

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

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Issue 63: How the Vikings Took up the Faith

## 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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## 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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## 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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## 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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