

13 Centuries of the Nordic Peoples

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The Nordic nations (the Danes, Norwegians, and Swedes, and related peoples) appear most prominently in the pages of history during Viking times (roughly 789-1098). This site covers that period in detail, but also charts their history in more recent times, which has much of interest. The dates chosen for this site are, with the exception of the start, end, and 1864, chosen to show the greatest extents of the power or influence of various Nordic nations. There is one map per century from the 8th to the 13th century, and then one every second century thereafter.

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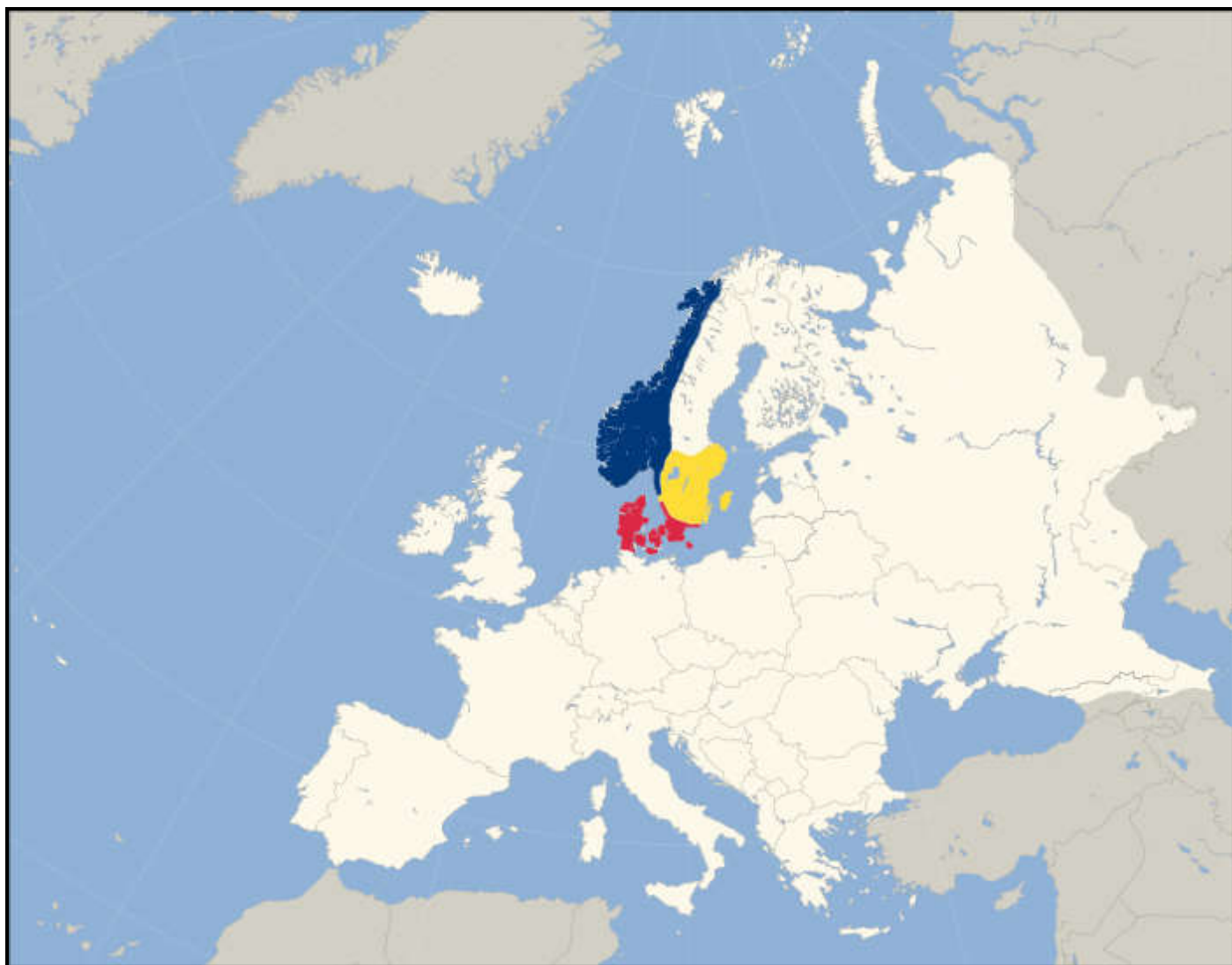
Note: to view these maps as a coarse "movie", first adjust the size of this window to be slightly larger than a map plus its title, then click on next (>) or previous (<) at the beginning of each title. To return to the Index of Maps, click on the up arrow (^).

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[^](#) [≥](#) **789** -- Scandinavia before the storm

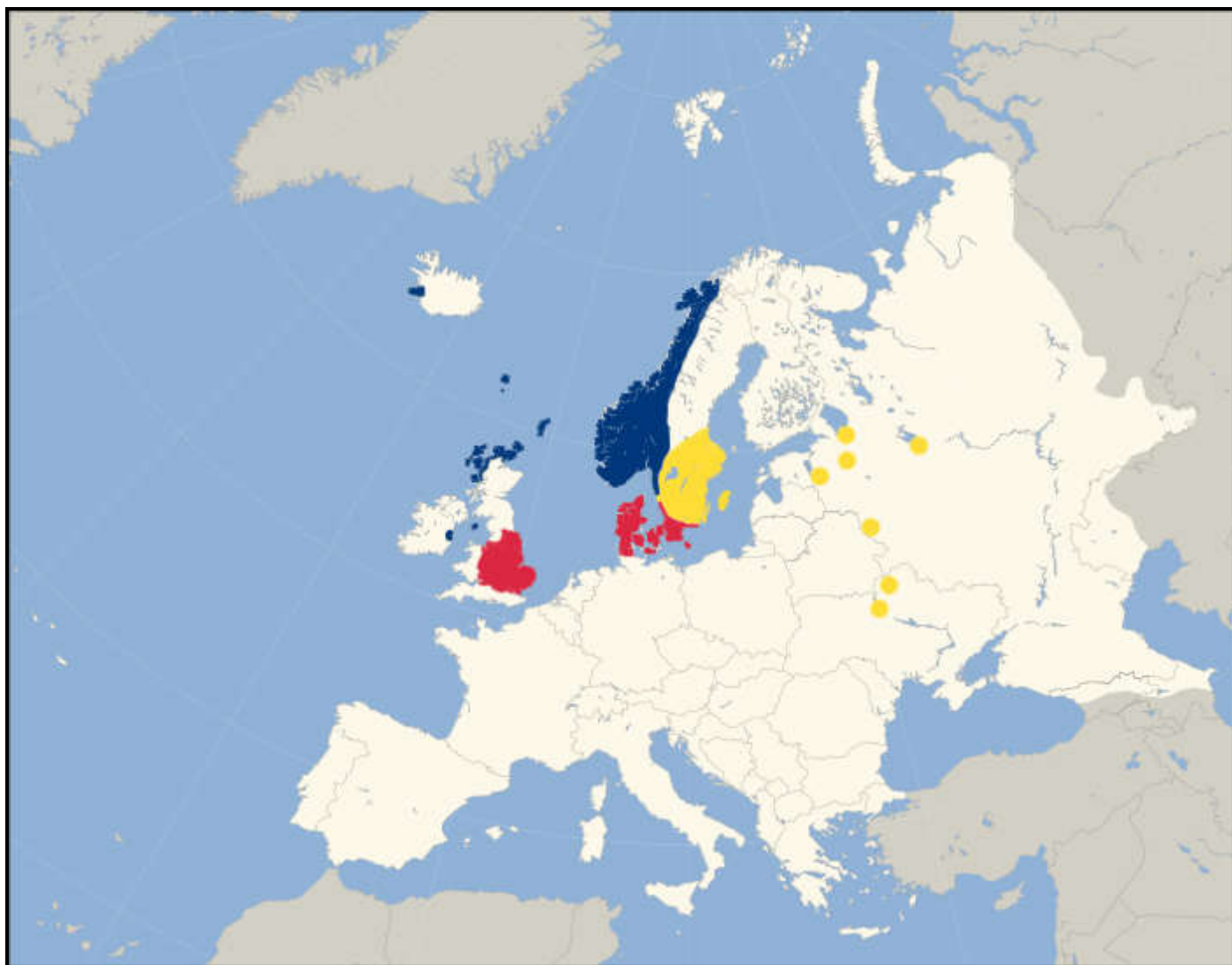
Danes, Norwegians, Swedes



The Nordic people have been living in Scandinavia for thousands of years. In the sixth century they had raided northern Francia, and may have participated in the Anglo-Saxon conquest of England. But for the most part they went unnoticed in European history. This all changed with the first recorded raid on England in 789, which launched the Viking Age. What prompted this change in Nordic culture remains controversial; it may have been over-population; or advances in ship-design which opened new opportunities; or Charlemagne's bloody conquest and conversion of the pagan Saxons, which brought the Frankish Empire to the borders of the Kingdom of Denmark (shown in red on the above map). Note that although it is reasonable even at this early time to divided the Nordic people into the three nations that persist to the present day in Scandinavia: the **Danes**, **Norwegians**, and **Swedes**, only the first of these was organized into a single Kingdom at this time.

≤ ^ ≥ 878 -- The Viking Invasions of Britain

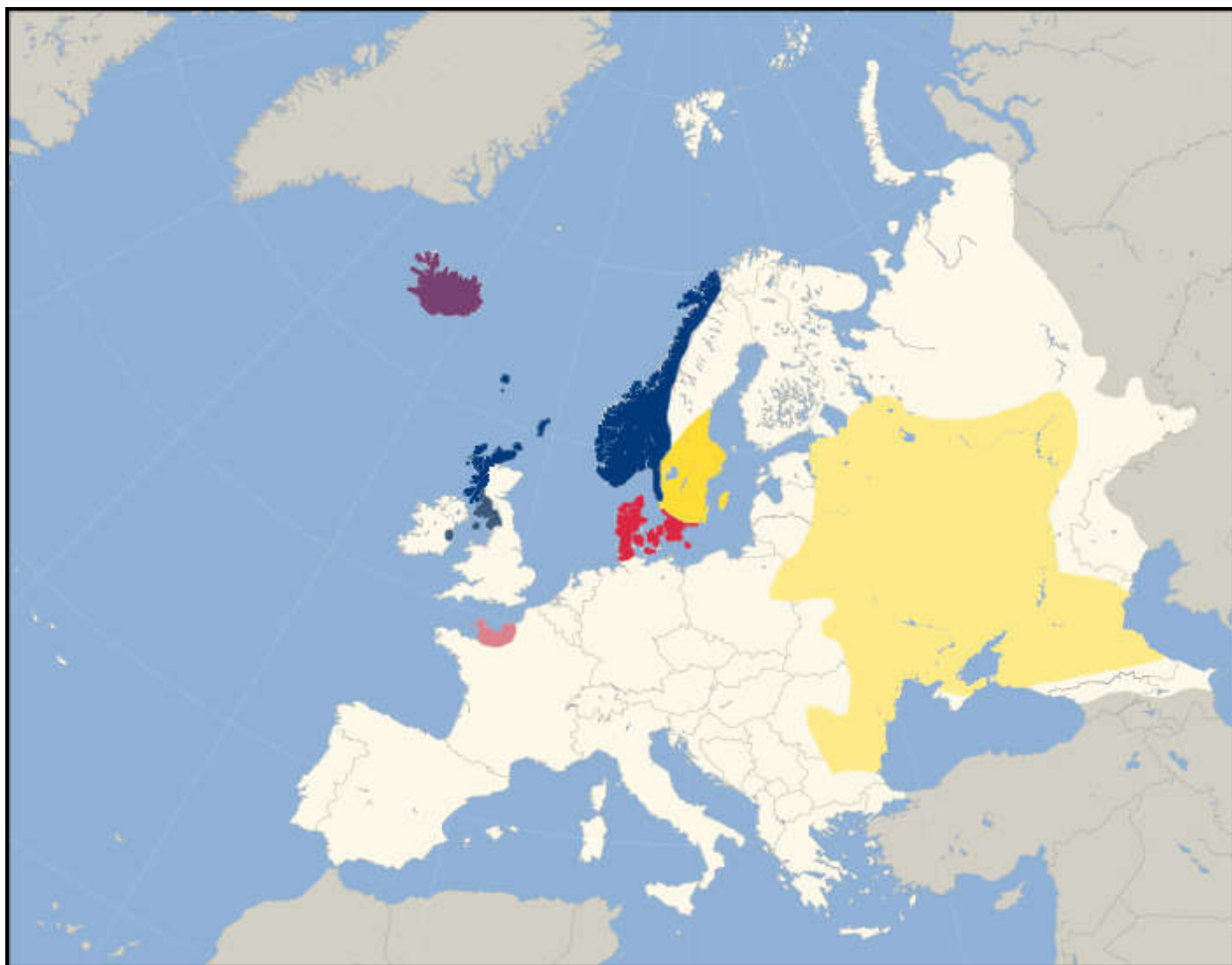
Danes, **Norwegians**, **Swedes**



The first Danish raid of three ships in Wessex in 789 was followed by the infamous sack of the monastery of Lindisfarne in Northumbria in 793 by Norwegian Vikings (or Norse, as they are called). Over the next two generations, the scale and area of Viking activity exploded. They set up bases and sacked towns throughout England and France (i.e. western Francia), and along the coasts of Spain, Africa and Italy. Their fleets could number more than a hundred ships, enough to carry an army of several thousand men. By the 860s, the cavalry forces of local French nobles had learned how to respond rapidly to the Danes, rather than waiting for their King to turn up. The Danes therefore turned their attention towards the easier pickings in England. In 865 the "Great Army" under Ivar and Halfdan invaded. York fell in 866, although the northern part of Northumbria remained independent. East Anglia was next in 869, and Mercia in 873. Only Wessex remained, and in 878, King Alfred, defeated, had fled to the Somerset marshes. The Norse, meanwhile had conquered the northern Scottish Isles, Man, and Dublin, and had established the first settlement in the Faroes and Iceland (previously uninhabited). In the east, Swedish Vikings (also known as Varangians) were establishing control of key trading towns on the great rivers of Russia.

[<](#) [^](#) [>](#) 972 -- The Rus Empire of Svyatoslav

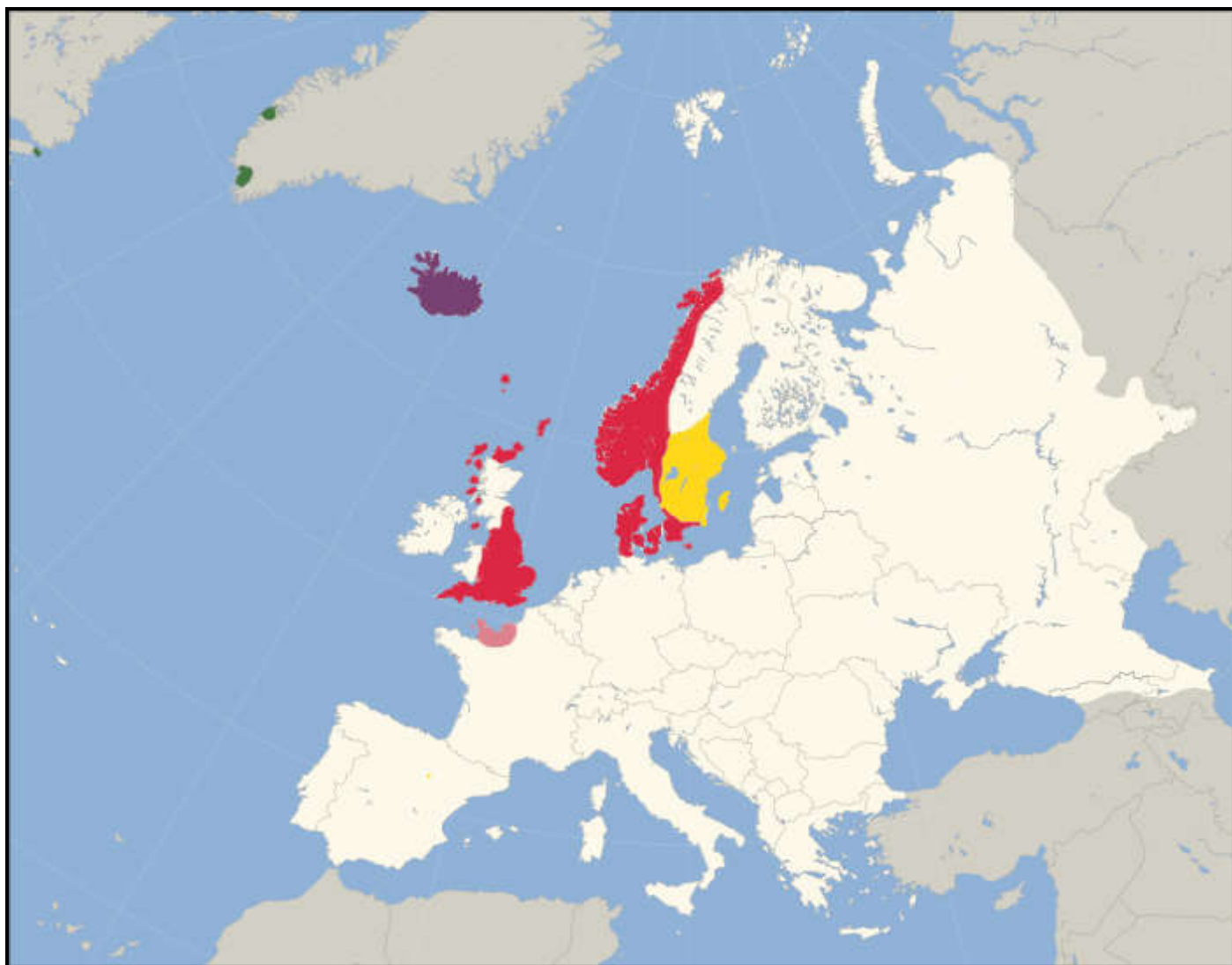
Denmark, Normandy, Norway, Hiberno-Norse, Swedes, Varangian Rus, Iceland



The Danish army had divided after its conquest of Mercia, but Alfred's victory over that fraction which had invaded Wessex was remarkable nevertheless. Gradually over the next two generations the House of Wessex reconquered all the Danish gains, and established the Kingdom of England. The Danes turned again on France, and in 911 Charles the Simple bought off the Viking Rollo by granting him a small piece of territory at the mouth of the Seine. Rollo was baptised and held his land as a vassal of the King, but this was purely nominal. By the time of this map, the **Normans** (that is, Northmen) had greatly expanded territory of Normandy. They were already becoming more French than Danish, but were still very conscious of their Viking roots. The Norse, meanwhile, had conquered all of western Scotland, while in Dublin, Man, and Strathclyde, mixed **Hiberno-Norse** elites ruled (in the last case, mixed also with the Strathclyde Britons). The **Icelanders**, drawn from all over the Nordic world, had created an island-wide system of government by *Thing* (assembly) in 930, around the same time the Norwegians were unified under a single King. But the most spectacular gains at this time were by the Varangians, who were known by the locals as the Rus. In 882, Oleg took control of Kiev and made it the capital of an Empire encompassing all the Rus settlements. The **Varangian Rus Empire** reached its greatest extent under Svyatoslav (945-72), but as his name betrays, by this time they were becoming integrated with the local Slavic population.

≤ ^ ≥ 1028 -- The Danish Empire of Cnut

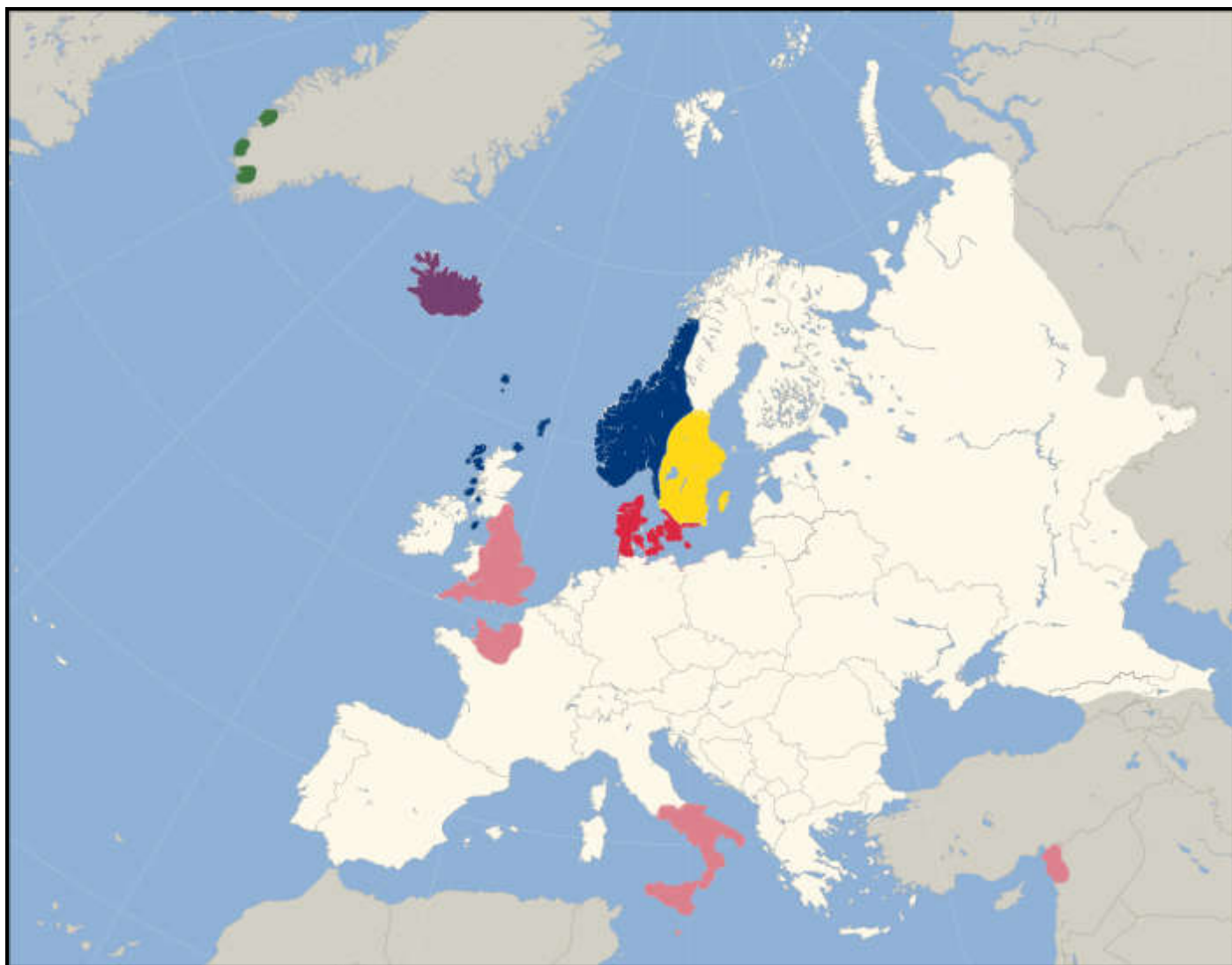
Danish Crown, Normandy, Sweden, Iceland, Greenlanders



By the early 11th century Varangian trade with the east had dried up with the exhaustion of silver mines in *Dar al-Islam*. The Rus Empire persisted, but was now definitely Russian (slavic speaking, land-based, and Orthodox Christian) rather than Nordic. But in the west Viking activity was on the rise again. England was subject to massive Danish raids from 991 onwards; the *Danegeld* King Ethelred repeatedly paid them to turn away served only to encourage them to return in future years. Their fleets were helped by the safe havens they were granted in Normandy, which was now a Dukedom. By 1016, Cnut, brother of the King of Denmark, had conquered the whole of England. In 1019 he inherited Denmark, and in 1028 conquered the Norwegians when they allied with Swedes (recently united under a single King) against him. With Norway came the Earldom of Orkney, from the Shetland Isles to the Isle of Man; Cnut had created the only ever Empire of the North Sea. Meanwhile, beyond Iceland, Viking settlers had reached Greenland in 986, and then Vinland in North America around the year 1000. I have shown a settlement of **Greenlanders** at the Viking site of *L'Anse aux Meadows* in Newfoundland, but whether this was Vinland and whether it was still occupied in 1028 is debatable.

≤ ^ ≥ 1130 -- The Norman Conquests

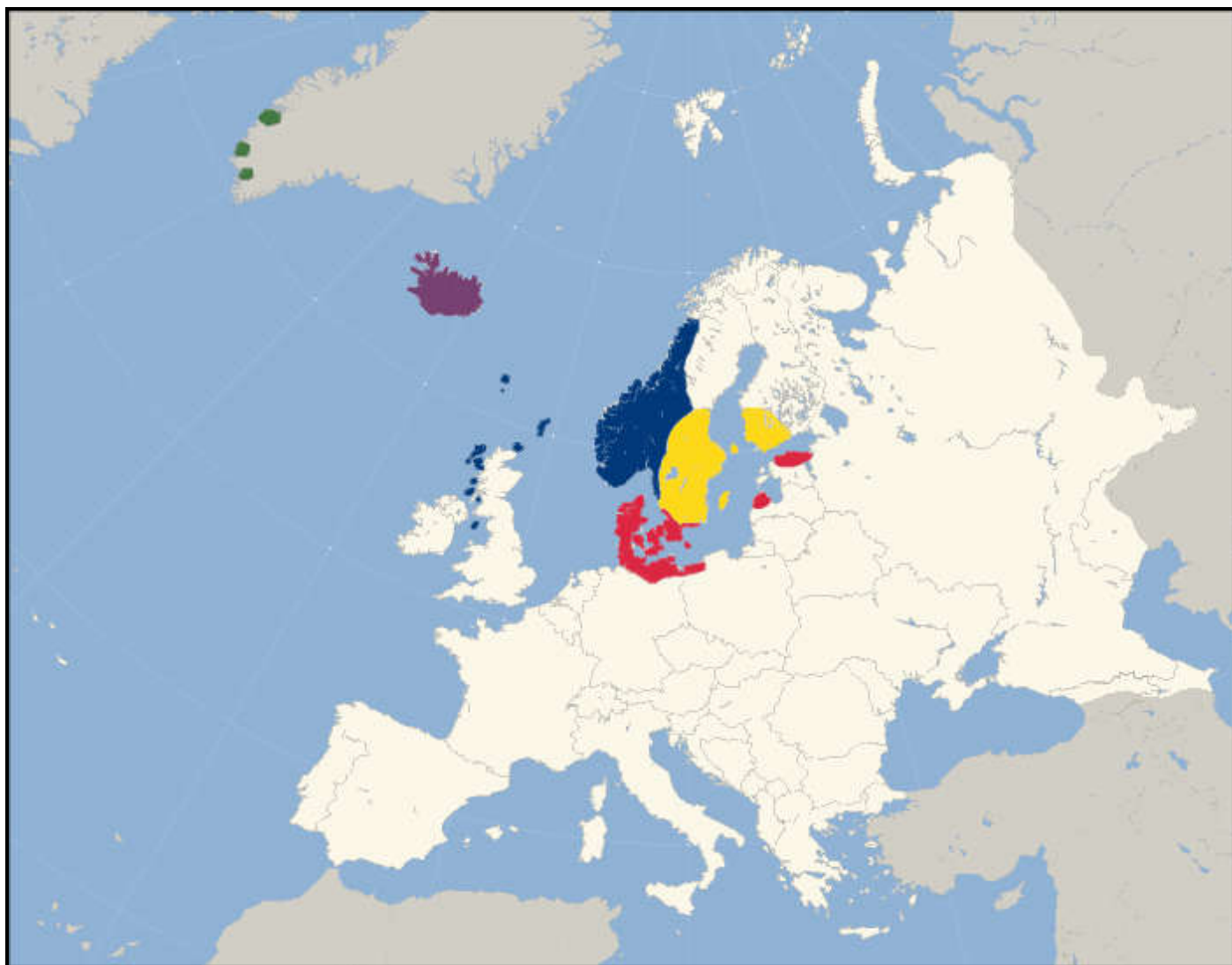
Denmark, Normans, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Greenlanders



Cnut's Empire did not survive his death in 1035, and Danish rule in England ended in 1042. But the restoration of the House of Wessex was also short-lived --- when the half-Norman Edward "the Confessor" died without a son in 1066, the Kingdom was up for grabs. The main contenders were: the half-Danish Harold, Earl of Wessex (the most powerful man in England), Harald Hardrada, King of Norway (with a weak claim to be Cnut's successor), and William the Bastard(*), Duke of Normandy (Edward's cousin once-removed, and his nominated heir). Two great battles on English soil determined that the last was to become King William I of England. But this famous Norman Conquest of 1066 was not the only one of this century, for even if they now lived as Frenchmen, the Normans still had the Viking *wanderlust*. From 1040, Norman mercenaries in southern Italy began grabbing land for themselves, and by 1091 had conquered almost the whole of it, plus Sicily from the Moors. These lands were united under Roger, Count of Sicily, who took the title King in 1130. Meanwhile, Normans from Normandy, England, and Italy were among those who had joined the First Crusade against the Seljuks in the East in 1096. Bohemond, a Norman from Italy, won for himself the rule of Antioch, and the title Prince, in 1099. (*) The Normans' willingness, at this stage, to recognize their illegitimate offspring as heirs was another legacy of their Viking past; they called their concubines "Danish wives".

≤ ^ ≥ 1223 -- The Danish Empire of Valdemar II

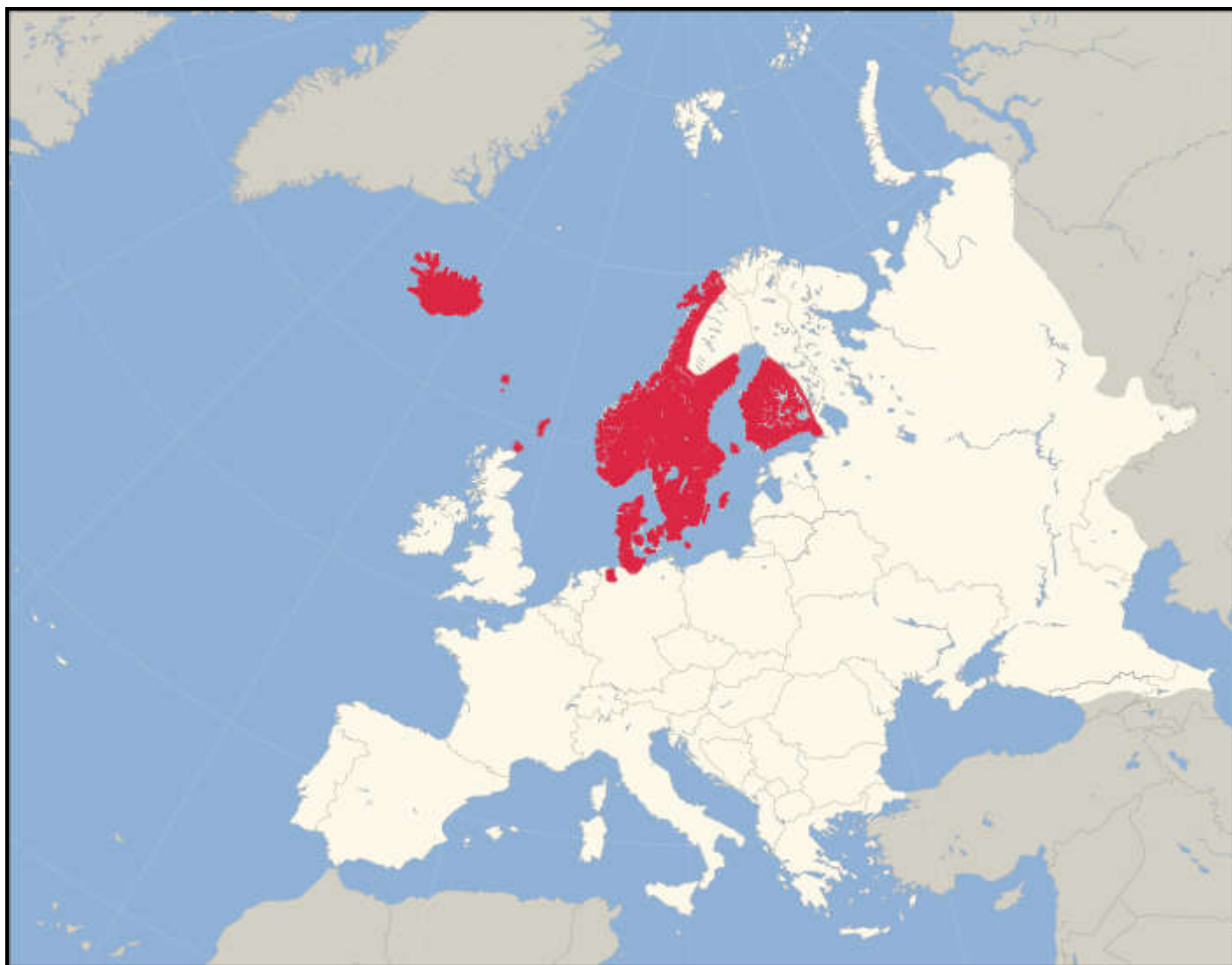
Danish Crown, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Greenlanders



Norman rule ended: in the Principality of Antioch with the death of Bohemond's son, Bohemond II, in 1131; in England and Normandy with the death of Stephen, grandson of William I, in 1154; and in the Kingdom of Sicily with its conquest by the Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI in 1194. After this, the next major Nordic conquest was the creation of a Baltic Empire by Valdemar II, King of Denmark, known as *the Conqueror*. He began by invading Norway, which became his vassal from 1208. Denmark had been increasing its influence in northern Germany for some time, and in 1214, Valdemar's military support of the beleaguered Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (son of Henry VI) was rewarded with the transfer of the whole coast of Germany east of the Elbe to Denmark. In 1219 he conquered northern Estonia, as part of a Crusade against the pagans there, and shortly afterwards took northern Courland (Latvia) [Kinder & Hilgemann, 1964]. By this time the Swedes had begun their colonization of Finland.

≤ ^ ≥ 1460 -- The Union of Kalmar under Christian I

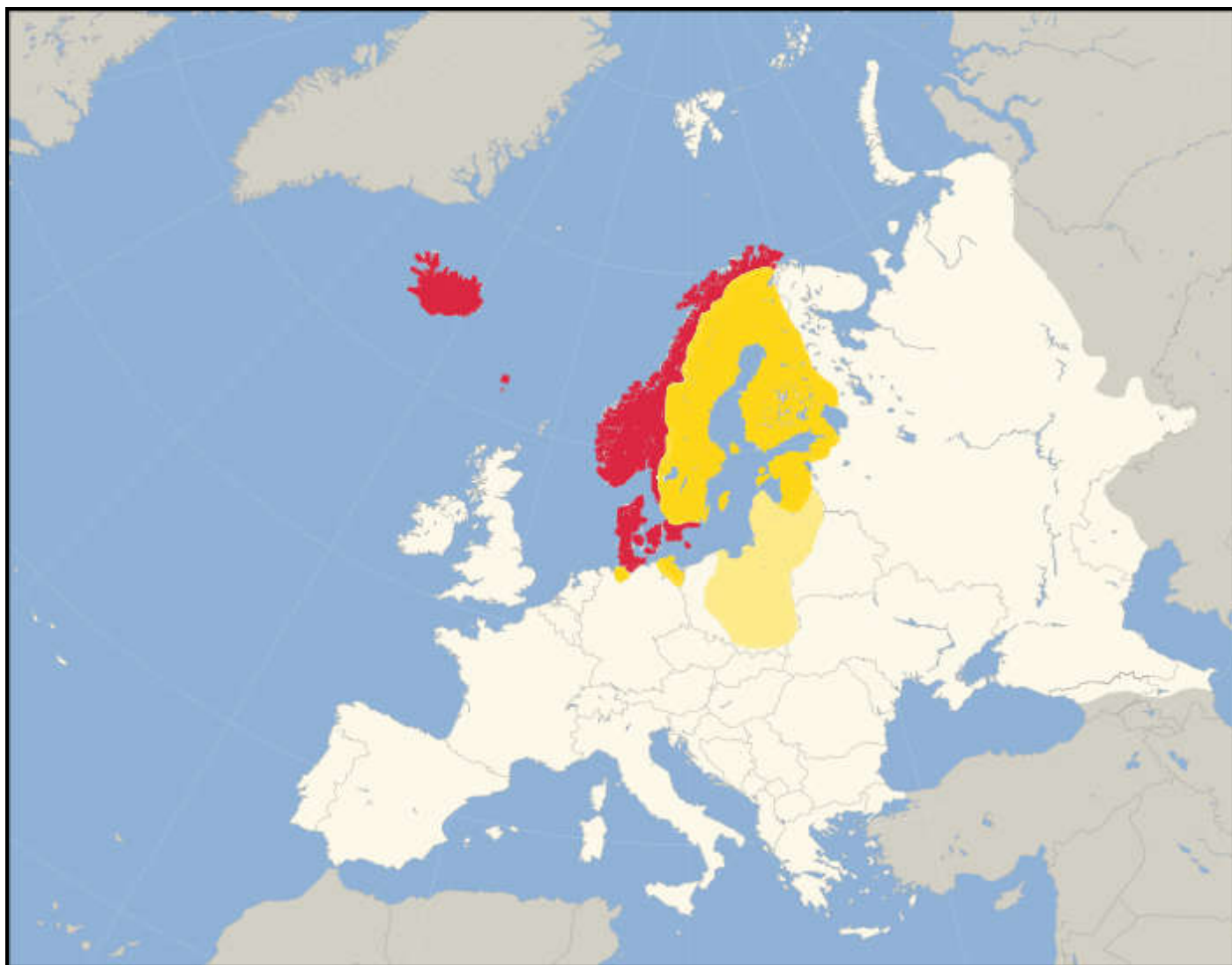
Danish Crown



In 1223 Valdemar II was captured by one of his north German vassals, and only released a year later after promising to give up his German territories. He soon reneged on this promise, but defeat in 1227 forced him to accept this loss. Northern Estonia remained Danish until 1346, when it was sold to the Teutonic Knights. Meanwhile in the west Nordic rule was also retreating --- the Isle of Man and the Hebrides were sold by Norway to Scotland in 1266, following an inconclusive war. However, Norway had won a far bigger prize in 1262 when the Icelanders voluntarily placed themselves under the Norwegian Crown. (The Greenlanders followed suit, but sadly, due to the deteriorating climate event known as the "Little Ice Age", they fell out of contact with their Nordic cousins and, by the time of this map, had perished through famine.) This was the beginning of a trend that culminated in the 1397 Treaty of Kalmar, which brought all the Nordic peoples under one King. The chief architect of this Union was Queen Margaret of Norway, who remained the power behind the throne of her grand-nephew Erik until her death in 1412. Thereafter the Danes became the dominant power in the Union, and the Swedes in particular often rose up against what they saw as an imposed foreign ruler. However in 1460 Christian I was unopposed King of all the Nordic nations, and had just extended Denmark to the south again by annexing Schleswig-Holstein.

≤ ^ ≥ 1655 -- The Swedish Empire under Charles Gustav

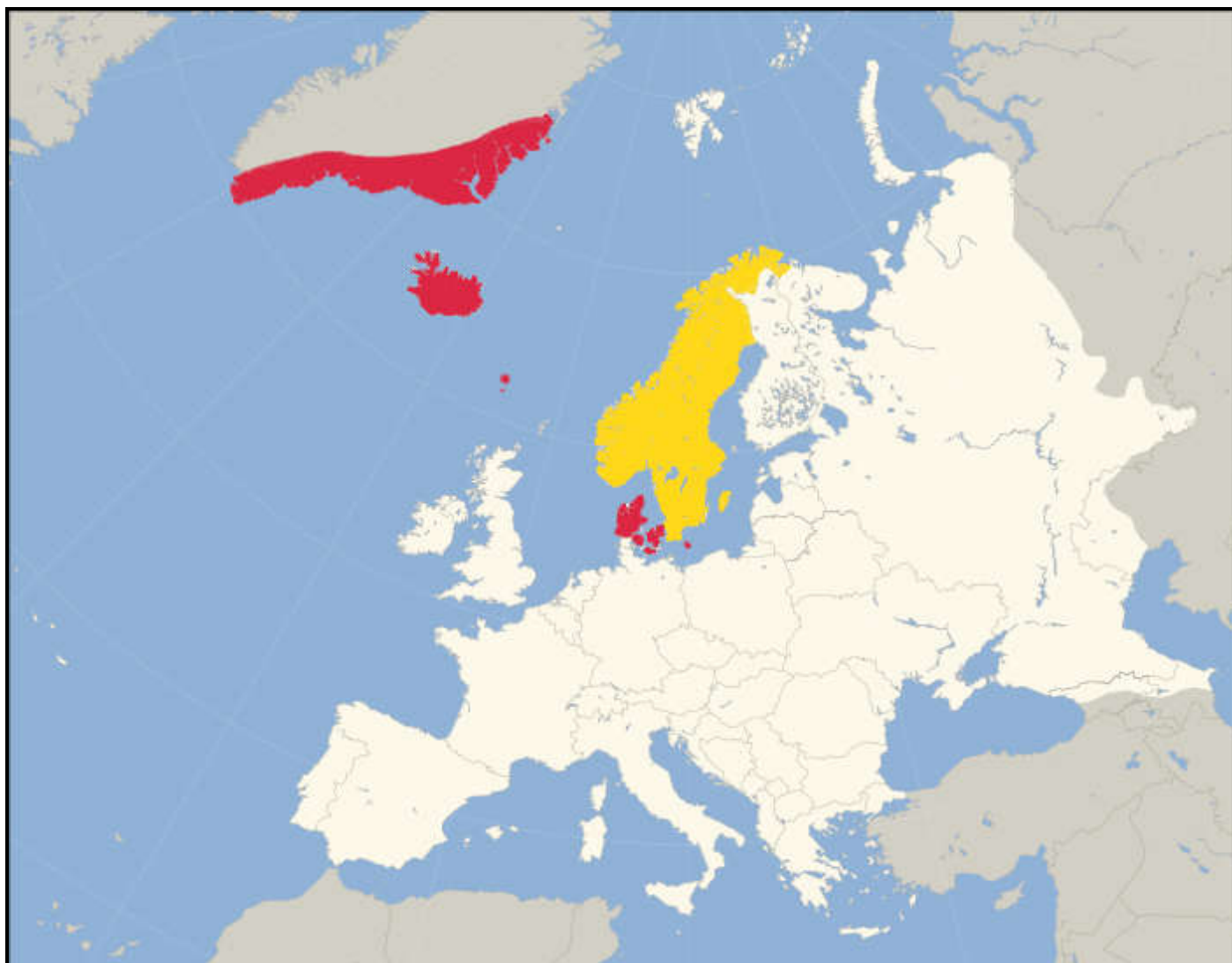
Danish Crown, Swedish Crown, Swedish occupying forces



Christian I was chronically short of money, because the nobles he relied upon for support paid little or no tax. In 1468 he pawned Orkney and Shetland to Scotland, to cover the unpaid dowry of his daughter Margaret (betrothed to the Scottish King). Earlier, in 1464, the Swedes had risen again in rebellion against his financial impositions, and restored one of their own Kings. Danish Kings were able to reimpose their authority at times in Sweden, but the massacre of Stockholm in 1520 and the subsequent rebellion saw the final end of the Kalmar Union in 1523. The Norwegians and Icelanders remained under Danish Kings, but it was Sweden which became in the following century one of the "Great Powers" of Europe. Sweden emerged from the thirty-year's war (1618-48) with an Empire in the Baltic and northern Germany, and an army that was second-to-none in Europe. This was a remarkable achievement, since Sweden's population was only about 1/5 of that of Britain (the next-least populous Great Power), and far poorer. It rested on the militarisation of the Swedish people, the generalship of their Kings, and, especially after 1648, subsidies by France. In 1655 King Charles (traditionally numbered the 10th of that name), surnamed Gustav, opportunisticly took Sweden to war against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Russia had invaded the year before, and the Swedish forces quickly overran what was left of the country, in what was remembered in Polish history as "The Deluge". This area is shown above in light yellow, as it was an occupation which never crystallized into a conquest.

≤ ^ ≥ 1864 -- The loss of Schleswig-Holstein

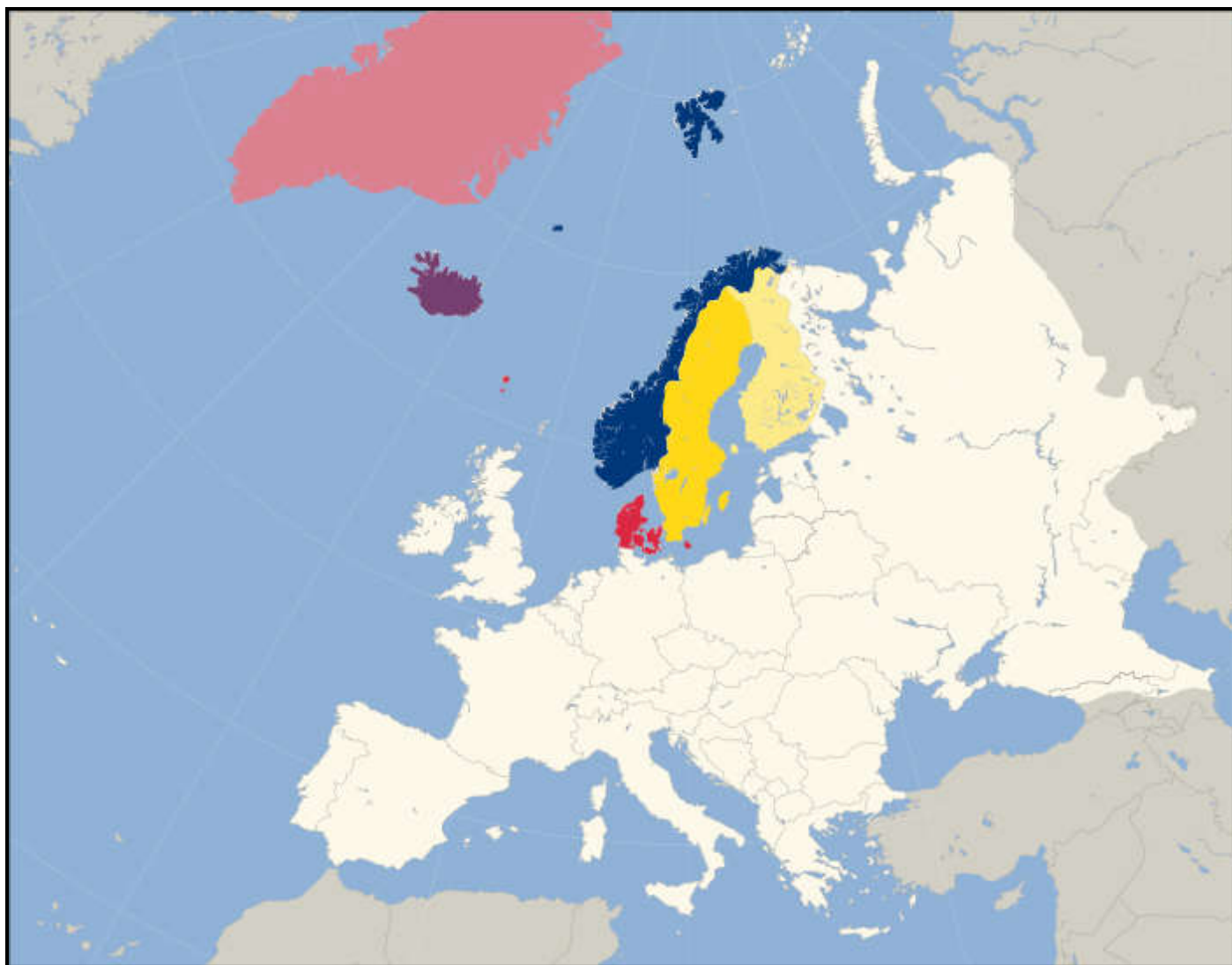
Danish Crown, Swedish Crown



Charles Gustav was forced to withdraw by Polish nationalist forces in 1657. However, he immediately went to war with Denmark, and by 1658 the Danes had ceded that part of Denmark on the southernmost point of the Scandinavian peninsula, and the central part of Norway, around Trondheim. The former turned out to be a permanent conquest; the latter was returned to Denmark-Norway in 1660. Sweden continued to act as Great Power in Scandinavia and the east until it was finally defeated in the Great Northern War of 1700-21, by an overwhelming coalition of Russia, Denmark-Norway, Poland-Lithuania and Saxony. Sweden lost all of its territories except for Finland and Pomerania. In 1814, following the Napoleonic wars, these remaining territories were given to Russia and Prussia respectively by the Great Powers (which no longer included Sweden). However, Sweden was compensated because it had fought against Napoleon (and Denmark punished because it had allied with him) by the transfer of Norway from the Danish to the Swedish Crown. The original Norwegian claims to Iceland, Greenland and the Faroes had, however, already been transferred to the Danish Crown. The final loss of Nordic territory occurred in the 1864, when Prussia and Austria-Hungary wrested Schleswig-Holstein (which was predominantly German speaking) from Denmark. By this time, Denmark had begun reoccupying Greenland, where Eskimo peoples, who had inhabited the far north for millennia, had spread to the south by c.1500 (and may have had a hand in the demise of the Nordic settlers there).

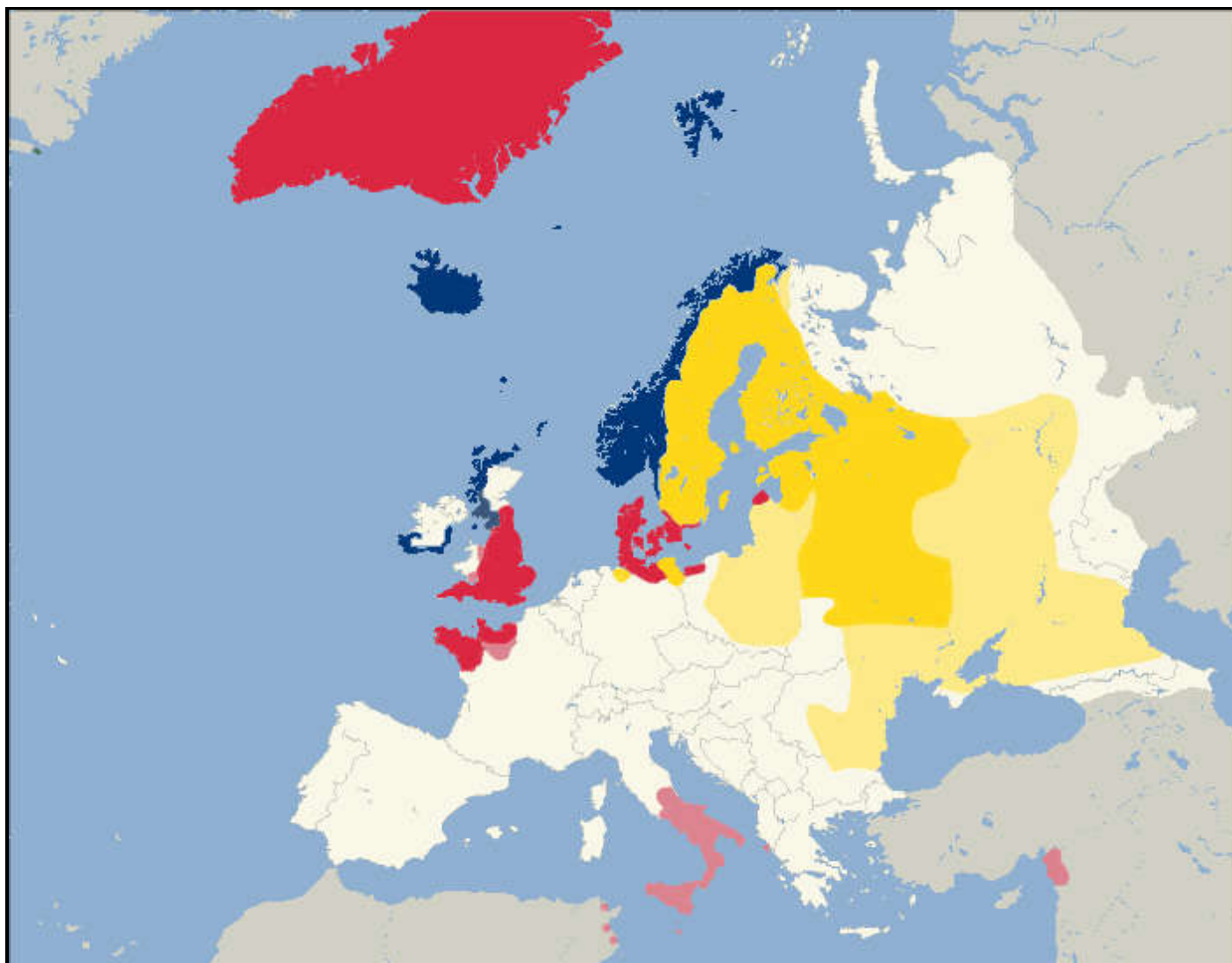
≤ ^ 2009 -- The Nordic Nations today.

Denmark, Greenland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland



The Norwegians had never been happy under Swedish rule, and the union could not survive the spread of democracy to Scandinavia. When a referendum in 1905 returned a tally 99.95% in favour of dissolution (among the 85% of Norwegian men who voted), Sweden accepted the inevitable. Following the First World War, in which all the Nordic nations were neutral, Denmark regained the Danish-speaking part of Schleswig, Norway gained sovereignty over the Arctic Island of Svalbard, and Finland gained its independence from Russia. Since then, the proportion of native Swedish speakers in Finland has dropped from about 11% to only half that, but Swedish remains an official language, hence the **colouring of Finland**. In Greenland, by contrast, which gained full autonomy from Denmark on 21 June 2009, Kalaallisut (an Eskimo tongue) is the only official language. However Danish is spoken by most citizens of Greenland, and remains the language of higher education, hence the **colouring of Greenland**. Iceland, meanwhile, voted in 1944 for full independence from Denmark as a republic; the other fully Nordic nations (**Denmark**, **Norway**, and **Sweden**) remain monarchies.

13 Centuries of the Nordic Peoples --- a Summary Map



The coloured areas of this map shows areas ruled or occupied by Nordic peoples at any time in the last 13 centuries. The colourings are as follows: **Areas ruled by Denmark, or Danish Vikings**; **Areas ruled by Norway or Norse Vikings**; **Areas ruled by Sweden or Swedish Varangians**; **Areas ruled by Normans**; **Areas ruled by Varangian Rus, or temporarily occupied by Sweden**; **Area ruled by Hiberno-Brittono-Norse**; **Area colonised by Greenland Vikings**. Since many areas fall into more than one of these categories, the colouring is somewhat arbitrary. I have tended to choose a colouring which emphasizes the greatest territorial expansion of the three original Nordic nations, the **Danes**, **Norwegians**, and **Swedes**. A few territories coloured here do not appear on the earlier maps on this site. The main ones are: (i) Norse colonies in southern Ireland (early to mid 10th century); (ii) Viking-ruled Brittany (914-39); and (iii) conquests by the Norman Kingdom of Sicily: Spoleto in central Italy (1144-94); the Island of Corfu (1147-49), and Tunis and other African cities, including some beyond the borders of this map, (1146-60). Other areas that are beyond the borders of the map are the former trans-oceanic colonies of Sweden and Denmark in West Africa, India, North America, and the Caribbean, and the current Norwegian Antarctic territories. Even without counting these (or indeed Greenland), the Nordic and once-Nordic territories shown cover almost half of Europe, and touch upon another three other continents: Asia, Africa and North America.

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