

# HOW THE VIKINGS WERE WON TO CHRIST

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The Scandinavians were the last great group of Teutonic people to abandon heathenism and embrace Christianity. The Viking marauders from the pagan North wreaked havoc throughout Northern and Western Europe. Throughout the 9th and 10th centuries Vikings raided, killed and plundered. They also established strong Viking settlements in Normandy, England, Scotland, Ireland, Iceland, Greenland, throughout the Baltic and in Russia.

## Terror from the North

Alcuin wrote of the shocking Viking raid on the monastery at Lindisfarne in AD 793:

*"Never before has such terror appeared in Britain as we have now suffered from a pagan race. Nor was it thought possible that such an inroad from the sea could be made. 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 has fallen prey to pagans."*

## The Fury of the Northmen

Soon a new prayer was added to the church liturgy:

*"From the fury of the Northmen, O Lord, deliver us!"*

## Conversion

At the time, probably nobody could have predicted that the violent Vikings would be conquered by the Prince of Peace and become some of the most enthusiastic missionaries for the advance of Christianity.

## The Viking Era

The Viking era is normally dated from the Lindisfarne raid of AD 793 to the battle of Hastings of AD 1066.

## Impacting Culture

Although the Vikings were famous for their hit and run raids, many Vikings actually settled in the British Isles and deeply influenced English culture. The fact that we have a seven day week is due to the Biblical account that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. However, the days of the week were originally named by the Romans after the seven main celestial planets: The Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus and Saturn. The Anglo Saxons replaced four of these with the names of Viking deities: Tuesday is named after the Viking war god, Tyr (or Tiw); Wednesday after the Viking war god Wodin (Odin); Thursday is named after the Viking god of war, Thor; and Friday after the Viking fertility goddess Frigg (Frey).

## Viking Words

Many English words have their roots in Scandinavian speech including: *anger, die, scant, ugly, loose, wrong, low, sky, take, window, husband, happy, thrive, ill, beer and anchor*. The word *berserk* is actually

from the name of a Viking soldier.

## **Ansgar -The Apostle of the North**

When the Vikings were the terror of Europe God placed a great missionary burden on young Ansgar. With his own money Ansgar redeemed several Danish youths who were slaves. He educated them to be his co-workers in bringing the Gospel to their countrymen.

## **Denmark**

Harold, King of Denmark, had been driven from his throne and had sought refuge at the court of Louis I, King of the Franks. While at Louis's court King Harold heard the Gospel and turned to Christ, submitting himself to being baptised. On the king's return to Denmark, Ansgar eagerly joined the king to preach the Gospel to the Danes. At Hedeby Ansgar built a small wooden church, but persecution forced him to flee the country.

## **Sweden**

Ansgar responded to a request from King Bjorn of Sweden. This was early in the 9th century when the Vikings were raiding, plundering and burning the coastal cities of Northern and Western Europe. Ansgar narrowly escaped with his life when Norsmen burned the churches and monasteries in Hamburg. With two co-workers Ansgar crossed the Baltic Sea to begin ministering in Sweden. On the way the vessel was plundered by pirates and they arrived destitute in Sweden. King Bjorn welcomed the Christians to Sweden and the first church was built in the country.

## **Stronger than Thor**

At an assembly of the people a question was debated as to whether the missionaries should be allowed to continue to preach Christ and so invite the anger of the old Viking gods. At a critical part in the discussions, an old Viking stood up and declared with great force that it was clear that the Christian God was stronger than Thor. This decided the matter and the missionaries received freedom to continue to preach the Gospel in Sweden.

## **God's Judgment**

More than any previous invasions and crises faced by the Christian church, the Viking raids wrought desolation throughout the western Christendom. The Vikings laid waste to monasteries and churches, shaking the churches to their foundations. A decline and decay in faith and morals had set in before the Viking invasions and many saw the fury of the Norsmen as a judgment of God upon a backslidden, and often apostate, church.

## **Resistance in Wessex**

Churches and monasteries were destroyed, clergy and monks were slain, church buildings lay vacant, until in the South of England the West Saxons were rallied by King Alfred the Great to steadfastly resist, and ultimately defeat, the great Danish invasion.

## **Conversion of the Vikings**

In 878, after King Alfred defeated the Danish army at Ashdown, he required its King Guthrum, and 30 other of his leaders, to be baptised as Christians. In 882 another Viking leader in the lower Rhine region abandoned heathenism and embraced Christianity receiving baptism in the Name of Lord Jesus Christ. Duke Rollo of the Vikings, and some of his followers, received baptism and created the Duchy of

Normandy.

## **Impressed by Christ**

The ethics of Christianity were so radically different to traditional Viking culture that it took literally centuries for the Scandinavian people to be thoroughly evangelised and disciplined. One of the chief attractions was the conviction that Christ is a mighty Victor who has risen triumphant over death. The power of Christ impressed the hardened Viking warriors. In Norway the king commanded his people to be converted to Christ or be prepared to die. However, in Denmark and Sweden the Vikings were converted by persuasion not force. Pioneer missionaries Willibrord and Liudger attempted to take the Gospel to the Vikings, but with little visible success initially.

## **Ansgar - Missionary to the Vikings**

It remained for Ansgar, born of Saxon parents in the North West of France in 801, to succeed where others had failed. Ansgar was described as a sensitive child who led a devout life. He experienced visions and dreams and possessed *"a combination of humility, of self-forgetfulness, and of undaunted courage and energetic initiative."*

## **Winning Sweden to Christ**

King Harold of Denmark was baptised in 826 in Mainz. Some of the first pagans in Sweden to request baptism included the leader of Birka, an Island in Lake Malar, not far from the present capital Stockholm. Despite serious reverses, violence and destruction of churches, Ansgar did not give up, he persevered and soon Danish missionaries were being sent to establish churches in Sweden. Ansgar's faithful work was continued by his disciple, Rimbert, who ministered both amongst the Danes and the Swedes. Rimbert was succeeded by Adalgar.

## **Opposition and Persecution**

Early in the 10th century, King Gorm of Denmark, a determined enemy of Christianity, attempted to banish Christianity from his realm. Many ministers and missionaries were martyred, numerous churches burned to the ground.

## **Saxons Champion the Christian Cause**

As the Saxons grew in strength they became champions of the Christian cause. When Henry became King of the Germans in 919 he sponsored numerous missionary outreaches to the Danes. After his victory over the Danes in 934, King Henry compelled their rulers to accept Christianity. Unni was encouraged by the king to renew the work of Ansgar. Gorm's successor King Harold looked with favour upon Unni's attempts to reassemble the scattered remnants of Christian communities on the Danish Isles and to bring in ministers to rebuild these congregations.

## **Reform and Revival**

King Henry's son, Otto the Great, became king in 936 and in 962 was crowned emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Under royal favour the churches experienced a wave of reform with a tremendous revival of devotion and enthusiasm. King Harold of Denmark extended his realm to become overlord of Norway. As he himself was baptised he encouraged the spread of Christianity throughout his realms.

## **Growth Despite Opposition**

Harold's son, Sweyn, attempted to bring about a pagan rebellion against his father who died in the

struggle (986). Sweyn severely-persecuted Christians and repeatedly invaded England where he died in 1014. In Sweden a pagan King, Eric, arose, hostile to Christianity. Yet the church continued to grow. The missionary Poppo won many thousands to the Christian faith in Denmark. Odinkar was a missionary from Denmark who strengthened the Gospel work in Sweden.

### **King Canute Sponsors Missions in England and Denmark**

Under King Canute the church was firmly established in Denmark. Canute later became king of all England. Under his support missionaries from Germany established more churches in Denmark. He commanded his subjects to learn The Lord's Prayer and to be faithful in Communion with the Lord. The church in Denmark grew and deepened with strong ties to the Saxon churches in Germany and England.

### **Missions to Norway**

The conversion of the Vikings in Norway was far more stormy than that of Denmark. Throughout the 10th century Saxon missionaries from England laboured throughout Denmark establishing many mission stations and congregations. From the time of King Alfred the Great the revived churches in England evidenced a dynamic vitality in missions to the Vikings.

### **The Kingdom of Norway**

The Norwegian kingdom was the creation of Harald Haarfager (fair hair) who died 933. By much combat he had established himself as the overruler of all Norway. His sons Eric Bloodaxe and Haakon the Good struggled over the succession. Haakon had been sent to England to study and there had been converted, baptised and discipled as a Christian. By 935 the young, tall handsome and athletic Haakon had established his supremacy through combat and was accepted as king of all Norway.

### **Royal Mission to Win the Vikings**

Haakon then attempted to win his people to the Christian faith. Most of his immediate court were soon baptised. Later he sent to England for missionaries and began to build churches in Norway. By the year 950 after he had been reigning 15 years, Haakon proposed to the assembly of landowners that they adopt Christianity. Most of the landowners responded with great hostility and vehemently refused to abandon the old pagan ways. They began to place great pressure on the king to compromise and participate in their pagan sacrifices. Facing open rebellion King Haakon, very reluctantly, ate some of the meat in their ceremonial feast organised by his landowners. Later, after being wounded in battle, on his death bed, in 961, Haakon declared his great remorse over that compromise and his desire to do penance for his sins.

### **A Rocky Road and Reverses**

His nephew, Harold Graafell, succeeded to the throne of Norway. While not as enthusiastic a Christian as Haakon, Harold Graafell did pull down pagan temples wherever he went. However misrule and bad seasons led much of the people to resent the faith which he had violently championed. In 970 Harold Graafell was lured to Denmark and killed. King Harold Bluetooth of Denmark then made himself the overlord of Norway and encouraged the spread of Christianity there.

### **Olaf Trygvesson**

Olaf Trygvesson was the son of the King of Norway. His great grandfather, Harald Haarfager (Fair-hair), had initially established the Kingdom of Norway. When Olaf's father was murdered in 968, Olaf fled the

country with his mother. Vikings captured their ship and sold the boy into slavery. Olaf ended up in the court of Russia's Tsar Vladimir I, where he became a favourite of the Queen. When Olaf was just twelve years old, the Tsar put a dozen ships under his command and sent him off into battle.

## **A Viking without Equal**

By the time he was twenty one years old, Olaf Trygvesson was renowned as the ultimate Viking, tall, strong, handsome, and unequalled in martial skill. He led a huge army of Swedish Vikings, in a fleet of almost ninety ships to loot Holland. After devastating the Dutch, he went to fight the French and left a massive amount of death and destruction wherever he went.

## **Extortion in England**

His next target was England where, after the battle of Maldon, near the mouth of the Thames, he forced the Anglo-Saxon King, Ethelred the Unready, to pay a tribute of 10,000 pounds of silver. After this he moved North plundering Northumberland and Scotland. He attacked the Hebrides and the Isle of Man. He conducted raids of Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, and France again. With a fleet of over ninety-four ships he again attacked England, killing and looting wildly until King Ethelred offered him a further 22,000 pounds.

## **Seeking Sorcery**

Off the coast of Cornwall Olaf heard of a local fortune teller who was renowned to have a gift of prophecy. Olaf rowed to the remote rocky retreat and asked the prophet if he could foresee anything in his future.

## **A Word of Prophecy**

*"Thou wilt become a renowned king and do celebrated deeds. And that thou not doubt the truth of this answer, listen to this ... "*

The old man predicted that Olaf would soon suffer a mutiny from his men, in which he would be wounded and carried to his ship on his oblong shield. After seven days he would recover and he would be baptised as a Christian. Many men wilt thou bring to faith and baptism, and both to thy own and others' good.

## **Mutiny**

When the mutiny, wounding and recovery happened, precisely as the hermit had predicted, Olaf sought the old man again to enquire how he could possess such knowledge. The man humbly confessed: *"The God of the Christians has blessed me."*

## **Conversion**

When King Ethelred heard of the conversion and baptism of his tormentor, King Olaf, he sent his bishop and officials to present him with royal gifts and to offer Christian fellowship.

## **Confronting Apostasy**

In 995, news from Norway reached Olaf that the leader Earl Haakon, the very man who had murdered Olaf's father, had caused an uproar in the land by demanding the daughters of respected leaders of the community. Although Earl Haakon had originally accepted Christianity, under threat from the German Emperor Otto, he had since reverted to heathenism, restoring many heathen temples and persecuting

Christians. Earl Haakon the Apostate had even gone so far as to offer his best horses and his youngest son, a seventeen year old, as sacrifices to a heathen goddess.

### **For the Love of Justice**

It was at this opportune time that Olaf, the great grandson of King Harald Haarfager, determined to leave England and avenge the death of his father, the exile of his mother, the slavery of his youth and to end the pagan misrule of Earl Haakon.

### **Norway for Christ**

With just five ships Olaf landed in Norway and claimed it for Christ. Soon word reached him that Earl Haakon had angered two landowners by attempting to seize their wives for himself. The growing resistance was greatly strengthened when word reached them that Olaf Trygvesson was on his way to claim the throne and deal with Haakon. Olaf was renowned as the Viking warrior without parallel. His height, strength, athletic stature, superior skills in all the warrior arts, his boldness and ruthlessness were renowned throughout the land. Earl Haakon the Apostate fled and hid in a pit beneath a pig sty, where he was killed by his slave. At a national assembly Olaf was proclaimed King of all Norway. He then travelled throughout the land consolidating his rule and attempting to Christianise the people.

### **Repent or Perish**

Many of his relatives became his first converts and he appointed them as "*Christ's captains.*"  
*"I shall make you great and mighty men for doing this work. All Norway must be Christian or die."*

### **Greater than Thor and Odin**

The scattered settlements on the West and East shores of the Oslofjord readily accepted baptism, but the people in the Northern part of the Vic resisted the Gospel. King Olaf challenged the followers of Thor and Odin to combat and by the end of the year he had convinced everyone that Christ was greater than Thor and Odin.

### **Conversion by Contest and Combat**

As King Olaf moved to the Western and Northern fjords of Norway he challenged the heathen to swimming races, archery contests and mortal combat. Olaf's message was to the point: Repent or die! Those who chose to fight were quickly defeated by Olaf's superior strength and skill.

### **War against Heathenism**

King Olaf declared that the heathen gods were demons. The powers behind the idols were evil spirits. All sorcerers, and those who promoted idolatry and heathenism, were to be banished. Those wizards and priests who resisted were killed and some other incorrigibles were marooned on a rock far off-shore at low tide.

### **Heathen Sacrifice**

At Trondheim, which had been the stronghold of the late heathen King Earl Haakon, Olaf burned the heathen temples and destroyed the idols. The local chiefs rose in rebellion against him. Olaf mustered a large army, and with thirty ships anchored in the River Nid, Olaf invited the local chiefs to a feast where he indicated that he would be willing to perform a heathen sacrifice. When the chiefs were gathered together, Olaf declared:

*"If I am to return to making heathen sacrifices then I will make the greatest sacrifice of all. I will not*

*sacrifice slaves but men. I will sacrifice the greatest of men only."*

Olaf named the most prominent leaders of the opposition.

## **Baptism or Battle**

As the horrified heathen howled in protest, Olaf gave them a straight challenge: "*Baptism or Battle*". He held eleven leaders hostage until everyone was baptised. At nearby Trondheim the local Chief Ironbeard demanded that the king offer sacrifices, as other kings before him had done. Olaf said he would make a sacrifice, walked into the temple and smashed the idol of Thor to pieces with his axe. He then killed Ironbeard and persuaded the rest of the village to abandon their heathen ways and to be baptised as Christians.

## **Defeating all Resistance**

Further North Olaf faced the strong opposition of Chief Raud the Strong. Raud mobilised his army and a fierce sea battle was fought. Olaf's forces overwhelmed Raud's rebels. Raud escaped to take refuge in an island hide-out in Saltenfjord. The narrow channel to the fjord was turbulent and for a week no ship could enter. As Raud attempted to mobilise his witchcraft against the king, Olaf summoned his bishop to read the Gospels and pray. By some miracle his ships managed to negotiate the treacherous and turbulent rocky entrance to the fjord. Soon Raud was apprehended and brought before the king who ordered him to submit to Christ.

*"I will not take your property from you but instead will be your friend, if you make yourself worthy to be so."*

When Raud rejected this offer, with vile blasphemies, Olaf had his men force an adder down his throat.

## **Crusade Completed**

This was the last resistance to Olaf's crusade to eradicate paganism in Norway. Now he focused on winning Iceland and Greenland to Christ. But before he could do so, in the year 1000, King Olaf was killed in the spectacular sea battle of Svold. The pagan queen Sigrid the Haughty, was furious that Olaf had spurned her advances. She mobilised two pagan kings to trap Olaf off the coast of Denmark. Olaf died as courageously as he had lived, rejoicing that he had succeeded in his mission to convince the Vikings of Norway to abandon heathenism, to destroy their idols and to commit to following the Christian Faith.

## **Olaf Haraldsson**

Another prominent Norwegian king who consolidated the Christian Faith in Norway was Olaf Haraldsson. In 1007, when he was just twelve years old, Olaf Haraldsson was sent out as a sea king to raid Sweden. Later, in Denmark, Olaf joined forces with Thorkel the Tall. They together launched raids on Jutland, Frisia, Holland and England. They tormented King Ethelred the Unready, who had already suffered much at the hands of the earlier Olaf Trygvesson. In 1009, Olaf and Thorkel attacked London and East Anglia. They martyred the archbishop of Canterbury and plundered the Cathedral. Thereafter Olaf raided Brittany, France and Spain.

## **Transformed**

Then Olaf had a traumatic spiritual experience and he saw a terrifying vision of Christ. Olaf abandoned his heathen ways and committed to being a Christian. In 1015 he arrived in Norway and proclaimed himself king. He immediately proclaimed the Christian Faith throughout Norway and built numerous churches. Olaf became known as a great lawgiver. With Bishop Grimkell he established the Moster Law.

While most of Norway accepted this, Trondelag continued with their pagan practices and incurred the wrath of King Olaf, who descended on the area fining or executing offenders.

### **Smashing Idols**

At Gulbrandsdal, local pagans confronted him with their huge wooden idol of Thor. Olaf distracted them by drawing their attention to the bright sunrise behind them as a herald of his God. As his enemies turned to face the sunrise, one of Olaf's warriors smashed the idol of Thor and revealed that its wood was rotten. As gold spilled out, large rats, which had evidently been living off the food offerings, scattered. King Olaf pointed out that the gold they had wasted on offerings to Thor's rotten idol would look far better as jewelry on their wives and daughters.

### **Winning Enemies to Christ**

This demonstration of Christ's superiority over Thor convinced the locals to be baptised. As a contemporary report noted: *"They who met as enemies, parted as friends."*

### **Ending Piracy and Plunder**

For twelve years King Olaf ruled Norway and brought Iceland and the Faeroe Islands were discipled in Christianity. Most unpopularly of all he outlawed the Viking raids, which had been considered an essential way of life.

### **A Warrior to the End**

It was at this point that Denmark attempted to regain control over their previous colony and Olaf was forced to flee. In 1030 Olaf attempted to liberate his country from the Danes. At the battle of Stiklestad, heavily outnumbered, more than three to one, Olaf inspired his men with a battle cry: *"Fram, Fram. Kristsmenn, Kraossmenn, Konungsmenn!"* (On. On. Christ's men, Crossmen, kings' men!) Olaf and his men fought boldly and bravely, but were overwhelmed by superior numbers.

### **Success and Sainthood**

As Danish taxes and oppression intensified the Vikings grew to regret their betrayal of King Olaf. Within a year Olaf was popularly proclaimed a Saint and his remains enshrined in Saint Clement. What he had failed to do in life, he achieved in death, to unite and inspire his people to win his country's freedom from Denmark and to be united as an independent Christian kingdom. The cathedral in York was dedicated to Saint Olaf. Olaf was regarded by many medieval leaders as an example of the ideal ruler. A church in Constantinople was dedicated to the memory of King Olaf and the sword that he had wielded at the battle of Stiklestad was hung over the high altar. Olaf is the last Western saint to be accepted by the Eastern Orthodox Church.

### **The Vikings Surrender to Christ**

And so, by a combination of pioneer missionary work, royal favour and combat the ferocious Vikings were convinced to abandon heathenism, destroy their idols, abandon their aggression, cease their violent raids, submit to baptism and commit to following the Christian Faith.

### **Christ Triumphant**

The Vikings came to be convinced that the Christian God is more powerful than all other gods. They saw how He answered the prayers of the Christians. They witnessed miracles. They saw how Christian

kings and missionaries were able to destroy idols and defy the heathen gods and taboos - without suffering any ill effects. They saw that their pagan gods were powerless before the all powerful Jesus Christ. Christ was honored and worshiped as the mighty Warrior who had triumphed over all the powers of death, hell and the grave. He is the risen ascended Christ, King of kings and Lord of lords, with all other authorities in subjection to Him.

*"Yes, all kings shall fall down before Him; all nations shall serve Him."* **Psalms 72:11**

## **Scandinavia for Christ**

The prominence of the Cross in every Scandinavian flag serves as a dramatic testimony to the conversion of the Vikings.

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