

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 63: How the Vikings Took up the Faith

Conversion of the Vikings: Did You Know?

Fascinating and little-known facts about the Vikings and their times.

What's a Viking?

To the Franks, they were Northmen or Danes (no matter if they were from Denmark or not). The English called them Danes and heathens. To the Irish, they were pagans. Eastern Europe called them the Rus. But the Norse term is the one that stuck: Vikings. The name probably came from the Norse word *vik*, meaning "bay" or "creek," or from the Vik area, the body of water now called Skagerrak, which sits between Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. In any case, it probably first referred only to the raiders (*vikingr* means pirate) and was later applied to Scandinavians as a whole between the time of the Lindesfarne raid (793) and the Battle of Hastings (1066).

Thank the gods it's Frigg's day.

Though Vikings have a reputation for hit-and-run raiding, Vikings actually settled down and influenced European culture long after the fires of invasion burned out. For example, many English words have roots in Scandinavian speech: take, window, husband, sky, anger, low, scant, loose, ugly, wrong, happy, thrive, ill, die, beer, anchor. ... The most acute example is our days of the week. Originally the Romans named days for the seven most important celestial bodies (sun, moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn). The Anglo-Saxons inserted the names of some Norse deities, by which we now name Tuesday through Friday: the war god Tiw (Old English for Tyr), Wodin (Odin), Thor, and fertility goddess Frigg.

Equal-opportunity pagans.

Around the sixth or seventh century, Buddha statuettes were made in north India. As the Viking era came to a close, a traveler brought it to the trading island of Helgö, Sweden (a Celtic bishop's crozier was also found nearby). Scholars believe the statue may have been used as an amulet since it was discovered with a leather strap around its neck. Such lucky charms were apparently popular among Vikings, who were eager to incorporate other religious symbols to make them luckier. Icelandic amulets, made in the 900s, incorporates the Christian cross neatly into the hammer of Thor. The earliest known Scandinavian crucifix, found in Birka, Sweden, also dates from the 900s.

The truth about Hagar's helmet.

Though it may not come as a shock that Hagar the Horrible isn't historically accurate, he reinforces the most widespread myth about the Vikings: they had horns on their helmets. Actually, Vikings weren't depicted with horned or winged helmets until the 1800s. The only examples of any helmet ornaments is from the late Bronze Age (800-400 B.C.), and these are bird beaks of bronze, not anything like cattle horns.

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Conversion of the Vikings: From the Editors - A Living Conversion Story

Ted Olsen

Two years ago, I walked around Sweden's Gamla Uppsala, where old Swedish kings are buried beneath mounds of earth and where the holiest site in Scandinavian paganism was razed to build a Christian church. I was struck by the degree to which Scandinavia still feels its slow, sometimes painful conversion today.

Some Scandinavians, like those in Moster, Norway, participating in this year's reenactment of the lives of Olaf Trygvesson and Olaf Haraldsson, celebrate. Others, like the neopagans who torched 22 historic Scandinavian churches (including several 900-year-old stave churches) between 1992 and 1997, lament. Scandinavia's everpresent link between cross and crown, a legacy of its conversion process, is again a hot topic as the Church of Sweden readies to disestablish itself as the state church in January.

The conversion of the original Vikings is a painful, complicated story. The conversion of each Scandinavian region was due to a variety of factors: missions, politics, miracles, and the like. We've opted, somewhat arbitrarily, to focus on one key factor for each region. For example, we've emphasized the role of missionaries in telling how Denmark converted, though Christianity's spread in that country also strongly depended on political support. And we've concentrated Norway's story on its conversion by the sword, though scholars emphasize other factors, such as economics and missions.

Many of these top scholars (and writers) have helped us put together this issue. Birgit and Peter Sawyer ("[Why Trust the White Christ?](#)") are the world's leading experts on the Viking world, especially when it comes to its encounter with Christianity. Richard Fletcher's ***The Barbarian Conversion*** ("[Converting by the Sword](#)") is being hailed as a landmark book on the subject ("No book on such an important and demanding subject combines entertainment, information, and stimulation more judiciously," wrote the ***New York Times***). James Marchand ("[Althings Work to the Good](#)") is a well-respected translator of primary source material, like the ***Islendingabók*** he wrote about for us. Michael Scott Rohan and Allan Scott ("[Dead Man Converting](#)"), award-winning science-fiction writers, have written the only book for a popular audience completely about Scandinavia's conversion. And journalist James Reston, Jr. ("[Be Christian or Die](#)"), has proven himself a master at retelling the old sagas.

Even with such a premier list of guides, Scandinavia's conversion is a challenge to digest at points, filled as it is with strange names and troubling moments. But the story is nonetheless fascinating and revealing, like the living monument of Gamla Uppsala, of the ongoing conversion of the world to Christ.

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End of the Known World

Never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race," wrote the English scholar Alcuin of the 793 raid on the monastery at Lindesfarne, the first major event of the so-called Age of the Vikings. "Behold, the church of Saint Cuthbert splattered with the blood of the priests of God, despoiled of all its ornaments; a place more venerable than all in Britain is given as a prey to pagan peoples."

Though the Vikings have been infamous for their attacks on Christian churches and monasteries—inspiring throughout Europe the prayer, "From the fury of the Northmen, O Lord, protect us"—those very raids began a centuries-long process of Christian conversion.

The Vikings raided because they had not. And they reasoned they had not (or at least not as much as their targets) because their gods were not as powerful. Envy, ironically, played an invaluable role in introducing Christianity.

Furthering the irony, the Viking leaders, having accepted Christianity overseas, sometimes returned to their homelands to conquer for the Prince of Peace—and for themselves.

It was a time when "personally accepting Jesus into your heart" was a nonexistent concept; regions felt obliged to convert together, with their leaders, or not at all. Piracy and human sacrifice made sense, and the person who got to choose which god to worship was often the person last left standing.

Scholars debate whether people thought the world was going to end at the close of the first millennium. But it is clear that for Viking Scandinavia, it actually happened. Its pantheon died, its way of life was replaced, and it found itself a part of something—Christendom—it had hardly considered. In short, their world ended, and a new Christian one rose in its place.

This is how that happened.

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Norway Part 2: Dead Man Converting

King Olaf Haraldsson had only moderate success at converting his people—until a year after he was killed in battle.

Michael Scott Rohan and Allan Scott

In July 1030, at the lonely moorland farm of Stiklestad, Norway, a dispossessed king perished beneath the spears and axes of his former subjects. Olaf Haraldsson, known as Olaf Digre ("stout" or "burly"), seemed to be just one more casualty in the shifting and brutal power politics of medieval Scandinavia.

Within a year, however, he was more than another Viking fatality. He was a martyr, a saint, a hero who brought Christianity to the heathens. In truth, none of those titles accurately describe the life of "Saint Olaf." But in death, Olaf did more to Christianize Norway than he ever did in life.

A bloody beginning

The son and foster-son of Norwegian kinglets, Olaf Haraldsson (not to be confused with the earlier Olaf Trygvesson) makes his historical debut in 1007, when he was sent out, at just 12 years old, as a "sea-king" or raiding chieftain (under the eye of an experienced captain). His first raid, in Sweden, resulted in a hairbreadth escape from the irate Swedish king—later hailed as his first miracle!

In Denmark Olaf joined forces with the notorious Thorkel the Tall. Together they launched profitable raids on Jutland, Frisia, Holland, and that greenest of Viking pastures, England. There they tormented that unlucky king Ethelred Unræd—a nickname meaning not so much "unready" as "clueless" (this is the same Ethelred who was tormented by Olaf Trygvesson—see ["Be Christian or Die"](#)).

In the winter of 1009, Olaf and Thorkel attacked London and raided East Anglia. That September Olaf, the future saint, plundered Canterbury and killed the archbishop, whom he pelted to death with bones.

King Ethelred finally got a clue and bought Thorkel's "services"—meaning he paid Thorkel protection money. Olaf raided Brittany, France, and Spain. The Norwegian planned on sailing to Jerusalem, but like many other legendary Viking heroes, he had a fateful dream. He saw a "great and important man, of terrible appearance" who told him to return home because, he said, "You shall be king of Norway for ever."

Vision or no, Olaf's timing was perfect. Norway, an unwilling part of the extensive empire of Knut the Great (reigned 1014-35), was ripe for revolt while the Dane was heavily engaged elsewhere.

Within a few months of his arrival home in 1015, Olaf had routed the Danes, proclaimed himself king, and established his capital in Nidaros (modern Trondheim). But a still greater change had taken place: somehow, somewhere, this fearsome young pirate had become a Christian.

Vikings often didn't take baptism seriously, undergoing it repeatedly for the sake of the free white shirt the church gave to the newly baptized (as well as perhaps a cash bonus). Even genuine converts seldom changed their habits: Olaf Trygvesson, for example, had evangelized his enemies with the same tortures and head-loppings he had used as a pagan seeking extortion money.

Although accounts of Olaf Haraldsson are sometimes contradictory, they agree he was free of the besetting Viking sin of manic vengefulness. Ready to meet force with force, he was equally ready to be reconciled even with enemies and rivals. Olaf warred fiercely but preferred peace and law. And he was a man of his word, with Christ as with any bargain. He immediately proclaimed the Christian faith throughout his realm, and he built churches, including St. Clements in Nidaros.

The faith had highly practical attractions for a Viking ruler. Christianity made it easier to trade with the Christian heart of Europe. It was the faith of the Byzantine emperor and the wealthy kings of England and France; it smacked of civilization, wealth and status.

And Christianity, with its teaching about the divine right of kings, gave the king something Odin and Thor never could: a share of divine authority. Furthermore, whereas pagan cults were local, diffuse and traditional, Christianity was centralized, scholarly, and unifying—it could unite a country that paganism divided. And it was a faith that respected the importance of civil law.

The Vikings also had great respect for law; we owe them the very word. And Olaf was a great lawgiver. With his bishop, Grimkell, he created the Moster Law, which became the enduring model for the church throughout Scandinavia.

Destroying the infested idol

Olaf was ready to enforce Christian law. Norway's outer regions were mostly Christian, but the less accessible Trondelag still observed the great pagan festivals, disingenuously excusing them as simple Yule and harvest feasts.

Olaf would have none of it and descended on the region, fining or executing offenders. But he did not rely on force alone. At Gulbrandsdal, in central Norway, militant locals confronted him with a huge wooden Thor-idol, which received offerings of food and gold ornaments. In turn, Olaf hailed the bright sunrise as herald of his God; with every eye on the sunrise, one of Olaf's warriors clubbed the idol. The rotten wood broke, scattering the gold and spilling out rats (as large as cats) and vermin that had fed on the offerings. The horrified pagans bolted. Olaf had them rounded up, but only observed dryly that the destroyed idol's gold ornaments would look better on their wives and daughters. Not surprisingly, they agreed and converted.

Though Olaf's 12-year reign was effective, the king was soon unpopular. Local divisions were strong; local lords still chafed at the loss of independence they'd enjoyed under the mostly absent Knut. Olaf punished the piracy and raiding that were the Viking way of life; he strove to bring Iceland and the Faeroes under his sway. And he enforced Christianity. His failures cost him prestige; his successes made him more enemies.

To the aging Knut, a powerful neighbor was bad news. When Olaf understandably rejected Knut's claim to be his overlord, Knut began to suborn powerful nobles like Einar and Kalf Arnarson with what Viking noblemen most prized: money, and status. Apparently the Danish bishop Sigurd also helped to whip up feelings against Olaf. In 1028 Olaf had to flee, taking refuge with his cousin, King Jaroslav of Kiev.

Olaf attempted to reconquer Norway in 1030, but could raise few followers and had lost the fleet that brought him to power. He arrived at Stiklestad with 3,500 men—against Knut's 13,000. Olaf could not turn back. Chronicler Snorri Sturluson says he gave his men a battle-cry: ***Fram, Fram, Kristsmenn, krossmenn, konungsmenn!*** "On, On, Christ's men, Cross men, King's men!"

It was stirring but useless (not to mention presumptuous: Knut's army prayed to the same God for victory, and was personally blessed by Bishop Sigurd). Accounts of the battle by Olaf's poets are full of drama, and it does no harm to believe them. Splendid in gold-decked armor, Olaf fought heroically as the sun

became eclipsed overhead. As one chronicler wrote,

On they came in fierce array,
And round the king arose the fray,
With shield on arm brave Olaf stood,
Dyeing his sword in their best blood.
For vengeance on his Trondheim foes,
On their best men he dealt his blows;
He who knew well death's iron play,
To his deep vengeance gave full sway.

But at last Olaf was struck down against a great rock. His men fled, and the army dispersed, but not, says Snorri, before the king's spilt blood began to work miracles even for his slayers: "The king's blood came on Thorer's hand, and ran up between his fingers to where he had been wounded, and the wound grew up [mended] so speedily that it did not require to be bound up."

Olaf's body was smuggled away to Nidaros and hidden in a sandbank to safeguard it. There it lay throughout a year of enormous change: Knut's promised rewards went unfulfilled, replaced instead by punitive taxes and Danes' grabbing the most prestigious posts; weather worsened, harvests failed; men remembered Olaf more kindly and vilified the treacherous Tronders.

Soon even Sigurd was obliged to flee to England and was replaced by Olaf's Bishop Grimkell. Barely a year after the Battle of Stiklestad, Olaf's body was disinterred.

"There was a delightful and fresh smell," Snorri recorded. "His appearance was in no respect altered, and his cheeks were as red as if he had but just fallen asleep. The men who had seen King Olaf when he fell remarked, also, that his hair and nails had grown as much as if he had lived on the earth all the time that had passed since his fall."

Grimkell declared Olaf a saint, enshrining him in his own church of St. Clement. His shrine rapidly became a center of miracles, as did the cathedral where he was later reburied. "A multitude of lame and blind and other sick who came to the holy Olaf went back cured," one early account records.

Now the Norwegian powerbrokers promoted their fallen king, memorializing him as a pious and noble Christian leader, to inspire national pride and win their country's freedom from Denmark. Olaf's son, Magnus (named after Karl Magnus, Charlemagne) was brought back to Nidaros from Kiev. The Danes were again driven out, and Knut died soon after. Suddenly, thanks to the dead Olaf, Norway was united and independent. And Christian.

Europe's saint

The fact that Olaf, like Christ, had become more powerful in death was not lost on contemporaries. Olaf became "Norway's king forever," guardian of his people and the national interest; through him the church's standing became too great for even the most obdurate pagans. After his story, tales of pagan resistance cease.

Soon Olaf's influence extended far outside Norway—further even than his early travels. Olaf's body in Nidaros became one of Europe's most visited pilgrimage sites. Shrines and churches were constructed in his honor in England, Sweden, and Rome. (York's famous minster was built "in God's name and Olaf's.") Even in Byzantium, then the heart of Christian Europe, Snorri says a church was dedicated to St. Olaf by the Norse and English soldiers of the emperor's bodyguard. (In fact, Olaf is the last Western saint accepted by the Eastern Orthodox church.) Above the altar hung the sword Olaf had borne at Stiklestad, and the hand that held it had stretched across the world. Olaf had not only converted Norway, he had

become for many medieval minds the ideal ruler, even God's regent over the earth.

Michael Scott Rohan and Allan Scott, both science fiction writers, coauthored The Hammer and the Cross: The Conversion of the Vikings (Alder, 1980).

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Why Trust the White Christ?

Besides spiritual solace, Vikings were attracted by Christianity's tangible blessings.

Birgit and Peter Sawyer

To encourage Scandinavian envoys to accept baptism, Frankish emperor Louis the Pious gave the newly baptized a fine, white baptismal garment. In addition, Frankish nobles, who acted as the baptismal candidates' sponsors, handed out other rich gifts.

Such generosity naturally attracted many envoys, with awkward results. On one occasion (probably apocryphal), related by a ninth-century German named Notker, 50 potential converts arrived, and since there was not enough new cloth for so many garments, the sponsors made some from old clothing. The solution wasn't acceptable to one elderly recipient.

"I've gone through this ablutions business about 20 times already, and I've always been rigged out before with a splendid white suit," he protested. "This old sack makes me feel more like a pig-farmer than a soldier!"

The story illustrates one motive for Vikings' becoming Christians, but hardly the most compelling. In fact, the motives for conversion were complex, and they changed over three centuries of missionary work.

Gospel of wealth and success

Such "converts" as the elderly man above did little to advance the cause of Christianity. One Frankish archbishop complained that many converts reverted to pagan ways and were behaving "like typical Northmen." Still, ninth-century Scandinavians who visited Christian Europe as raiders, settlers, merchants, or envoys must have been impressed by the enormous wealth and elaborate rituals of Frankish and British churches. So when Viking leaders came to terms with Christian rulers, they normally accepted baptism.

Unconverted Viking kings, however, were still fascinated with Christian wealth. In the 800s, missionaries were encouraged by pagan kings to work in the trading centers Hedeby, Ribe, and Birka, apparently to reassure Christian merchants that it was safe to visit them. Rimbert, Ansgar's successor, commented that after a church had been built in Hedeby, there was great joy because Saxon and Frisian merchants could go there "without any fear—something which was not possible previously."

These pagan kings also tried to maintain good ties to Christian leaders. In 864, for example, the Danish king Horik II sent gifts to Pope Nicholas I. Nicholas returned thanks but urged Horik to be baptized and to abandon the worship of idols.

Horik and other kings were naturally reluctant to abandon traditional beliefs and rituals, but there was also a political factor: conversion by missionaries sent by the Frankish emperor could imply submission to the empire.

Though ninth-century missionaries were therefore unable to convert rulers, they claimed to have baptized many people, including some of high status. They were, however, unable to establish bishoprics and churches, or ordain priests so that converts could be instructed. As a result, as Widukind (a tenth-century

Saxon historian), put it, "The Danes had long been Christian but they worshiped other gods." The comment was probably true of other Scandinavians.

Had Viking kings accepted baptism, it would have made little difference, for at that time they directly controlled relatively small areas. Most Scandinavian power was in the hands of chieftains who acknowledged Danish kings as overlords but not as rulers who warranted religious uniformity.

Christ the Conqueror

By the end of the 900s, the situation was very different. Christian evangelistic influence had spread dramatically. Missionaries said little about theological subtleties such as the Virgin Birth or the Trinity but concentrated on the power of a militant Christ who ensured success in this world and salvation in the next. They sought to demonstrate that their God was not just more powerful than other gods but was indeed the only God. All others were demons.

That Christ had triumphed in the rich and fertile parts of Europe impressed many Vikings. Though many may have doubted Christ's power after they disrupted churches, Christians merely explained Viking victory as divine punishment for Christians' sins. Victories won by Christians were, in contrast, proof that their God was supreme. Miracles and the impunity with which missionaries and Christian kings destroyed idols and defied pagan taboos were further proofs of the power of Christ.

Not until the 1100s did the concept of the suffering Christ take root in Scandinavia; before that Christ was depicted as a triumphant prince—even on the cross!

Benefit for a king

By 954 the Danish conquests in England had helped create a united, Christian kingdom, and descendants of Scandinavian settlers had begun to build hundreds of churches.

In Scandinavia itself, the new threat was not the Franks but the Germans. Harald Bluetooth converted partly to preserve his independence (removing one reason for conquest by the German emperor).

Harald also recognized that Christianity had much to offer his rule. It not only exalted his status, but also provided practical help. Missionary bishops were literate, and those who had experience of royal government in Germany or England could be valuable advisers.

Still, Harald's work remained incomplete: on the monument at Jelling, on which he announced that he had "won all Denmark and Norway for himself," he could only claim to have "made the Danes Christian."

Other parts of Scandinavia were not so vulnerable to external pressure. In Norway the growth of royal power was closely linked with conversion. The kings traditionally associated with Norway's conversion and unification (Hakon the Good, Olaf Trygvesson, and Olaf Haraldsson) all had firsthand experience of English kingship and understood the advantages enjoyed by a Christian monarch.

At the same time, not all Scandinavia was equally vulnerable to external pressures. In Denmark Harald gained general public acceptance of the new religion, apparently without serious opposition, while in Norway the Olafs are supposed to have done so with violence, although this has been exaggerated.

Birgit and Peter Sawyer are the authors of Medieval Scandinavia (University of Minnesota, 1993) and editors, with Ian Wood, of The Christianization of Scandinavia (Viktoria Bokförlag, 1987).

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The Dead Still Speak

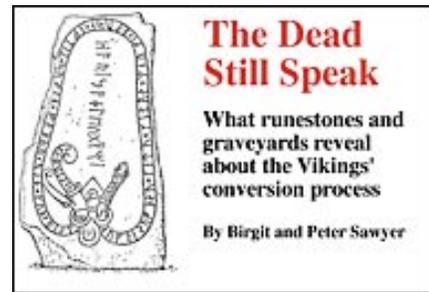
What runestones and graveyards reveal about the Vikings' conversion process

Birgit and Peter Sawyer

The Dead Still Speak

By the turn of the first millennium, pagan forms of burial had been abandoned in Denmark. Christian teaching about life after death must have been persuasive.

Missionaries objected to elaborate pagan burial rituals in which some graves were furnished with valuable goods, even ships, and covered by huge mounds. They urged instead that gifts should be made to them as "payment" for future prayers on behalf of the dead. This was an enormous breach with custom; the rituals of pagan burials were not only for the sake of the dead but also a means of demonstrating the wealth and status of the survivors.



With burial mounds gone (and before church yards became the natural places for memorials), rune stones provided a way of displaying wealth and status while honoring the dead. Such monuments flourished in western Scandinavia in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, while in eastern Sweden, they became popular later and continued into the twelfth century.

Inscriptions on these stones show the personal side of conversion, especially the place of women in the conversion process; one inscription erected by two men in memory of their father and mother ends "May God now help her soul well." It was obviously their mother, not father, who had converted.

There are many indications, in fact, that women outnumbered men among early Scandinavian converts. Most of the early Christian graves at Birka, for example, were of women, and most of the runic monuments commemorating men who were converted in their last days, who had "died in white clothing," were erected by women. Another inscription, from the eleventh century, commemorates a woman who planned to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

The c.145 inscriptions that refer to bridge building (missionaries often suggested building a bridge or causeway "over deep waters and foul ways for the love of God") confirm the leading role of women in the conversion period. A surprisingly large proportion of these inscriptions were commissioned by or erected in memory of women.

The inscriptions also cast light on the methods of the missionaries. Many of the religious formulas in them derived from the Roman liturgy, which must have played a vital part in Christian evangelism.

Birgit and Peter Sawyer are the authors of Medieval Scandinavia (University of Minnesota, 1993) and editors, with Ian Wood, of The Christianization of Scandinavia (Viktoria Bokförlag, 1987).

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The Conversion of Scandinavia: Christian History Timeline

A Christian History timeline

790-900

c.710 Willibrord unsuccessfully attempts to convert the Danes

793 Vikings attack Celtic monastery at Lindesfarne

790s Viking raids on western Europe, Scotland, and Ireland

826 Ansgar journeys to Denmark and to Birka, Sweden (829-31), to evangelize

841 First wintering of Vikings in Ireland

845 Pagan revolt forces missionaries to abandon Birka

859 Vikings enter the Mediterranean

865 Ansgar dies, succeeded by Rimbert

870 Vikings kill the king of East Anglia, Edmund (later St. Edmund)

c.870 Norse begin to settle Iceland

Other Events

800 Coronation of the Emperor Charlemagne

c.800 Irish hermits settle in the Faeroe Islands and Iceland

862 Brothers Cyril and Methodius go as missionaries to Moravia

864 Boris I of Bulgaria converts

900-1000

902 Vikings expelled from Dublin

911 Founding of Normandy by Viking chieftain Rollo

930 Founding of the Icelandic Althing at Thingvellir

c.934 Hakon the Good becomes king of Norway and soon attempts to convert his country to Christianity

948 Bishops appointed to Hedeby, Ribe, and Arhus in Denmark

954 **Erik Bloodaxe**, son of **Harald Finehair**, expelled from York and killed at the battle of Stainmore

958 **Gorm the Old**, king of Denmark, buried at Jelling by his son, Harald Bluetooth

c.965 **Harald Bluetooth** of Denmark converts

980 Renewed Viking attacks on England

c.985 **Erik the Red** settles in Greenland

c.995 **Olof Skötkonung**, king of Sweden, converts to Christianity

995 **Olaf Trygvesson** unites Norway under Christian banner

Other Events

963 First monastic settlement on Mt. Athos

980 Mainz Cathedral begun

c.988 Prince Vladimir of Kiev baptized

1000-1100

1000 **Olaf Trygvesson** dies in the Battle of Svold; Iceland converts to Christianity

c.1000 **Leif Eriksson** voyages to Vinland in North America

1013 Danish king Svein Forkbeard conquers England, succeeded by his son **Knut the Great** (1016)

1021 Bishopric established at Skara

1027 First Scandinavian stone church built at Roskilde, Denmark

1030 **Olaf Haraldsson**, later St. Olaf, dies in the Battle of Stiklestad

c.1050 Bishopric established on the Orkney Islands

1053 Hamburg-Bremen archbishopric granted authority over Norway, Iceland, Greenland, Danes, and Svear

1056 First bishopric in Iceland, at Skalholt

1067 Ari Thorgilsson, historian of Iceland, is born

1070 Adam of Bremen describes the pagan temple at Uppsala, Sweden

c.1070 Urnes stave church built in Luster, Norway

Other Events

1054 Great Schism; eastern and western branches of Christendom excommunicate one another

1066 Battle of Hastings; the Norman conquest of England (last major event of the Age of Vikings)

1093 Anselm becomes archbishop of Canterbury

1095 Pope Urban II preaches the First Crusade

1100-1200

1104 Archbishopric for Scandinavia established at Lund, Sweden

c.1110 Public celebration of pagan rites at Uppsala ended

1117 Magnus, patron saint of Orkney, murdered

c.1125 Bishopric established at Gardar, Greenland

1157 **Eric IX** and **Henry**, bishop of Uppsala, embark on a crusade to convert Finland

1178 Snorri Sturluson, Icelandic poet and historian, is born

Other Events

1115 Bernard founds monastery at Clairvaux

1141 Hildegard of Bingen first writes about her visions

c.1150 Universities of Paris and Bologna founded

1170 Thomas Becket assassinated

1182 Francis of Assisi born

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Denmark: Planting the Seed

How missionaries' modest beginnings eventually bore fruit in Denmark

J.R. Christianson

Around the year 965, King Harald Bluetooth of Denmark and his Viking warriors were discussing which god was most powerful. Some favored mighty Thor, who defeated giant trolls with ease and caused lightning by throwing his hammer. Others picked Odin the Wise on his eight-legged horse, leading a horde of all dead warriors who ever perished in battle. One mentioned mischievous Loki, who tricked the other gods to serve his evil purposes.

But what about this new god, *Hvíta Krístr*, White Christ, who was said to rule the hosts of heaven?

A foreign priest named Poppo at this meeting was a servant of *Hvíta Krístr*. The Viking warriors called upon him to prove the power of his god.

At the forge of the smith, so the story goes, Poppo took a red-hot iron and held it in his hand. When he set it down, the king looked at his hands. There was not the slightest sign of injury.

That was enough for King Harald Bluetooth. He was baptized without delay and ordered all his subjects to follow his example.

Even if it did take a miracle to formally convert King Harald's realm to Christianity, the process did not begin that instant. For two centuries a variety of forces had been at work to bring the Christian faith to Denmark, but none so important as the missionary presence.

The first missionary to Denmark was Willibrord, an Irish monk known more for his work in Friesland than in Scandinavia. In his efforts to evangelize Friesland (now parts of the Netherlands and Germany), he visited Denmark briefly in the early 700s, returning with 30 Danish boys to educate as Christians.

But as often happened in Denmark's turbulent history, missionary work was interrupted by war. In 772 the great Frankish emperor Charlemagne launched a crusade into Saxony, and his troops slowly conquered and forced its conversion to Christianity. In less than 30 years, his armies approached the borders of Denmark, which was ruled by a powerful king named Godfred.

To Godfred and his Danes, it seemed obvious that Frankish conquest and Christianity went hand in hand. They did not want to be conquered, so that meant they had to reject Christianity, as well. He built a great wall, the Dannevirke, along his southern border and manned it with warriors to hold back the Franks. Then he launched a counter-attack, sending waves of Viking ships to harry the coasts of the Frankish empire, and the crusade was stopped cold.

But Christian merchants ventured where Frankish armies could not go. They traveled to Hedeby, just beyond the Dannevirke, where they traded with the pagan Danes, sustaining a Christian presence.

Vanguard churches

A quarter-century after the Danes repulsed Charlemagne's troops, they found themselves immersed in civil war. One of the contending princes, Harald Klak, sailed to the Frankish empire to seek the aid of Charlemagne's son, Emperor Louis the Pious. As part of the alliance, Harald and a great host of his Viking followers were baptized, and Ansgar became Harald's chaplain.

It was a position that Ansgar, a devout monk from Picardy, longed for, despite the dangers. "Since there could not be found a preacher who would go with them to the Danes because of their barbarous cruelty —on account of which everyone shuns that people," Adam of Bremen writes in his *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, "the blessed Ansgar, inspired ... by the Holy Spirit and desirous of obtaining martyrdom ... presented himself."

Unlike other hagiographies of saints' lives, Ansgar's is not replete with miracles and signs. While Rimbert, his biographer and successor, writes that many were healed during his ministry, Ansgar himself denied he had any such gift. "Were I worthy of such a favor from my God," he told one of his followers, "I would ask that he would grant to me this one miracle, that by his grace he would make of me a good man."

Ansgar's patron, Harald Klak, never actually returned to Denmark (now ruled in part by Swedish overlords), but the evangelist got his wish to visit there briefly in 829.

Three years later, the pope, hearing of Ansgar's missionary passion, appointed him archbishop of Hamburg with the mission of converting Scandinavia to Christianity. It took another dozen years, however, before Ansgar won the right to establish a church in Hedeby, after which more Christian merchants moved to the town and a few Danes became Christians. Soon, a second Danish church was established in the North Sea port of Ribe.

"By God's favor the church of Christ was established both among the Danes and among the Swedes, and priests are functioning unhindered in their proper office," Ansgar happily announced.

As a child, Ansgar had reportedly received visions as a child of God telling him, "Go and return to me crowned with martyrdom." But in 865 he lay on his deathbed not because of persecution but illness, and "became very sad," lamented his biographer, and Ansgar kept repeating, "Thou are just, O Lord, and thy judgment is righteous." Just before his death, however, he experienced another vision that assured him he had been faithful.

For all Ansgar's devotion and effort, Denmark remained pagan for another century save the tiny churches in Hedeby and Ribe. As Adam of Bremen wrote, "Let it suffice us to know that up to this time all the kings of the Danes had been pagans, and amid so great changes of kingdoms or inroads of barbarians, some small part of the Christianity that had been planted by Ansgar had remained, the whole had not failed."

Preaching to the king

During these next decades, Danish Vikings increasingly encountered Christians on their raids abroad. Back home, they began to weave stories of *Hvita Kristr* into tales of Odin and Thor, Frey and Freya, Balder and Loki, Ull the winter god, giants, trolls, water sprites, mermaids, sea serpents, and all the other supernatural beings of the Nordic pantheon.

In 934 international politics again entered the picture. Christian troops from the Holy Roman Empire forced the Swedish ruler to submit and accept baptism, which meant, again, that Denmark was officially Christian. But then came another pagan reaction against Christianity, Danish independence, and the beginning of the rule of the heathen King Gorm.

Though Archbishop Unni of Hamburg preached in his court, Gorm remained hostile to Christianity. His son, Harald Bluetooth (who co-ruled with his father), listened sympathetically. Harald even allowed missionaries to baptize Danes.

After Gorm died, Harald extended his authority in many directions. When he converted (after his encounter with Poppo), he was at the height of his power, and there was little resistance when he commanded all his subjects to become Christians.

Yet politics entered into even this decision. By 965, King Harald knew he was powerful enough to accept the Christian religion without succumbing to German political domination. He knew that his new faith, in fact, would help him to solidify his own control over his extensive realm. But whatever his motives, King Harald became an exemplary Christian, and the new religion began to penetrate more deeply into the country.

Eventually, his son, Svend Forkbeard, rose in revolt, and Harald was forced to flee. But Svend was a Christian like his father and, with royal patronage, Christianity continued to grow in Denmark. When Svend died suddenly in 1014, his Christian son, Knut ("the great," the king who killed Norwegian Olaf Haraldsson, the saint, in battle) succeeded him as ruler of a Danish empire that now included England and Norway.

Two centuries had passed since the mission voyages of Ansgar, and 70 years since the miracle of Poppo. Denmark had become a solidly Christian country, and bells were ringing every Sunday from some 500 churches throughout the land. Pagan superstitions still lingered, but Hvíta Krístr was triumphant at last among the Danes.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 63: How the Vikings Took up the Faith

Conversion of the Vikings: The Gallery - Power Evangelism Checked

The stories of three Viking rulers and their encounters with Christianity.

Georgia L. Beaverson

EASY APOSTATE

Hakon the Good of Norway

(935-961)

As was the Norwegian custom, Hakon, son of the aged Harald Fairhair, was fostered to England's king, Athelstan. Across the North Sea, Hakon not only took on English customs but also its Christian God.

When his father died, the 15-year-old Hakon sailed for Norway to claim his kingdom and bring his Christianity to Norway, 45 years before Olaf Trygvesson. When his rival (and brother) Erik Bloodaxe was killed by the English in 954, the Christian youth took Norway's throne.

"King Hakon was a good Christian when he came to Norway," writes Snorri Sturluson in *Heimskringla* (c. 1220). "But as the whole country was heathen, with much heathenish sacrifice ... he resolved to practice his Christianity in private ... It was his intent, as soon as he had set himself fast in the land and had subjected the whole to his power, to introduce Christianity." But that time never came, and when he did try to encourage Christianity, local chiefs complained that he was trying to take away their freedom. The opposition became so fierce that Hakon's rule was threatened.

He decided he didn't have the power to force Christianity upon his country, so he allowed his subjects to continue practicing paganism. But that was not enough, and the chiefs, to ensure that Hakon was a true pluralist in religion, demanded that he sacrifice to the Norse gods.

Hakon complied. To satisfy his conscience, he made the sign of the cross over the sacrifice (though he said publicly he was making the sign of Thor's hammer), but eventually he forsook the charade and made straightforward sacrifices to the pagan gods.

Even though he proved a faithless Christian, Hakon was treated well by later Christian historians. His title of "the Good" did not refer to his spiritual state, though, but to his innovations in law and justice. He voluntarily limited his autocratic power while strengthening his standing as a nationwide king by building up the Lagthing (local advisory groups) to consult on national law. He also reorganized his coastal defenses to protect Norway from Denmark.

VICTIM OF RELIGIOUS POLITICS

Harald Greycloak of Norway

(c. 935-c. 970)

Hakon the Good was succeeded (after a bloody battle) by Harald Greycloak (the son of Erik Bloodaxe, whom Hakon had defeated decades earlier).

"Harald Greycloak, or Greypelt, was clearly a man of character and authority," writes Viking historian Gwyn Jones. But ultimately, Harald was judged a failure as a sovereign. Why?

First, his Norwegian subjects discovered that he'd won his throne with the help of Harald Bluetooth—a Dane!

More important, Harald Greycloak was a Christian unlike the politically savvy Hakon; Harald retained his Christianity and fought harshly to stamp out Norway's paganism.

Harald too had become a Christian in England. But, as Sturluson writes, "When [he and his brothers] came to rule over Norway, they made no progress in spreading Christianity—only they pulled down the temples of the idols and cast away the sacrifices where they had it in their power, and raised great animosity by doing so."

Naturally, his subjects, who thought these actions offended their gods, were angered in turn. A series of bad harvests and years of rotten weather deepened their animosity toward Christianity and their sovereign. At the same time, Harald, described as "very condescending, and full of fun" by Sturluson, felt the chill of Harald Bluetooth's waning affection on his southern flank.

Eventually, sources say, Harald Greycloak, his power base severely weakened, was lured to northeast Jutland and killed.

PROPHETIC KING **Stenkil of Sweden**

(d. 1066)

When Stenkil, a Christian, took the Swedish throne, his country was still a stronghold of pagan worship.

In 1060, two Swedish bishops, Egino and Adalward, came to their Christian sovereign with an ambitious plan: promote Christianity by demolishing the heart of pagan worship—the Uppsala temple.

This would strike right at the heart of Scandinavian paganism. Christians everywhere lamented "the Heathen Temple at Uppsala," including church historian Adam of Bremen. A mere decade after Stenkil's death, he wrote, "Those who have already adopted Christianity redeem themselves at [Uppsala] ceremonies"-- meaning these new converts were covering their religious bases by sacrificing to pagan gods.

"If it were torn down, or preferably burned," Adam of Bremen continued, "the conversion of the entire nation might follow."

While sympathetic with the bishops' zeal, Stenkil, though a firm Christian, turned down the idea. Not only would the bishops be killed, he himself would probably be exiled, and subjects who had converted to Christianity would undoubtedly revert to paganism. In short, destruction of the Uppsala temple would be a political and evangelistic disaster.

The bishops saw his point but persisted, going to regions where they felt paganism was weak and destroyed many local temples.

After Stenkil died in 1066, though, even these "victories" were reversed. The Swedes drove out the antagonistic bishop of Sigtuna, and, as Stenkil had foreseen, paganism returned fullforce. When his son, King Inge, refused to sacrifice to the gods at Uppsala in the 1080s, he was banished from Sweden and its throne.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 63: How the Vikings Took up the Faith

Sweden: Faith Without the Fireworks

The conversion of Sweden is unspectacular—and for that reason most illuminating.

Mark Galli

Sweden, "the wildest and most remote of the Scandinavian lands," was the last Scandinavian region to be converted. The specifics of its conversion remain as remote and mysterious to historians as the land's medieval reputation.

The earliest attempts were seeming failures. Ansgar, the famous apostle to Denmark, attempted to establish a Christian outpost as early as 830, building a church in the town of Birka. But Swedes showed little interest and, when Ansgar died, so apparently did the Christian presence.

We know of a second Frankish missionary who was soon forced to flee the land, and a century after Ansgar's attempt, the archbishop of Hamburg undertook a new mission—with as little success as Ansgar.

In western Sweden, things weren't much better. One ruler, Erik the Victorious, converted—probably to marry the daughter of a Polish duke, a devout Catholic. But Erik quickly lapsed and died a pagan around 995.

When success did come, it came haltingly. Erik's son Olof (995-1022) publicly identified himself as a Christian: in one town he struck coins with Christian slogans (such as "God's Sigtuna"), and he founded a bishopric at Skara. His son Anund (c. 1022-c.1039) became the first member of the family to take on a Christian name: James. Contemporary historian Adam of Bremen called him the "most Christian king of the Swedes," and claimed that while he reigned, Christianity was "widely diffused" in Sweden.

Not quite—unless he meant that Christians, still a small minority, could be found in many areas of Sweden. Missionaries from England and Denmark were having limited success in towns and country. But when they tried to force the issue, they ran into stiff opposition. When an English missionary smashed an image of Thor to demonstrate the power of Christ, he was instantly killed.

In the Uppsala region, even though it was ruled by King Stenkil—a Christian—paganism stubbornly held its ground. The local capital of paganism was the temple in Uppsala, which Adam of Bremen described: "It is situated on level ground, surrounded by mountains. A large tree with spreading branches stands near the temple. There is also a spring nearby where the heathens make human sacrifices. A golden chain completely surrounds the temple, and its roof, too, is covered with gold."

The temple housed three gods—Thor flanked by Odin and Frey—to which priests offered sacrifices. Every nine years, a major ceremony was held, with people from all the Swedish provinces bringing sacrifices. According to Adam, "the most distressing feature of this festival is that Christians too participate in the sacrifices . . .Animals and humans alike are sacrificed,and their bodies are hung in the trees of a sacred grove that is adjacent to the temple."

About 1060 King Stenkil made Adalward ("the younger") bishop at Sigtuna. Adalward, an enthusiastic evangelist, traveled about the countryside smashing idols and winning many converts. But when he and another bishop concocted a plan to finish off the opposition by burning down the great pagan temple at Uppsala, Stenkil dissuaded them, feeling that the pagan backlash would hurt the Christian cause (see

"The Limits of Power Evangelism," page 33).

Stenkil's judgment appears to have been correct. A few years later (1080), when his successor King Inge I tried to forcibly end the pagan cult at Uppsala, he was promptly expelled and replaced by his brother-in-law, Sweyn. Though a Christian, Sweyn agreed to permit pagan worship (and thus earned the nickname, "the sacrificer"). It wasn't until Inge gathered an army, defeated Sweyn, and imposed Christianity in the region that public pagan rituals at Uppsala ended (in about 1110—though they continued privately for generations).

For many decades, if not centuries, such syncretism prevailed. Polytheism was not adverse to permitting another god into its pantheon. Pagan Vikings had sent offerings of thanks to Saint Germain near Paris and to Saint Patrick in Ireland for successful raids. Before one important battle, a Swedish Viking army in Courland cast lots and determined that Christ was the god who would help. When they won, they gave thanks by fasting for 47 days in Christ's name—with no thought of converting.

In many instances, though, the pagan past made possible the Christian future. One story goes that in Gotland (an island off of eastern Sweden), Botair of Akubekk built a Christian church. When pagans burned it down, he built a second, under a cliff by the shore where pagans sacrificed to their gods. When pagans threatened to burn it as well, Botair locked himself inside and said, "If you burn it down, you shall burn me with it." His father-in-law joined him, adding, "Do not burn down the church. It stands on sacred ground." The father-in-law's reasoning seems to have won the day: the church remained intact.

Certainly church politics played a role in Sweden's conversion (in 1164 Uppsala was named an archbishopric), as did key martyrdoms (in 1160, Erik IX was killed by rebelling nobles and his shrine flourished). But overall, only through many failures and by much perseverance, sustained over many generations, did "wild and remote" Sweden submit to Christ.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Greenland: Father-Son Saga

The story of Erik the Red, his son Leif (the famous explorer) and the most misnamed of Viking Islands

Roger McKnight

"Are you intending to sail to Greenland this summer?" Norway's King Olaf Trygvesson asked Leif Eriksson, whose father had founded the island colony.

"Yes," Leif replied, "if you approve."

"I think it would be a good idea. You are to go there with a mission from me, to preach Christianity in Greenland," said the king credited with the conversions of Norway, Iceland, Orkney, Shetland, and the Faroes. "Your good luck will see you through."

But on his way home Leif was blown off course, landing far southwest of Greenland, in a land now known as Newfoundland.

So says *Erik's Saga*, which, like other such stories, is part truth and part fiction. What is known is that the story surrounding Erik the Red and his son Leif Eriksson (or "Leif the Lucky") spans many generations. It begins during the ninth century with political violence in Norway and ends in fifteenth-century Greenland as one of the unsolved mysteries of medieval Europe.

A cunning outlaw

Erik and Leif traced their origins back to Norway and Iceland. After a series of bloody campaigns, the ninth-century Norwegian King Harald Fairhair consolidated all of Norway under his rule. Unwilling to submit to Harald's authority, provincial rulers and district strongmen emigrated to establish farming settlements in Iceland. Though formally devoted to the rule of law, these Icelandic farmers were often governed by relentless family feuds and their own violent passions.

In the late tenth century, Erik the Red and his father, Thorvald, left their home in Norway "because of some killings" and settled in Iceland. When Thorvald died, Erik married and established a farm.

Blood troubles soon caught up to them across the Norwegian Sea. As *Erik's Saga* tells us, Erik's slaves "started a landslide that destroyed the farm of a man called ValthjofSo Eyjolf Saur, one of Valthjof's kinsmen, killed the slavesFor this, Erik killed Eyjolf Saur; he also killed Hrafn the DuellerEyjolf's kinsmen took action over his killing, and Erik was banished."

After even more bloodshed during his exile in the early 980s, Erik and three followers sailed westward to the previously sighted but yet unnamed Greenland, where they spent three summers and winters exploring the land.

Though forbidding to modern readers, such rigors seem not to have fazed the expedition members. Viking voyagers loved nothing more than a challenge. In addition, modern studies of core samples from the Greenland ice sheet show that during the Viking era, North Atlantic regions were undergoing a warming phase, a so-called climatic optimum, which allowed for animal husbandry and some agriculture in areas where they are now unthinkable.

In 985 Erik led a full-scale migration of Icelanders to the world's largest island, which he named **Greenland**, "for he said that people would be much more tempted to go there if it had an attractive name." Of 25 ships filled with settlers, only 14 completed the stormy, 200-mile journey.

The Norse colonies they set up in the new land were pagan, devoted to the Viking deities, known as Aesir (Odin, Thor, etc.). Though ethnically and religiously similar, the settlements were geographically separate. Located in southwestern Greenland, they were known as the Eastern and Western settlements, an adventurous brave new world at the very limits of Viking expansion.

As the colonies' leader, Erik built his farm on choice land at Brattahlid in the Eastern Settlement, where he lived until his death (possibly of an epidemic) sometime around the year 1000.

We catch glimpses of his personality: **Greenland Saga** says "he commanded great respect" and people "recognized his authority." He was most likely temperamental, as the aforementioned killings suggest, and certainly a devout follower of the pagan gods, especially the thunder god Thor.

Versions of conversion

While Erik's flight to Greenland gave his public life a stability he had not known in Norway or Iceland, the introduction of Christianity divided his family. Though the story from **Erik's Saga** credits Olaf Trygvesson, the new faith probably spread to Greenland via Iceland, which had been Christianized under Olaf's influence.

As elsewhere in Scandinavia, the Christianization of Greenland was likely a gradual process urged on by monarchs and clergy from abroad as well as by local leaders. Pagan and Christian practice existed side by side for decades: we read the numerous tales of pagan witchcraft and superstition in the Vinland Sagas, many taking place supposedly after the conversion to Christianity.

Other sources insist that Leif Eriksson himself introduced the faith. **Greenland Saga** describes Leif as the opposite of his father: "tall and strong and very impressive in appearance" and "always moderate in his behavior," characteristics clearly in line with Christian virtues.

Furthermore, Leif represented the new order, the younger generation that introduced Christianity and replaced the pagan ways of Erik's generation. In **Erik's Saga** we read, "Erik was reluctant to abandon his old religion, but his wife, Thjodhild, was converted at once, and she had a church built not too close to the farmstead . . . Thjodhild refused to live with Erik after she was converted, and this annoyed him greatly." Following this episode, Erik slowly fades from the sagas, the implication being that he is isolated in the new dispensation.

Separating fact from fiction is difficult. In the twentieth century archaeologists have excavated the Norse settlements in Greenland, including Brattahlid, where they discovered the remains of a chapel that may correspond to "Thjodhild's church." Likewise, excavations in Newfoundland prove that Vikings indeed later settled in Leif the Lucky's Vinland, even if only for a short time. Were they the first Christians in the New World? We'll likely never know.

By whatever process Christianity reached medieval Greenland, it remained a potent force there for over 400 years. After Leif's time, the Catholic Church sent clergy to the distant island, and the Norse settlers built numerous stone churches. But by the 1400s, the Norse settlements had mysteriously languished as the population dwindled and disappeared, leaving only their stone buildings as testimony to a once thriving Christian community, estimated at 4,000 to 6,000 souls.

In the Icelandic annals, the last notations from Greenland tell of a wedding held there in the early 1400s. After that, all is silent.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 63: How the Vikings Took up the Faith

Iceland: Althings Work to the Good

At a legislative Althing, a pagan judge prevented civil war in Iceland by converting everyone to Christianity.

James W. Marchand

In one sense, Iceland began as a Christian land. The earliest history of the volcanic island, Ari Thorgilsson's *Islendingabók* records, "There were Christian men here, whom the Norsemen call 'papa' (priest); and they later went away, since they did not want to be here with the heathen men, and they left behind Irish books and bells and crooks, from which one might judge they were Irishmen."

But when the Irish monks left, Iceland was left to Norwegian settlers with their own religious customs—some Christian, some pagan. The clash between beliefs was not unlike that in the rest of the Viking world at the time, but its resolution is one of the most unexpected conversion stories in the world.

Lamponers and hotheads

Iceland, called the ultima Thule in ancient geography, first came to the attention of Norwegian Vikings intent on settlement in the year 870. There were already Christians among the early settlers, people such as Audh the Deep-Minded, who wished to be buried beneath the water line, to be able to touch the same living water as Jerusalem.

Then there were some, such as Helgi the Lean, who believed in Christ but prayed to Thor when out on the sea. And there were those, like Hall and Thori Godhlaus, who claimed to have no religion, "trusting in their own might."

The *Book of the Settlements* (*Landnamabok*) would have us believe that Christianity, such as it was, died out after the first few generations, but we find Christians in Iceland throughout the era. We know that Irish missionaries came to convert the heathen, and Ari even mentions three "Armenian" bishops, Petrus, Abraham, and Stephanus.

The Vikings were, however, a rough lot and not easy to convert. Though their reputation for hostility to Christianity has been exaggerated, they were much given to lampoons and sneering verse. When a German Christian, Friedrich, came to Iceland with Thorvald the Far-Traveled in the 980s, two men made a poem accusing him and Thorvald of *ergi* (sexual perversion):

***The Bishop [Friedrich] has borne nine children;
Thorvald was the father of all of them.***

Thorvald slew the lamponers, so Friedrich and Thorvald had to leave Iceland. In spite of this, the Christian party was getting ever stronger on the island.

Meanwhile, Olaf Trygvesson had become King of Norway. Immediately upon taking the crown, he began forcibly Christianizing his kingdom (see "Be Christian or Die," p. 13). In 997 he sent his friend and court chaplain Thangbrand to Iceland to convert the island. According to another Icelandic chronicler, Thangbrand was "a passionate, ungovernable man, and a great manslayer; but he was a good scholar and a clever man."

He seems at first to have been quite successful, baptizing among others Hall of Sida, Hjalti Skeggjason, Gizur the White, "and many other distinguished men" who play key roles in Icelandic sagas and histories.

Nevertheless, Thangbrand shared the fate of his predecessor, Friedrich. "When he had been here one winter or two," writes Ari, "then he went away, and he had killed here two men or three, those who had lampooned him."

But it wasn't just the pagans who loved the ribald lampoons. Thangbrand's convert Hjalti, not the coolest of heads, pronounced his own *ergi*-verses in front of the Icelandic governmental assembly:

***I don't want to blaspheme the gods,
But Freya seems to me a bitch.***

Freya was the Venus of the pagan pantheon, and this very successful verse, containing an untranslatable pun (*geyja* means "to blaspheme", but also "to bark"), caused Hjalti to be banished from Iceland for three years.

Meanwhile, Thangbrand returned to Trygvesson a frustrated man, recounting all the problems he had in his missionary efforts, grumbling that Iceland would probably never be converted.

The king was not known for his even temper, and he threatened to maim or kill all the Icelanders he could round up in Norway.

The exiled Icelanders Gizur and Hjalti were in Norway at this time and managed an audience with Trygvesson (who was actually Gizur's cousin). They convinced the king to cancel his massacre and persuaded him to let them make one more try at converting Iceland.

"They were of no other expectancy than that they would succeed," Ari notes.

One law, one faith, mass baptism

Almost from the first settlement, Iceland was divided into quarters, with generally three *things* (courts, or local assemblies) in each quarter.

An **Althing**, a kind of superior court or general assembly, met every summer on Iceland's southwestern Thingvellir plains.

Iceland's legal code had not yet been completely put in writing, so one of the main features at the **Althing** was the Law-Sayer's recitation of one-third of the law. Every three years, the entire legal code would be transmitted to the assembly in this way.

Gizur, Hjalti, and companions arranged to arrive in Iceland as the **Althing** was opening in the summer of 1000. They left Hjalti behind, since he had been outlawed for lampooning Freya, and made their way toward Thingvellir. On their way, they learned that their enemies intended to forbid them entrance to the **Althing** by force—a common tactic—so they paused and sent word to their helpers to come to meet them.

While they were hesitating, Hjalti came riding up with his 11 men. Together with their helpers they broke the blockade. A battle was so narrowly avoided, says Ari, "that you couldn't tell the difference."

The next day, Gizur and Hjalti went to the Law-Mound to preach their message. "It is said that it was

remarkable how well they spoke," Ari recounted. The substance is unknown, but we may be sure that they stressed the displeasure of Olaf Trygvesson and that they relied on his backing.

The result was predictable: the Christians and the heathens each refused to follow the others' laws and declared each other criminals.

The Christians asked one of their own, Hall of Sida, to announce the law that the Christians were to follow, but he paid the heathen Law-Sayer Thorgeir to do it. When the people retired to their booths, Thorgeir lay down and spread his cloak over him (perhaps a vestige of pagan shamanism). He remained there all day and the next night without saying a word. The next morning he sat up and told everyone to go to the Law-Mound.

Thorgeir the Law-Sayer, above all, knew the importance the law played in Icelandic society. Two separate, armed camps following different laws would destroy the community. They would inevitably come to blows, desolating the land. Thorgeir referred to the examples of other countries, particularly Norway and Denmark, where bloodshed had been avoided when one law was forced upon the warring parties.

"If we tear the law asunder," he said, "we may also rend the peace." The two sides agreed they would indeed adopt one law, be it pagan or Christian, which Thorgeir had yet to announce.

"Then it was said in the law," recounts Ari, "that all men should be Christians and those be baptized who before were unbaptized before here in Iceland." But the mass conversion came with several compromises: the old laws allowing the exposure of infants and the eating of horseflesh would continue. And people could continue to sacrifice according to pagan custom but only in secret; if they were caught sacrificing, they would be outlawed for three years.

("A few winters later," Ari notes, "these heathen practices were taken away like the others.")

And thus did Christianity come to Iceland. Isleif, Gizur's son, became bishop at Skalholt, and the land slowly (and with its share of bloodshed) became the very model of a Christian state.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 63: How the Vikings Took up the Faith

Conversion of the Vikings: Christian History Interview - Converting By the Sword

Why Christians used it, why it worked, and why it died.

interview with Richard Fletcher

This issue, more than any other we've published, raises the awkward matter of forced conversions—"Be Christian or die." There's no sense in pretending this was an exceptional missionary tactic; for many centuries, it was the method of choice among Christian rulers and missionaries. The conversion of much of Europe and of Latin America is unimaginable without the sword.

It is not a pleasant aspect of our heritage, but one that nonetheless teaches us a great deal about human nature and what, in fact, solidifies Christian faith.

*To explore this topic, Christian History spoke with Richard Fletcher, history professor at the University of York, England. Professor Fletcher has spent a lot of time researching medieval Europe, the era when forced conversions were the rule, and his *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity (Henry Holt, 1997)* is one of the splendid results.*

When did Christians first begin to use force to convert people?

Soon after the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine, though the first use of force was not designed to convert pagans but to correct dissident Christians. Augustine, the great bishop of Hippo in North Africa in the late fourth and early fifth century, was faced with a dissident sect, the Donatists. Augustine wanted to bring them back in the orthodox fold, and he agonized about whether it was permissible to use coercion to do so.

Eventually he decided it was, and one biblical text that persuaded him was the parable of the great banquet (Luke 14:16-24). A rich man gives a feast, and when no one he invites shows up, he tells his servants to go out and "Compel people to come in."

It isn't until the Frankish kingdom of Charlemagne in the eighth century that we see force used to coerce conversions, specifically in the campaign against the Saxons.

Why did Charlemagne move in this direction?

First, the concept of Christian kingship had developed the previous century, and the duty of expanding Christendom, if necessary by force, became part of a king's duty. It's partly based on an Old Testament model of kingship.

Second, an adviser at the highest levels of Charlemagne's government pushed this particular policy. Scholars think the real hard-liner was a man named Lull, who was of Anglo-Saxon origin, had traveled with Boniface, and had succeeded Boniface as archbishop of Mainz. He'd given his life to the conversion of the Saxons, and nothing had worked. In essence he said to Charlemagne, "These stubborn people will never convert on their own. We've got to force them to submit."

This policy of using violence to motivate conversion in Saxony was not supported by all the king's advisers. Another Englishman at Charlemagne's court, Alcuin, had grave doubts. In the 790s, when the Franks conquered the Avars on the eastern frontier (in modern Hungary), Alcuin wrote letters to Charlemagne, saying essentially, "Don't make the same mistakes you made with the Saxons. You can't force Christianity upon people." There are some signs that Alcuin's advice was heeded; the proposals to convert the Avars by force were slightly toned down.

But by the 1300s, no one objects anymore. The chronicles of the Viking kings, for example, laud them for using the sword to convert pagans. What happened in medieval Europe to solidify this view?

Robert Moore, author of *The Rise of the Persecuting Society*, argues that from the eleventh to the fourteenth century, European Christian society became much less tolerant. This is the era when we see persecution of Jews and heretics, crusades against Muslims, and the increasing acceptance of forcible conversion—especially in the only area of Europe that remained unconverted: Scandinavia and the Baltic region. I don't agree with Moore's argument in all respects, but more people were being persecuted in Europe in 1250 than were in the Europe of 1050. That's a fact. One can't get away from it.

Is this a product of Christian theology—an insistence on Jesus Christ as the truth—or of political strength—Christians finally have the military force to insist on their way?

Both. On the theological side, there is an unprecedented emphasis upon the humanity of Jesus Christ, especially upon his sufferings. Coming closely behind is a feeling of enmity toward those who were identified as his persecutors, especially the Jews, and by extension, all those who were perceived as not fully Christian. Though Christians lived peaceably with Muslims in the Holy Land for centuries, during this era, Muslims become identified as the enemies of Christ who must be booted out of the Christian holy places.

Yet we should also emphasize the sheer power of Western Christendom, which blossoms during this time. There is an upsurge in technology, in military organization, in state power, in the ability to raise taxes and hire armies. This put Western European states at a decisive advantage over the remaining pagans in the Baltic, for example. Given the climate of intolerance, it's irresistible to use the power at your disposal to clobber pagans and make them Christian.

Were forced conversions successful?

Yes and no. The problem is semantic. The definition of conversion has changed over the centuries.

Charlemagne or Olaf Trygvesson would have said, "I defeat my enemies, and a priest then sprinkles water over them and says some words in Latin, and they become Christians. They've been converted."

Today, we don't regard that as conversion—nor would some early medieval people, like the Venerable Bede (c.673-735) or Alcuin (c.740-804). They wouldn't have thought people converted until they were taught the creeds, Christian morality, and the like—which may take two, three, or four generations.

Nonetheless, because of the initiative of coercive kings, Christianization was now possible in a way it hadn't been possible before.

In the end, medieval pagans seemed more willing to submit to forced conversions than Christians under similar circumstances. Why is that?

The common factor in paganism all over medieval Europe was polytheism. Pagans had lots and lots of gods—gods of weather, of harvest, of the sea, of the sky, of beer making, of battle, and so on. Anthropologists who've studied conversion in polytheistic culture in Africa, for example, have found that such peoples think they can just add Christ to their existing pantheon. This is what seems to have happened in medieval Europe. The exclusive claims of a monotheistic faith didn't sink in at first. That's why even after "conversion," we find a long period in which ideas about gods and goddesses, spirits and fairies, elves and goblins coexist with faith in Christ.

Another reason was that pagans were impressed with the sheer material power of Christendom. Paganism was a faith that was largely geared to gaining material prosperity. There were gods for the crops because they wanted their crops to grow. They had gods for cattle so that they would produce more milk. When these pagans looked at the wealth and power of Christian Europe, they were impressed: the Christian God was obviously one who could deliver the goods. Christians built bigger buildings, made more beautiful jewelry, possessed better ships, and so on. Many pagans were not adverse to converting to Christianity because they believed it would, in fact, give them more material prosperity than had their gods.

To appreciate this point, note how Christian missionaries fared in sixteenth-century China. Here was a non-Christian culture that was in many ways superior to the West. In that context, Christianity makes practically no headway.

In Europe, we see evidence that this wasn't a by-product but a deliberate tactic of missionaries. When the bishop of Winchester sent his pupil Boniface to evangelize Germany, he stressed that Boniface should remind the pagans just how rich and powerful the Christians were.

Were there any cases in which forced conversion didn't work?

Yes. With pagan polytheists, I don't think there were any failures. But with the monotheists—Jews and Muslims—coercion had little

success. They understood it wasn't a matter of adding a new god but choosing a different one. They also come out of cultures that were sophisticated in their own right.

Though the first generations converted for less-than-pure motives, in subsequent generations, Christianity seems to "stick." That is, as the centuries unfold, these formerly pagan societies sincerely adopt Christianity. Why is that?

One significant reason is the Christian teaching that took place after the formal acceptance of Christianity. It's easy to point out the many abuses of the medieval church, even in what it taught. On the other hand, it did an awful good job at instilling knowledge of Christianity into people who had been pagan for centuries.

One good example of this is seen in Anglo-Saxon England. The Venerable Bede, in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, tells the story of King Edwin, who had embraced Christianity primarily because he thought he would become a great and powerful king as a result. And Bede says, in fact, he did.

But he also noted that Edwin was, and always had been, a thoughtful man who would sit by himself hour after hour pondering the deep mysteries of life. Before he had become a king, in fact, he had a vision in the middle of the night, in which a mysterious stranger said to him, "I will tell you about a God who brings salvation." Later on, after Edwin had become king and was growing in power, he ran into a missionary who was this same mysterious stranger whom he'd had seen in his vision years earlier.

There was in Edwin a desire for salvation, and he felt that beyond the wealth and power Christianity gave him, it also helped him settle this issue in his own heart and mind. For Bede, this seems to illustrate the need for Christian teaching—to instruct especially rulers and the elite on the meaning of Christianity, of salvation, and other key theological concepts.

Today using force to convert is unthinkable. Why did this idea, that was used for centuries, pass away?

A couple disclaimers: this is an immensely complex topic, and I'm not an expert on post-medieval missionary history. That being said, my hunch is that it's largely due to the rise of Protestant evangelical movements, especially the Great Awakening. Here we see a new stress placed upon the individual soul and upon religious experience. Conversion becomes a voluntary, individual turning to God. Once you have that understanding, the idea of forcing someone to convert becomes absurd.

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CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 63: How the Vikings Took up the Faith

Conversion of the Vikings: Recommended Resources

Conversion of the Vikings

Ever since a Celtic monk spotted the first Viking longships approaching from the horizon, these medieval Northmen have been associated with murder, theft, and destruction. But their greatest sin in the eyes of some is that they didn't write anything down.

Apart from a few runic inscriptions, no texts were written before the eleventh century either in Scandinavia or in most of the areas they settled. What we're left with is archaeological artifacts and the biased accounts of writers centuries after Scandinavia converted.

"In portraying this dark and illiterate age, the oral tradition is the stuff of our history," says James Reston, Jr., who "embraces" the old sagas. "We cannot discard virtually everything except the broken shards of pottery, the worm-eaten swords, the beads and horn combs of the archaeologists."

Oh no? Peter Sawyer disagrees. "Few scholars today still accept these texts as reliable sources of information about the Viking Age," he says. "Historians ... now rely more on archaeology and numismatics ... for they cast light on many topics about which the texts are silent."

In this issue, we've included articles by both Reston and Sawyer because we find each perspective helpful.

The saga and the sword

The most complete and readable book about Scandinavia's conversion is *The Hammer and the Cross* by Michael Scott Rohan and Allan J. Scott (Alder, 1980). Indeed, it remains the only book specifically about the conversion of the Vikings directed at a general, nonacademic readership. Unfortunately, it is out of print and difficult to find—but well worth the effort of seeking it out.

James Reston's *The Last Apocalypse* (Doubleday, 1998), just released in paperback, is the most accepting of the oral traditions (which offer a painting, not a photograph, he suggests), and perhaps for that reason it is the most exciting book on the subject. Reston is also master journalist and storyteller; his eye for the fascinating makes this book a must-read even for the most skeptical.

For the most scholarly take on Scandinavia's conversion, track down *The Christianization of Scandinavia* (Viktoria Bokförlag, 1987), edited by Birgit and Peter Sawyer and Ian Wood. The Sawyers' *Medieval Scandinavia* (University of Minnesota, 1993) is a bit more readable but does not deal as fully with the conversion stories.

The conversion of "Scandinavians at home and abroad" fills an entire chapter of Richard Fletcher's ambitious and landmark book *The Barbarian Conversion* (Henry Holt, 1997). Both easy to read and academically solid, Fletcher's book deserves the attention of those interested in the history of evangelism, the history of Europe, and fascinating stories from church history.

General books about the Vikings seem to be legion. We found *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings* (1997) and the *Cultural Atlas of the Viking World* (Facts on File, 1994), edited by Peter Sawyer and James Graham-Campbell respectively, most helpful in our research.

If you want to judge the sagas for yourself, most of the ones mentioned in this issue are available for free online, such as Snorri Sturluson's ***Heimskringla*** (Chronicle of the Kings of Norway), which is at <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/OMACL/Heimskringla/>

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