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THE HAMMER AND THE CROSS:
The Conversion of Scandinavia, 800-1100

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History 392K
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April 15, 1978
AUTHOR'S NOTE

The transliteration of proper names from Old Norse into English appears to be a rather haphazard affair; the modern writer can suit his fancy with any number of spellings. I have spelled names in whatever way struck me as appropriate, striving only for internal consistency.
The advent of a new religious faith is always a valuable historical tool. Shifts in religion uncover interesting aspects of the societies involved. This is particularly true when an indigenous, national faith is supplanted by an alien one externally introduced. Such is the case in medieval Scandinavia, when Norse paganism was ousted by Latin Christianity.

This conversion is probably the central fact of early Scandinavian history, despite the overbearing press granted to the Viking raids. Yet Western scholars, in the height of their ethnocentric arrogance, have tended to dismiss this society-shaking event with a few paragraphs. The purpose of this paper shall be to analyze the various elements of that conversion, and to attempt to evaluate its impact.

The availability of sources presents a brutal problem, especially for the benighted scholar who lacks reading knowledge of a Scandinavian tongue. There are some discussions of the problem scattered about. Moreover, there are some original sources available in translation.

The important medieval historiographical sources for the conversion of the North number three. One, the Vita Anskarii, was written by Anskar's successor Rimbert in the 880's. Another, the History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen, was written by a monk, Adam of Bremen, by 1085. The third, Snorri Sturlason's Heimskringla, is an Icelandic lay composed in the early thirteenth century.
Anskar was abbott of New Corvey, and eventually Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen. Considered the first major missionary to work in Scandinavia, he served as papal legate to Denmark and Sweden. He labored for many years, converting hordes of pagans.\(^1\)

Or so says Rimbert. Although historians seem willing enough to accept the *Vita Anskarii* as essentially accurate in outline, they reserve the right to correct the details. Musset characterizes the first Danish mission as "mediocre," and dismisses the first Swedish effort as having led "une vie obscure."\(^2\) After Anskar's death there is a century-long hiatus of recorded Christian activity in Denmark,\(^3\) indicating that what success he did have was due to his personality alone. Indeed, that personality must have been a good deal more pugnacious than Rimbert would have his readers believe, to judge by Anskar's forty-year sustained effort.

Equally susceptible to scholarly correction is Adam of Bremen's *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*. Adam was probably writing to please his superiors, and he occasionally bollixed up the sources he used. Yet the work is nevertheless highly important for any study of medieval Scandinavia. Adam's History is divided into four books. The last of the four is the least valuable to the topic at hand, although it is of critical importance to Scandinavian studies in general, it is a geographical description of the areas considered in the work. Books I and II are quite helpful, although often plagiarized from such sources as the *Vita Anskarii* discussed
Age origin which continued to crop up in the Viking era. These threads provide the key to understanding the religion.

The symbols of major importance include weapons (the axe, spear, and sword), animals (the horse, boar, serpent, goat, and so on), manmade objects (ships, wagons) and natural objects (the sun, trees). Each can be traced back to the Bronze Age. Needless to say, the evidence is fragmentary and inconclusive, but it is clear that the various symbols were interconnected, with essentially fertility-related functions. The sun-cult dominated; the ship, horse, axe and tree were all subsidiary solar symbols. Almost incidental was the goddess of fertility, so prominent in other religions.

By the Roman Iron Age (roughly the first half-century after the birth of Christ), individual gods were beginning to appear. Three main gods of Germanic origin stand out: Tiwaz, Wodan and Freyr. By the fifth and sixth centuries, they had become Thor, Odin and Frey respectively. Thor was the sky-god, associated with the sun and its symbols (the famous Hammer of Thor was originally an axe). Odin was the magic and death god, with his "cunning spear," while Frey was a fertility figure. These gods did not receive clear definition until the Viking age.

Up to the end of paganism's hold over Scandinavia, the gods continued to develop attributes and bodies of legend. This was facilitated by the development of a true literary tradition, a very late introduction. Yet there remained some basic throwbacks to Bronze Age religion: snake symbolism, forms of
tree worship, the significance of footprints, to name but a few.10

The resulting picture of Scandinavian paganism clashes somewhat with the traditional picture. Although normally seen through the misleading frame of "Norse Mythology," the religion was actually substantially apart from the literary legend. Granted that the gods, especially Thor, were well-loved and their attributes emulated,11 the elements of cohesion in the faith were far more instinctive, being grounded in the age-old struggle for survival in a hostile world.12 In short, the sophisticated tales of the Eddas are only veneers grafted onto a very primitive fertility religion.

The conversion of the North must be seen as an essentially two-pronged event. The first part consists of an outline of facts, with heavy political overtones. The second part bears the trappings of social revolution.

Due to geographic proximity to Christendom, Denmark received the first missions. The earliest one known of is that of the Anglo-Saxon Willibrord, early in the eighth century. Willibrord's mission was to the Frisians, but its success was rather marginal. Trying his luck further north, he paid a visit to a Danish king. He left rather rapidly, with thirty young men in tow (probably purchased slaves). So ended the first Danish mission.13

There was a break of about a century before Willibrord's almost accidental mission was followed up. There are several reasons to be suggested as to why the conversion of the Danes
was pursued so vigorously in the ninth century after having been officially ignored for so long. First, the pious notion of Christian duty certainly had its effect. After Charlemagne's sword-point conversion of the Saxons, the Danes were the pagan people over the next hill. Furthermore, the Carolingian monarchs saw conversion of pagans both as their Christian duty and as an excellent tool for empire-building. But perhaps the most convincing reason is suggested by Musset. In 793, Lindisfarne burned, followed shortly by Monkwearmouth, Iona and Rechru. The timing of the evangelism is no coincidence; the Viking incursions were serious problems, and conversion was seen as a possible weapon against them. Not only a selfless sacrifice for the souls of the Northmen, the conversion effort was rooted in dire necessity and the tactics of self-preservation.

The first manifestation of this new evangelical zeal was the appointment of Ebbo of Rheims as papal legate to Denmark in 822. Ebbo's appointment came from Pope Paul I and Louis the Pious, a very active Christianizing monarch. According to such Frankish sources as Einhard, Ebbo conducted a mission to the Danes of Slesvig with assistance from the archiepiscopates of Bremen and (supposedly) Cambrai. He met with mediocre success, says Einhard. Unfortunately, there is no corroborating evidence that Ebbo's mission ever existed. This is probably less an indictment of Einhard's veracity than of Ebbo's effectiveness.

However, in 826 Harald Klak and four hundred followers
went down to the waters, and this could have been due to Ebbo's work. More likely, however, it revealed Harald's hope of getting aid from Louis the Pious. Harald was a claimant to a throne in Denmark; although he lost it to Horik the Elder in the end, he was a lively contender in 826. That Louis might commit Frankish troops to the cause of establishing a Christian monarch in Denmark must have seemed a gamble worth taking.

In any case, Harald's baptism took place near Mainz. Since he would be returning to Denmark with Louis' backing, it was agreed that he would also return with Louis' chosen representative. And so the story comes to Anskar.

Anskar, an abbott at New Corvey, apparently saw martyrdom as his best route to heaven. The invitation of Louis and Harald provided a sparkling opportunity. Taking along some assistants, he strode bravely into Denmark, where he did encounter some Christians. Much of his preaching was aimed at young boys, for whom he started a school.

Next he was off to Sweden (829), ostensibly at the invitation of King Bjorn II. Pirates nearly killed him on the way, but he did reach Birka. There he converted many, including a local magistrate. Upon his return from Sweden, he was made papal legate to all of Scandinavia by Pope Gregory IV.

The remainder of his life was spent in purposeful pursuit of the conversion of the Danes and Swedes. The tale is a long succession of travels and miracles. In the meantime, he became archbishop of Hamburg. When the city of Hamburg was burned in 845, he became archbishop of Louis the German's
administrative anomaly, the Archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen. Anskar died in bed in 865 at age 63, denied the actual martyrdom he had sought so earnestly.\textsuperscript{23}

Several observations can be made from all this. First, it bears mention that Anskar (and his disciples, for that matter) concentrated their efforts in two areas: royal courts and commercial centers. The value of converting from the top of society on down had been a Christian concept since Constantine. Notably, though, not even Rimbert can credit Anskar with the conversion of a monarch. As for the commercial centers, Gwyn Jones suggests that this tactic had two purposes. As relatively cosmopolitan areas, they would have exposure to Western, Christian merchants, making Christianity less strange and therefore more acceptable. Also, however, those same Western merchants were living as isolated enclaves in a pagan world; providing these men with priestly sustenance had as high a priority, if not higher, than saving pagans.\textsuperscript{24}

Furthermore, those who did convert did so, as a rule, in one of two ways. The most readily available way for the missionaries to convert souls was to buy slaves and make them Christians. This pocketbook evangelism, while representing a kind of forced conversion, was probably a laudable favor granted to the slave, and demonstrated Christian charity to any who were watching. Perhaps more traditional, though less controllable, were miracles. The straightforward presentation of miracles as historical facts has always been a source of difficulty for historians, and most attested miracles are
susceptible to various historical interpretations. Be that as it may, much of Anskar's success is attributed to the miracles he performed, mostly in the way of restoring bodily damage. It is certainly safe to say that a heathen Dane would be impressed by the repair of his neighbor's gimpy leg.

One final observation about Anskar must be made. He and his followers shuttled about between Denmark, Sweden and Germany with notable frequency. Now, perhaps Anskar felt his archiepiscopal duties beckoning, and he was probably concerned about all the heathens languishing all over the North. But his reasons for moving about was more that, after he had been in any given area for any length of time, he was driven out forcibly.

After Anskar's death, the whole mission collapsed. This confirms the suspicion that Anskar's personality was the glue holding the operation together, particularly since the declining Carolingian monarchy was no longer effective in much of anything, including the support of missionaries. However, the cessation of missionary activity also meant a cessation of written records of the situation in Denmark. It does appear that the Danevirke, an earthen fortification sealing off the Danish peninsula, was finished during this period. This allowed the various "kings" of Denmark to contest with each other the right to rule the entire area with a minimum of Frankish influence.25

During this period, lasting past the middle of the tenth
century, only two Christian-related events occurred in Denmark. Because of excessive raiding of the Frisian coast (always a popular pastime in Viking Denmark), Henry the Fowler demonstrated the illusory nature of the Danevirke's protection by invading, chastising King Chnuba and converting him at swordpoint. This information comes from Widukind. Adam corroborates the event, except that he makes it Gorm the Old. Musset suggests that Henry actually subdued Chnuba, and that Gorm made the pretense of submitting just to avoid a confrontation with the Fowler. This explanation would harmonize with Adam's later description of Gorm, who does not seem to have been either baptized or chastised.

The second occurrence also comes from Adam. Unni, Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, conducted a mission in 935 to Denmark, where he managed to obtain the sympathies of Gorm's son, Harald Bluetooth (not yet king). Unni also travelled to Sweden, and even Adam admits that the results there were indifferent.

At this point, a new set of motivations for the conversion of the Danes appears, one that applies to the Danes themselves. For a number of reasons, including the Danevirke, the weakened state of the Western monarchies, and the distraction of the strongest of those monarchies by the Magyars, the Danish peninsula was as free from outside influences as could ever be expected in a politically-disunited region. This facilitated the development of an indigenous monarchy with control over the whole peninsula.

The hero in this story is Harald Bluetooth. He had been
exposed to Christianity by Unni, as mentioned above. However, Gorm the Old was a fervent pagan, and Harald did not go so far as to receive baptism. The final push had to come after Gorm's death, and, by all accounts, it came from above.

The missionary Poppo was engaged in lively argument with members of Harald's court one day in 960, over the true nature of the cosmos. While the Danes were willing to grant Christ's divinity, they balked at Poppo's monotheistic insinuations. To prove his point, Poppo underwent the ordeal of the red-hot iron glove. His hand proved sturdier than the Danes expected, and they all had to admit the omnipotence of the One True God. This story is told by Widukind and Adam.

Harald had motivations that extended beyond Poppo's appeasement, no matter how nonflammable. It is an accepted fact that many Danes in the lower and merchant classes had been converted by then. Furthermore, the Germans were not to be forgotten.

Otto the Great was no mean ruler. That he was the greatest monarch in Europe since Charlemagne is not to be doubted. Moreover, his decimation of the Magyars at Lechfield in 955 left him free to ponder the iniquities of pagan Denmark. It is not a bad guess at all that Poppo was sent by the Ottonian court.

As had once been the case with Clovis the Frank, Harald was able to look at an impressive list of advantages that would accrue to him by converting. He was on the throne of a patchwork state, partially assembled by his father, and had
ideas of adding to it himself. He needed something badly to hold it together besides his axe. Thanks to the conversion tactics of the Hamburg-Bremen emissaries, the Christian element must have been strongest in the influential mercantile communities. A state-supported religion, with the organization so lacking in paganism, which also held the allegiance of the merchants, was no trivial thing for the state-builder. And Harald surely wanted to avoid the kind of confrontation that nearly occurred between his father and Otto's. Conversion to Christianity was clearly a politically-expedient move.

Harald's son Svein Forkbeard must have been less perceptive, for his faith was marginal at best. The experience in the thoroughly-Christian Danelaw in England began to show in Svein's successor, Cnut the Great. And Cnut II, although a bad enough king to get himself assassinated, was a good enough Christian to get himself canonised.

Christianity was the professed religion of the Danish monarchy after Harald Bluetooth. It is agreed that Harald ruled a country in which the new faith was strong and growing. Thus he did not have to force it upon his people; he was able to use it to his own benefit.

The Norwegian kings were less fortunate. They were subjected to some of the same political pressures as the Danish kings. However, they lacked the convenient presence of Hamburg-Bremen right across the border to prepare the way for converting the populace. The Norwegian conversion was shorter and far more violent than the Danish.
The first Norwegian king associated with Christianity was Haakon the Good. He was the protege of the English king Athelstan, and brought a retinue of missionaries to his court when he succeeded his father, Harald Finehair, sometime in the 940's. However, this did not sit well with his subjects, and the clerics were sent packing. Lest he follow his missionaries, Haakon evidently elected to revert to heathenism. In any case, he had a pagan burial upon his death c. 960.40

Snorri insists that the next king, Harald Greycloak, was a good Christian who had no success proselytizing.41 Snorri, of course, is none too accurate most of the time, but his account of Harald having acquired the faith as a child in England is reasonable. Still, Christian or no, Harald Greycloak is of little importance.

The next period is confused. One Earl Haakon joined forces with Harald Bluetooth, killed Harald Greycloak, and served as vassal to the Danish king. When Bluetooth was diverted by the German Otto II, Earl Haakon promptly repudiated the Danish overlordship, leaving Norway divided in three parts. Finally, in 995, Olaf Trygvason defeated Earl Haakon and took the Norwegian crown for himself.42

Now Olaf presents a complex problem. Snorri wrote an extensive saga about him, insisting that he was a crusader for Christianity.43 Bronsted mentions that he had been confirmed in his faith by Aethelred of England.44 But Adam blasts him unmercifully, claiming that his faith had lapsed into heathenism.45 Where the truth lies, no one knows. Olaf was
certainly rapacious, cruel, ambitious, and very brave.\textsuperscript{46}

The only facts that stand out in this morass are that western Norway was converted under Olaf Trygvason and that the ecclesiastical influence came from Northumbria.\textsuperscript{47} What part Olaf played cannot be determined with authority. However, it bears mention that, with respect to political cohesion, Norway was in even worse shape than Denmark had been. Olaf may well have undergone baptism in England to secure foreign aid to further his ambitions. That his conversion was strictly political and not at all religious may have been noticed by whatever authors Adam drew on for his portrait.

But Olaf's reign was short (995-1000) and filled with troubles. He died in a sea battle, betrayed by his allies and crushed by his enemies. His realm was carved up by Swedes and Danes, and his throne was left vacant.\textsuperscript{48}

The next claimant was another Olaf, Haraldsson the Stout. This is none other than St. Olaf, about whom more was written than any other Viking. After spending his youth in viking (he started at age twelve), Olaf decided to press his somewhat tenuous claim to the Norwegian throne. Appearing in Norway by 1015, he immediately began to consolidate power. Since the volume of source material on Olaf is more than matched by its lack of trustworthiness, his exact methods are unknown. Suffice it to say that by the end of 1016, Olaf the Stout was entrenched as King of Norway.\textsuperscript{49}

Olaf made two major contributions to the conversion of Norway; indeed, he completed it. First, he converted the uplands,
where no one else had managed to succeed. Second, he founded a national Norwegian church.

To convert his people, Olaf made war on them. His proselytizing was simple: either be baptized and become a friend of the king, or be destroyed. Snorri tells tales of men killed, maimed, outlawed, banished and/or dispossessed for not immediately converting.\textsuperscript{50} It was crude, but it was effective.

Together with Bishop Grimkell, Olaf erected a state church. They drew up a body of canon law, called the Moster Law after the town of its origin, which they promulgated throughout Norway. They brought priests and monks from England, but because Olaf's mortal enemy Cnut was king there, they established their legal ties with Hamburg-Bremen. They even managed to build some churches.\textsuperscript{51}

The effect of all this was to bind Norway together. The notion of a central Norwegian monarchy was rather new in the early eleventh century, and Olaf went far towards imprinting it on the popular mindset with his widespread conversions, his state church, and his eventual sanctification. The value of a loyal bishopric in governing a region with no history of political unity cannot be overestimated.

Olaf was really no more secure from foreign intervention than his predecessor, however, and in 1028 he had to flee the country. He was killed in 1030, trying to win back his throne. But, because his body did not decay, he was canonised. And Norway did not lapse into paganism again.\textsuperscript{52}

The Swedes were the last of the Scandinavian peoples to
accept Christianity. This was largely due, no doubt, to the remoteness of Sweden geographically from established Christendom. This same remoteness, however, means that German, French and English chroniclers have little to say about Swedish history. It goes without saying that the native literary sources are untrustworthy. So the picture of Sweden's conversion will be vague.

It has already been mentioned that Anskar paid some visits to Birka in Sweden, as did his successor Unni. Their success was minimal. Thus when Denmark and Norway were quite Christian in the early eleventh century, Sweden was still quite pagan. When Adam discusses Sweden in his Book IV survey, he terms it as almost all pagan—and if he were to exaggerate anything, it would have been the extent of Christianity, not the extent of paganism.

But the English monks, come to Denmark thanks to Cnut's overlordship, and the German monks, based at Hamburg-Bremen, continued to work. The English, not as politically threatening as the Germans, probably had the greater success; this notion is borne out by examining the etymology of church-related terms in Swedish, and by checking the number of English saints for whom Swedish churches were named.53

It also bears mention that in 988 the kingdom of Kiev, which was largely a Swedish colony and which maintained close ties with the mother country, was converted under Vladimir to Greek Orthodox Christianity.54 This must have had some impact, but its extent cannot be gauged (probably, it was contributory
at best).

By the twelfth century, Sweden's pagans were alone in a Christian Europe. There had been a string of Christian kings: Olaf Skotkonung (994-1022), Onund Jacob (1022-1050), Emund (1050-1060), and Stenkil (1060-1066). Olaf had managed to found a bishopric at Skara under the metropolitan wing of Hamburg-Bremen, and others followed at Sigtuna and Skane. The handwriting was on the wall.

Bishops Egino of Skane and Adalward the Younger of Sigtuna proposed in 1060 to convert Sweden in the same way that St. Olaf had converted Norway. Stenkil, however, would brook no such violence, and quashed the project. After Stenkil's death, Adalward was driven out by the pagans, and Egino's bishopric was not filled after his death.

It was after 1100 that the great pagan temples at Uppsala were razed. There were many brief recurrences of paganism, especially in bad times, says Aelnoth of Canterbury. Indeed, it was not until St. Bernard of Clairvaux began dispatching his Cistercians into Sweden that the fight was completed. But the verdict was inevitable.

The connecting thread through all of these conversions is political expediency. The Danish kings only converted when Carolingian and Ottonian monarchs asserted their political/military power. The Norwegian kings used Christianity to bind together a geographic region that had very little self-consciousness as an independent political unit. The Swedes held out until they were the final frontier, with all of
Europe pressing upon them. Like Constantine and Clovis before them, the Scandinavian kings knew a smart move when they saw it.

Yet so far the story has been limited to the conversion of kings. While the history of the ruling class may have been sufficient for Gibbon, it is now generally accepted that there can be great rifts between the lives of kings and the lives of their subjects. To examine the conversion of the populace is a difficult task which will require some oblique strategies; nevertheless, it is a task that cannot be shirked.

The Vikings are best known as world travellers. It is in this guise that they are considered important to European history. Fritz Askeberg has proposed a four-fold categorization of Viking expeditions overseas, and all four would have resulted, in varying degrees, in the acquiring of Christianity by the individuals involved.

The first category is private raiding organized by individuals. Although the most romantic of the Viking activities, these were the least significant. However, when the warriors swarmed through monasteries burning and looting, they were being exposed to Christianity; this can have had a more positive side when permanent bases were established in Christian coastal regions, where Northmen would have had year-round exposure under some peaceful circumstances. The same argument applies to another of the types, that of political ventures. When Swedish heathens marched into Christian Norway as conquerors, they were inevitably going to pick up some exposure
to the dominant faith.

More extensive were the colonizing ventures. Danes began moving wholesale into East Anglia and Kent in the ninth century. This culminated in 1016 with the crowning of Cnut the Great as king of England, plus Norway and his native Denmark. In England, the Danes encountered a Christianity several centuries old and thoroughly rooted in the inhabitants. Here, the interchange of religious views was intensive. The Danes took Christianity away from England with them. 62

With all the hurrah in popular history about giant Norsemen spreading rapine and slaughter throughout Europe, it is easy to forget the fourth kind of overseas venture: mercantile activity. Nevertheless, intrepid Scandinavian merchants travelled widely both East and West. 63 This brought them into constant contact with the whole of Christendom. It is worth noting that the earliest Christian communities in the North were in the trading towns, such as Birka and Hedeby. 64 Moreover, the converse effect of commercial travel—the presence of foreigners in Scandinavia—was another vehicle for the introduction of the new faith.

Thus Christianity's presence in Scandinavia is very satisfactorily explained. The thornier question is this: Why was it taken to heart? The Norsemen were used to worshipping a sizeable number of gods. Their culture was deeply attached to the ancient fertility rites. Their ethical codes of conduct were based on fanatical loyalty to family, the exaltation of battle, and an egotism bordering on the insane. How could
such a foreign religion as Christianity take hold?

Part of the answer lies in the very polytheism that seems an impediment. To acknowledge Christ as a god was no threat to a Viking's religion; it just meant a longer list of gods. To deny the existence of the Norse gods was not required. Indeed, even staunch Christians believed in the existence of Odin and company, if as devils rather than gods. It was in all likelihood this casual addition of Christ to the Norsemen's pantheon that led missionaries to think that they had converted so many souls. Also, the presence of the saints as minor dieties must have been comforting to Vikings used to having a choice as to whom they could pray to.

The Germanic concept of kingship was a good deal more personal than the modern European, based as it was (at least in theory) upon election, with fighting prowess a prime criterion. What the king said and did was a matter of great import to his subjects. If the king proclaimed Christ the One True God, then his people paid serious attention, never mind what the king's personal motives might have been. This was particularly true when the king was Olaf the Stout, bringing three hundred armed men to the local village to ensure that the people were paying serious attention.

Kingly action had another effect. As part of the state-building mechanism, the monarchs encouraged the development of ecclesiastical hierarchies. Thus every locality had a representative of an organized Christian body, actively pushing Christianity. Paganism, on the other hand, had no pro-
fessional clergy to press its claims to the allegiance of the populace. The framework of an organized church that carried Catholicism through so many vicissitudes simply could not be competed with by a religion whose priests were the heads of decaying tribal units. 68

The religion of the North seems to have met with an internal decay that had causes totally apart from the influx of Christianity. There are real atheists to be found in the sagas. 69 This is perhaps due to the fact that the Norse religion was shaped by the needs and conceptions of early Bronze Age forest dwellers. 70 These men were subsistence hunters and farmers, living at the edge of starvation; their problems were chiefly those of simple survival, and their religion reflects that. But by the tenth century, Scandinavians were moderately encumbered with the trappings of civilization. Their culture (and therefore their problems) was far beyond that of the Bronze Age. Yet the religion was basically Bronze Age. The vague, incoherent cosmogony of the pagan faith, product as it was of centuries of contradictory amendment, offered very little comfort to the individual approaching death, particularly by comparison with Christianity and its firm promise of eternal life.

Most importantly, Christianity proved itself able to assimilate heathenism without thoroughly eradicating it. In Iceland, for example, the instantaneous conversion by Althing decree carried two riders: first, that pagan rites could be continued in private homes; and second, that all baptism
would take place in the hot-water springs. The first clause shows, obviously, that the two faiths could coexist, though it is unlikely that pagan sacrifices took place for too many more years. The second clause not only saw to the comfort of converts in well-named Iceland, but introduced an element of the old fertility-based spring worship into Christianity. A look at some Norwegian folk-tales reveals the startling scenario of trolls building churches for St. Olaf on bets. Olaf Trygvason had a number of run-ins with Thor, Odin, trolls and witches in similar folk-tales. Christ's birth and the winter solstice were celebrated together as Yule, children continued to take names like Thorvald, mid-week was still Woden's-day, and libations became part of the sacraments. This curious, though not atypical, mixture of the old and new made the transition easier.

Moreover, there is little evidence that the Christian precepts of humility and brotherly love took hold over the Norse notions of honor and family with any rapidity. In the folk-tales mentioned above, St. Olaf loses every bet, but manages to cheat the trolls out of their victories by turning them to stone. That is hardly good Christian behavior, but turning one's betting partners to granite was a trick any Viking would have envied. The kinds of deeds attributed to St. Olaf by Snorri seem suspiciously similar to those of his Yngling ancestors, in terms of motivation; only the terminology has changed. As for historical deeds, it is not needful to look past the enthusiastic participation of the Norsemen in the
Crusades to see that warfare was still the Scandinavian's national sport.  

But the Norse religion was not helpless in the face of the onslaught of Christianity. The conversion took three centuries from start to finish, which is a remarkably long time as such things go. Surely, heathenism had some power over its people.  

It cannot be overemphasized that the old religion was a very comfortable one for the Scandinavians. It imposed no major obligations, allowed for a good deal of personal choice within its loose framework, and encouraged the Scandinavians in doing what they wanted to do. Christianity was just the opposite. It imposed all sorts of restrictions on modes of worship and behavior. The Norsemen loved Thor, with his easygoing manner, his immense strength and his all-enduring courage; their chief god was Odin, who would sacrifice even his most loyal supporters to achieve his desires. Pious gospel stories simply have a different appeal.  

The Norse religion was singular. Nowhere else in the world were the Norse gods worshipped; if one can trace their origin back to Indo-European prototypes, one can also certainly locate enough unique aspects to set them apart from the standard Germanic gods. The Scandinavians knew that. Their religion, common amongst themselves but alien elsewhere, served to tie them tightly together. That, along with their common language, gave them an ethnic identity that greatly resisted any meddling. Western Europe, on the other hand, had its universal religion, Catholicism, which was symbiotically tied
to its universal language, Latin. To accept Christianity meant to destroy both of the ties that bound the various Scandinavian regions together.

Even lacking a professional priesthood, paganism fought back. Against the White Christ was posed Red Thor. If every Christian bore a silver cross, then every pagan carried a hammer amulet.79 (Indeed, a block has been found that has three molds cut in it: one for the hammer, one for the Latin cross, and one for the Greek cross.80) From the old temple complex at Uppsala, strong counterattacks were launched against the new religion.81 Paganism refused to simply melt away.

Nevertheless, it did eventually succumb. What must now be considered are the consequences. What was the impact of the conversion of the North?

Despite the great archeological breakthroughs that have been made in the last century, the historian’s most valuable tools are still written records. But the Scandinavians were virtually illiterate. What sources do exist were either written by Christians such as Adam, whose primary concerns were with the religious state of the North, or by native Scandinavians after the conversion had introduced literacy. This latter type of source was particularly prevalent in Norway and Iceland; here, a heavy English religious influence permitted the development of literacy in the vulgar tongue, rather than in the Latin brought by the Germans, so that the literary tradition became much stronger much more quickly.82 Were this not the case, some of the greatest of the literary
sources would never have been preserved. Any Viking historian would be frustrated indeed if all those sources of Scandinavian history which are direct or indirect consequents of conversion were eliminated.

As suggested above, the old faith held the Scandinavian region together culturally. The new faith could have done the same, yet it did not. The reasons are several.

First, the various regions were not approached at once. Denmark was converted during the course of the ninth and tenth centuries, Norway in the late tenth and early eleventh, and Sweden towards the end of the eleventh and into the twelfth. When, say, Denmark and western Norway were Christian, and the rest of Norway and Sweden were heathen, there must have been a good deal of antipathy. A king like Chnuba, who was probably a Swede, could never have ruled in Denmark in such a period arousing no comment, like he did in the days before Harald Bluetooth. The multi-stage conversion badly damaged Scandinavian unity.

Equally damaging was the multiplicity of Christian influences. Little love was lost between the German and English churches, both of whom shared in the conversion effort. The Byzantine influence, not yet properly evaluated by anyone, could only have made matters worse. Denmark, with its German ties, and Norway and Sweden, with their English ties, were thus pried further apart.

Finally, each region developed its own national church hierarchy. Archbishop Adalbert of Hamburg-Bremen tried to
organize all three into one metropolitan see under (of course) Hamburg-Bremen in the mid-eleventh century. But he failed badly. Afterwards, it was inevitable that independent sees would be established. This was accelerated by Gregory VII’s run-in with the Imperial monarchy. Wishing to deny the Germans any authority he could, Gregory encouraged ecclesiastical independence for Scandinavia. Denmark got its metropolitan freedom from Hamburg-Bremen in 1139, Norway in 1152, and Sweden in 1164.

The time differential, the variety of religious influence, and the organizational separation drove wedges between the three regions, and between them and the rest of Latin Christendom. Scandinavia would always be separate from the rest of Europe in every sense. As Marc Bloch said, "Germany was never to be--the whole of Germania." Some would suggest that the end of the Viking Age was due to the advent of Christianity. Looking at the suspicious sequencing of events, they argue that the conversion softened the Norse spirit and channelled what was left into the legitimized plundering of the Crusades.

Such an argument immediately suggests the spectre of post hoc ergo propter hoc logic. Much of the reasoning depends upon timing. And the timing is in fact wrong. The height of the real Viking raids was in the mid-ninth century. By the time Christianity had made a serious dent in Denmark (to say nothing of Norway and Sweden) in the middle of the following century, pillaging raids had been displaced by colonizing
ventures as prime Viking activity.

It is more likely that the raids stopped because there was no longer any motivation for them. The major reason for the Viking raids most probably was Malthusian. Either wealth had to be imported or bodies exported. When both had been accomplished, the raids could cease. ⁹⁰ The niceties of religious philosophy have historically tended to subordinate themselves to the dictates of Malthus' equation.

Peter Sawyer neatly undercuts the whole question with a lovely piece of nihilism. There was no Viking Age, he insists, and so no Viking Age was terminated by Christianity. The Norse way of living and thinking continued after 1100, just as it had continued before 800. Only the framework within which the Norsemen operated (Christians fighting Christians, not heathens fighting Christians) was changed. ⁹¹ As Sawyer says, "(The Viking Age) began when the men of the West first became aware of the strangers of the North who came in search of land, wealth and glory. It ended when they were no longer strangers." ⁹²

If Christianity was not directly responsible for the cessation of the raids, then it was largely responsible for the state of Scandinavian culture in the twelfth century and after. Moreover, it was responsible for the nature of the Scandinavian political situation, within each nation, between the nations, and with the rest of Europe. The factors leading to conversion were as varied and complex as the results. In all, the conversion was the most important occurrence in medieval Scandinavian history; every other aspect was shaped in whole or in
part by it. As such, it deserves more attention than it gets.
FOOTNOTES


7 Gelling and Davidson, pp. 27-113.


9 Davidson, pp. 147-148.

10 Gelling and Davidson, pp. 139-183.


12 Davidson, pp. 14-17.

13 Musset, pp. 120-121.


15 Musset, p. 121.

16 Bronsted, pp. 32-33.

17 Musset, p. 121.


19 Jones, p. 105.
Jones, p. 106.

21 Rimbert, pp. 25-44.

22 Rimbert, pp. 44-54.

23 Rimbert, pp. 54-126.

24 Jones, p. 108n.


26 Jones, p. 112.

27 Adam, I-lvii.

28 Russet, p. 125.

29 Adam, I-lviii-lxi.

30 Adam, I-lix.

31 Jones, p. 126.

32 Adam, II-xxvii.

33 Bronsted, p. 309.


35 Jones, p. 126.

36 Bronsted, pp. 74-75.

37 Bronsted, p. 308.

38 Kendrick, p. 119.

39 Kendrick, p. 119.

40 Bronsted, p. 309.


42 Bronsted, pp. 79-80.

43 Snorri, "Olaf Trygvason's Saga," in *The Olaf Sagas*, passim.

44 Bronsted, p. 80.

45 Adam, II-xi.
46. Jones, pp. 131-139.
47. Musset, pp. 127-128.
53. Bloch, p. 34.
54. Jones, p. 262.
55. Bronsted, p. 311.
56. Bronsted, p. 311.
57. Jones, p. 74.
58. Bronsted, p. 312.
60. Bronsted, p. 31.
61. Bloch, p. 32.
63. Bronsted, pp. 35-36.
64. Bloch, pp. 32-33.
65. Bloch, p. 32.
68. Bloch, p. 31.
69. Bloch, p. 32.
70. Gelling and Davidson, passim.
71. Toyne, p. 25.

73 Craigie, pp. 11-12, 18-19, 44-46, 335-337.

74 Musset, pp. 135-136.

75 Musset, p. 137.

76 Bronsted, pp. 74-75.

77 See Dumezil, discussed in Jones, p. 319.

78 Jones, pp. 73-74.

79 Jones, p. 321.

80 Jones, plate 8.

81 Bronsted, p. 311.

82 Musset, pp. 127, 132-134.

83 Jones, p. 111.

84 Toyne, p. 23.

85 Adam, III-passim; also E. N. Johnson, "Adalbert of Hamburg-Bremen," In Speculum IX (1934), pp. 147-179.

86 Musset, pp. 136-137.

87 Musset, pp. 141-142.

88 Bloch, p. 35.


90 Bloch, p. 37.


92 Sawyer, p. 206.
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