A History of Copenhagen

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Introduction

Copenhagen, the proud capital of Denmark, is a city shaped by a thousand years of dramatic events, social change, artistic innovation, and global interactions. Its journey from a modest Viking fishing village by the Øresund to a thriving, green metropolis at the heart of Northern Europe offers a unique insight not only into the evolution of a place but into the very fabric of Danish and Scandinavian identity. As the city's skyline has evolved—from low medieval rooftops to modern, sustainable landmarks—so too has its role on the world's stage.

To understand Copenhagen is to discover how geography, politics, and commerce intertwine. The city's natural harbor was the cradle of its fortunes, first drawing fishermen and merchants, then kings and bishops, and later armies, industrialists, and artists. Each wave of newcomers, each era's ambitions and anxieties, has left a visible imprint on the terrain, the architecture, and the collective consciousness of the people who call the city home.

Throughout its history, Copenhagen has endured periods of hardship and transformation—fires have razed its neighborhoods, war has threatened its very existence, and shifting economic winds have forced adaptation. Yet, time and again, the city has rebounded, demonstrating both resilience in the face of adversity and a remarkable capacity for reinvention. From the stately grandeur of Renaissance and Baroque constructions to the cozy, people-centered urban spaces of today, Copenhagen's built environment narrates a story of change and continuity.

At the same time, Copenhagen's local story has always resonated far beyond Denmark's borders. As the seat of the Kalmar Union, it was crucial to Nordic politics; as a trading powerhouse, it shaped economic tides across the Baltic. In the modern era, its experiments in social welfare, environmental design, and participatory democracy have inspired cities around the world. Its cultural output, from the literary genius of Hans Christian Andersen to its pioneering culinary scene, has added distinctly Danish hues to global culture.

This book offers a comprehensive history of Copenhagen, tracing its evolution from earliest times through Viking settlement, medieval ascendancy, royal expansion, industrial modernization, and the challenges and triumphs of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Each chapter explores how new ideas, new inhabitants, and new conflicts shaped the city's distinctive character, transforming it into the innovative and welcoming place it is today.

Whether you are a lifelong resident of Copenhagen, a visitor enchanted by its

atmosphere, or a student of urban history, this narrative aims to illuminate the forces—both dramatic and subtle—that have knit together a city of resilience, creativity, and enduring relevance. The history of Copenhagen is not only the story of buildings and streets, but also of spirit and imagination—a story that continues to unfold along the shores of the Øresund.

CHAPTER ONE: The Land Before the City: Prehistoric Copenhagen

Long before Viking longships cut through the grey waters of the Øresund, before bishops plotted fortifications, and centuries before merchants haggled over herring catches, the land that would one day become Copenhagen lay shaped by forces far grander and slower than human endeavour. This was a landscape born from the retreating ice sheets of the last glacial period, a canvas of clay, sand, and gravel carved by meltwater and uplift, slowly being claimed by vegetation and teeming with early life. Understanding this ancient terrain is key to understanding why a city eventually took root here at all.

As the great Scandinavian ice sheet began its ponderous retreat some 15,000 years ago, it left behind a topography marked by its passage. In the area of modern-day Copenhagen, this meant a relatively low-lying coastal plain, punctuated by drumlins (elongated hills formed by glacial ice) and moraine deposits. The sea level fluctuated dramatically in the millennia that followed, as vast quantities of ice melted and the land itself, relieved of the immense weight, slowly rebounded in a process known as isostatic uplift. What is now the Øresund, the crucial strait separating Denmark and Sweden, was not always a constant feature. At times, it was a freshwater lake, or even dry land, before the sea finally broke through and established the waterway much as we know it today, albeit with fluctuating shorelines.

This dynamic coastal environment offered shifting opportunities for the earliest human inhabitants. As the ice receded and forests of birch, pine, and later oak spread across the land, hunter-gatherer communities followed the migrating game and adapted to the changing ecosystems. The Mesolithic period, roughly spanning from 9,000 BC to 4,000 BC in this region, saw these nomadic groups living off the land and, crucially for the future of Copenhagen, the sea. The coasts of Zealand, including the area around the emerging Øresund, were rich in resources. Shellfish, fish (including the herring that would later make the site famous), seals, and seabirds provided a vital food source, supplementing hunting in the forests.

Evidence of these early inhabitants has been found across Zealand, typically along ancient shorelines or near rivers and lakes. While direct, extensive Mesolithic settlement sites within the precise footprint of medieval Copenhagen are rare due to later building activity and changing sea levels, archaeological finds from the surrounding areas paint a picture of a coastline actively used by these resilient people. They crafted tools from flint and bone, built temporary shelters, and left behind middens (ancient refuse heaps, often containing shells) that tell us about their diet

and way of life. The strategic location by the water, offering both access to marine resources and a point of connection to the wider landscape, would have been attractive even at this early stage.

The transition to the Neolithic period, starting around 4,000 BC, marked a fundamental shift in lifestyle: the introduction of agriculture and settled farming. This brought about more permanent settlements, though still often shifting as soil fertility waned. Evidence from this era includes dolmens and passage graves, monumental burial sites that speak to increasingly complex social structures and a deeper connection to specific territories. While grand Neolithic burial structures aren't a defining feature *of* the immediate city site, the surrounding areas of Zealand contain many examples, indicating the broader region was inhabited and farmed. The low-lying coastal meadows that characterised the Copenhagen area would have been suitable for grazing livestock, an essential part of the Neolithic economy.

Bronze Age (c. 1800-500 BC) and Iron Age (c. 500 BC - AD 800) finds further demonstrate continuous human presence and evolving societies in the vicinity. Burial mounds, hoards of metalwork (often found in wetlands, perhaps as ritual offerings), and traces of longhouses indicate more established communities, engaging in trade networks that stretched across Scandinavia and beyond. While Copenhagen proper lacks spectacular Bronze or Iron Age archaeological sites compared to some other parts of Denmark, pottery shards, metal objects, and other smaller finds unearthed during construction projects confirm that people were certainly living, farming, and traveling through this area. The strategic potential of a sheltered point along the Øresund coast would not have been lost on those familiar with maritime travel, even if large-scale settlements hadn't yet coalesced precisely where Absalon would later build his fort.

Geographically, the future site of Copenhagen was defined by its relationship with the water. The coastline was not a straight, clear line but rather a complex series of inlets, lagoons, and marshy areas. Slotsholmen, the island where the first fortress was built, was originally just a small, slightly elevated spit of land in a shallow bay. To its north, the land rose gently towards higher ground where the Church of Our Lady would later stand, while to the west lay lower, wetter meadows. To the east, across a narrow channel, was the island of Amager, offering potential for grazing and agriculture. The "natural harbor" mentioned in historical accounts wasn't a deep fjord, but rather a more sheltered bay created by sandbars and the configuration of the coastline, offering protection from the open sea for smaller vessels. This was less of a dramatic, ready-made port and more of a promising indentation in the coast, awaiting human modification to reveal its full potential.

Life for these early inhabitants was dictated by the seasons, the availability of food, and the constant challenges of a coastal environment – storms, changing water levels, and the need for sturdy boats and fishing gear. Their world was one of myth and

nature, spirits of the land and sea. They left no written records in this period, so our understanding is pieced together solely through the objects they left behind and the subtle clues embedded in the soil. Flint tools, shards of pottery, burnt wood from ancient hearths, animal bones, and the marks left by ancient plows or fences are the fragments from which archaeologists reconstruct this distant past.

Crucially, the presence of abundant herring in the Øresund was a consistent natural resource throughout these millennia, a cyclical bounty that would prove enormously influential in drawing people to the area. While not the sole reason for settlement, the reliable presence of massive herring schools during their spawning season provided a surplus that could support larger groups and potentially facilitate early forms of trade or seasonal gathering. This natural wealth was a constant invitation from the landscape itself.

As the Iron Age drew to a close and the Viking Age dawned (c. 800-1050 AD), Scandinavia saw increased maritime activity, long-distance trade, and the rise of more powerful chieftains and kings. This period saw the emergence of proto-urban sites and trading centers like Hedeby and Ribe in Denmark. While the Copenhagen site wasn't one of these major early centers, its location on the Øresund, a vital artery for Viking expansion and trade routes linking the Baltic with the North Sea, made it increasingly significant. Boats would have regularly passed this way, perhaps seeking shelter or opportunities for smaller-scale trade or fishing.

The precise moment when a temporary fishing camp or seasonal gathering place in the Copenhagen area transitioned into something more permanent is difficult to pinpoint definitively. The archaeological evidence, however, suggests that by the late Viking Age or very early medieval period (around the 10th and 11th centuries), human activity on the site intensified beyond mere transient use. This period, standing at the cusp of prehistory and recorded history for this specific location, saw the landscape begin its transformation from a purely natural environment, albeit shaped by millennia of human interaction, into a place recognized and utilised specifically for settlement and exchange. The stage was set for the arrival of more formal structures and the beginnings of what could truly be called a settlement, paving the way for the 'merchants' harbour' to come into being. But the land itself, with its subtle harbour potential and rich coastal resources, had been waiting, patiently, for millennia.

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