, but lacked the fleet necessary to reach the islands. Therefore, it was his opponent, King Waldemar Atterdag (1340-1375), who attacked the islands as part of his program to restore Denmark to greatness and recover lost territories. He began with the north Harden and in 1344 won a decisive victory at Boekingharde. Yet the terms of the surrender—no revenge to be taken on royal supporters, five hundred soldiers to be placed at royal disposal with weapons and horses, and a promise to defend the land and pay minor taxes—indicate that the subjugation was far from complete. The Black Death took a fearful toll of island and mainland Frisians, and in 1354 and 1358 the hard-pressed survivors revolted against increased taxes. The Edomsharde Frisians sought help from the count of Holstein and successfully resisted the king for a time. In 1362, however, a terrible storm struck and 7600 persons drowned. This made further military resistance impossible. Even Eiderstedt, the community composed of the three parishes just north of Dithmarschen, is recorded as having paid taxes in 1374, the year before Waldemar's death. Nevertheless, it was to be another sixty years before the kings of Denmark successfully concluded their wars of conquest and yet another century before they were able to subdue the region completely.

Our knowledge of North Frisian law and custom derive principally from one document, the *Siebenhardenbeliebung* of 1426. In that year, in the middle of the long

war between Denmark and Lübeck, the seven northern parishes asked Eiderstedt and Holstein to help them throw off Danish rule. This document defined the government which was to be maintained if victory and independence were won. Generally, the laws are similar to those of other Frisian groups. There were no legal classes, no serfs—only clans. Even so, the clans here never achieved the importance of those in Dithmarschen. The Harden assisted one another by forbidding anyone to harbor a fugitive from the law, the penalty for which was to be the same as that which would be meted out to the accused, that is, drowning in capital cases and the payment of wergild in all others. However, the North Frisians had few years left to enjoy self-government. When peace came in 1435, Schleswig was joined permanently to Holstein, and the German duke discontinued his support of the Frisians. The last rising of the northern parishes against their Danish overlord in 1472 was put down with bloody reprisals.

Eiderstedt

Eiderstedt is much more important for us than the northern parishes, running as it did along Dithmarschen's northern border. The earliest records describe this area as the "three lands" because it was formed from three islands. Each island was divided into quarters for the election of councilmen, twelve for each land. This is perhaps a reflection of the old Germanic hundred courts, in that these local courts handled all cases except capital offenses, which went before the *Landesding*, where they were decided by the community as a whole. Punishment by drowning was inflicted on those found guilty. This system was maintained with minor changes after Christian of Oldenburg became king of Denmark (1448-1481). In response to the disturbances accompanying the civil war, the populace had already been disarmed. Christian now installed his advocates in magisterial posts throughout the land, with the duty to collect taxes and preside at court hearings. The king allowed the thirty-six councilmen to continue their traditional responsibilities of summoning the oathgivers, administering oaths, and making decisions concerning guilt or innocence, but they then remanded those found guilty to the advocates for execution by beheading. This system of local self-government came to an end only in 1572, when King Frederick II (1559-1588) imposed a more direct form of justice.

As can be seen, the Eiderstedters possessed many of the same social characteristics of their Dithmarschen neighbors to the south: clans, parishes, elected magistrates, and wergild, as well as a similar social and economic structure. The Eiderstedters were also warlike, as numerous routed Danish armies would testify. But, although the Frisians of that community disliked and distrusted Danes and Germans, they needed the aid of these very Danes and Germans against the Dithmarschers, whom they hated and mistrusted even more. Over the centuries the Eiderstedters endured numerous bloody raids, retaliations, and invasions by the Dithmarschers. To protect themselves, to guarantee the safety of the Eider ferry, and to

avenge themselves on their hated neighbors, the Eiderstedters were willing to sacrifice certain elements of their independence. Nevertheless, some North Frisians were still using Frisian law in local courts until 1867, when Prussian law was introduced. In this way, though not fully independent, the Frisians retained considerable autonomy throughout the centuries.¹¹

There still remained the small Frisian community of Nordstrand north of Eiderstedt whose 1558 revisions of the customary law have a striking resemblance to the legal traditions in Dithmarschen. However, that region was too small and too unimportant to interest be of much interest.¹²

Summary

In general, the future lay in the hands of the princes, especially those dedicated to transforming their anarchic lands into modern states. Although some peasant communities were able to retain their right to self-government, this occurred only in certain mountain and marsh regions—and even then only when a combination of political genius and luck was present. If most experiments in democracy were failures, it does not mean that the efforts should be ignored.¹³ The failures shed much light on the reasons why successful experiments such as Dithmarschen survived as long as they did. At first glance Dithmarschen seems a relic of the past, surviving only by a quirk of fate and geography. A second look tells us that it was more than just another peasant state that disappeared with the passage of time. It was a state in miniature whose success was due to its institutions and people, and whose failure was due principally to size.

**PART THREE
THE REPUBLIC**

CHAPTER SEVEN REPUBLICAN INSTITUTIONS

Feuds among the clans

As the preceding chapters have demonstrated, there were advantages to basing a peasant government on the clan system. In fact, it is difficult to imagine Dithmarschen or Frisia's remaining independent into the fifteenth century without the solidarity provided by the clans to their societies. But there were also disadvantages.

The major drawback to this form of government was that each clan tended to defend its members' activities whether they were in the right or not. In modern times this attitude has been described as "my country, right or wrong." Consequently, individuals often abused the protection afforded them, becoming arrogant and abusive toward members of weaker clans. When called before the court, they resorted to perjury. Wild and independent individuals could be tolerated by these societies, indeed, even encouraged up to a point, but if these people pressed the boundaries of common sense too far, feuds resulted. In Frisia prolonged feuding destroyed the unity which was necessary to maintain the independence of the country. It was a danger that had been present in Dithmarschen, too. Although the counts of Holstein had exploited feuds from time to time, they did not achieve much success in their endeavour to pit the clans against one another. Most citizens of Dithmarschen continued to approve of reckless individualism and clan unity as unpleasant but unavoidable byproducts of institutions which had maintained their liberties in centuries past. Since Dithmarschers resisted every proposed change until some crisis required them to take action, reform of the legal system came only after the terrible feuds which began in the 1420's.

The origin of the feuds lay in the *bad blood* which had long existed between the two largest clans, the Vodiemannen and the Wollersmannen. The Vodiemannen held sway in the south and on the coasts, the Wollersmannen in the north and inland. This seems to confirm the local belief that the Vodiemannen clan was created by an union of Frisian families and former advocates, the Wollersmannen by Saxon

peasants. The differences based on language (which in medieval terms also meant race) and class were no longer significant by the fifteenth century, but everyone remembered that they had once been important. The origin of each individual quarrel is lost in the mists of time and legend, but undoubtedly went back to the early days of the free state. What is important is that ancient grievances were nursed for generations with all the intensity a proud and active people can devote to family disputes.

The occasion for the particular feud which began in the 1420's was a complaint from Hamburg that *pirates* were preying on the Elbe shipping. This was nothing unusual. The parishes of the *Southshore* (actually all the coastline) took secret, and sometimes open pride in their freebooting tradition. Furthermore, protected as they were by the extensive marshes which stood between the mainland and their settlements, the Vodiemannen clansmen tended to worry less about attack from Holstein than did the Wollersmannen in the northern inland parishes. The economic interests of the coast also diverged somewhat from those of the inland. However, the most serious disagreement concerned foreign policy: the *north* believed that an alliance with Hamburg was necessary, more so than ever since Count Gerhard VI had united Schleswig with Holstein in 1386. The *south* did not agree, largely because Hanseatic mercantile monopolies prevented Dithmarschers from free access to the most important commercial markets. Every Hamburg effort to eliminate competition from Dithmarschen seamen brought swift retaliation from the warlike Vodiemannen merchants. The most specific dispute was the Vodiemannen refusal to recognize the validity of the imperial privilege of 1359 which granted Hamburg the right to police the lower Elbe—which obviously included Brunsbüttel and the Southshore. In short, the Vodiemannen defended their right to salvage *flotsam*



and *jetsam* on their shores—the correct description of most alleged cases of piracy—and denied any Hanseatic authority over them. Moreover, the coastal and inland (i.e., southern and northern) parishes of Dithmarschen held both real and imagined grievances against each other which threatened the very unity of Dithmarschen. The Vodiemannen quarrel with Hamburg was the final straw which broke the overloaded patience of the Wollermannen clan.¹

The Hamburg complaint about pirates was valid. This was a time when piracy was widespread,

and it was common knowledge that Vodiemannen clansmen (first Abel Reimers, then Rudolf Maes, and finally Rolf Karstens [Radlefs Kerstens] of Wesselburen) had led bands into Holstein and against the Elbe shipping for years. From the Vodiemannen standpoint these raids were not unprovoked. For example, in 1430 a shipload of Hamburg mercenaries returning from the Danish wars had landed on the coast at Büsum and begun to plunder the farms. Rolf Karstens' followers killed one hundred and eight of them, then confiscated the vessel and its contents. Hamburg naturally

complained and even sent a councilman with six hundred soldiers to exact repayment. However, the mercenaries became uncontrollable and treated every Dithmarscher they met as an enemy. This provoked the Vodiemannen to gather their forces and wipe out the mercenaries. They killed the councilman as well. Rolf Karstens then led his forces straight to Hamburg and burned several ships in the harbor there. The Hamburgers retaliated by raiding Büsum. Because the Hamburgers had underrated their foe and mishandled the whole affair, the feud burned on for some time, completely out of control. Rolf Karstens proved to be a far more dangerous man than any of his predecessors, at home as well as abroad. His position as advocate, his daring and resourcefulness, and his unashamed defiance of all outsiders made him the idol of the Vodiemannen, who sheltered him against all his enemies. Moreover, when the Hamburgers began to collect taxes from all shipping on the Elbe to pay for a new lighthouse across the river, even the most neutral persons in the coastal parishes felt that a little piracy was justified. What they began was soon more than a "little" piracy.

Eventually, the inland parishes could no longer ignore the Hanseatic protests. Lübeck, Lüneburg, and the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen reminded the Dithmarschers that Hamburg had given them valuable aid and comfort in their past conflicts with Holstein, and the attitude of the Hanseatic cities might well be decisive if the dukes of Schleswig-Holstein were to make war on them again. As it stood in 1434, Hamburg was allied with the present duke, Adolf VIII (1404-1459), who was fighting to hold Schleswig against the Danish monarch, King Erich. Thus, the Vodiemannen attacks seemed to support the Danish war effort (as perhaps they were, to an extent). Nevertheless, the Wollersmannen clan, led by Kruse Johann of Meldorf, ordered the Vodiemannen to bring Rolf Karsten's raids to an end and make peace. Rolf Karsten refused. Threats were exchanged, but neither side retracted its accusations. The Vodiemannen either could not or would not comply. Then the Wollersmannen turned to force. Soon, the two major clans were at war with one another.

When Wollersmannen failed to win an immediate victory over their opponents, they called on Hamburg for help. Acting by virtue of the imperial privilege of 1359 and according to its own self-interest, Hamburg now sent five hundred musketeers to help the Wollersmannen. This force had originally been raised for the Danish war, but Hanseatic victories had forced the king to sign a truce and enter into peace negotiations. Hamburg had not yet disbanded its army, which put the citizens in the unusual situation of having a small army ready to send to Dithmarschen. Rolf Karstens in turn asked Hamburg's erstwhile ally, Adolf VIII, for aid. In doing this he went too far: not even his own clansmen would tolerate an alliance with Holstein. The Vodiemannen branded Karsten an outlaw, then, when he continued his trouble-making, murdered him. The crisis passed. The feud slowly died out. Meanwhile, the northern parishes embarked upon a thorough but conservative reform of the government, which involved the subordination of every clan to the dictates of the parishes as represented by an assembly and forty-eight regents. This development was the culmination of a long process during which the parishes had become increasingly important in the conduct of government.²

The eight inland parishes which formed the Wollersmannen stronghold began the reform by signing a treaty with Hamburg in which they promised to punish any of their members who harmed Hamburg merchants. They agreed to meet regularly in a centrally located meadow to discuss public matters and to abide by majority decisions. This proved so successful that a chapel and the village of Heide (*the meadow*) soon sprang up there.

This reform created the third and last element of the unique Dithmarschen constitution—the representation of the parishes in a central government. Typically for a conservative community such as Dithmarschen, this retained the form and the name of the previous government, the assembly, but its powers were greatly

enhanced. First of all, it could meet weekly in Heide on marketday to discuss problems and pass legislation. Secondly, it had an executive body—the forty-eight regents, composed essentially from the two earlier dominant groups, the advocates and the clan chieftains—who were to call the assembly together and, in case of emergency, could act on behalf of the entire country. Thirdly, it possessed a written constitution. It is interesting to note that the dominance of each element of the constitution corresponds roughly to a period in which one of the major powers of the neighborhood predominated: the advocates originated when the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen was dominant, the clans when the counts of Holstein were



important, and the parishes when the Hamburg alliance existed. Now the roles of the advocates, the clansmen, and the parish representatives were mixed together in a new way to create the Dithmarschen Republic (*universitas terrae Dithmarsae*).

National Government

In 1434 the assembly of all citizens met in Heide and swore to that if any Dithmarscher attacked a Hamburg merchant, his clan would make restitution. If the clan refused to make this payment, the parish would do so. Should the parish refuse, then the remaining parishes would force it to reimburse the merchant. Thus the authority of the assembly was established, and the power of the clans was limited once and for all.

Later the parishes agreed upon a permanent law-book. Despite its being often amended in subsequent generations, this constitution was called the *law-book of 1447*. It contained 257 articles relating to every aspect of Dithmarschen law and custom. In essence, it extended the market-peace to cover the inhabitants of the entire

land: farmers going to and from the fields, citizens going to and from assembly, youths, maidens, and women were all protected in persons and goods by a heavy fine of sixty Lübeck Marks, whether or not a feud had been declared. Refusal to abide by these laws or to bow to the decisions of the elected officials was punished severely. The patriotic feeling of the lawmakers expressed itself in the numerous *caveats* against appealing to outside powers, either lay or clerical, and by strong laws against treason. A few examples of the language of the *law-book* illustrate its nature (the numbers indicate the order in which they were codified, hence an indication of their importance):

- 4) If anyone, whoever he may be, high or low, causes or aids in injury to our state, a parish, a community, a clan, or an individual, whether great or small damage, he and his shall make reparations as long as they have property worth even one penny in our land, and shall also pay a fine of sixty Lübeck Marks.
- 6) If anyone in our state is so high-and-mighty and presumptuous that he will not allow his case to be judged by God according to our law-book, he shall pay sixty Marks fine, and be held by us to be unloved, faithless and dishonorable, and shall go into eternal exile.
- 26) If anyone in our state, whoever he may be, makes future alliances or agreements against our regents and our law-book, whoever he is, high or low, he shall be an open traitor, and all his goods shall fall to the judgment of the state.

Even failure to celebrate St. Oswald's Day as equal to Easter was punished by a heavy fine. The *law-book* was periodically brought up-to-date by amendment. However, there was little innovative legislation. Most reforms were actually efforts to state more exactly the traditional practices and to eliminate specific abuses. The clans continued to exist, the oath retained its central position in the judicial system (*nemede* was required for all pleas of innocence); and property ownership was not changed. The *law-book* devoted little space either to the duties of officials or to activities of the organs of government. Its only provision for the protection of officials from assault was to assign them a higher *wergild* and to threaten high fines on them if convicted of corruption. In short, the *law-book* was a practical document, not a body of theory. It was designed by and for a nation of yeomen.³

The most basic innovation in the *law book of 1447* was the creation of a permanent executive body called the forty-eight regents. Over time the power and authority of the regents grew ever greater, but even so, a full generation passed before the final nature of the regental office became clear. The regents held office for life, representing, of course, the most important families. Twelve came from each of the four *Döffté* represented at Heide. (The *Southshore*, nursing its grievances from the feud, stood aloof from the government for almost a century and refused to send its representatives to the regents' meetings.) Since the original regents were the leading clansmen of the community, they were also the richest men. Dithmarschers were not free from the general belief in Germany that the best and noblest men should govern

and pass their offices on to their heirs by hereditary right. Although strictly speaking, Dithmarschers did not establish the regents as a legal nobility, the plutocrats who monopolized the seats clearly resembled aristocrats more than democrats. While the process of selecting the regents did not always guarantee that the best men were sent to Heide, it did lend considerable prestige to the new constitution and assured that tradition and circumspection would be the hallmarks of the new government.

Each Saturday twelve of the regents would gather in the meeting house on the huge market square in Heide to discuss routine business. If some party petitioned them to call an assembly, they would discuss it. If they agreed the matter was worth public debate, they would send the representative from Weddingstedt out to the market to announce: "Men of our country. There is something to be said concerning our Land." Then the assembly would gather in the northwest corner of the square, which meant they could call an assembly together on any Saturday. This did not happen often, of course, because the citizenry watched *the Forty and Eight* carefully and insisted upon advance notice of all meetings except in dire emergencies.

The regents had the prerogative to introduce all legislation to the assembly. Notice of proposed legislation was usually announced well in advance, so that all interested citizens could be present on the market square. On important occasions the entire muster of the land would appear at which time often a thousand or more men came. They would assemble in a circle when the secretary called and listen to his reading of letters and communications. Then the debate was opened by the most prominent of the regents. When everyone of importance had expressed his opinion, the assembly divided into three bodies for voting. If two of the three bodies approved, their decision was binding upon all Dithmarschers.⁴

The predominance of the regents in the government of Dithmarschen reflected the trend of social and economic development throughout northern Europe. In the following decades about a dozen wealthy families not only dominated the government but also increased their land holdings as well. Many poor citizens slipped to the level of cottagers and day laborers. Nevertheless, even though the social and economic gap between the classes widened steadily, the lower classes retained sufficient confidence in local government and in the assembly to prevent the patricians from establishing an open oligarchy. Even the practice of having coats-of-arms was not a monopoly of the very rich. The clans had coats-of-arms which every clan member could wear. Even so, the changes were sufficiently great that this era could be labeled that of the *Patrician Republic*.⁵

Local Government

The most essential duty of any government is to defend its population against aggression from external enemies. No Dithmarschen ever doubted this or denied the right of the state to require military service of every able-bodied man. The only difficulty was in organizing an effective system of national defense without giving

so much power to a few individuals as to create a new aristocracy. A modern army of that era needed units of approximately equal size, with good weapons, and well-trained leaders. Basing the army on either the clan or the parish violated these principles, since all were of differing sizes, and talent was not spread evenly throughout the population. However, the Dithmarschers did not have a regular army, but rather a militia. This could best be maintained on a local basis. In Dithmarschen each clan was responsible for its members appearing in arms when summoned, and each parish for its clans. The parishes were then formed into five *Döfft*, with the intent that they would each provide a more or less equal number of militiamen. The *Döfft*, as mentioned earlier, were probably the original parishes, but now they served only a military function. Once a year the citizens reported for military drills and maneuvers in each *Döfft* so that the many small units would become accustomed to acting in concert. The advocates and local regents seem to have been the unit commanders and shared a collegiate responsibility in each *Döfft*. At the republic level, however, there was no command structure. Instead, the regents and assembly were to debate the strategy to be followed in each campaign and to assign the overall command to an individual or group for only the time necessary to fight a battle. It is not even clear who was responsible for the artillery park, which needed constant supervision, but it was probably distributed among the parishes. With the passage of time and the introduction of new weapons and techniques, military training became more exacting. The number of men in arms grew steadily, so that Dithmarschen was defended as well as was possible.⁶

Civil government in the parishes was administered by elected officials called *Schliesser (clavigeri)* or key bearers. There were either two or four such officials, depending on the size of the parish. No Schliesser could be a regent. This provision helped assure widespread participation in the government. The parish officials supervised the church property (the only communal property in Dithmarschen), collected the tithes, and kept the parish seal. Now they also acted as local police, issued limited edicts, and directed the local tribunals. They presided at trials, assisted the jury in decisions, and acted as executioners.⁷

Criminal law was administered by the Schliesser and advocates. Those officers were assisted by a body of jurymen. This body numbered either ten or twenty, depending upon the size of the parish. Since the Schliesser and Advocates were permanent members of the jury, the total number of jurymen became either twelve or twenty-four—a number also traditional to Anglo-Saxon law and, therefore, familiar to Americans and Britons. However, jury verdicts did not require unanimous agreement but only a two-thirds majority for conviction. If a defendant wished, he could undergo the *ordeal*—to put the question of guilt or innocence directly to God. In the typical ordeal by water, for example, it was assumed that likes attract and unlikes repell; hence, an individual who takes a false oath and becomes impure would float if thrown into clean water. Dithmarschers, being fishermen, knew more about water than to undergo this ordeal—they preferred the ordeal by glowing iron, with

the assumption that God would prevent an innocent man from developing blisters even though he grasped the iron firmly.

Members of each parish selected new officers at regular intervals through an indirect election. At the beginning of the year, the Schliesser chose new jurymen. At the end of the year, the jurymen appointed a new Schliesser. This process avoided the technical problems and the divisive controversy of an open election.

The parish assembly met quarterly and followed the procedure at Heide: the assembly met, discussed grievances, then split into three bodies for further discussion and voting; each body reached a decision by a two-thirds majority; two bodies in agreement sufficed to settle the matter. Anyone could appeal the parish assembly's decision to the regents, who could place the matter on the agenda for discussion by the national assembly, but such an action was rare: a heavy fine accompanied failure of the appeal.⁸

By 1500, the Dithmarschers had created a form of government which operated effectively on several levels. Each organ of government was balanced with others so that no one predominated, and they believed that their remarkable freedom and prosperity was due to this unique constitution. They reared every child to understand the principles of government and to love liberty. Such education was the foundation-stone of the republic.

Dithmarschen Society in the Fifteenth Century

Although Dithmarschen was a male-dominated society, women exercised considerable influence and occasionally even spoke in the assembly.⁹ Nevertheless, by common consent, the society was based on a tradition of masculine prowess and each man taking the responsibility to care for himself and his family. Every boy became his own spokesman at the age of eleven years and six weeks; thereafter he could speak in court. Moreover, he was free to employ himself as he saw fit. At fourteen he armed himself with sword and spear and entered the militia. At eighteen he became a full citizen with all rights and duties. He was free to dispose of his property as he wished. Thereafter he stood under the authority of no other man, but was an adult member of a self-governing community and of a proud clan.¹⁰

Dithmarschers paid no tolls or direct taxes. Only a few parishes paid the tithe. Nevertheless, the government did not lack revenues, because fines provided a substantial income, usually a surplus. In Dithmarschen crime paid—for the government. Since there were no paid officials and few regular expenses, the regents could count on an ample treasury in the strong-box at Weddingstedt, where an impressively thick-walled brick structure attached to the church served as jail and bank. Out of this treasury they paid the irregular contribution to the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen as well as for the purchase of cannon and powder from citizens of those cities.

Dithmarschers were pious, but they did not believe in taxing themselves excessively for the support of the church. First of all, it was unnecessary—devout

individuals could always be found to contribute funds for new buildings. Secondly, Dithmarschers were skeptical that churchmen could be trusted with money. Therefore, they kept all funds firmly under their own control. In spite of these deviations from normal medieval practice, outwardly religious life resembled that elsewhere in northern Germany. Each tidy brick church had whitewashed walls, a tower-like stepple, and was surrounded by a graveyard and hedge. Attendance at mass depended on the weather and the holiday season, but was generally good. The priests lived in relative poverty and were held in little prestige. Guilds administered by elected officials oversaw care for the poor and infirm whenever family and clan failed their duty. Most important, the veneration of the Virgin was more than a religious obligation—it was an expression of patriotism.

As religious life illustrates well, Dithmarschen was a land of contrasts and contradictions. The best and worst characteristics of their ancestors still prevailed. *Individualism* and *pugnaciousness* were one side of the coin, the stern call of *duty* and *law* the other. The puritan customs of the early republic remained in force by tradition and law, even when they conflicted with the teachings of the church. For example, the lawbook stated:

224) Whenever a man gets a woman or maiden with child outside the bonds of marriage, and she does not complain before the fact becomes noticeable, he shall be fined sixty Marks. If he does not have enough wealth to pay the penalty, he shall be imprisoned for it, and his relatives shall raise the child.

225) But if she accuses an innocent man, and the truth comes out, she shall be burned, according to the law, by her relatives, by penalty of sixty Marks.

226) If a man attacks a respectable woman or maiden, and it is proven, he shall pay her sixty Marks and be fined sixty Marks. If he denies it, he shall provide a *nemeade* from his church and a *nemeade* from his clan.

236) Should anyone slay a loose woman, one from whom a man has to cast down his eyes, there shall be no charge of crime or punishment.

240) All those who wish to undergo the ordeal in the future must carry the glowing iron in full weight from one container to the other; whoever refuses the ordeal, forfeits his case.¹¹

Some laws, however, strike us as simply humorous, though they were undoubtedly practical:

103) When one man intentionally pours a glass of beer onto another, he must recompense him with eight Schillings, and he must swear an oath with twelve co-swearers that he has made full payment for his injuries and his insult.

108) If a group comes together for company, and a quarrel arises whereby one grabs another and tears some clothing from him, and the host and hostess and two-thirds of the company testify that he was in the wrong, he shall pay ninety Schillings to the accuser and ninety Schillings to the court. If he denies he was wrong, he shall provide a *nemede* from his clan. If this fails to prove his innocence, he shall pay the costs, as much as twelve men shall decide.¹²

Dithmarschers remained a rough-and-ready citizenry, proud and independent, and unwilling to bow to anyone on account of wealth or birth:

230) If it is the case that two men seek a fight, that both men agree and that one kills or wounds the other in any way, the foemen shall not be punished, no matter what the injury may be.¹³

Unburdened by feudal services and payments, in possession of large and fertile farmsteads, the Dithmarschers prospered. Some men were well educated—some even attended universities. Many were wealthy and dressed accordingly (in fact, surviving portraits of the wealthy patricians resemble those of Renaissance bankers and nobles).

The Dithmarschers were a cheerful people who sang both at work and at play. This attitude contrasted strongly with their more sober Saxon neighbors and perhaps comes as a surprise to those who expect their puritan attitudes to carry over into all aspects of life. Many songs of the republican era have survived, especially the songs celebrating the successful defense of Dithmarschen liberty from outside threats. Terrible and feared abroad, friendly and happy at home, the Dithmarschers seem to have achieved part of that idyllic state about which their Germanic ancestors had dreamed.¹⁴

The above facts notwithstanding, it would be a mistake to conclude that the Dithmarschers were successful in their efforts to retain a rustic simplicity and freedom while their neighbors were being reduced to serfdom. Not all peasants in the neighboring states were badly exploited, not every Dithmarscher prosperous and independent. Since poverty existed in all rural societies, and it was especially noticeable among day-laborers, the ill and infirm, and the alcoholics and ne'er-do-wells, poor Dithmarschers were probably no better off than poor Holsteiners. The contrast was one of perception—but that perception was important. Dithmarschers believed that geography, courage, and good fortune protected them—and, of course, divine intervention, they said, as they envisioned the Virgin Mary in their mind's eye.

It was nevertheless true that it was not the legacy of olden times, but the labor of each successive generation that made the existence of an independent Dithmarschen possible. The people had adopted a constitution suitable to the needs of a small peasant state. Theirs was not the constitution of a medieval commune, many of which were often so terribly riven by internal quarrels and jealousies that they voluntarily sacrificed their liberties to noble advocates who could maintain law and order. In Dithmarschen, the regents and assembly provided the strong executive and legisla-

tive bodies that most peasant and urban communes lacked. The regents and the assembly each exercised judicial authority, thus resolving one of the great problems of any state—how to provide for adjudication of disputes. Moreover, the administration of this justice provided the revenues necessary for maintaining the government. With equipment provided by these funds, the militia was capable of defending the state. Thus, the Dithmarschers had found the formula for successful self-government which many states today still seek in vain: leadership, law and order, sound finances, and an effective national defense.

The Dithmarschers had not achieved this success in governance without travail. Democracy is a form of government with natural tensions and inner struggles which can be restrained only by strong traditions of self-control, mutual trust, and fair play. When an educated public takes upon itself the regulation of government, especially in those day-to-day activities where corruption slinks in so easily, democratic forms of government become self-correcting mechanisms which reduce the need for sudden innovations or revolutions. The Dithmarschers seem to have realized this. Over the years they debated and tested every aspect of their government but they made changes only when absolutely necessary.

The only weakness of their state was its small size. At the end of the fifteenth century, Dithmarschen was surrounded by powerful and hostile neighbors who put the strength of the new constitution and of the Dithmarschers themselves to the test.



Views of modern Dithmarschen: Brunsbüttel above, Meldorf below



CHAPTER EIGHT THE FEUD WITH DENMARK

King Christian

The last count of Holstein from the Schauenburg dynasty was Adolf VIII. When he died in 1459, the nobility of Schleswig-Holstein saw no alternative but to accept his closest relative, King Christian (1425-1481) of the United Scandinavian Kingdoms (Denmark, Sweden, and Norway), as his heir. Any remaining doubts the nobles might have held about gaining this powerful monarch as their new lord were removed when Christian agreed to their demands to grant them rights and immunities beyond anything they had enjoyed previously. In the Treaty of Ripon Christian granted them a monopoly in office-holding, especially in the profitable collection of taxes, and a veto over local legislation.

The citizens of Dithmarschen viewed this development with alarm. Christian was an ambitious man who wanted to live in splendor. This desire, combined with an unwise practice of acquiring new debts to cover old ones, brought him severe financial problems. The easiest solution was territorial expansion. He already disliked Dithmarschers, having grown up in Oldenburg, practically across the Elbe from Dithmarschen, and thus learned early of their inciting unrest among his peasants. As ruler of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway for eleven years, he heard more tales about their proud clannishness and arrogant belligerence from his subjects in Eiderstedt. Now the Holstein nobles added their voices to the chorus of complaints and urged him to put an end to the existence of the troublesome republic.

The nobles' recommendation went straight to the heart of the problem: the very existence of an independent peasant state was a danger and an affront to all nobles and kings. Moreover, the nobles were finding it increasingly difficult to keep up with their peers elsewhere. Living like a lord was no more easy for them than for the king. Paying inheritance taxes and interest on debts was difficult; providing suitable dowries and allowances seemed almost impossible. The nobles' best hope of contending with the rising cost of living was to acquire new lands. Even if they themselves did not receive new fiefs, they could earn money for paying their debts. If lucky, they could carry home enough booty to buy the lands and offices the king

was offering for sale. King Christian understood their problems and listened willingly to their counsel. It was not difficult to persuade him that Dithmarschen would be easy to conquer with the large army it would be possible for him to raise.

It was not long before the king began seeking a pretext for declaring war. Although he could have invaded Dithmarschen without warning, his was an age which prized formalities and legalism. The king would lose face among his equals if he violated international law too flagrantly. Even more to the point, he might find it difficult to conclude alliances and make trade agreements—who would trust a ruler who ignored the rules even when he could get what he wanted by following them.

Christian had an additional problem in summoning his armies together immediately. Denmark was a feudal state. Unless the king could finance a war by himself, his nobles and churchmen had the right to debate its propriety (and extract royal concessions) before it was declared. Such a debate could not be opened without suitable preparation. Therefore, Christian chose a more devious approach. On the one hand, he used all possible diplomatic channels to improve his position vis-à-vis Dithmarschen; on the other, he allowed his subjects' quarrels with Dithmarschers to rise to crisis level.¹

King Christian gave no public warning of his intentions toward the republic prior to his state visit to Rothenburg in February of 1474. There he met with the emperor, Frederick III (1415-1493), who would have objected strongly to any breech of the peace inside the Holy Roman Empire which took place without his prior approval. Christian had prepared quietly and carefully for this interview. His wife's uncle, Elector Albrecht of Brandenburg (1414-1466), had already used his considerable influence with the emperor: in the spring of 1473 he had obtained an imperial decree granting Dithmarschen to Christian because—Albrecht claimed—the peasants there had no lord. This proclamation had been kept secret until Christian's visit so that no one would be prepared to refute the statement by presenting documents demonstrating that Dithmarschen was technically subject to the archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen. As a result, the announcement caused a minor sensation. By the time the marshal of the Holy Roman Empire had sent a formal copy of the imperial decree to Lübeck to be delivered to Dithmarschen, the Lübeck city council had already received a full report of the matter from their representative at the court. (The marshal did not send a messenger directly to Dithmarschen, perhaps on the grounds that such an act was beneath his dignity, perhaps because it was too expensive, but more likely because he suspected that nobody could deliver such a document and escape unharmed.) The Lübeckers had sent a message immediately to the Dithmarschers, who were a potential ally in the event Christian should make war on the Hanseatic League. The councilmen of Lübeck warned the regents to expect an attack at any time. In short, this was a dangerous situation for everybody.

In May an imperial messenger reported to the emperor that he had delivered the proclamation via Lübeck. Frederick III then took steps to force the Dithmarschers to recognize Christian as their lord. He forbade the Hanseatic cities, the king of

Poland, and the Teutonic Knights to trade with the *rebels* and ordered the princes neighboring Dithmarschen to assist Christian in conquering them if they refused to submit. Elector Albrecht hurried to complete the legal formalities for declaring war before protests could be made by the archbishop. Even Charles the Bold of Burgundy, who was not necessarily a supporter of imperial policy, sent a stern warning to Dithmarschen to surrender or else.

Only one friend remained to the peasants: the Hanseatic League led by Lübeck. Lübeck citizens were proud of their independent spirit, and they had always chosen self-interest over any vows of loyalty and obedience to a distant and almost inaccessible emperor (no matter how much lip service they gave to him). Consequently, when the Dithmarschen regents wrote the Lübeck city council in September of 1460 to ask for help, they received assurances the city would do what it could. Indeed, not only did the Lübeckers brave an imperial threat to cut off their trade if they gave the Dithmarschers any help at all, but they sent their representative to the imperial court to inform Frederick that Dithmarschen was subject to the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen and, therefore, was not a land without a lord, free to be disposed of by imperial command. Furthermore, the envoy reported that the Dithmarschers had declared they would defend themselves and that the Hanseatic League would

offer its assistance. The envoy concluded with a scarcely veiled threat that the free and imperial city of Lübeck might be forced to secede from the Holy Roman Empire if imperial policies continued to threaten the well-being of Hanseatic allies. Such bravado was based on the awareness that a Hanseatic refusal to pay taxes would have a considerable impact on imperial finances. The Lübeck protest produced as effective a response as could be expected from an emperor whose interests lay almost wholly in southern Germany: Frederick III did nothing. Perhaps



the emperor concluded that he had been tricked by the wily Dane. Perhaps he had changed his mind—that would be typical of Frederick. Most likely, he simply had no interest in the affair.

Meanwhile, the Dithmarschers, having already met in the mayor's house in Meldorf, the old archepiscopal assembly place, composed an appeal to Pope Sixtus IV. They asked him to intervene, reminding him that they were subjects of the archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen, in token of which they paid each new archbishop five hundred Marks, accepted five advocates appointed by him, paid an annual tax, and that spiritual jurisdiction was exercised by the prior of cathedral chapter at

Hamburg. This letter was notarized by a Bremen cleric September 26 and hurried south, followed by another appeal October third.

The archbishop of Bremen had not been idle either. He wrote Frederick asking the emperor to call all of the parties involved to meet in Hamburg on October 9 to negotiate a peaceful resolution of the matter. He also sent a letter to the pope explaining the situation. The cities of Hamburg and Lübeck addressed similar letters to the Holy Father.

While these appeals were pending, parties representing King Christian and the regents met in Lübeck and agreed to a truce until May of the coming year. King Christian agreed, probably reluctantly, because any delay might be fatal for his hopes of conquering Dithmarschen before war with Sweden or some other entanglement made it impossible for him to spare the troops. However, refusal would brand him a disrupter of the peace and perhaps involve him in war with the Holy Roman Empire. The truce was renewed twice for six-month periods at a time. At last, on March 14, 1476, the Pope recognized the archbishop as overlord of Dithmarschen and the regents as the lawful government of that land.

Christian refused to accept this decision as final. He sought to persuade Frederick to render a dissenting verdict. However, everything moved slowly at the Hapsburg court; and Frederick III was unwilling to assist in relieving his fellow monarch's plight. Neither was Christian able to prevail in his appeals to Rome. The Pope warned him to cease harassing subjects of the archbishop or face ecclesiastic censure. Meanwhile, the regents studiously avoided offering any provocation which the king could use as an excuse for war. Thus, throughout the long negotiations they frustrated King Christian's ambitions and maintained the peace unbroken.

Several years later the regents broke off the ongoing peace talks and defied the king to attack them, declaring that Dithmarschen was prepared to defend itself to the last. The king was embarrassed by the ensuing situation because at that moment he was involved in a quarrel with the nobles of Schleswig-Holstein which kept him from being able to persuade them to go to war, King Christian could do nothing except make vague threats and continue his vain efforts to win a favorable decision from an emperor who had no interest in the situation.

The more time passed, the less reason Frederick III had for giving any encouragement to Christian. The anti-foreign sentiments uttered by his vassals reflected the growth of a reform movement in the Holy Roman Empire. Patriots were complaining of *outside interference* in German affairs, and the princes were accusing foreign princes and foreign prelates of acting against German interests. Some remembered that Christian had lied to them by calling the Dithmarschers *landless rebels*. Some were interested in receiving bribes. Frederick III may even have honestly wished to do justice without rescinding his grants of 1473. Whatever motives the emperor may have had, he did nothing until Christian was dead. Then he ordered the Danish heir to attend court and await his decision. When the new monarch failed to comply, Denmark lost its claim upon Dithmarschen by default.

If diplomacy had failed the Danes in 1481, their ambition to conquer Dithmarschen still remained, and force was yet to be used. Christian's heirs immediately violated his sacred promise to preserve Schleswig-Holstein's unity: John (1455-1521) took the north and the crown and young Frederick (1471-1533) became ruler of Holstein. They held equal contempt both for international law and for German patriots. In continuing their father's quarrel with Dithmarschen, they did not imagine that they were setting in motion a series of events which would culminate in the collapse of their United Scandinavian Kingdom.²

The Dithmarschers remained defiant, singing:

*Dat schut nu und nummermehre,
Darrime willen wi wagen Hals und Gut
Unde will dar alle umme sterven
Ehr dar de Kaning von Dennemark
So scholde unse schone Land verderven.³*

Now and forevermore,
we will risk our lives and goods
and are all ready to die
before the king of Denmark
should destroy our beautiful land.

One important result of this long crisis with Denmark was the universal acceptance of the regents as the body most qualified to guide state affairs. Another was papal recognition of the Dithmarschen state. *Contemporaries viewed it as a state; we should also.*

We have seen, how throughout the centuries, but particularly in the fifteenth century, Dithmarschen developed along the lines of a modern state, differing from more successful states principally in its small size. Since expansion into Holstein was neither practical nor desired, the only possibility for Dithmarschers to form a larger political and economic unit was to make an alliance with the Hanseatic cities or with other free peasant communities along the North Sea coast. Would that have been possible? The success of the military alliance of 1493 with the Hanseatic League and the successful joint defense of Hadeln across the Elbe a few years later suggest that it might have been. Unfortunately, burgher and peasant alike failed to see their need for one another clearly enough. The example of Switzerland, where rural and urban cantons gave one another military and political support, went unheeded. This failure came in part from the fact that the bonds of political and economic interest tying Dithmarschen and the Hanseatic cities together were temporarily severed in 1499 by a quarrel and never fully reestablished. Ironically enough, the quarrel arose out of one of the most successful experiments in cooperation attempted by these rural and urban powers, the intervention in Hadeln.

The Hadeln War

This conflict began when the cathedral chapter in Bremen elected a local merchant's son as archbishop, an act which was interpreted as an affront to the class feelings and political interests of the surrounding princes. The neighboring count of Oldenburg, a relative of the Danish king, objected strongly to the election. He demanded that a member of his family replace the low-born candidate whose name had already been forwarded to Rome for confirmation. When his ultimatum was rejected, the count tried to bring pressure on the canons by asking the duke of Saxon-Lauenburg to occupy Hadeln, a small peasant community on the North Sea subject to the archbishopric. The citizens of Bremen and the archbishop-elect appealed to the Hanseatic cities for assistance. Hamburg responded by raising a small mercenary army, and Dithmarschen sent five hundred men to join it. Both Hamburg and Dithmarschen were theoretically subjects of the prelate, obligated to assist him militarily, but they had never before done anything not dictated by self-interest. Therefore, citing their feudal obligations was seen as pure hypocrisy. The Hanseatic force swooped down on Hadeln, drove away the Saxon forces, and almost captured the duke. The expedition had been a complete success.

Unfortunately, as the army marched back to Hamburg dissensions arose among the victors. The Dithmarschers ridiculed a Hamburg soldier for having stabbed a noble from Bremen in a private quarrel. Blows followed. Apparently the Dithmarschers came out of the scuffle in better condition than the mercenaries. After the army was paid and dismissed, the Dithmarschers left for home. Unknown to them, the Hamburg soldiers had followed them. When the Dithmarschers stopped in Otterndorf to spend the night, they had hardly taken off their armor to prepare supper when the mercenaries attacked by surprise and killed seventy-three of their number. The mercenaries stripped the prisoners of their money, weapons, and clothing, then sent them home in disgrace. The regents complained about the matter, but the Hamburg government claimed it was helpless. It did not have the means or the will to punish its mercenaries.

When the Dithmarschens saw that the Hamburg city council would not act on their complaint, they took matters into their own hands, and *pirates* soon seized a number of Hamburg merchant vessels on the Elbe. The feud which began in this way was to last thirteen years. All hope of cooperation between the parties disappeared.⁴

Thus, Dithmarschen lost her closest ally on the very eve of the greatest threat ever to her independence. The tiny state doomed itself to stand alone against the mightiest nation in the north, the United Kingdom of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. The dark path the Dithmarschers had to tread by themselves, without friends and allies, led directly to **Hemmingstedt**, where the light of their virtues would shine brighter than at any moment in this people's glorious history.

CHAPTER NINE

THE BATTLE OF HEMMINGSTEDT

King John, ruler of the United Kingdom of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, claimed that he had been so often provoked by the Dithmarschers that there was no honorable action left for him except war. In reality he needed no provocation—he was eager for excitement, fame, and the opportunity to enrich himself—but, like his father, he realized the necessity of complying with the letter of international law. Although the provocations he cited in defense of his aggression were only excuses, he listed an impressive number of incidents between Dithmarschers and his subjects in Holstein and Eiderstedt. For example, in 1403 Dithmarschers had plundered half of Eiderstedt in revenge for the kidnapping of seven women. In 1414 after Eiderstedters had arrested and hanged four Dithmarschers, a party of five hundred Dithmarschers sailed across the Eider to Tonningen but were routed by hastily assembled Frisians. The Eiderstedters fell on the raiders, drove them pell-mell into the river to drown, then seized their ships. The Dithmarscher force was essentially wiped out, while the Eiderstedters lost only one hundred and forty men. When the other Dithmarschen parishes heard of the disaster, they sent the entire militia across the Eider. The Frisians, unable to stand against such numbers, took to flight, leaving the area around Borchsande to be burned and plundered. The Dithmarschers killed two hundred and fifty-nine of their enemy at the cost of one hundred and twenty men.

In the following year, 1415, the Dithmarschers returned and so intimidated the Frisians that they offered no resistance at all to the invaders. After the Dithmarschers had sailed away, leaving homes, barns, and fields burning behind them, the Eiderstedters sent their priests to seek peace. When the Frisians promised to pay a heavy indemnity for all the men they had killed the previous year, the Dithmarschers agreed to halt their attacks.

The counts of Holstein had been unable to support their subjects at this time because they were still youths and, moreover, were involved in war with Denmark. They may have encouraged the Eiderstedters to delay paying the indemnity, which was still unpaid in 1440 when the Danish-Holstein war came to an end and the counts

were free to offer help. At that time the Eiderstedters asked to negotiate the treaty anew. The matter was given to the Prior of the Hamburg church and the Hanseatic cities to mediate, but it remained unsettled even in 1459, when the last Schauenburger count died and the lands went over to King Christian of Denmark. This dispute remained a major source of unhappiness for decades to come.¹

There was another outbreak of fighting in 1496. Fishermen from the Hanseatic cities and Dithmarschen had long landed on the beaches of Helgoland to dry, salt, and pickle their herring catch. When Duke Frederick, the brother of King John of Denmark, demanded that they pay for the use of the island facilities, the Hanseatic cities found themselves in a crisis. Bremen fisherman, who were the principal users of the facilities, refused to comply. When Duke Frederick ordered everyone who failed to pay taxes expelled from Helgoland, it was easier to enforce the command on the archbishop's Dithmarschen subjects than on citizens of Bremen. The Dithmarschers then retaliated for the Duke's action by burning the customs house on the island. Frederick waited two years for revenge, then ordered the Eiderstedters to sail to Helgoland and arrest all the fishermen they found there. They did so willingly, thereby interrupting the fishing season and bringing tremendous financial hardship on Bremen, Hamburg, and Dithmarschen. Not surprisingly, soon afterward the Dithmarschers fell upon Eiderstedt. They took a heavy toll of those who were holding their fishermen prisoner.

King John had responsibilities to his brother and to his subjects, and could have used this as an excuse for war against Dithmarschen or, at least, intervention in the dispute. He did not, and the real reason for his attack was his desire to add that land to his domains. He had recently crushed his rival, Sten Sture, at Stockholm and was now ruler of the United Kingdom of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden; moreover, he was overlord of Schleswig-Holstein.² He detested the existence of the tiny free state on his frontiers and coveted its taxes. Winning the consent of his vassals for war, he began to raise armies from all his domains and gather them in Holstein. Large though this army was, however, he placed his confidence mainly in a large body of mercenary troops hired for the occasion. This private army, the Black Garde, was the most feared body of cutthroats in the north.

The Black Garde had been raised by the Duke of Saxony in 1488 especially to deal with unruly peasants. This experiment began because his knights had been unable to come to grips with peasant bands along his North Sea coastal domains; this infantry force could penetrate into the most fearsome woods and swamps. The arms and tactics of the Black Garde were similar to those of the peasants, well suited to swamp warfare, but its training, equipment, and morale were so superior that it was almost invincible. The duke had filled its ranks with the dregs of England, France, Scotland, Spain, Hungary, Italy, and even North Africa; he hired mercenaries who spared neither age nor sex in their slaughter of the defeated enemy. He eventually dismissed the mercenaries, who were expensive to keep, but the force did not disperse. Under independent leadership, the Black Garde hired itself to anyone willing to pay; and in the years between 1488 and 1497 the warriors committed many

bloody deeds in East and West Frisia. Serving briefly in Sweden, the Black Garde returned to Saxon service in 1499 to occupy Hadeln. A minor setback there caused the Garde to reorganize under an experienced nobleman from Cologne, Thomas Slentz, with about four thousand troops, engineers and artillery. Slentz accepted the Danish offer of employment.

With these forces at his disposal, and with his royal levies, King John saw little chance of defeat. Expecting perhaps to have already intimidated his intended victims, he commanded the Dithmarschers to pay 15,000 Marks for his expenses and allow the construction of three castles at Brunsbüttel, Meldorf, and Eiderföhre—or face destruction. Most likely, he did not expect compliance. That was merely his way of declaring war without adequate cause.³

Dithmarschen's allies were all cowed. Lübeck sent some material aid and money, but Hamburg did not even attempt to prevent the passage of the Black Garde through her lands.⁴ By the middle of January of 1500, the four thousand mercenaries were poised on the border of the free state. With them were two hundred and fifty nobles from Holstein with their mounted followers and a smaller number of nobles from Denmark, Mecklenburg, and Saxon-Lauenburg, about two thousand armored horsemen in all. In addition the king and duke had called up some fifty-five hundred militia from Holstein, Schleswig, and Jutland, similar in arms and training to the Dithmarschers and filled with generations of hate toward them. Also, they had a large park of artillery. The king provided a thousand wagons to carry the food and munitions for this force of twelve to thirteen thousand fighting men.

This was an imposing force for some six thousand farmer-militiamen to face, and the debate in the assembly reflected the deep concern of the citizens: some spoke for defending the border, fighting it out at once, and having a decision one way or the other without allowing the land to be invaded and plundered; if they lost, at least their families would be spared hardship. Others claimed that this would be equivalent to throwing themselves under the feet of the enemy, and that they should withdraw unto the islands and leave only their flooded lands to the invaders, who would have to withdraw eventually. Still others argued that such a policy would merely prolong the agony until they were starved into submission, for the Danes would build fortresses that could not be captured. Nevertheless, few spoke for surrender, and those were quickly overridden by the general desire to defend the land as long as possible. The assembly decided to gather the army in Heide, assign some units to the strongpoints in the *Risenwold*, and make the best of such opportunities as presented themselves.

On the eleventh of February, 1500, the long worm-like invasion force crossed the undefended frontier and occupied the deserted Geest. The next day it proceeded south in the general direction of Meldorf under the guidance of some exiled Dithmarschers. This movement caught the defenders entirely by surprise, for they had expected the attack to come at Tielenbrücke. The eventless progress of the Danish-Holstein army was therefore interrupted only when an advance party ran into a wedding procession and a fire-fight ensued! On the thirteenth the royal army stood before the hastily erected fortifications of Meldorf. As the royal cannons opened fire,

the garrison of mercenaries fled, leaving the few old women and children in the town to be massacred by the Black Garde. As the smoke from burning settlements round

about blackened the skies, the king ordered the *Danebrog*, Denmark's ancient national banner, to be hung from the tower of St. Peter's in Meldorf; he then took up quarters in the Dominican monastery.

The Dithmarschers were despondent. The Southshore was isolated and only four thousand men remained in the main army to face the invaders. Two main counsels dominated: to negotiate, and to withdraw to the islands. Nevertheless, many still spoke in favor of a pitched battle. Women volunteered to fight alongside their men. Dithmarschen folklore put these words into the mouth of one speaker:



Although they have taken the Geest and the high ground, the largest and most secure part of our land still lies ahead of them. This is cut by ditches which can be made more formidable by opening the sluices in the dikes. Conquests must be made, not by declarations and pomp, but by manly prowess. These people who would eat the world with words have so far only dealt with old people, women, and children. They have sinned against God, the archbishop of Bremen, and St. Peter. God always punishes such people, and here is an army of people ready to fight in this just and unavoidable war. If we had to die a thousand deaths, even without winning eternal fame, we should do it for the sake of our fatherland. The freedom of our children and future generations is at stake. Even those who are born serfs long to be free. Are we, who are born free, to subject ourselves to servitude without resisting? It is a shame to live under a regime where a farmer and a hunting dog fetch the same price.²⁵

Such an eloquent statement serves as a summary of Dithmarschen history to this point. King John might well have heard speeches from Dithmarscher envoys containing these very sentiments, but he would not have been moved: the upper classes understood the value of a good hunting dog but took little interest in common peasants.

King John sent messengers to the regents and waited for their surrender. But no messenger returned. After three days the king lost patience and announced his intention of marching north to Heide while the fields were still frozen. That very night this information came into the hands of the Dithmarschers through the fortuitous capture of a Frisian scout who told them what he knew in return for his life.

North of Meldorf lay four miles of swamp. With the sea to the west of the swamps and the southern *Hamme* to the east, the slightly elevated roadway was—in military terms—the equivalent of a mountain pass: it was a narrow path where a small number of men could meet a larger force on equal terms. At the council of war, Wulf Isebrandt of Oldenwöhrden suggested that the militia ambush the Danish army just south of the high ground at Hemmingstedt. The assembly adopted his plan and, without dissent, placed Isebrandt, a Dutch immigrant, in command. Isebrandt ordered the militia to hurry to Hemmingstedt with entrenching tools.⁶

Under Isebrandt's direction, the militamen labored through the night to build an earthen wall across the road at Dusenddüwelwarf (to the west of the modern highway) and dig a ditch to protect the small rising upon which he had chosen to place the guns. By morning the redoubt was finished and manned with the best-trained infantry and artillerymen the country possessed. He assigned the rest of the militia to guard the sluices of the dikes and hold the knolls (*Wurten*) flanking the line of march. A forty-year-old virgin from Oldenwöhrden seized the Dithmarschen banner and vowed to enter the cloister the people had promised to build for the Virgin Mary if victory were theirs. The battle cry was "Hilf, Maria milde" (Help us, gentle Mary).

Ignorant of all these preparations, King John gave orders to have the army underway before daybreak. When his mercenary general, Thomas Slentz, pointed out that it was a holy day and that the weather was becoming warmer, he swore that the mercenaries wanted only to stretch out their contract to earn more money; and, if he couldn't fight in God's name, he'd fight in the devil's! Slentz dutifully assigned the Black Garde, accompanied by engineers and artillery, to form the vanguard. The infantry followed next, then the cavalry, and finally the heavy artillery and supply wagons. This long column was forced to remain on the road because the ground had begun to thaw; the ditches to either side, originally dug less to provide material for the roadway than to drain the neighboring fields, were filling with icy water. Mixed rain and snow blew into the face of the infantry marching four abreast. Knee-deep in mud, the army churned slowly forward, unaware that defenses against them had been erected overnight. The day before, scouts had reported the road clear; now, Dithmarschers made certain that no scouts lived to warn of the danger which lay ahead.

The roadway, rendered liquid by the thousands of feet and hooves, became almost impassable for the units at the rear of the column, especially for the wagon train. Slentz, at his position in the vanguard, may not have been fully aware of the difficulties encountered by the units behind him, but he had no reason to turn the column around: the worst was past; high ground lay just ahead.

King John and Duke Frederick were still in Meldorf with the part of the wagon train that had not yet cleared the city gates, when they heard distant gunfire to the north. They were apparently surprised to hear anything in this weather. Certainly, they were not expecting sounds of battle so soon.

The handful of cavalry scouts, moving up the narrow road only slightly in advance of the Black Garde, had been so blinded by the fog and rain that they almost

blundered onto the redoubt before anyone realized what it was. Then, before any alarm could be given, a Dithmarscher volley had blasted into the horsemen, and artillery began to fire into the columns of infantry behind them. Slentz reacted quickly, ordering the closest Garde unit to form a phalanx on the right shoulder of the narrow road and to wait until the engineers had put planks over the ditches, then to attack. However, the engineers were shot down as they approached the main ditch. The Black Garde stood defenseless in huddled masses, perfect targets for the Dithmarscher guns except that it was still dark. Normally, full daylight would have arrived by this time, but it was delayed by the winter storm this February morning.

Realizing that an immediate assault along the road would be very costly in lives, Slentz ordered the royal artillery brought forward. He expected few volleys to neutralize the militia's guns and destroy enough of the earthen fort that his phalanx could roll over the defenders. Once the cannons were hauled into place, however, the wind and wet weather doused the wicks and ruined the powder. As Slentz sent for fresh supplies, he could clearly see the outline of the redoubt against the light of a huge fire the Dithmarschers had built to dry and warm themselves and their gunpowder. Meanwhile, Wulf Isebrandt looked at the Garde's line of strangely silent cannon and wondered how much time he had before they would begin to batter down his hurriedly-built redoubt. Seeing that his artillery was not damaging the Garde's guns, he ordered his footsoldiers to sally out and overturn them by hand. Every militiaman understood that any cannon which had been dumped in the mud would be useless for the rest of the battle—and none of them wished to be stationary targets for skilled artillery fire. Consequently, they willingly scrambled over the ditches and threw themselves onto the bristling pikes of the Garde, who came forward to meet them. As the militiamen sought to break through to the guns, some were accidentally shot down by their own artillery. Failing to force the Garde's ranks back, the militiamen retreated into their fortifications and reformed their ranks. The Garde presumably took advantage of the pause to reorganize as well; they had to form a solid front across the raised roadway and protect their flanks in the marshes to either side. But, before Slentz's men were ready, a fresh unit of Dithmarschers sallied forth, this time meeting with success—they pushed back the mercenaries, overturned the cannons, and then fled back into their redoubt.

By now daylight must have revealed that the Black Garde stood in an exceedingly perilous position. They were massed under the guns of the enemy without supporting artillery and with little room for maneuver. Slentz briefly consulted with his staff, then ordered eight companies of the Garde (2700 men) to ready themselves for storming the redoubt. Heavy casualties could be expected, but there was no acceptable alternative to an immediate advance. Slentz did have the advantage of overwhelming numbers: his pikemen were facing a force similarly armed and trained one-ninth their number. His disadvantage was that he had no space along the road to deploy all his units in a concentrated attack. Nor did he wish send his men directly into the teeth of the artillery. In short, Slentz concluded that his best chance was to

order his men onto the marshy ground and move around the Dithmarschen flank. With the marsh to the west impossibly deep, his chances to the east looked better.

Slentz must have understood the risk he was taking in moving onto ground he had not inspected personally. Still, he doubted that the militia had been able to stretch their defensive works as far the hillock which lay northeast of the redoubt. Surely, that flank would be weaker than the center. In any case, the defenders would not be able to reposition their guns to resist an assault at that point. Since one of the fields seemed to be somewhat higher than the rest, Slentz ordered his commanders to take their units there and align the ranks for an irresistible assault on the Dithmarschen fortifications. Undeterred by the mud and marsh grasses, the Garde's units marched off to the right and formed their phalanx. With their lowered pikes forming a bristling mass of sharp points, the Garde moved to the attack.

Isebrandt knew that a passive defense would be fatal; he had to break the ranks of the phalanx before it reached the high ground. A counter-attack was his answer. Knowing that his surviving infantrymen were already exhausted, he ordered them to remove their shoes, heavy helmets and armor, to cast away their shields, and to fight unprotected with spear and sword. According to some traditions, the approaching Garde shouted "Wahr di, Bur, de Garr de Kumt!" (look out, farmers, the Garde is coming). At that point Isebrandt ordered everyone in the redoubt except the artillery crews to throw themselves on the phalanx while it was still on low ground. This tactic was costly in lives and it gained Isebrandt only minutes, but it was the only method he had to prevent the Garde from incapacitating the artillery or outflanking the redoubt. If the cannonfire had been interrupted, the redoubt could not have been held against new attacks up the roadway. The precious minutes also represented the time Isebrandt needed for every nearby unit to hurry to the rescue.

Slentz, too, understood that time was of the essence. After his Garde had repulsed the desperate charge of the half-naked militiamen, the phalanx must have been in great disarray—the rain, the feet churning the marshy field into a quagmire, the confusion in the fog. Nevertheless, he allowed his men only a moment's pause to reform their lines, then ordered them forward again. Meanwhile, Isebrandt had collected every man available, including some almost-unarmed artillerymen, and was holding them until the Garde approached more closely. When he gave the command, two to three thousand Dithmarschers hurled themselves on the oncoming enemy with the cry, "Wahr di, Garr, de Bur de Kumt!" (look out, Garde, the farmers are coming). At the same time other militiamen were opening the sluices of the dikes, causing the sea to rush across the marsh and the roadway with such force as to knock men from their feet. With incredible rapidity the low-lying land was covered by salty water. Before the combatants separated once more, Slentz and his officers had fallen in the fighting. Isebrandt's third attack broke the disorganized phalanx into fragments. The mercenaries fled for their lives.

Two units of the Garde which had been unable to reach the scene of combat retained their discipline and escaped intact, but the others threw down their heavy

weapons and fled the battlefield. The Dithmarschers followed with the cry "no quarter," killing every man who succumbed to exhaustion and wounds. Such was the impact of the fleeing Garde on the units to the rear that entire Holstein regiments were thrown off the road into the ditches or trampled underfoot. Units to the rear, having heard the noise of combat and seen the water rushing in from the sea, fled in panic. Confused by the blowing rain and the fog, they imagined Dithmarschers everywhere. Perhaps they remembered the fate of past invaders as they threw away their weapons or used them on those who impeded their escape. Soon there was a mass flight along the narrow, muddy road toward Meldorf, while Dithmarschers followed along behind, massacring those who could not or would not flee.

As the infantry reached the cavalry, men and horses became entangled. Once forced off the road into the morass and then abandoned by the fleeing infantry, the knights found themselves in a horrifying situation—their horses were mired in the deep mud, and they could not dismount because the weight of their full armor would pull them under the water. When the Dithmarschers saw the knights, they raised the ancient cry "Schone den Man, schlæ de Perde!" The armor-bearing nobles did not have a chance. The half-naked Dithmarschers, accustomed to swamp and sea, moved with ease to surround and annihilate them. The battlefield became a slaughterhouse.

When King John realized that the battle was lost, he ordered the wagons pushed into the ditches to clear the road for the fugitives, then he and his brother took to their heels and led the stream of fugitives out of Meldorf for the safety of Holstein.

The losses to Denmark and Holstein were tremendous. The Black Garde alone lost eight hundred men, and the Dithmarschers buried six hundred cavalry in a mass grave. Among the one hundred and fifty Holstein nobles left on the battlefield were twenty Pogwishes, eleven Ahlefeldtes, including the marshall of the army, five Rantzaus, six Sehestadtes, four Buchwalds, four Wisches, and two Reventlows. There were also two counts of Oldenburg, and about fifty nobles from Denmark, Mecklenburg, Brandenburg, and Lüneburg. In all nearly four thousand men from the Danish army had perished. The booty staggered the imagination, totalling perhaps 200,000 Gulden. This included the princes' gold and silver table settings, the wagons of food and war-material, several thousand war and draft-horses, a park of artillery and powder, and the personal effects of the fallen. Seven battleflags and the famous *Danebrog* were hung in Isebrandt's church at Oldenwöhrden in memory of the victory. Sixty Dithmarschers had fallen.⁷

The news of the Battle of Hemmingstedt spread like wildfire across the north. Celebrations broke out in Lübeck and Sweden rose in revolt against the Danes under the leadership of Sten Sture. King John swore revenge but was never again able to implement his plans for making war again against the Dithmarschers. The victory at Hemmingstedt gave Dithmarschen six more decades of independence.

Hemmingstedt was the jewel in the crown of Dithmarschen liberty. Protected by its memory, the farmers returned home and continued their life as of old. The people became ever more prosperous and content. Those last golden years of the free Republic were remembered for centuries afterward as the best of all.

CHAPTER TEN THE REFORMATION

Exempted by history and location from the problems agitating many provinces of the Holy Roman Empire at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Dithmarschers showed little interest in the great controversies preceding the Reformation in Germany. They no longer experienced significant church interference either in secular affairs or local worship; sales of indulgences were insignificant; and corruption was minimal. In short, there seemed little reason for Dithmarschers to question the fundamental tenets of their faith or to challenge the rights of distant popes. Nevertheless, once the reform movement was underway, Dithmarschers shared the doubts, agitation, and fanaticism which prevailed everywhere in Germany. One result was that the constitution itself underwent a careful scrutiny and some revision.

For a long time the Dithmarschers had regulated local church affairs independently. Congregations managed parish property themselves and appointed their own priests. In doing this they were already practicing one of the major reforms advocated by early Protestants. They brooked no interference from the archbishop or those canons who were supposed to oversee religious services, the consecration of priests, and the use of church money. The prior of Hamburg, who made periodic visitations, was wise not to interfere with local practices. Indeed, he had no reason to interfere: the Dithmarschers gave him no cause for worry. They were a very devout people who required everyone to attend church and to participate in parish activities. As was the common medieval practice, the communicants founded church guilds which combined feasting, entertainment, and charity work so as to make the parish churches centers of social life. Wealthy guildsmen adorned the church buildings magnificently.

Local piety expressed itself in the personal lives of the members as much as in the corporate worship we tend to associate with the *Church*. This piety, unfortunately, did not extend beyond the frontier. Dithmarschers were hesitant about recognizing Holsteiners as brothers in Christ. They distrusted *foreign* priests. Also,

unlike pious folk in other parts of Europe, few Dithmarschers became monks or nuns. Local political and social conditions emphasized the active life. Entering a cloister appeared to be a waste of talent and time.

This attitude did not mean that Dithmarschers disapproved of the international church. Dithmarschers honored the Virgin Mary as the Protectress of their land. They looked to the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen and the pope to defend their liberty. They relied upon sacred oaths as the basis of their judicial system. In short, they believed the Church was a necessary part of the world order. They were ready to defend this order to the death, but they preferred to seek ways for defending it without paying taxes or leaving home.

The Dithmarschers were practical Christians who drove hard bargains with God. When they needed a virgin to vow to enter a convent in return for victory, as was their custom before battle, they were willing to allow an old woman (over forty) to take the vow of chastity, thus demeaning what was supposed to be an act of great sacrifice on behalf of the community. They were aware of abuses in the greater church, but they did not feel called upon to correct every injustice in the world. In fact, their very awareness of the unjustice of crusades against peasants much like themselves may have hindered their protests against the raising of taxes elsewhere for purposes which seemed to them immoral. If unfit men held high office in regions of Germany distant from them, that did not concern them. Each person, each community had to take care of itself. In any case, any effort to interfere with the day-to-day operation of the Roman Church outside of Dithmarschen would be a waste of time and energy. Lastly, the more corrupt the churchmen, the more likely they were to be dangerous as well. Therefore, even though Dithmarschers listened to stories about specific abuses in the Church—such stories provided excellent reasons for defending their own rights against the pretensions of the clergy—they refrained from making statements which would call attention to themselves.

Even so, on the eve of Luther's revolt heated discussions of religious issues, not unlike those found throughout Germany, were occurring in the parishes of Dithmarschen. Educated men and women generally sympathized with the reforming trend of the time more than the common people did. These men were always from the leading families and therefore had a following from among their clansmen, but they hesitated to speak out against the abuses for fear that the church hierarchy would urge Holstein and Denmark to attack their country. Because Dithmarschers understood the close relationship between religion and politics, the Reformation came to Dithmarschen only after all the neighboring states had been converted to Protestantism. By that time their conversion was largely a matter of conforming to the prevailing regional custom. In fact, one reason for changing their form of worship was to avoid being singled out as potential Roman Catholic victims of a Protestant crusade.

Although the Reformation did not begin in Dithmarschen until the second quarter of the sixteenth century, the ground had been prepared there as elsewhere long before by the presence of specific problems.

Local church problems

In the fifteenth century a few Dithmarschers had advocated Hussite doctrines which supported the rights of peasants and minor nobles to determine Church doctrine and practice. Others were appalled by the superstition and hypocrisy they saw around them. A few were disturbed by the domination of each parish church by a few families. However, those men and women were always outnumbered by those who feared dangerous ideas about church reform would bring harm to both church and state. Fear of a crusade, the desire to conform, and a literalness of belief which often spilled over into superstition made intolerance a salient characteristic of the clansmen.¹

Nevertheless, there were dissenters. To a certain extent, this dissent may have reflected nothing more than the Dithmarschers' natural inclination to quarrelsome ness or the individualists' protest against community efforts to enforce conformism. But there were also specific local disputes over matters which originally had nothing to do with religious theory but which forced the adherents of various positions to demonstrate that their ideas were in agreement with church doctrine. This led naturally to a rethinking of the role of the church in the society. This most important of these disputes arose shortly after 1500, when the Dithmarschen honored their battlefield vow at Hemmingstedt to build a convent in honor of the Virgin Mary. The controversy which resulted soon made all previous local disagreements about religion seem unimportant in comparison.

There was only one logical site for the nunnery—Meldorf. The Dominican monastery there had been founded almost two centuries earlier to fulfill a similar battlefield vow. The Dominicans could provide the nuns a priest and a chapel, thus sparing the Dithmarschers major expenses in construction costs and salaries. The regents authorized funds for building an appropriate dormitory for the nuns just south of the Dominicans' church. So far, so good. Then the troubles began.

The first difficulty was that too few girls entered the convent to make it flourish. Not only was there no tradition of consecrating daughters to God's service, but soon Meldorf was abuzz with stories of scandals and quarrels inside the convent. Parents refused to allow even willing daughters to take vows, much less send young girls there for an education. At length, the regents were so shocked by the situation that they decided to move the handful of nuns to the more rural (and therefore more pious and conservative) community at Lunden, where Franciscan friars were willing to assume responsibility for the behavior of the nuns. The Dominicans, of course, were humiliated and outraged. Doubtless, they made their displeasure known in Hamburg and Bremen. Consequently, when the regents notified the prior at Hamburg, who was technically responsible for oversight of the convent, that they had appropriated money for a building in Lunden, the prior said that the move would be too expensive and too embarrassing to the church. He refused permission to move the nuns to a new location. Instead, he announced that the money which had been appropriated for the new convent would be used to complete the unfinished church

at Wöhrden. This initiated a serious confrontation between the regents and the prior. The regents forbade anyone to deliver building stone to Wöhrden until the Hamburg Church built the new nunnery at Lunden. The prior stood by his right to spend as he wished that portion of parish income which was set aside for his use in maintaining buildings and refused to compromise with the regents in any way.

Faced by the obstinacy of the Hamburg churchman, the regents had to either act or yield; they did the former, seizing the income devoted to the care of church buildings. During the next four years the regents held the accumulating money in the strong box at Weddingstedt. They refused to spend these funds as the prior wished, but they did not dare allocate money to the nunnery without his permission. Therefore, the money remained unspent and all construction came to a halt. Both parties were stubborn in this matter, but since the churchman was not personally touched by the regents' measures, he could continue to resist. By 1506 the regents could not wait any longer—their church buildings needed repairs. They increased the pressure on the prior by depriving the local priests, monks and deacons of all income until he gave way. This was an effective strategy, a blow straight to the pocketbook of the church. However, the matter did not end there.

The prior brought suit against the regents in Rome, but this was the Renaissance papacy. Nothing was done quickly without a bribe. Since the Hamburg church apparently failed to take the monetary approach expected by the bureaucracy, ten years passed before a papal decision was reached—in favor of the regents. The pope ordered the nunnery moved to Lunden and transferred to the care of the Franciscan Order.

This crisis had disrupted religious services in every parish. Before the matter was resolved, the regents had deprived the prior of his power of oversight and the priests of their control over religious services, to the effect that more than a decade before Luther's Reformation in Saxony, the Dithmarschers had taken control of the local church into their own hands. Beginning in 1523 congregations elected their own priests, paid them, and regulated all parish activities.

As for the nunnery, the building collapsed in a storm in 1521 and the priests and nuns were dispersed by the Reformation before it could be repaired.²

The Reformation

In the decades prior to Luther's rise to prominence reform propaganda spread slowly through the Holy Roman Empire until a large majority of the educated classes was persuaded that some type of reform was necessary. Because there was such widespread support for reform, once Luther defied the Imperial Diet and Emperor Charles V in 1521, calls for action came from every corner of Germany. Rulers asked Luther and Melanthon for advice, then instituted sweeping reforms. Dukes and counts seized church lands while bishops and abbots secularized their territories. They *purified* the church by eliminating the veneration of the saints and the Virgin, the sale of indulgences, and pilgrimages. They abandoned the Latin mass

in favor of religious services in German. Meanwhile, monks and nuns were leaving their convents and priests were marrying. Radicals demanded even greater reforms. Mobs burned religious pictures, smashed statues, and called the pope the *anti-Christ*. Peasants began to demand changes in their social and economic life which would reflect the new equality of all believers.

Dithmarschen was not exempt from this excitement. In 1523 the regents proposed that all citizens who held responsible positions in the country's religious life should meet together in a council to discuss means of resolving problems which had arisen in various parishes and to discuss the general issue of reform. The idea that laymen should participate in any debate of this nature was, in itself, revolutionary, no matter how much it was in the tradition of Dithmarschen's self-government. Despite the protests which arose, the regents were determined to pursue the matter—it could not be avoided forever—but they wanted to do it slowly and deliberately. To minimize the chances of the debate becoming too controversial for the maintenance of public order, they decreed the death penalty for anyone who hurriedly introduced changes in religious life without their permission. The result of the council was a proposed package of moderate reforms, among which was a reduction in the annual payment to Hamburg. The prior complained that he lacked sufficient funds to continue the work of the church, but he wrote in vain. The regents refused to pay him more than a token sum, because they were now assuming the financial responsibility for support of the parish churches themselves. This affair was soon forgotten, however, as it was overshadowed by the historic controversy which began when the Meldorf congregation invited a prominent reformer to address them.

The invitation was sent to Hinrich Möller of Zütphen (1488-1524), a native of the Netherlands who had studied in Wittenberg and had become, like Luther, an Augustinian monk. He had risen swiftly in the esteem of his brethren, becoming prior of the convent in Cologne at age twenty-seven. In 1520, when Luther was at his most controversial and his supporters stood in considerable danger of being arrested and executed, Hinrich Zütphen (as he was generally known) returned to Wittenberg and took his place alongside his mentor. Two years later he was sent on a mission to Antwerp. There he was arrested and charged with heresy. His two colleagues were burned at the stake, a fate he would have shared had he not been rescued by friends and smuggled out of the Low Countries. He then went to Bremen, where his sermons were instrumental in winning over the people to Luther's ideas.

Up to this time the reform movement had proceeded relatively slowly in north Germany because Luther's High German was essentially a foreign language. Luther's ideas were being spread through pamphlets, but relatively few of the common citizens of Bremen could read in any case and even fewer could understand High German well enough to grasp Luther's complex thoughts. Zütphen, in contrast, grew up speaking Dutch and was acquainted with several Low German dialects. Consequently, when he put Luther's powerful words in a language everyone could understand, he met with sensational success. Zütphen's first sermons had all the immediacy and shock of an unexpected thunderstorm.

It was not long before word of Zütphen's preaching reached Dithmarschen. An invitation to deliver a series of lectures then came from the congregation of Meldorf. The invitation was probably inspired by Nicholas Boie, the pastor and Wiebe Junge, the widow of the prominent regent Claus Junge, both individuals so prominent in local society that no one wished to oppose them openly—though within a short while some individuals had second thoughts about the matter. Meldorf was no ordinary congregation. The church was the oldest in Dithmarschen, with roots reaching back to 810, and was such a large and impressive brick structure that it was commonly referred to as the cathedral (*Dom*)—although it was obviously not the seat of a bishop. Nor was Boie an ordinary priest, since he had been a student in Wittenberg when the Lutheran controversy began. From Zütphen's point of view, Meldorf was the ideal place for the first introduction of Luther's thought into Dithmarschen.

On November 20, 1524, Zütphen was met at Brunsbüttel by members of Boie's powerful clan, the Vodiemannen, and escorted to Meldorf. Boie announced that the reformer would speak at the next worship services. This development disturbed some members of the Meldorf congregation who remembered the regents' prohibition of introducing any changes in religious life without permission. A few were fearful of the consequences of ill-considered reforms, and some disagreed both with his ideas and his emotional approach to religion, saying that they ran contrary to local tradition. Only a handful feared for their own future, but among that handful was Augustine Torneborch, the prior of the Dominican monastery—Protestant reforms would ruin his career. Consequently, as soon as he heard of Zütphen's arrival, Torneborch hurried to Hamburg to confer with officials of the archbishop. Those churchmen, in turn, sent a letter describing Zütphen's activities to Bremen, whereupon the archbishop ordered Zütphen to come to Buxtehude to stand trial for various crimes against the Church. Zütphen ignored the order. If Luther could defy the emperor and the Imperial Diet, surely no mere archbishop should be allowed to interfere with preaching the true gospel.

Zütphen's sermons in Meldorf created a sensation. He exhorted his listeners to reform both their individual lives and their churches. He made the Dominicans a special target of his rhetoric, just as Torneborch had expected, and persuaded many hearers that their traditional suspicions about the friars were well-grounded.

Torneborch did not despair, not yet. He knew everyone in the parish who would be affected adversely, who would disagree with radical reform, and who could see the political consequences of Zütphen's activities. He also sought out wealthy and conservative men elsewhere in Dithmarschen who believed in the Roman church and feared the political and social results which were following in the wake of the Protestant movement in other parts of Germany. He found strong backing in those parishes which had not yet heard Zütphen's sermons. On December third he went to Heide to lay his complaints before those regents who met every Saturday to hear public business. He found two regents willing to support him in this

matter. They gave him an order forbidding Zütphen to preach until the matter had been discussed by the full body of regents. He hoped this would settle the matter. Nicholas Boie, however, rejected this order as undue interference with the freedom of the Meldorp parish. Boie argued that the parish governors alone had the right to call and dismiss priests. He was supported in this stand by the Vodiemannen clan, which in any case traditionally disliked the overbearing manner of the northern clans and their representatives among the regents. That Sunday Zütphen spoke to an overflowing audience on the text from Romans, "God is my witness." Although Torneborch handed Zütphen an ultimatum from the regents, placing a 1000-Mark fine on the parish if he spoke again, the reformer delivered two more sermons that afternoon and won many converts to his Protestant program.

The regents hurriedly met to discuss the situation. Although they were unable to decide upon a course of action, all the important leaders (including several men who were later prominent in introducing the Protestant reforms into the north) were appalled by the obstinate defiance of the Meldorp parish. Moreover, they knew that Zütphen was being sought by the archbishop, to be tried for preaching doctrinal errors. Their logical course of action was to order Zütphen's arrest, but that was difficult because he had the firm support of the local church and the controversy might easily lead to armed conflict. Unsure what to do, the regents merely sought to stop the sermons. However, Zütphen preached again on the 6th and 8th of December, each time apparently to a larger audience.

Torneborch had thus far stayed strictly within the bounds of the law. The law was clearly on his side. However, he had exhausted his constitutional appeals without having silenced his enemy. Now he had to take stronger action. If the regents were unwilling to enforce the law, Torneborch knew men who would—he hurried to Lunden (the heart of traditional conservative pietism) in the company of Johann Schneck, the priest of Heide, to talk with Peter Swyn, the most prominent clanman of the region. To their disappointment, Swyn wanted to proceed slowly—he suggested writing to Zütphen to explain why his actions were considered dangerous to the community. Torneborch then conferred with the Franciscans in Lunden about forming a common front. After persuading those friars to suspend their practice of disagreeing with everything the Dominicans wanted to do, he spoke to Peter Nanne, a prominent and uncompromising clansman, who agreed that action had to be taken quickly, before Zütphen could plunge the country into civil war.

Nanne collected his friends and clansmen to the number of five hundred and marched on Meldorp without warning. His men entered the town at night through a gate of the Dominican convent, where food and drink were waiting. The combination of hard exercise and strong liquor broke down any inhibitions the small army might have had. Toward midnight this thoroughly drunken mob lit torches, marched through the streets to Zütphen's residence, and broke down the door. They then carried Zütphen off to Heide and placed him on trial for violating the orders of the regents.

Zütphen did not have a chance at his trial. He had no admissible defense against the charge of disobedience to the regents' order. The few friends who dared appear in Heide were so intimidated by the hostile crowd that they did not dare speak. There was no time to organize a force at Meldorf to rescue him, even if his supporters had been ready to risk civil war, which they were not. Zütphen realized that the hour of martyrdom was on hand. He conducted himself accordingly. Convicted quickly by a majority of the Assembly, he died courageously at the conclusion of a bizarre and botched effort to burn him alive—he was finally dispatched by heavy blows to the breastbone. The regents detached his arms, legs and head for burning, then buried the body secretly on December 11, 1524. They scattered the ashes so as to prevent them from becoming the object of a cult.³ From this action it is clear how little the regents understood the spirit of the times: to the reformers Zütphen's actions were more important than his remains: deeds, not relics, called men and women to a new concept of service. No Protestant would kneel to pray at the collected ashes of a martyr—they could honor a martyr at any distance. This hurried and cruel execution portrayed the moral bankruptcy of the old order in a light that contrasted sharply with Protestant demands for courage and spiritual renewal. As the story of Zütphen's martyrdom spread throughout the country, people came to believe the Meldorf version of the events—that the execution was nothing more than judicial murder.

Zütphen's courageous death undoubtedly hastened the Reformation in Dithmarschen by encouraging reformers to persist, while traditionalists quarreled among themselves regarding the wisdom and propriety of Nanne's actions. As citizens learned more about Luther's doctrine of the two bodies, church and state, by which no secular government should impose belief by force but rather the church should win over heretics by peaceful means, public opinion began to shift in favor of Protestant reforms. All subsequent attempts to repress reformist agitation failed because public opinion persuaded the regents not to take legal action against it.

This did not mean that violence was completely absent from the debate. The Dominicans were suspected of sponsoring the attempted assassination of the head of the Vodiemannen clan. However, the murderous assault not only failed but so outraged the southern parishes that the Southshore parishes proceeded almost immediately to introduce Protestant reforms. When Nicholas Boie was called to become pastor at Wesselburen, that became the first completely Protestant parish in Dithmarschen. Soon afterward the congregation at Meldorf drove the Dominicans from the city (unfortunately burning all the monastery records in the process). The friars fled to Lunden to take refuge with the Franciscans, but their stay there was short. In 1532 the Protestants forbade the singing of mass in the north and ordered those friars and priests who still remained to conform to the Lutheran manner of worship or leave. Nevertheless, the Latin mass was continued in Lunden until 1537.

There were fewer changes in religious life in Dithmarschen than in most parts of Germany because the congregations had long been accustomed to supervising their parish churches themselves. After the Reformation parishioners continued to elect and supervise their pastors, keep a close watch on finances, and encourage

young people to become pious and God-fearing folk. Although abandoning the veneration of saints and the Virgin Mary, they retained many superstitions—as might be expected of relatively uneducated countryfolk. In fact, Protestant doctrine perhaps even encouraged them to be on the watch against devils and witches.

Among the changes necessary to adapt to Protestant practices were providing housing for a married clergy and finding a use for the buildings and lands of the former monasteries. The Dominicans' buildings in Meldorf, for example, became the site of the new school. That was a step toward resolving one of the great challenges of Protestantism: to educate the entire congregation to the point that each communicant could read the Bible. Another challenge was to provide an educated pastor for every congregation—a task almost no rural Roman Catholic community in Germany had mastered in the past. This was made easier by the fact that many priests supported the reforms and remained at their posts. Johann Schneck, the priest of Heide who had been so deeply involved in Zütphen's trial, married and founded a small dynasty of pastors.⁴

Governmental reforms

Although the Reformation was introduced into Dithmarschen with a minimum of bloodshed, many had briefly feared civil war might accompany the process. Happily, the crisis was sufficiently short-lived that it did not divide the people into factions or weaken the state permanently. In fact, it may even have strengthened the government by alerting the regents to the need for revising the Constitution in ways which reduced the independence of the clans.

The old Church had always opposed the clan system and its harsh justice but always in vain. Now that new doctrines emphasizing the importance of individual conscience were accepted in every parish, more Dithmarschers began to see that clan insistence on family solidarity was causing dire perversions of justice. It now seemed right that just as the individual must stand alone before God to be judged, so he should stand alone before the law, without the aid of rich, powerful, and warlike friends. This was not a sudden development: in 1495 an imperial edict had forbidden private justice; in 1501 the Southshore clans introduced some changes in their legal practices; and people were generally losing patience with the lawlessness which seemingly permeated their society. The situation became critical in 1537 during a feud between the Vodiemannen and Wollersmannen.

Leading the movement to substitute *proof* for the *oath* in all trials was Peter Swyn of Lunden. Swyn was among the most prominent men in the country, having been a regent for a quarter of a century and having represented his country as a diplomat on numerous occasions. A friend of prominent humanists in Hamburg, a moderate in politics, a supporter of Protestant reforms, Swyn now took up the delicate task of persuading traditionalists that the court system was no longer capable of functioning. Illustrating this fact was a quarrel between his clan, the Wurtmannen, and the Russeboligmannen of St. Annen, which could not be resolved because each

clan gave an oath to prove its innocence and the other's guilt. Swyn, rather than treating this as a local problem to be resolved by compromise, saw it as a constitutional issue which had to be dealt with before the unity of the country was threatened. His enemies, unintentionally, made the issue clear to everyone one evening in 1537 by lying in wait for him as Swyn returned home from a parish meeting. The assassination led to the passage of the new laws which comprised the *Constitution of 1539*. Peter Swyn was remembered as the *Pater Patriae*.

The clans did not pass away quickly—they continued to perform a social role into the following century—but they ceased to play a central role in the government.⁵

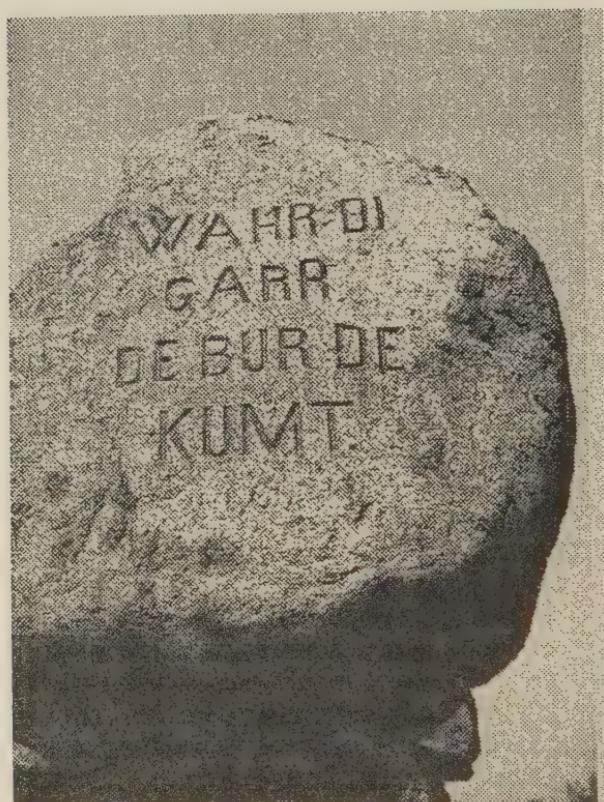
After the Reformation Dithmarschers entered more fully into the practices and ideals of their more refined neighbors. Wealth and even luxury became common, especially among patrician farmers. Even the common people prospered. The refinements of wealth and education became widespread. Nevertheless, much remained unchanged. There were, of course, still more poor men than rich, more foolish and ignorant individuals than wise and capable ones, but more importantly, the ancient independent spirit still remained. As a result, many men nursed their old feuds and grudges as before. Ignoring the assemblies and tribunals, perhaps scorning the human shortcomings of the judges and juries, they continued to rely on their clansmen's spears and swords to obtain "justice" from foreigners and countrymen alike.

Wiebe Peters's feud

Wiebe Peters's feud against the regents and Land of Dithmarschen had its origins in a debt of forty Gulden. In 1540 the regents demanded that he pay this debt to the government "or else." Peters fled Dithmarschen for Bremen, leaving his wife, children and debts behind, whereupon the regents declared him to be an outlaw and confiscated his property to pay the debtors. This was not an unusual action, but Peters took it as an unusual affront to his honor. He asked the regents to revoke their decree, but without success. Upon being rebuffed, he gathered a group of malcontents and began to attack isolated farmhouses in the countryside, stealing cattle and burning buildings. Once he sent two men to beg for overnight lodging from a prominent farmer. After the farmer had fed them and given them a warm bed, the two spies waited until he went to bed, then opened the doors to Wiebe Peters and his gang. The outlaws took what they wanted, then left the host and his family tied up in the burning house. Soon Peters's gang had murdered twelve people, a sufficiently large number that most Dithmarschers began to think of him as a "pirate" rather than an aggrieved citizen. When Dithmarschers learned that Peters was staying in Holstein between raids, they sent a delegation to Segeberg to ask Danish officials to arrest and extradite him to Dithmarschen. However, the Danes refused to surrender Peters. Instead, they put him on trial themselves in 1542 and rendered a verdict of innocent. The court declared that all the blame for the troubles lay with the regents.

Subsequent Dithmarschen appeals to the emperor in Speyer to reverse the verdict became unimportant after Peters resumed his piratical activities from a base on the island of Helgoland. After suffering more depredations, the Dithmarschers gathered volunteers together, set sail into the North Sea, and killed Peters and a brother in a brief fight. This was not the end of the matter, however, because another brother brought suit against the regents in the Danish courts, demanding 80,000 Gulden in fines. This staggering sum was not paid, of course, but after 1559 the Danish king did force the Dithmarschers to pay 6000 marks in compensation.⁶

The Wiebe Peters's affair was proof that the feud remained a socially-approved means of seeking revenge, but it was becoming ever less common. As long as men live, there will be those who prefer to use force, rather than rely upon the law, to settle disputes. The Reformation could not change every man's heart for the better any more than the churches can today, nor were Protestant churches free from abuse and hypocrisy. What the Reformation could do was to carry the traditional congregational governance of the Dithmarschen parishes toward its full and logical conclusion—democratic political procedures and traditions. In a real sense, the Reformation was the culmination of three centuries of democratic self-government in Dithmarschen.



The battlefield monument at Hemmingstedt



CHAPTER ELEVEN THE LAST FEUD

Even in normal times it is difficult for small, weak states to defend themselves against larger, richer ones. In times of rapid technological and social change it becomes almost impossible. By the middle of the sixteenth century European technology was evolving at a pace previously unimaginable. Development in this area alone would have caused the military arts to evolve rapidly, but the impetus of expanding monarchies gave the process greater necessity for speed. There had been conflicts between Roman Catholics and Protestants, wars between France and Spain, and pseudo-crusades against the Turks. A generation of experience in the martial sciences had changed society. Young peasants, burghers, and nobles had seen service as mercenaries as a means to fame and fortune. Better led, better equipped, and better paid than any feudal army, these soldiers made the *Black Garde* seem like a very ineffective, amateur force. The gold and silver of Central and South America, the spices of the Orient, and the exotic cargoes of Africa provided revenues for states to raise these armies. Moreover, those imports accelerated a natural inflation and stimulated production over all of Europe so that the upper classes prospered, and princes were quickly learning ways of persuading their assemblies to tax this wealth. Kings used this income to hire sons of the increasingly pauperized lower classes as soldiers for standing armies—an innovation which later on made possible (and perhaps inevitable) the conscription of soldiers and the pursuit of territorial expansion. In fact, expansion was not only possible for the ambitious, it was necessary for the fearful. On the one hand, to cite Machiavelli, *Fortune favors the bold*; on the other hand, whoever fell behind was doomed.

The new armies, however, were not completely revolutionary. Much equipment and many organizational forms remained the same. Often troops were not particularly well disciplined (the sergeant had not yet been invented); weapons were imperfectly standardized; and the support services, particularly the supply system, were primitive. What was most revolutionary was a new attitude toward command:

kings and nobles understood at last that warfare was a profession, not a royal pastime. Kings, therefore, hired experienced generals to lead their armies. Intent on obtaining victory at minimum cost and danger, these commanders abandoned cavalry charges in favor of the more effective tactics provided by the infantry and artillery. This change dismayed the knightly class by eliminating their best method for heroic gestures, but it caused even more anxiety for small states like Dithmarschen, since small states' safety had long rested in their mastery of delaying tactics. Such a strategy was most effective when the enemy leader was incompetent or impatient—and since a feudal system almost guaranteed that a lord could not conduct a protracted campaign, the dukes and kings of earlier eras were likely to take risks a sixteenth-century commander would have avoided. Small states had come to rely upon the expectation that no enemy would be able to maintain its greater strength in the field long enough to force a decisive battle. Consequently, the opposing leader would eventually choose a risky strategy and employ foolish tactics. Such an expectation was disappearing with the rise of professional armies led by experienced generals.

The changes occurring in the military arts did not necessarily doom the small state to extinction. There were countervailing pressures which provided hope for even the smallest political units. First of all, even the richest monarchs found themselves hard pressed to find the revenues needed to support their armies.

Consequently, they continued to rely heavily on their noble horsemen. Secondly, cavalrymen adapted their weapons and tactics to the new situation. The *knights* vanished only to reappear as *hussars*. Such forces were less effective in mountains and swamps than on open plains, thus were not easily employed against free people in Switzerland, Frisia, and Dithmarschen. Thirdly, large states faced rivals who were so dangerous that the monarchs could not find either the time or the resources to destroy their smaller neighbors. Fourthly, there was a growing sense among the important rulers that stability was essential for the survival of all concerned. The psychological need for the approval of one's peers acted as a restraint for a majority of rulers, which resulted in a widened net of diplomatic activity in which persuasion, treaties, and marriage contracts became as important as weapons. Fifthly, personal relationships, usually involving marriages and inheritances, created *de facto* alliances. Unfortunately, Dithmarschen did not fit well into this system. The personality of King Christian III (1503-1559) of Denmark provided the basis for its greatest hope of peace. Renowned for his passivity and lack of ambition, Christian hesitated to risk any war, but especially one involving Dithmarschen. He did not want his attention to be distracted for even a moment from his powerful enemy, Sweden. As he became prematurely elderly, he became even more cautious.

The regents of Dithmarschen sought to encourage a respectful attitude in its neighboring rulers toward Dithmarschen by keeping the ranks of the militia filled and by maintaining military equipment in the best condition; they also built new fortifications, filling them with cannon, and they educated all men and women for their roles in the drama that would inevitably come. War had visited almost every

preceding generation, and they did not believe that the decades of peace would necessarily continue. This skepticism concerning the nature of their opponents was borne out when Christian III died on New Year's Day of 1559. The regents began diplomatic efforts to obtain help from the Hanseatic cities, the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, and the emperor. But none of these efforts were equal to those of the new king of Denmark, Frederick II (1534-88), and his brothers, who coveted the tiny free state.

In 1559 the Danes were stronger than they had been for two generations. The consequences of the disaster at Hemmingstedt—the destruction of the Danish army, the humiliation of the monarchy, and the ensuing revolts throughout the kingdom—were at last overcome, thanks to Duke Frederick of Holstein, who had won the Danish crown in 1523 and governed skillfully for a decade, and to his successor, Christian III. They had provided the stability needed for political and economic recovery. Danish armies under the skilled generalship of Johann Rantzau humbled first Sweden and then the Hanseatic Cities. The royal word of the Danish monarch had become law throughout the north. All that was needed for an attack against Dithmarschen was the will, and that was provided in 1559 by the new monarch and his brothers, John and Adolf, who were dukes of Holstein. Christian III had prepared the way diplomatically, but he had refrained from summoning troops for an invasion. His demise started the death train of war into motion.

It was an expression of Frederick's adventurous and impulsive personality that he brought his forces together so quickly after his father's passing, but he balanced his haste by giving command to his most calculating and unflappable general, Johann Rantzau. Moreover, Frederick knew that Sweden was temporarily occupied with the Livonian War, a conflict which he himself carefully avoided even though he sent his younger brother, Magnus, to Estonia with money to purchase territories for himself from prelates and nobles who fearfully anticipated being conquered by Ivan the Terrible's advancing armies. Frederick, perhaps foreseeing his subsequent war with Sweden, wanted to eliminate Dithmarschen without delay.¹

An invasion would come as no surprise to the regents. Frederick's hurried diplomatic activities to secure either the active cooperation of his princely neighbors or their promises of neutrality could not be kept secret. Nor could the jubilation of the Holstein nobility, once they received summons to appear at the mustering places. They had suffered witticisms regarding Dithmarschen from neighboring nobles far too long for anyone to expect them not to savor their revenge in advance and to boast about forthcoming deeds. If any doubts remained, the actual assembly of troops and supplies removed them. As a result, the Dithmarschen regents had ample time to unify the country, prepare their defenses, and devise a strategy for victory.

The regents followed tradition in abandoning any hope of defending the Geest bordering Holstein. They ordered everyone living there to withdraw from the frontier with their movable possessions and take refuge behind bastions which protected the roads through the swamps and forests. In the north they built redoubts at Tielenbrücke

and Ouwbrugge, in the Hamme, and at Hemmingstedt. Heide and Meldorf had already been fortified, the latter with a wide moat. Now the Regents mounted cannon, laid in supplies of ammunition, and recruited mercenaries to service these weapons. Most of the hired troops were stationed in Meldorf, the key post which bound together North and South. The militia gathered at Heide was not quite ten thousand strong. As had happened before, the Southsiders remained at home; they did not trust a strategy which placed its emphasis on the defense of the North. However, such an attitude was anticipated and few could condemn the Southsiders for wanting to defend their homes, even though everyone expected the decisive fighting to be in the North. The regents made the customary call for a maiden to dedicate the rest of her life to the veneration of the Virgin Mary and to carry the battle flag. An old woman volunteered. After some deliberation about the appropriateness of selecting an aged spinster for what was to be an act of patriotic sacrifice, Dithmarscher practicality prevailed: the men voted her the post of honor. Then the troops went to their posts.

The Danish king had raised thirty-five units of infantry. The exact numbers cannot be reckoned, because the size of the units varied so greatly. The quality of some units was probably low, of course, because most armies were raised according to the principles of Falstaff: rounding up criminals, unemployed, and barflys. Other units were of high quality, especially the two regiments of the Danish Royal Guard. In any case, these units certainly outnumbered the Dithmarschen militia by far. There were four thousand cavalry, largely from the feudal levy. The army of the count of Oldenburg was present as well.² The commander was Johann Rantzau, the most capable field marshal of his generation. He alone was worth an army.

On May 18, 1559, the lords and their troops gathered on the Dithmarschen border. The weather in the preceding three weeks had been good, so they experienced no difficulties in bringing up the stores or mustering their regiments. Nor had the king neglected any of the rites associated with lawful warfare—a notable concession honoring his low-born opponents. After announcing his intention to make war and calling on the regents to surrender, he sent a messenger across the border with a declaration of war. Then he waited a reasonable time for an answer. When none arrived, he gave the order to advance. That the troops' eager anticipation of rich booty may have been tempered by their fear of the Dithmarschers was demonstrated by the length of time it took them, in their caution, to cross the border. They did not even enter Alversdorf, which lay barely inside Dithmarschen, until May 22nd. When this town was captured without a fight, their pent-up emotions burst loose. Horsemen from Oldenburg, Holstein, Schleswig and Denmark rode back and forth, burning and plundering the abandoned farmsteads all along the Geest. That same day the messenger returned from the regents with the traditional white staff signifying a declaration of war. The opening of hostilities had proceeded with all due formality and correctness on both sides.

However polite and proper Dithmarscher diplomacy had been, the guerrilla war that followed was decidedly discourteous. Small groups of militiamen ambushed raiders as they sallied forth from the Danish camp to raid scattered farms and villages.

The Dithmarschers not only killed about thirty of the invaders but also mutilated their bodies, cutting out hearts and laying them on the mouths of the corpses and exhibiting stomachs on poles outside the Holstein camp. Some prisoners had been bound and executed by a firing squad, others tortured by women. In retaliation, the Danes hanged three captives.

During this interlude Field Marshal Rantzau inspected his defenses. He sent small parties of Danish, Holstein, and Oldenburg cavalry out to report on the strength of the redoubts and on the determination of their defenders. The Dithmarschers came out of their fortifications to drive these mounted parties away and disrupt what they thought were preparations for an attack upon their positions. These tactics made it clear to Rantzau that the Dithmarschers' had not manned any posts weakly in order to concentrate their forces for an attack. Their strategy was to wait behind their fortifications until he ran out of time and supplies. This meant that he would be free to maneuver without fear of an attack on his base at Alversdorf.

Their early successes and the caution on the part of the royal forces made the Dithmarschers so confident of their ability to withstand an assault on any of their fortifications that they rejected out of hand a peace offer brought by the secretary of the Lübeck city council at the request and order of the field marshal. They settled in behind their bastions in the expectation that Rantzau would have to use his massed infantry to assault the fortifications in the *Risenwold* in an effort to break through by sheer force. They believed they could repel any such assault with horrible casualties.

Rantzau probably agreed with them. However, he had no intention of ordering suicidal assaults on strong bastions. He preferred using speed and surprise to get around his enemy's flank--tactics the Dithmarschers no longer expected, thanks to the Danes' slow, cautious advance at the beginning of the campaign. On

June 2nd, Rantzau sent three units of infantry and cavalry to the *Risenwold* with instructions to distract the defenders. While the main Dithmarscher force hastened to the threatened area, he marched his army through the night in a south-west direction to Meldorf. His march was so secret and so swift that the garrison there was not alerted to his presence until his forces arrived at the walls at 3 a.m. Rantzau's attack was well planned but poorly executed. With the light from burning windmills showing the way, the Oldenburg forces attacked the town from the left. Three regiments of Danish infantry were supposed to attack from the right



but instead stumbled into a moat they did not know existed. Consequently, Rantzau's attack was improperly coordinated and the two thousand defenders were able to throw back the first assault, then the second. The defense might have been completely successful, if the best five hundred men of the garrison had not marched north to the *Risenwold* that very night, lured by Rantzau's feint. When the Meldorp defenders realized this, they were unsure whether all the fortifications were manned properly—a fear which caused panic to spread.

Confusion reigned among the defenders. This gave an advantage to the attacking force which Rantzau used skillfully. Even though the Danish and Oldenburg troops hardly understood what they were doing, at least they did not have to guess where the next assault would come. The light provided by fires revealed some troops' movements to the defenders, but not clearly enough to tell what was happening, and there was so much noise that the enemy seemed to be everywhere at once. The defending commander had no idea which walls to reinforce, but even more crucial was the fact that nobody seems to have known who was in command. In contrast, Rantzau knew what he wanted to do. His only problem was in accomplishing his wishes before dawn, when light would reveal his plans to the defenders. After the first wave of attackers had fallen back in confusion, Rantzau sent the Oldenburg cavalry to make feints against distant walls. The defenders were lucky to have put their men at the right point at the very beginning of the fight, so that they were able to drive back the first attack easily. This turned out to be an unfortunate coincidence, because the Danish advance had been so mishandled that the Dithmarschers believed it had been a feint. If that movement was a feint, then where was the real attack going to be? On that reasoning, the defenders hurried to the points now seemingly threatened by the cavalry, looking for the real assault and leaving poorly manned that part of the fortifications which was truly in danger.

Rantzau rallied his infantry as quickly as he could and ordered them to attack again. His Danish troops reluctantly waded up to their necks into the moat's muddy water, waving their now useless firearms and stabbing ineffectively with their spears, then retreated. Another commander might have abandoned the assault at this point but not Rantzau. He ordered the men to strip off their cumbersome long pants, to clean their weapons, and to attack once more. The third assault succeeded in breaking into the town because the Dithmarschers had stationed their troops at the wrong points and the artillerymen who constituted almost the entire defense of the critical sector had fired their cannons so rapidly that four had overheated and burst. At the cost of only a hundred men, the Danish infantry broke into Meldorp and began a fearful massacre among the panic-stricken population. The Dithmarschers' mercenaries fled for their lives, leaving the old men and boys outnumbered, surrounded, and confused. The conquerors gave no quarter; they killed everyone who even appeared to be an enemy.

Some Dithmarschers fought on after having been shot four or five times, but their gesture was in vain. The Oldenburg cavalry came into the city at this moment

and galloped back and forth through the streets while the militiamen fled over the walls into the countryside. Waiting cavalrymen took up the pursuit and killed about two hundred Dithmarschers in one running engagement. They surrounded another body of men and compelled them to surrender. The town and surrounding countryside were littered with the bodies of fallen men and women, abandoned weapons and armor, and discarded personal possessions. However, the next morning the Danes counted no more than three hundred bodies of warriors, an indication that most of the militia and mercenaries had successfully eluded the trap and made their way to friends in the north or south.

The assaulting infantry had plundered many houses and killed every male they found. In their fury they had also slaughtered thirty women. They collected the bodies for burial to prevent an outbreak of disease, then sent out scouts to locate the Dithmarscher forces. Discovering that the defenders had been holding all the cattle from the Geest in a field a few miles away, the horsemen hurried there to seize for themselves the vast quantity of cows, horses, sheep, and pigs. However, when this group of men began to herd the animals back into town, each man attempted to claim some for himself, in this way provoking a series of individual struggles over the plunder. When officers tried to restore order and discipline, the troops refused to obey. It appeared for a moment that victory might turn into mutiny, but Rantzau intervened quickly and ordered all the livestock immediately driven back to Holstein. This decree brought some units to the point of armed resistance, but Rantzau and his officers convinced them that the war was not yet over and they would not be permitted to take their animals home immediately, in any case. Moreover, there was no way each man could guard his own animals and, besides, they were outnumbered by troops which had not shared in the cattle theft and would be willing to enforce Rantzau's edict. The field marshal's order to surrender other forms of booty was less fully enforced. The troops delivered only a small part of their plunder to the booty-master. Many soldiers were so heavily laden that it was a wonder the army could still march and fight.

The king and his brothers approved of Rantzau's every disposition. Orders were issued in the king's name, but the king was too wise to believe that he was actually issuing them. Frederick II remained in the background, ready to treat with the Regents for their surrender when the time came.

The Dithmarschers, meanwhile, reversed their front and erected defenses at Hemmingstedt, expecting that their royal enemy would again try his fortune on that battlefield in an attempt to redeem his family honor. In such a case, the militia was ready. The troops huddled behind a bastion lined with cannon. They made no effort to go closer to Meldorf, whose walls now served the Danes and Holsteiners better than they had served the builders.

On June 7, after Field Marshal Rantzau had restored order in his army by requiring his troops to put their booty into safekeeping, he left a portion of his force at Meldorf and marched toward Brunsbüttel to deal with the Southsiders. The

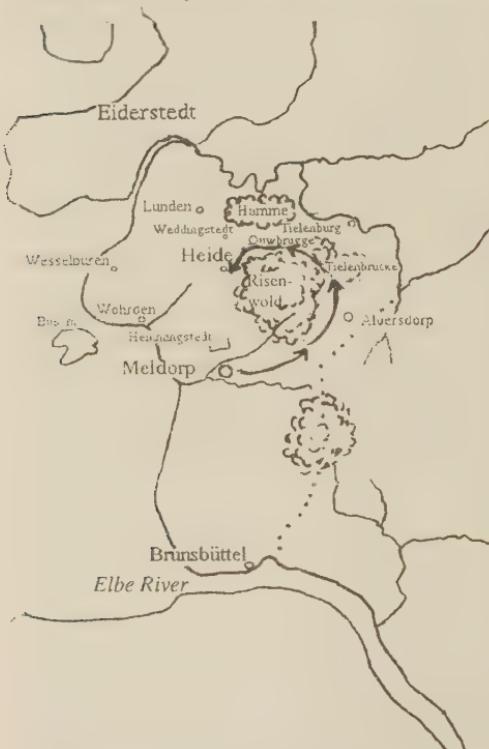
Dithmarschers there took up their position in a marsh, but without hope of success against such huge numbers of opponents. Seven hundred Dithmarschers laid down their lives here without slowing the progress of the Danish advance. The king and his brothers then rode on to the Elbe, pardoning peasants they met along the way. They offered reasonable terms to the garrison at Brunsbüttel. The three hundred men there surrendered to the king, another five hundred in other locations surrendered to Count Adolf of Holstein. Within a short time all war materiel was in the hands of the new rulers of the Southshore. On June 10th, the Danish army had returned to Meldorf, ready to engage the militia of the northern parishes.

The Dithmarschers watched the preparations of the invaders carefully and reflected on the deceptions which had been practiced by the wily general opposing them. When they heard that the main units of cavalry and infantry had marched out

of Meldorf at mid-day on June 12th up the road toward Alversdorf, they were determined not to be deceived again. Expecting Rantzau to counter-march and attack Hemmingstedt by night, the Dithmarscher generals ordered their troops to be especially alert for a surprise attack on their position.

Field Marshal Rantzau was busy that night—but in a different place. He drove his troops in a long forced march around the Dithmarscher flank to Tielenbrücke. He pushed his troops hard, ignoring complaints of exhaustion and hunger. As a result, he arrived at Tielenbrücke at daybreak ready to deliver a crushing blow.

Rantzau's troops found the redoubt practically unguarded, the men and cannon having been withdrawn to Hemmingstedt on the assumption they could return quickly if necessary. They captured the strategic fortification so



easily that Rantzau chose not to stop to rest his troops. Instead, he pressed on to Ouwbrouge, where the path ran along a dam so narrow that only two riders at a time could pass. His men found the bastion abandoned, the handful of defenders having chosen not to die trying to stop a large army by themselves. The cavalry then broke out into the open countryside and galloped toward Heide. The exhausted infantry struggled to keep pace.

Halfway to Heide the Danes encountered a unit of militiamen hurrying from Hemmingstedt in hope of occupying the defensive positions which had just fallen. The cavalry shattered their formation, drove them onto a moor, and cut them down. They left three hundred bodies in a heap. Only two noble Holsteiners fell. While the nobles briefly rested their horses, the infantry came up behind them and tried to take a moment of much-needed rest. However, when Rantzau saw this, he ordered them to move on, to seize Heide before the rest of the Dithmarschers arrived. He was upset about the loss of almost three hours in moving his forces across the narrow dam at Ouwbrugge. He knew the Dithmarschers had been warned. Time was short; the opportunity for victory was at hand. If he could capture Heide, the Dithmarschers would be trapped between two heavily fortified posts. He could well imagine that the Dithmarschers, if facing the prospect of storming either Heide or Meldorf, might well choose to negotiate surrender terms.

Indeed, the Dithmarschers had been warned. Though they had little time for debate, they were also well aware of their predicament. The fall of Tielenbrücke and Ouwbrugge meant that the odds were now against them. If Heide fell, too, their position was hopeless. Since their last hope lay in rescuing Heide, the generals sent four thousand men to hurry north as quickly as they could. Astounded to learn that the enemy was still advancing, they pushed on desperately northward, dragging their cannon and maintaining as good an order as possible under the circumstances. Since the units could not march quickly through the fields and swamps, of necessity they came up the road one at a time, four or five hundred men to a unit, toward the waiting Danes. This meant that although the Dithmarschers arrived on the battlefield somewhat fresher and more eager to fight than the Danes and Holsteiners, their situation resembled that of the earlier battle of Hemmingstedt: the units came one by one directly into the teeth of the royal forces. The first Dithmarscher units were in no mood to wait for reinforcements before engaging. In any case, Rantzau gave them no opportunity to file off the road to the right and left to form a line of battle. The field marshal, with a portion of his army, attacked each militia unit as it came up the road and routed it before the next one could come to its aid. With the rest of his army Rantzau assaulted the main bastion in Heide, which was defended by four hundred men and difficult to capture; if properly reinforced, it could be almost impregnable. There was no other place except Heide where the Dithmarschers could rally and reorganize their army. Rantzau was succeeding in preventing the advance guard of the Hemmingstedt army from reaching the town, but capturing the fortifications with the few forces remaining at his disposal was nevertheless difficult.

While Rantzau's main army was engaged south of Heide, the field marshal drove the rest of his exhausted men against the bastion until they carried it. But even then the remaining Dithmarschers in the defensive works refused to surrender. Rantzau's men found it necessary to slay them all. Then the royal forces broke into the city and set it on fire. The two hundred men there blocked the streets with wagons, hemming in the Danish knights who had ridden through the gates, and driving them

toward the flames. However, at the last moment the horsemen found an escape and made their way out to join the battle which was taking place on the meadow.

When the main Dithmarscher force finally arrived from Hemmingstedt, the commanders formed a line of battle on the heath facing Heide. Having no supplies, no camp, and no fortified refuge, their only hope lay in a decisive victory. Therefore, they sent their men immediately on Rantzau's exhausted forces, hoping to overwhelm them in one great charge. The Dithmarscher militia now fought with their traditional courage and skill. They routed some Danish units and might have crushed others if the enemy cavalry units had not hindered their maneuvers. In fact, some units had to abandon their attacks on the infantry to deal with the cavalry. One charge almost overwhelmed the cavalry unit commanded by Adolf of Holstein, when the duke was wounded in the back by a halberd thrust and had to be helped from the field by Duke John. King Frederick was more prudent: he had remained in the rear near Rantzau and had never exposed himself to danger. Rantzau kept the situation well in hand, riding from place to place to direct the battle, but not participating personally in the combat. As long as he and the king remained alive and his units were intact, the outcome of the war could not be doubted. Even if he were to lose this battle, he still could hold Heide, Meldorf, and the Southshore. With all the major defensive positions of the land in his control, he could threaten the Dithmarschers with utter destruction. His forces had already killed or wounded over half the Dithmarschen army—a thousand in the final clash alone—and had captured most of the artillery. Even if the Dithmarschers had been able to mount a final attack and hold that day's field, they had no reserves, no food, and no tents. After the critical moment passed, the Dithmarschers reluctantly withdrew from the field, fully aware of the fact that with better leadership, they might have obtained a victory. Now, however, they lacked sufficient strength to drive Rantzau out of the country, much less to force peace upon the king.

Rantzau, meanwhile, ordered his army to withdraw to the Ouwbrugge fortifications. He made his camp inside the bastions, sheltered against a night attack. His army carried away all the captured cannon, leaving the Dithmarschers little means of mounting an assault on his position the next day. The common soldiers on both sides probably collapsed from sheer exhaustion and hunger, but their leaders had too much to think about to sleep. The tremendous losses of the day's fighting did not necessarily mean the war was over. The king and his brothers had learned to respect the militiamen's will to fight. They had seen for themselves that Dithmarschers were desperate and stubborn beyond all reason, and they did not want to kill all of them—dead men pay no taxes, and Dithmarschers were good farmers who could pay well. Therefore, they decided to offer reasonable terms of surrender.

On the morning of the 14th of June the king sent three clergymen to the regents with a letter offering to negotiate terms. Meanwhile, no military operations were undertaken, which gave the Dithmarschers an opportunity to reflect on their situation and to discuss the royal letter. On June 15 the royal camp rejoiced to see

eight representatives arrive from the regents. The talks did not last long. When the king proved more lenient than the regents had expected, the representatives agreed to recommend surrender to the Assembly.³

On June 20 the four thousand militia still under arms came forth, gave up their weapons, and took an oath of allegiance to their new masters. Many of the nobles present may still have been unable to believe their eyes to see the proud Dithmarschers kneel in submission after so many centuries. Dithmarschers had killed their grandsires and humiliated their fathers. Everyone knew that Dithmarschers, like Spartans, never surrendered. However, the Dithmarschers were also practical and realistic men who could look truth in the eye. The truth was, they had no choice but to submit.⁴

Frederick demanded the surrender of all documents, all battle flags—including the *Danebrog*—and all implements of war. On the 21st, the king and his brothers dismissed their armies. Rantzau retained no more than a cavalry regiment to crush whatever isolated resistance might still remain.

King Frederick made many concessions to local traditions. He appointed advocates from among the richest Dithmarschers rather than name foreign governors. He did not introduce new customs on his subjects too quickly—he especially avoided anything which could be interpreted as serfdom. His most radical innovation was to undermine the ancient unity of the community by dividing the country into three parts, one for himself and one for each of his brothers.⁵

So it was that the old free state came to an end. It had once held the promise of surviving forever, but now it retained nothing but proud memories.



CHAPTER TWELVE RETROSPECTIVE

Dithmarschen had grown from obscure beginnings into a formidable opponent of noble rule. The people were more independent than many of their neighbors, thanks partly to geography, partly to the difficulty caused by the local political situation for one noble family to dominate the region, and partly to an apparently universal human desire for liberty. The decisive event in the history of the country may well have been the settlement of the marshes. When secular and ecclesiastical nobles in the areas round about were introducing foreign settlers into the fens and collecting taxes from them, the Dithmarschers began draining their own swamps themselves. The organization of the clan grew out of this activity, creating stronger, more flexible social bonds than had existed earlier. At the end of the thirteenth century the clans expelled all nobles who refused to become part of their system of clan government. Wars with the counts of Holstein taught the Dithmarschers military lessons which they used to make each clan semi-autonomous and almost a law unto itself. As each clan sought to defend the rights of its own members first and to worry about justice for others last, many people began to look for a better way to guarantee stability and security. At last a new form of regional government emerged based on the parishes and the assembly.

The establishment of the forty-eight regents was the second decisive stage in the history of the Dithmarschen republic. Under the guidance of the regents, the assembly resolved the internal quarrels, organized a national defense, and broke the powers of the clans within the state. The republic under the regents remained free and independent, but it lost its aspirations to egalitarianism. Dithmarschen was by no means classless. Both rich patricians and landless laborers were prominent. A similar situation existed in neighboring lands ruled by nobles and burghers, but the difference was that in Dithmarschen everyone participated in the

operation of the government and everyone depended on the government for the defense of their liberty. In contrast to many other Europeans, Dithmarschers did not see the state as an instrument of oppression. Therein lies a reason for present-day Dithmarschen pride in themselves and their past.

In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century Dithmarschen had shown promise of developing into a modern state, and in many ways it succeeded. The Republic had an executive council, a representative body, a judicial system, an effective army, and adequate revenues. It signed treaties. It made war and peace. The only major attribute of sovereignty it lacked was its own coinage. Its ultimate failing was its small size. The Dithmarschers, like so many people of that era (and this), could not see beyond their immediate situation. They, like their erstwhile allies, Hamburg and Lübeck, were left isolated in their time of trial. Even as late as 1554 the Hanseatic League—by then a weak power—would not recognize the republic as a full member, though they did extend some Hanseatic privileges to its citizens.¹

This failure to take the decisive step of unifying the burghers of the cities with the free farmers of the countryside meant that the future would lie with the monarchs. The decisive moment for success had been much earlier anyway, before the battle of Hemmingstedt, when the Hanseatic League was still a major power. It is interesting to note that the Dutch would rise against Spanish rule within a decade of Dithmarschen's fall and create a state where burgher, peasant, and sailor would join together, flood their polders, and frustrate the efforts of the best army in the world to conquer them. The next example of a republican government was to appear in the late eighteenth century in North America. Indeed, most Americans who fought in the Revolution believed that liberty was possible only when government was locally controlled and remained weak. James Madison's essay #10 in the *Federalist Papers* was written to persuade his fellow citizens that liberty could be maintained more easily in large, mixed states than in small ones vulnerable to attack or insurrection. We cannot ask that Hanseatic cities and peasant communities should have anticipated the arguments of James Madison.

Under the Danish kings the old autonomy of the Dithmarschers slowly faded. Inevitably, bankruptcies occurred and families died out, rich farmsteads were divided and purchased by immigrants, and governors imitated their peers by drawing power into their own hands. Dithmarschers who were ennobled by the king grew apart from their neighbors.²

Differences between common Dithmarschers and their neighbors remained nevertheless. Cultural continuity is hard to destroy, particularly in rural communities which discourage any contact with the outside world, especially through intermarriage. Dithmarschers retained their old proud and independent spirit as best they could, primarily through pride in their history. They taught their children the old songs and legends. They memorized the poetry, especially those with patriotic themes such as the following:

*De sick gegen Dithmerschen settin will,
De stelle sick wol thor Wehre:
Dithmerschen, dat schölen Buren sin?
It mögen wol wesen Heren.³*

A rough translation of the spirit of this proud boast is:

Whoever comes against Dithmarschen
had better come well-armed.
Dithmarschen, it should belong to peasants?
They should be considered lords.

The *universitas terrae Dithmarsae* was nevertheless gone forever. Dithmarschers could only dream of independence now and celebrate its memory; they could not practice it.³ The legend on the organ at Hemme summarized the situation concisely:

Ditmarja libera fuit. 1559*

*(Dithmarschen was free. 1559)

ENDNOTES

ENDNOTES

Abbreviations

- Bolten = Johann Adrian Bolten, *Ditmarsche Geschichte* (Flensburg and Leipzig, 1781-4).
- G.Dith = Friedrich Christoph Dahlmann, *Geschichte Dithmarschens* (ed. Wilhelm H. Kloster. Leipzig, 1873).
- G.Dänn = Friedrich Christoph Dahlmann, *Geschichte von Dänemark* (Hamburg, 1843).
- Detlefsen, *Geschichte* = Detleff Detlefsen, *Geschichte der holsteinische Elbmarschen* (Glückstadt, 1891).
- Detlefsen, "Rittergeschlechter" = Detleff Detlefsen, "Die Rittergeschlechter der holsteinischen Elbmarschen, insbesondere der Wilstermarsch," *ZschG*, XXVII (1897).
- Helmold = Helmold von Bosau, *Helmoldi presbyteri chronica Slavorum*, 800-1172, (ed. Johann M. Lappenberg) in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores*, XXI.
- Lammers = Walter Lammers, *Das Hochmittelalter bis zur Schlacht von Bornhöved*, vol. 4, part 1, of *Geschichte Schleswig-Holsteins* (Neumünster, 1981).
- Nehlsen = Rudolf Nehlsen, *Geschichte von Dithmarschen* (Tübingen, 1908).
- Neocorus = Johann Adolfi (Neocorus), *Chronik des Landes Dithmarschen* (ed. Friedrich Dahlmann. Kiel, 1827).
- PB = *Chronicon Holtzatiae Auctore Presbytero Breminis Dioecesis* (ed. Johann M. Lappenberg) in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores* (Hannover, 1862), XXI.
- Stoob, *Ges* = *Die Dithmarsischen Geschlechterverbände; Grundfragen der Siedlung und Rechtsgeschichte in der Nordseemarschen* (Heide, 1951).
- Stoob, *Regentenzeitalter* = Heinz Stoob, *Geschichte Dithmarschens in Regentenzeitalter* (Heide, 1959).
- Schröder = "Karsten Schröder's Dithmarsche Chronik," (ed. Wilhelm Kloster) *ZschG*, 8 (1878).
- UB = *Urkundenbuch zur Geschichte des Landes Dithmarschen* (ed. Andreas Ludwig Jacob Michelsen. Altona, 1834).
- ZschG = *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für schleswig-holsteinische Geschichte*.

Preface

- ¹ George Holmes, *Europe: Hierarchy and Revolt, 1320-1450* (New York, 1976), 13-4: "The combination of political fragmentation and social diversity was crucial....European history is increasingly made up of the interaction between divergent ways of life and thought."

Introduction

- James Westfall Thompson, *Feudal Germany* (New York, 1928), I, 550-3; Otto Jensen indicates that the construction of dikes began in the river bottoms of the Netherlands in the ninth century and reached the sea in the twelfth. *Die Friesen* (ed. Conrad Borchling and Rudolf Muuss. Breslau, 1931), 31; Günther Möhlmann places the beginning of diking somewhat later, around A.D. 1000. *Geschichte der deutschen Länder* (Würzburg, 1964), 406; a similar opinion is expressed by Herbert Junkun, *Geschichte Schleswig-Holstein*, vol. 3: *Die Frühgeschichte* (Neumünster, 1957), 20-1; and in *Die Landschaften Niedersachsens, Bau, Bild und Deutung der Landschaft; Ein Topographischer Atlas* (3rd edition, ed. Erich Schrader. Hannover, 1965), section 16 (no numbered pages); Christian Degn und Uwe Muuss, *Topographischer Atlas Schleswig-Holstein* (Neumünster, 1963), 136-157; H. Tamm, "Friesische Spuren in Dithmarschen," *ZschG*, 6(1876), 37; especially note William TeBrake, *Medieval Frontier. Culture and Ecology in Rijnland* (College Station, Texas, 1985) [Environmental History Series, 7].
² *Römischer Reich. Deutscher Nation* (Munich and Hamburg, 1964), 46-7, 214-220.
³ Uwe Karstens, "Der Fall Grantz. Innere Kampfe in der dithmarschen NSDAP 1929/1930," *ZschG*, 112(1987), 215-6, 233.
⁴ *PB*, 284, 287.
⁵ *Cambridge Medieval History* (Cambridge, 1964), VII, 718. © Cambridge University Press, 1961.
⁶ Wilson King, *Chronicles of Three Free Cities: Hamburg, Bremen, Lübeck* (New York, 1914) makes this the theme of his book.

Chapter One

- ¹ Tacitus, *Germania* (numerous editions).
² Vilhelm Groenbech, *The Culture of the Teutons* (Oxford, 1931), I, 82-93.
³ For Charles the Great's conquest see Helmold (13-7) and Neocorus (I, 272-7); in spite of the well-documented Carolingian occupation of the region, Neocorus states in his low-German chronicle: "Datt de Detmershen ein frie Volk sin unde keinen Heren jemals underdaen gewesen, ahne dat se dem Bischop van Bremen mit einem klenen Tinss underworpen...iss so gewiss bi velen Scribenten unnd Historicos." 287-8. Readers must always make allowance for a strong local patriotism and a tendency to exaggerate.
⁴ "His autem sunt Nordalbingorum populi, Stumarii, Holzati, Thetmarzi, nec habitu nec lingua multum discrepantes, tenentes Saxonum iura et cristianum nomen, nisi quod propter barbarorum viciniam furtis et latrociniis dare conueverint, hospitalitatis gratiam secantur." Helmold, 48; James Westfall Thompson gave this description of the early Saxons, which applies here: "As a people, the Saxons as late as the twelfth century were a simple folk, wholly agricultural in their means of livelihood.... Feudalism in Saxony was almost rudimentary when

compared to the system elsewhere in Germany. There was hardly any *ordo militaris* there. Suzerainty and vassalage (overlordship and underlordship) were less formal relations than in Swabia and Bavaria. While there were many nobles, there was also a large body of free peasants. Moreover, these nobles were not many of them great landowners. Their distinction was a social one rather than one of political superiority. They lived much like English country gentlemen upon their estates. The early Saxon noble was more a rich proprietor farming his ancestral acres than a great baron....The true-born Saxon was opposed to new-fangled feudal laws and feudal methods....He was a staunch conservative in this attitude, and in the sentiment the peasantry shared. The Saxons were proud of the *crudelissima lex Saxonum*, opposed to the new invention of the church to regulate and restrain private war, the Truce of God, resented efforts to stamp out the good old blood feud (faida), were sticklers for the old legal idea of personality of law, were democratic within their class, but clung tenaciously to social distinctions, and detested outsiders of any kind." *Feudal Germany*, 180-2; furthermore, "by the beginning of the twelfth century Germany had become historically conscious of the worth of its frontier and were as eager to occupy it as our forefathers here in America were....The hardy rustics who tilled their little farms redeemed from marsh and swamp and forest in Dithmarsch and Holstein, in Mecklenburg and Brandenburg, were men like unto our own ancestors in conditions of livelihood, in courage, in hope, in perseverance. Life on the East German border then was rude and crude and impinged as sharply upon the feelings of the cultured and refined society of older Germany as the Kentucky of Boone grated upon the sensibilities of staid tidewater communities like Baltimore or Philadelphia."

Ibid., 523.

⁵ Throughout the nineteenth century a popular pastime among north German historians was to speculate on the origin of the Dithmarschers. Were they Saxon or Frisian, or perhaps Dithmarschen Frisians? Much of this controversy was due to the common impression that the great eastward migration of the Dutch and Flemish population was due to their unique ability to dike and drain the northern landscape, and that the most skilled of these were the Frisians. Hence, if dikes existed (and they did), the population must be Frisians. There were other reasons also for believing in any early Frisian settlement, which are best summarized by Friedrich Christoph Dahlmann in his *G.Dänn*, III, 258-62; Today the solution of the question does not appear so simple. Several theories have been advanced to explain the existence of Frisian words and customs in Dithmarschen, especially the construction of Frisian houses. Elsewhere in northern Germany traditional building practices have proven reliable guides to the origin of the population. Heinz Stoob discusses each of these, but he himself favors a Saxon immigration onto the islands where the new clan organization then developed and changed the history of the region for centuries. Ges, 12-19, 106-118; Herbert Jankun indicates a Saxon settlement in the marsh as early as the seventh and eighth centuries, the islands having been occupied much earlier in the Roman iron age. *Die Frühgeschichte*, 20-1, 47; Lammers, 362, 364, summarized the most recent scholarship. He emphasized the Saxon ancestry and character of the Dithmarschers. The study of the photographs in this volume show clearly the differences between the very regular Dutch fields and the Dithmarscher use of natural drainage patterns.

⁶ Eckermann, "Zur Geschichte der Eindeichung in Norderdithmarschen," in *ZschG*, 12(1882), 1-72; 21(1891), 187-235, 23(1893), 39-121, 25(1895), 119-161, 26(1986), 8-15; the origin of a village is usually revealed in its name: -*stede* is found in old villages, -*büttel* indicates a pre-Christian settlement, -*wurt* a more

recent settlement, *-husen* is an inhabited place, *-and -dorp* a local center, usually unfortified. Paul Dohm, "Holsteinische Ortsnamen," in *ZschG*, 38(1908), 117-131.

⁷ Stoob, *Ges*, 32-56, 118f; Lammers, 360-65; Karl Wilhelm Nitzsch, a nineteenth century historian, presented the view that the clans originated on the Geest; he demonstrated that clans existed in Holstein as well as in Dithmarschen, and that the advocates and knights were strongest in the marsh, especially on the Southshore. *Archiv der schleswig-holsteinische Gesellschaft für vaterländische Geschichte und Topographie*, 3(1860), 88-110; more recently Werner Carstens disagreed and prepared the way for Stoob's synthesis: "Bundnispolitik und Verfassungsentwicklung in Dithmarschen bis zur Mitte des 15. Jahrhundert," in *ZschG*, 66(1938), 9-10; Heinz Stoob, "Dithmarschens Kirchspiele im Mittelalter," *ZschG*, 77(1953), 97-140; see also Nehlsen, 30-33.

⁸ Stoob, *Ges*, 73-4, 118-56; Lammers, 364-5; Berta Phillpotts, *Kindred and Clan in the Middle Ages and After* (Cambridge, 1913), 125-34; for inheritance laws see Max Sering, *Erbrecht und Agrarverfassung in Schleswig-Holstein auf geschichtliche Grundlage* (Berlin, 1908), 154-61; Ingeborg Leister, *Rittersitz und adliges Gut in Holstein und Stormarn* (Remagen: Amt für Landeskunde, 1952), 14-15; note Peter Sax, *Werke zur Geschichte Nordfrieslands und Dithmarschens* (5 vols. St. Peter Ording, 1986).

⁹ Stoob, *Ges*, 75-9; Bolten, I, 309-12; *UB*, 6.

¹⁰ *PB*, 284; Lammers, 379-401.

¹¹ Neocorus relates various horrible punishments imposed by the clans and notes "Solcher Exempel sin untellich." 94-100, 361-2. "Immitissimi homines, quotquot reperrent, necant crudeliter, occisa corpora non tradunt sepulture neque ab amicis occisorum tradi frustra." *PB*, 288.

¹² Thompson notes that, unlike France and Britain, Germany was marked by the presence of a large class of ministeriales. That class was formed not only of former serfs trained as mounted warriors and administrators, but also "tempted by the advantage of the position many freemen sought to become ministerials." As a result, "the German noble class became filled with parvenus, men of low birth, without family pride, and actuated by grossly materialistic motives and ambitions, without the culture and idealism of the French noblesse. As 'cheap as a German baron' was an adage as far back as the twelfth century." *Feudal Germany*, 323-37; "Von einem Adel als besonderem Stande ist in der älteren Zeit in unserem Land keine Spur nachzuweisen. Noch in den Zeiten der ersten Schauenburger rührte die Kraft des Landes auf dem freien Bauernstand.... Die Entstehung des Adels oder der Ritterschaft hängt in Holstein mit der Kolonisation Wagriens und der Elbmarschens zusammen. Die Grafen verfügten hier über weite Gebiete, die sie möglichst bald nutzbar machen wollten und zu dem Ende als Lehen weitergaben. So entstand ein Dienstadel.... Die Grafen wählten ihre Ritter (milites) zumeist aus dem einheimischen Geschlechter, das heißt aus der Bauernschaft. Der holsteinische Adel ist also nicht aus de(n)... Ministerialen, sondern aus dem Stande der Freien hervorgehoben.... Im Anfange des 13. Jahrhunderts kam eine neue Klasse von Ritter auf, die wir im Gegensatz zu den Bauernrittern als die Herrenritter bezeichnen können." Hinrich Ewald Holm, *Schleswig-Holsteinische Heimatgeschichte* (2 vols. Kiel and Leipzig, 1910), I, 256-9; Phillpotts, *Clan and Kindred*, 248; In the Wilster marsh a peasant patriciate continued to exist, and often these rich peasants were counted among the nobility as late as the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Detlefsen, "Rittergeschlechter," 185. The neighboring kingdom to the north retained an

egalitarian society until this same period. There only the royal family and the princes held the title Herre, and the remaining free population was called bonde, literally peasant. Serfdom vanished in the thirteenth century, but a nobility slowly rises to prominence, so that only the wealthy peasantry retains its position by virtue of its ability to serve as cavalry. The others slip to a status of dependency. John Henry Stopford Birch, *Denmark in History* (London, 1938), 68-72; *G.Dänn*, I, 173-4; III, 64-86; Not only were the rich peasants of the north akin to nobility, but many customs were not unlike those practiced in Dithmarschen. Nitzsch points out that old Saxon traditions such as the family clan, wergild, and the right to feud remain at least to 1392, and that the knights and advocates remain in Dithmarschen until relatively late. "Dithmarsche Geschlechterverfassung." 83-150.

¹³ Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1964), I, 248, ©1961; Phillpott's answer is substantially the same: "where cohesive kindreds persist into the later Middle Ages, there the peasant or townsman tends to be free. Where, on the other hand, the solidarity of the kindred disappears early, there the liberty of the individual suffers, and seigniorial rights make their appearance." *Clan and Kindred*, 254.

Chapter Two

¹ Helmold, 25-6; Neocorus, I, 297-303; Schröder, 205-6; Bolten, II, 63-92; Lammers, 31f, 93-5; Christiansen, *The Northern Crusades* 25-27; Karl Jordan, *Henry the Lion; a biography* (trans. by P. S. Falla. Oxford, 1987).

² Helmold, 22-32; *PB*, 259-60; Neocorus, I, 307-314; Lammers, 127-8.

³ Helmold, 36-9.

⁴ Christiansen, *The Northern Crusades*, 48-69.

⁵ *PB*, 262; Schröder, 207-8; Neocorus, I, 320-4; *UB*, 3-6; an effort to identify Reinold and clarify his role in Henry's plans for dominating the north is in Helmut Willert, "Graf Reinold von Dithmarschen—Überlegung und Anmerkung zur nordelbischen Politik Heinrichs des Löwens," *ZschG*, 111(1986) 19-38; Kurt Schulte, *Durch Marsch und Geest. Fahrt- und Wanderziele in Dithmarschen* (3rd ed. Heide, 1979), describes the archeological excavation of Stellerburg in the 1930's.

⁶ The peasants may or may not have killed the abbot of Stade in the course of this rising. Probably it was a tax-collector who was mistaken for the abbot. *PB*, 262-3; Neocorus, I, 329-34, 424-9; Helmold, 90; Schröder, 208; *UB*, 8-9; Lammers, 328-9, 351-2, 359, 370; Bolten, II, 147-88.

⁷ Lammers, 237-47; William Urban, "The Wendish Princes and the 'Drang nach dem Osten,'" *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 9(1978), 225-244; Friedrich Lotter, "The Crusading Idea and the Conquest of the Region East of the Elbe," *Medieval Frontier Societies* (Oxford, 1989), 267-304.

⁸ Adolf of Holstein had attempted to occupy the land in 1183. The bishop of Schleswig could be of great assistance against that prince also. Neocorus, I, 339-43; Lammers, 377f.

⁹ *Arnoldi P. abbatis Lubecensis chronica a 1172-1209*, ed. Johann Martin Lappenberg. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores*, XXI, 162, 179, 184, 218-23; *PB*, 205-6; Schröder, 209-10; Neocorus, I, 343-7; *UB*, 6-9; for the Danish system of taxation, see Viggo Starcke, *Denmark in World History* (Philadelphia, 1968), 313-5.

¹⁰ Neocorus, I, 347-50; *Holsteinische Reimchronik*, ed. Ludwig Weiland. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Deutsche Chroniken*, II, 630; *Annales Danici*, ed. Ellen Jorgensen (Copenhagen, 1920), 106-7, 152; Paul Hasse, "Die Schlacht bei Bornhoeved," *ZschG*, 7(1877), 1-20; Lammers, 393-401.

¹¹ Alfred Kamphausen, *Die Kirche zu Meldorf* [Grosse Baudenkmäler, Heft 128] (München:Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1972).

Chapter Three

¹ *Annales Stadenses Auctore M. Alberto*, ed. Johann Martin Lappenberg. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores*, XXI, 361-3; *Sachsische Weltchronik* ed. Ludwig Weiland. *Monumenta Germaniae, Chroniken*, II, 249-50.

² Volquart Pauls, "Die holsteinische Lokalverwaltung." *ZschG*, 38 (1908), 1-89; 43 (1913), 1-256; Jens Jessen, "Die Entstehung und Entwicklungen der Gutswirtschaft in Schleswig-Holstein, 610 zur Beginn der Agrarreform." *Ibid.*, 52 (1922), 1-207; Karl-Heinz Gaasch, "Die mittelalterliche Pfarrorganisationen in Dithmarschen, Holstein und Stormarn," *Ibid.*, 76(1952), 39-81.

³ Neocorus, I, 268-338; *UB*, 12-17; *G.Dith*, 252-6; Bolten, II, 349-70; Detlefsen, *Geschichte*, I, 255; Detmar-Chronik in *Die Chroniken der deutschen Städte*, vol. 19: *Lübeck* (Göttingen, 1967), 370, 392, 399-400, 424-5; Werner Carstens does not see that any great changes took place, which accounts for the lack of comment in contemporary chronicles. Rather that the nobility was a declining factor and had perhaps already been overborne before the crisis of 1283-1305. In fact, he sees the clans and nobles joining forces against the rising pressure on the part of the parishes to institute a more democratic government. "Bundnispolitik," 12-20. Lammers, 367, merely remarks about the expulsion of the nobles; Nehlsen, 39-40, with speculation about the Reventlows and Vodiemanns.

⁴ *UB*, 61-63; *G.Dith*, 71-2; Heinz Stoob, "Dithmarschens Kirchspiele im Mittelalter," *ZschG*, 77(1953), 103-21.

⁵ Rudolf Nehlsen, *Geschichte von Dithmarschen* (Tübingen, 1908), 17-33.

⁶ *PB*, 287.

⁷ Numerous novelists have used Dithmarschen as a background for their work. The best of these is the romanticist Adolf Bartels, *Die Dithmarschen* (Hamburg, 1934). The best short historical survey is Alfred Kamphausen, *Dithmarschen, Land und Leistung* (Hamburg, 1950).

Chapter Four

¹ Erich Hoffmann, "Graf Gerhard III der Grosse von Holstein, Der Aufstieg eines Territorialfürsten des 14. Jahrhunderts," *ZschG, Spätmittelalter und Reformationszeit*, vol 4, part 2 of *Geschichte Schleswig-Holsteins* (Neumünster, 1981), 66-87.

² *UB*, 20-5; *PB*, 269-70; Schröder, 206, 209, 210, 215; Neocorus, I, 366-70; Detmar-Chronik, 434-8; *G.Dith*, 259-76; Bolten, II, 371-86; Hoffmann denies that a battle took place, saying that the Dithmarscher chronicles exaggerated the effect of a number of minor combats. "Graf Gerhard III," 21; most historians, however, agree with Wilson King's assessment: "Holstein had once more learned that the only safe Dithmarscher was a dead one." *Chronicles of Three Free Cities*, 187.

³ *PB*, 284.

⁴ *PB*, 284-5; *UB*, 25-7; Bolten, II, 271-386.

⁵ *PB*, 262, 286-90; Neocorus, I, 378-89; Schröder, 209, 210, 211; *UB*, 30; *G.Dith*,

73-8, 281-9; Bolten, II, 419-57; Lübbing, *Stedinger, Friesen, Dithmarscher*, pp. 36f.

⁶ Bolten (IV, 3-99) provides the best survey of the actual religious life of the community.

Chapter Five

¹ Francis Ludwig Carsten, *Princes and Parliaments in Germany from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1963), 423-5.

² Geoffrey Barraclough, *Origins of Modern Germany* (Oxford, 1957), 320-352.

³ Karl Pagel, *Die Hanse* (Braunschweig, 1956), 126-51; Philippe Dollinger, *La Hanse* (Paris, 1964), 111-40; A. Weiner, "The Hansa," in *Cambridge Medieval History* (Cambridge, 1964), VII, 7.

⁴ Heinz Stoob, "Dithmarschen und die Hanse," in *Hansische Geschichtsblätter*, 73(1955), 117-8.

⁵ "Did any freehold or alodial owners survive in and through the manorial age? Yes, and in considerable numbers in certain parts of Europe. In Saxony the free peasantry were not reduced to serfdom until the end of the eleventh century. In Tuscany, the mountainous or hilly nature of the country preserved very much of the local population from manorialization. Many freedmen, too, survived in the mountainous parts of France, especially in the Auvergne. The feudo-manorial regime was preeminently based upon an agricultural society, and where agricultural conditions were most favorable, there feudo-manorialism most obtained. Accordingly we find freemen also existing in considerable numbers in the marshes of Frisia and Dithmarsch. Naturally the manorial pressure upon such free groups was very great and most of the alodial class succumbed to it." James Westphal Thompson, *An Economic and Social History of the Middle Ages, 300-1300* (New York, 1928), 751; Friedrich Lütge defines this "freedom" much more cautiously, drawing a distinction between the new forms of free peasant in the medieval world and their free ancestors a millennium earlier. *Geschichte der Agrarverfassung* (Stuttgart, 1963), 39-69.

⁶ Otto Feger, *Geschichte des Bodenseeraumes* (Konstanz and Lindau, 1964), III, 295-322; *Handbuch der Schweizer Geschichte* (Zürich, 1972), I, 163-466; Günther Franz, *Der Deutsche Bauernkrieg* (7th ed. Bad Homburg, 1965), I, 10f; Günther Franz, *Quellen zur Geschichte des Bauernkrieges* (München, 1963); Wilhelm Zimmermann, *Grosser Deutscher Bauernkrieg* (Stuttgart, 1891), 15-26. The impact of this work and its analysis of the peasant risings before and during 1525 deeply influenced Friedrich Engels, who used it as the basis of his *Der deutsche Bauernkrieg*, the first Marxist history. Briefly stated, Engels said that both the Rising of 1525 and the Revolution of 1848 failed because the rural and urban proletariats failed to see their common interest in opposing the upper classes. Zimmerman was more interested in the religious basis of the insurrections. Even more concerned with revolutionary messianism was Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York, 1961).

⁷ Edward P. Cheyney, *The Dawn of a New Era: 1250-1453* (New York, 1962), 141.

⁸ Charles Oman, *A History of the Art of War in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1924), II, 253-61; Hannsjoachim Koch, *Medieval Warfare* (London, 1978), 170-1, 188f.

⁹ Paul E. Martin, *Cambridge Medieval History*, VII, 183-215; Wilhelm Martin, *A History of Switzerland: an Essay in the Formation of a Confederation of States* (trans. G.W. Booth. London, 1963), pp 56-87; Franz, *Deutsche Bauernkrieg*, 7-16; Wolfgang von Wartburg, *Geschichte der Schweiz* (Munich, 1951), 25-140.

Chapter Six

- ¹ Henry S. Lucas, *The Low Countries and the Hundred Years War, 1326-1347* (Ann Arbor, 1929), 14-21; Henri Pirenne, *Early Democracies in the Low Countries* (New York, 1963); Thompson, *Feudal Germany*, 547-51; Adriaan J. Barnouw, *The Making of Modern Holland* (New York, 1944), 13-21; I. H. Gosses in *Die Friesen*, 81-4; Rudolf His, *Ibid.*, 112-4; Phillipotts, *Clan and Kindred*, 147-59; Heinrich Schmidt, *Politische Geschichte Ostfriesland* (1975), V, 12-48; Okko Leding, *Die Freiheiten der Friesen im Mittelalter und ihr Bund mit der Verwaltungsgeschichte Ostfriesland bis zum Aussterben seines Fürstenhauses* (Göttingen, 1955), 12-22.
- ² Günther Möhlmann, *Geschichte der Deutschen Länder*, 404-9; Gosses, *Die Friesen*, 82-90; Lübbing, *Stedinger, Friesen, Dithmarscher*, 24-35; Heinrich Schmidt, *Ostfriesland*, V, 48-90; König, *Verwaltungsgeschichte*, 22-162; and the very fine series *Ostfriesland im Schutze des Deiches* (4 vols. Leer, 1969); for Klaus Störtebeker, see "Legends," *Focus on Germany*, 7/8(1990), 10-11.
- ³ King, *Chronicles of three free cities*, 90.
- ⁴ Georg Dehio, *Geschichte des Erzbistums Hamburg-Bremen* (Berlin, 1877), II, 85-9; Thompson, *Feudal Germany*, 553-9, 567; Ferdinand Dannmeyer, Erich von Lehe, Heinrich Ruther, *Ein Turm und seine Insel* (Cuxhaven, 1952), 12-21; Detlefsen, *Geschichte*, 20-59.
- ⁵ Henry Lea, *History of the Inquisition* (London, 1922), III, 182-8; Hermann Lübbing, *Stedinger, Friesen, Dithmarscher: Freiheitskämpfe niederdeutscher Bauern* (Jena, 1929), 6-9; William Urban, *The Baltic Crusade* (DeKalb, 1975), 152-5.
- ⁶ Hinrich Hoff, *Schleswig-holsteinische Heimatgeschichte* (Kiel and Leipzig, 1910), I, 356f. Detlefsen, *Geschichte*, I, 25-31.
- ⁷ Detlefsen, *Geschichte*, 59-66, 82-95; this thin foreign settlement was resented by the earlier pioneers, and many of the newcomers returned home after 1147; Detlefsen, "Geschichte des Kirchspiels Neuenkirchen an der Stör," *ZschG*, 28(1898), 341-402; Thompson, *Feudal Germany*, 440; Lammers, 297-301, 310-3; Wilhelm Jensen, "Geschlechter und Meenten in den holsteinischen Elbmarschen, *ZschG*, 57(1928), 509-19, and "Sächsische und Holländische Siedlung in der Wilstermarsch," *ZschG*, 46(1916), 41-52.
- ⁸ Detlefsen, *Geschichte*, 100-119; Detlefsen, "Rittergeschlechter," 173-90; Wilhelm Biereye, "Untersuchungen zur älteren Geschichte des Adels in den holsteinischen Elbmarschen," in *ZschG*, 64(1936), 139-41, and Werner Carstens, "Untersuchung zur Geschichte des Adels und des adeligen Gutes in Holstein im Mittelalter," *ZschG*, 63(1935), 73-85, who disagrees, believing that all peasants fought on foot and that none rose above his station.
- ⁹ Detlefsen, *Geschichte*, 249-63.
- ¹⁰ Detlefsen, *Geschichte*, 267-90; Hoff, *Heimatgeschichte*, I, 360-66; Ulrich Lange, "Grundlagen der Landesherrschaft der Schauenburger," *ZschG*, 100 (1975), 106-8.
- ¹¹ *Blick über Eiderstedt, Beiträge Zur Geschichte, Kultur und Natur einer Landschaft* (Heide, 1965); Alexander Scharf, *Geschichte der deutschen Länder*, I, 432-3; Jankin, *Die Frühgeschichte*, 174-6; Rudolf Muuss, *Die Friesen*, 99-105; Rudolf His, *Ibid.*, 123-6; Volquart Pauls, "Zur Geschichte der Eiderstedter Gerichtsverfassung," *ZschG*, 57(1928), 169-202; C. P. Hansen, *Chronik der Friesischen Uthlande* (Garding, 1877).

¹² Johannes Petreus' *Schriften über Nordstrand* (ed. Reimer Hansen), vol. 5 of *Quellensammlung der Gesellschaft für schleswig-holsteinische Geschichte* (Kiel, 1901), 144-164.

¹³ There are numerous good studies of the failed peasant rising in England. See Rodney Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free; Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381* (New York, 1973), *Peasants, Knights and Heretics* (ed. R.H. Hilton. Cambridge, 1976), Charles Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381* (Oxford, 1906), and Philip Lindsay and Reg Groves, *The Peasants' Revolt 1381* (New York, 1950).

Chapter Seven

¹ As early as 1286 Brunsbüttel clansmen promised not to attack merchants on the Elbe. When that agreement was renewed in 1307 and 1316, each side promised to refrain from "omnes controversie, inimicitie, spolia, vulnera seu homicidia et generaliter omnes causa, sive de novo seu specialiter in albea." In 1384 further agreement was reached in to moderating the salvage practices whereby the cargoes of stranded vessels were looted by the shore dwellers. *UB*, 14, 16-20, 28-9.

² Schröder, 211; Neocorus, I, 404-5; II, 534-6; Stoob, *Regentenzeitalter*, 21-34; *G.Dith*, 79-82, 290-3; Bolten, II, 496-9; Nehlsen, 52-53; Ernst Carstens views the victory of the parishes over the clans as essential to the preservation of liberty, and sees in this triumph the establishment of a principle first set forth in the thirteenth century. The clans had been a danger. "So bedeutet ihre Existenz doch im Ganzen eher eine Schwächung und Gefährdung der Staatsordnung...Nur in Zusammenhang mit der Überwindung Festigkeit und äussere Macht. Die Voraussetzung für die Erringung und Bewahrung der Dithmarscher Freiheit ist die Beschränkung der Geschlechter;" "Bundnispolitik," 23-33.

³ Ed. Adolf Ludwig Jacob Michelsen, *Sammlung altdithmarscher Rechtsquellen*, (Altona, 1842); Klaus Alberts, *Friede und Friedlosigkeit nach dem Dithmarscher Landrechten von 1447 und 1539* (Heide, 1978).

⁴ Neocorus, I, 363; II, 533-47; Stoob, *Regentenzeitalter*, 40-76; *G.Dith*, 82-7; *G.Dänn*, III, 264-75.

⁵ Wilhelm Thiessen, *Wappen und Siegel aus Dithmarschen* (Heide, 1964); Stoob, *Regentenzeitalter*, 331-4, 368-88.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 218-29; *G.Dith*, 89-90; Bolten, IV, 128-35.

⁷ Neocorus, I, 361-3; *G.Dith*, 84, 293-4; Bolten (IV, 116-21) remarks that each parish and even each clan is a free state in itself; Karl-Heinz Gaasch, "Die mittelalterliche Pfarrorganisation in Dithmarschen, Holstein und Stormarn," *ZschG*, 76(1952), 39-81; Stoob, "Dithmarschens Kirchspiele," 120-34.

⁸ *G.Dith*, 84-5; Michelsen, *Altdithmarscher Rechtsquellen*, 14, describes wergilds, 34-41.

⁹ Neocorus waxes with patriotic pride in describing the virtues, courage, and independence of Dithmarschen women. I, 100-36.

¹⁰ *G.Dith*, 90-2; Michelsen, *Altdithmarscher Rechtsquellen*, 52-63.

¹¹ Michelsen, *Altdithmarscher Rechtsquellen*, 72-5, 78-9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 36-9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 77-8.

¹⁴ Neocorus, I, 137-49.

Chapter Eight

- ¹ Leister, *Rittersitz und adlige Gut*, 46-7; In 1460 and 1461 Dithmarschers killed in battles two of Christian's most important vassals. He had considered this murder and took appropriate revenge. The Dithmarschers then mixed into his political difficulties with his brother, Gerhard VI of Oldenburg (1430-1500) and in 1473 won an apparent diplomatic victory. *UB*, 63-65; Stoob, *Regentenzeitalter*, 54-61.
- ² Neocorus, I, 411-6, 429-44; *UB*, 35-94; *G.Dith*, 93f; *G.Dänn*, III, 275-80; Bolten, III, 40-104; Stoob, *Regentenzeitalter*, 61-77; L. Schleker, *Die Dänisch-Dithmarschen Streitigkeiten seit der Vereinigung Holstein mit Dänemark bis zum Ausbruch des Krieges vom Jahre 1500* (Rostock, 1875), 3-34; Urkunden und andere Actenstücke zur Geschichte der Herzogthümer Schleswig und Holstein unter dem Oldenburgischen Hause (ed. G. Wartz), vol. 2 of *Quellensammlung der Schleswig-holsteinische Gesellschaft für vaterländische Geschichte* (Kiel, 1863), 1-30.
- ³ Neocorus, I, 420-1.
- ⁴ Dannmeyer, *Ein Turm und seine Insel*, 22f; see note 2.

Chapter Nine

- ¹ Neocorus, I, 377, 391-5, 406-7.
- ² *UB*, 94; *G.Dänn*, 281-3. Since 1490 Friedrich had been the joint ruler of Schleswig-Holstein with his brother John, who ruled the United Kingdom of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.
- ³ Walter Lammers, *Die Schlacht bei Hemmingstedt* (Heide, 1982), 43-127, with an earlier version in *Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte Schleswig-Holsteins*, 28(1953), 1-180; see also Neocorus I, 447-534; *G.Dänn*, III, 281-301, and *G.Dith*; for Landsknechten, see Koch, *Medieval Warfare*, 192-99, 212.
- ⁴ Hamburg could probably have defied King John and the Garde, and had it done so it probably would have been rewarded with the status of an imperial city by Emperor Maximilian, but Hamburg both feared involvement and hoped to see the Dithmarschers get their just deserts.
- ⁵ The original speech is found in Neocorus, I, 464-5, but without the reference to hunting dogs. That reference apparently has its origins in folk myth—the best efforts of generations of scholars have been unable to identify any incident which might be construed as its source. Compare the very different speech in Bartels, *Die Dithmarscher*, 127, which follows the reliable sources very carefully and brings in the additional traditional theme of divided loyalties among prominent Regents, especially the belief that the royal army was led to its fate by a "traitor" who at the last minute remembered his obligations to his fatherland. Of all the episodes in Dithmarschen's romantic history, perhaps none has been retold as often as this debate. One party was ready for negotiations, another for retreating to Büsum, but the majority was won over by this speech—which went on to compare their situation to that of the Spartans at Thermopylae.
- ⁶ Lammers, *Die Schlacht bei Hemmingstedt*, 134-42.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 142-184.

Chapter Ten

- ¹ There was no organized Inquisition in Germany, but there were periodic trials of Waldensians and Hussites. Richard Kieckhefer, *Repression of Heresy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, 1984), 11-12.

val Germania (Philadelphia, 1979); Koch summarized the peasant risings, saying, "Peace had been reestablished; the peace of the gallows, the sword, the wheel and the fire." *Medieval Warfare*, p. 237.

- ² A. J. L. Michelsen, "Nachträge zum Dithmarsischen Urkundenbuch," *Archiv f. Staats- und Kirchengeschichte der Herzogthümer Schleswig, Holstein und Lauenburg*, 9 (1867), 263-84; W.H. Kloster, "Die Klöster Dithmarschens" *Ibid.*, 3(1860), 61-64.
- ³ Neocorus, II, 1-31; Bolten, III, 227-84; Stoob, "Dithmarschens Kirchspiele," 122-5, 138-40; "Heinrich Zütphen," *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*, XI, 642-3; Kloster, "Die Klöster Dithmarschens," 65-76; Reimer Hansen, "Die geschichtliche Bedeutung Heinrichs von Zütpheus, des Martyrer der Reformation in Dithmarschen," *Dithmarscher Zeitschrift für Landeskunde und Landschaftspflege*, 1(1990), 1-15.
- ⁴ Wilhelm Johnsen, "Zur Geschichte der Reformation in Dithmarschen nach dem Zeugnis einiger Kunstdenkmäler jener Zeit," *Aus Schleswig-Holsteins Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Neumünster, 1950), 46-61.
- ⁵ Heinz Stoob, "Dithmarschen und Peter Swyn," *Peter Swyn 1481/82-1537. Ansprachen bei der Feier aus Anlass seines 450 Todestages* (Kiel, 1987), 13-21; Stoob, *Regentenzeitalter*, 407-18; Stoob, "Dithmarschens Kirchspiele," 138-139; Alberts, *Friede und Friedlosigkeit*, 14.
- ⁶ Rudolf Brinkman, "Wiebe Peters, ein berüchtigter Landesfeind seines Vaterlandes Dithmarschen," in *Archiv für Staats und Kirchengeschichte der Herzogthümer Schleswig, Holstein, und Lauenburg*, 3(1860), 1-15; UB, 154-5.

Chapter Eleven

¹ Birch, *Denmark in History*, 172-3.

² Anton I (1505-1573), a cousin of the king.

³ "Bericht eines Augenzeugen über die Eroberung Dithmarschen's," *Archiv für Staats- und Kirchengeschichte der Herzogthümer Schleswig, Holstein, Lauenburg*, III, 341-370, which Fr. Bertheau, "Zur Kritik der Quellen der Unterwerfung Dithmarschens," *ZschG*, 17(1887), 221-79, considers a copy of Cilicus' manuscript, hence as close to an accurate contemporary account as possible.

⁴ As it was expressed at the time, "dar it anderst ja nicht sin kan." Reimer Witt, *Die Privilegien der Landschaft Norderdithmarschen in gottorfsicher Zeit, 1559 bis 1773 [Quellen und Forschung zur Geschichte Schleswig-Holsteins]*, 67] (Neumünster, 1975), 17-19, 48.

⁵ UB, 205-210; Witt, *Die Privilegien*, 20-24.

Chapter Twelve

¹ Heinz Stoob, "Hansehaupt und Bauerstadt, Dithmarschen und Lübeck im Mittelalter," *ZschG*, (1938), 5-24; see also Lammer's comments in "Die Schlacht bei Hemmingstedt," 191-2.

² Schulte, *Durch Marsch und Geest*, notes that the Linden trees in Marne died after 1559—apparently Nature grieving for the people. However, the oppression was not unendurable. The most visible sign of the efforts of the new government to further the interests of the Dithmarschers were the new dikes which created the present coastline. No region between Marne and Lunden remained unchanged.

³ Neocorus, I, 522.

⁴ Dithmarschen was unified as a political district in 1970.

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