

# Björn Again Christian: The Formation of the Scandinavian States

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## Introduction

The introduction of Christianity into Scandinavia began social arms race for control and consolidation, radically changing the political landscape of Scandinavia. The starting shot was in Denmark, during the mid-tenth century, when the ostentatiously pagan Harald Bluetooth proclaimed Christ his God. By the beginning of the twelfth century, the constellation of chiefdoms that dotted the fjords and valleys would be re-aligned into the states of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, with kings and Christ as their guiding lights. The conversion of Northern Europe was touted by medieval chroniclers as a triumphal sign of God's divine plan. In reality, the Christianization of Scandinavia was a social phenomenon spanning centuries and a product of the culture it was trying to re-invent. In the competitive environment of Viking Age Scandinavia, chieftains competed with one another for wealth and prestige, attracting followers and social networks through gifts and obligations. Kings and chieftains incorporated Christianity as a feather in their cap and a new coin to gain supporters, providing baptisms for their retainers and gaining monopolies on religious authority. Rather than a "black to white"<sup>1</sup> religious conversion, Christianization is best seen as a catalytic social tool, enabling the ambitious warlord in a period of nation-building, consolidation, and immense opportunism.

## Conversion in a Scandinavian Context

Defining "conversion" lays the groundwork for discussing the process. In his introduction to *Conversion and Identity in The Viking Age*, Ildar Garipzanov refers to two interpretive models for organizing the transition: 'top-down' and 'bottom-up'.<sup>2</sup> The first model revolves around the idea of 'following the leader', with kings and chieftains acting as shepherds, converting first, with their flock following them. This model relies on a *conversion moment*: powerful figures and inspiring events producing "sudden, dramatic change that deeply transforms personal

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<sup>1</sup> Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia: Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking Of Northern Europe* (London: Yale University Press, 2012), 135, [http://ezproxy.library.dal.ca/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=568247&site=ehost-live&ebv=EB&ppid=pp\\_iv](http://ezproxy.library.dal.ca/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=568247&site=ehost-live&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_iv).

<sup>2</sup> Ildar Garipzanov, "Introduction: Networks of Conversion, Cultural Osmosis, and Identities in the Viking Age," in *Conversion and Identity in the Viking Age*, eds. Ildar Garipzanov and Rosalind Bonté (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2014), 1, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.MISCS-EB.1.102030>.

worldviews, beliefs, and convictions”.<sup>3</sup> This remains the dominant model in historical and political discourse, since it reflects the narrative of early Scandinavian sources. Anthropologists, however, remain skeptical. They favour the second model, a type of grassroots conversion, drawing on individual-scale influences and tracing change through long periods of cultural osmosis.<sup>4</sup> This model focuses on *conversion periods*, explaining *how* Christianity came to be introduced, diffused, then settled into Scandinavia’s social fabric and popular imagination. This approach offers depth and balance, sketching through archeology a “gradual trajectory”<sup>5</sup> of cultural-religious change. While both models are valid separately, they are not mutually exclusive.

In his book, *The Conversion of Scandinavia: Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe*, Dr. Anders Winroth shows how the definition between these two models must be blurred, as conversion is a messier process than narratives portray. Scandinavia was never isolated from the rest of Europe, the borders were porous, with a constant flow of Christian ideas and symbols pouring in through trade and travellers since the days of the Roman Empire.<sup>6</sup> This would be enough to familiarize Scandinavians with “bits and pieces” of Christianity through traders, mercenaries, and travelers<sup>7</sup>. Meanwhile, the “complete package”<sup>8</sup> came from authorized sources such as missionaries and kings, who established institutions and rituals. Conversion emanated from all directions, both top-down and bottom-up. However, the effects of these influences can still be traced into a simple three-step conversion process: growing familiarization, official conversion (through a king or chieftain), and gradual consolidation.<sup>9</sup> Within this process, one can see that the momentum of Christian conversion may be supported gradually by small cultural influences. However, it hinged on the moment when local authorities embraced it. Each region of Scandinavia beat to a different “religious rhythm”<sup>10</sup> based on the dynamics and politics of local social elites choosing to support or hinder the conversion process. While Christianity did not need elites to circulate, their authority and support were vital for it to take firm root. Why kings and chieftains supported Christianity explains how Christianity came to dominate the North.

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<sup>3</sup> Garipzanov, “Networks of Conversion,” 3.

<sup>4</sup> Garipzanov, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Garipzanov, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia*, 129-30.

<sup>7</sup> Winroth, 129.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Garipzanov, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Here, it is important to describe the cultural and political landscape of pre-Christian Scandinavia. In his book *Children of Ash and Elm*, Dr. Neil Price attempts to make sense of the ‘Vikings’, and their era, from the inside out. The term ‘Viking’ is problematic, as it reflects a homogenous view of an entire culture through the lens of horn-helmeted men engaged in violent piracy. While such pirates did exist, they made up a fraction of a complex and dynamic collection of communities, which, at their core, were “strongly multi-cultural and multi-ethnic”<sup>11</sup>. Rather than shaggy barbarians, lacking culture or sensibility, these were well-groomed “fastidious” people, ever conscious of a “thoroughly visual world” of “all-enveloping [...] symbolism and display”.<sup>12</sup> From their dress to their ships, to their runes and poetry—even the patterned tattoos within their skin—their fashion and aesthetics reflected a view of a world imbued with meaning, brimming with life, and “fundamentally permeable”.<sup>13</sup> The diversity and fluidity of the Viking experience is best expressed through Price’s term *religlect*, which is the closest we can come to understanding Viking pagan Norse religion and spiritual mentality. Like dialects, the Norse religion was not systematized or written down, but a cultural reality distinct and coded to each local community. While these beliefs were regulated and managed by local elites, a sense of difference was ever present, which cultivated relative tolerance<sup>14</sup> and “the core of diversity in the Viking mental landscape”.<sup>15</sup> This is not to ennoble the Vikings, whose society was capable of brutal acts of violence and oppression, as seen in their raids and in their keeping of slaves (*thralls*).<sup>16</sup> Rather, it is to emphasize that they were not ignorant or without culture, and thus ripe for Christian colonization. The Vikings lived in world of frontier beliefs, constantly in contact with peoples and ideas other than their own, and conscious of a world beyond their borders.

This interior religious and social experience of the Vikings, their values and beliefs, reflect the wider phenomena of their era. Occurring from 750CE to 1050 CE, the Viking Age was a period marked by a dramatic rise in seaborne piracy, which ultimately culminated into devastating wars for plunder and conquest.<sup>17</sup> However, parallel to this conflict was the mass

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<sup>11</sup> Neil Price, *Children of Ash and Elm: A History of the Vikings* (New York: Basic Books, 2022), 24.

<sup>12</sup> Price, *Children of Ash and Elm*, 108.

<sup>13</sup> Price, 10.

<sup>14</sup> Price, 24.

<sup>15</sup> Price, 207.

<sup>16</sup> Price, 141.

<sup>17</sup> Price, 9.

demographic and cultural shift of the Scandinavian diaspora. This was a period defined by permeability, shifting boundaries, trade, exploration, and colonization. As the Vikings expanded out of the heartland of Scandinavia and into Europe, Russia, and across the Atlantic, they created a wider dynamic of cross-cultural-pollination. Beyond raiding and trading, this was “above all else a period of social transformation”.<sup>18</sup> Over three hundred years, a fragmented Viking world blurred with Christendom, becoming ever more intertwined. At the same time, ever greater wealth and influence concentrated in the hands of the elites who best adapted and took advantage of the changing political landscape.

Chieftains were the dominant political entity of the pre-Christian Scandinavia. Centered on their hall, their power was ostensibly “based on violence”<sup>19</sup>, with the most powerful chieftains commanding the loyalty of the best warrior retinues (*hirðs*). However, behind the violence, Viking Age society revolved around social connections made through wealth and prestige. Scandinavia was a network society, in which the size of one’s social network determined a ruler’s sphere of influence. For the Vikings, friendships (*vinátta*) combined the idea of kinship and “brothers in arms”.<sup>20</sup> They were not private affairs of preference, but social and political contracts with “legal obligations”<sup>21</sup> and “reciprocal duties”<sup>22</sup>, According to Dr. Jon Vidar Sigurdsson, generosity, and the importance of gifts—wealth in this system, “cannot be overstated”<sup>23</sup>, since all relationships were constantly asserted and reaffirmed through an exchange of gifts.<sup>24</sup> In the gift-giving relationship of Viking friendship, chieftains provided their warriors with prestigious goods—special tokens of honour—and their warriors were obligated to give a “countergift” of their loyalty<sup>25</sup>, supporting their lord’s interests in war or in their community. It was through this personal social bond that pre-Christian Scandinavians maintained their society in the absence of a state. However, it was a critically unstable system.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Winroth, 41.

<sup>20</sup> Price, 114.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Scandinavia in the Age of Viking*, trans. Thea Kveiland (New York: Cornell University Press, 2022), chap. 3, “Introduction – Network Society”, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=2889435&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>23</sup> Sigurðsson, *Scandinavia in the Age of Vikings*, chap. 3, “Networks of Power.”

<sup>24</sup> Winroth, 45.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

Authority was not inviolable, and the power of chieftains, even their gifts, were associated with luck.<sup>26</sup> As relationships were cemented through gifts, loyalty and power, quite literally, rested on the wheels of fortune. Opportunism and pragmatism characterized friendship between chieftains,<sup>27</sup> because each represented a mutual threat to their sphere of influence, a potentially greater gift-giver who may make their rule obsolete. Chieftains rivaled each other in extravagant displays of “conspicuous consumption”,<sup>28</sup> displays of wealth to show who could give the best gifts. Gift-giving led to a social arms race: the more exclusive the gift, the higher the esteem of the giver and the more powerful he became.<sup>29</sup> The power of a chieftain was relative to the gifts and prestige another chieftain could offer.<sup>30</sup> It was onto this scene of instability and fractious competition that Christianity came to Scandinavia.

To the ambitious warlord, adopting Christianity offered several advantages. The first was the prestige. Christianity was the religion of the Frankish and Byzantine emperors, whose wealth and power—witnessed through trade missions and Viking raids—made an impact on Scandinavia’s popular imagination.<sup>31</sup> No ideology was more august, and chieftains wanted a share of that status and wealth. Dr. Winroth compares Christianity to other luxury goods, suggesting it was another coin to win support.<sup>32</sup> This was the immediate purpose of bringing the faith to Scandinavia. Distributing rituals and rites, along with religious items, were means of providing a new prestigious gift to their followers, strengthening existing loyalties, while also building new ones. Baptism was particularly useful in this regard. As both a gift and an institution, it provided a powerful bond of association between the baptized and their sponsoring godparent. Scandinavian rulers forged new connections of “religious fellowship”<sup>33</sup> with prestigious European monarchies and they passed down that prestige to their followers. This “quasi-familial relationship”<sup>34</sup> provided a new means, beyond marriage and brotherhood, of creating a community of loyal warriors and supporters. At the same time, a chieftain capable of providing baptism was also capable of withholding it. Christianity formalized power

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<sup>26</sup> Sigurðsson, *Scandinavia in the Viking Age*, chap. 7, “Religion and Power – The Holy Kings.”

<sup>27</sup> Sigurðsson, *Scandinavia in the Age of Vikings*, chap. 3, “Network of Power – To his Friend a Man Should be a Friend / and to His Friend’s Friend too.”

<sup>28</sup> Sigurðsson, “Introduction – Peaceful Region.”

<sup>29</sup> Winroth, 45.

<sup>30</sup> Winroth, 44.

<sup>31</sup> Winroth, 138.

<sup>32</sup> Winroth, 137.

<sup>33</sup> Sigurðsson, *Scandinavia in the Age of Vikings*, chap. 7, “Religion and Power – Kings and the Christian God.”

<sup>34</sup> Winroth, 140.

relationships and reinforced authority, consolidating their social networks. Kings and chieftains became the “well-wishers”<sup>35</sup> of Christianity, building churches, and providing land, for the advantages they gained over their rivals.

The changing religious landscapes of Scandinavia went hand in hand with its politics. As an “elite religion”<sup>36</sup>, chieftains had always played an outsized role within the practice of Norse paganism. Chieftains controlled communication with the gods and acted as the representatives of their friends and community. But while their religious position enabled chieftains to influence their local communities, their role was ambiguous, and pagan religion was inherently decentralized<sup>37</sup>. There was no pagan clergy and no need for religious control<sup>38</sup>. Chieftains did not hold any relative advantage over their rival Norse religious leaders. Christianity, on the other hand, provided the opportunity for a “monopoly cult”<sup>39</sup>. Through the introduction of clergy and a monotheistic system, Scandinavian rulers could lock out their rivals from the religious landscape and create a new hierarchy in the process. Christian kings reaped all the previously mentioned advantages of Christianity in cultivating friendships, while also introducing a religion whose practice and rituals necessitated “specially authorized people and buildings”.<sup>40</sup> A mutually beneficial relationship developed between the ascendent kings and their emerging clergy. The early clergy relied heavily on their royal sponsors, acting faithfully on their behalf, making kings “virtual heads of their ‘national’ churches”.<sup>41</sup> The church represented a new institution through which kings could exercise their authority in the domain of rival chieftains and develop a realm in which “they alone had power”.<sup>42</sup> Following conversion, outlawing paganism cut off a king’s rivals from religion as a path to build networks and spiritual relationships, while the creation of a clergy legitimized the king’s power and aided in the administration of an expanded sphere of influence<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> Sigurðsson, chap. 7, “Religion and Power – Kings and the Christian God.”

<sup>36</sup> Sigurðsson, chap. 7, “Religion and Power.”

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Winroth, 151.

<sup>39</sup> Winroth, 146.

<sup>40</sup> Winroth, 145.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Winroth, 146.

Christian kings were not uncontested. “Kings”, after all, were but Scandinavian chieftains who had adopted a new network for authority in a region still competitive for influence.<sup>44</sup> However, this new system, unlike the old, recognized a single ruler as “the leader and protector of Christianity”.<sup>45</sup> There is only one God and there is only one king. The reaction of the chieftains to the Christian system varied from region to region. Two options presented themselves: baptism and submission or a stance of independence and pagan resistance. Acceptance of Christianity was also accepting the status of being subject to the king, and, thus, the spirit of independence merged with paganism as a form of political resistance.<sup>46</sup> However, many chieftains decided to make a “strategic change of faith”.<sup>47</sup> Like the old system of reciprocal friendship, both chieftains and their new kings got something out of conversion. For chieftains, joining the king meant gaining his friendship, avoiding his wrath, and reaping the political and economic support therein. For kings, baptizing chieftains helped to spread their influence by incorporating their social network into the Christian fold. Conversion remained, first and foremost, a social phenomenon, and the baptism of elites followed with mass baptism of their social groups.<sup>48</sup> Just as Chieftains converted to create a positive relationship with the king, common folk converted to maintain the social network of their community. According to the *Hávamál*, a collection of Norse poems and sayings, losing one’s social network was the worst fate a person could suffer.<sup>49</sup> It wasn’t that people stopped believing paganism privately, but, publicly, a person belonged to their friends and social community.<sup>50</sup> Pre-existing Scandinavian social networks played a decisive role in the spread of Christianity and the consolidation of these many networks into a single kingship. Every region in Scandinavia formed around kings and under Christ at different rates and in different ways which reflected local political contexts. However, the trends which formed Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, sprung from a familiar social and political culture, from which they all developed.

## Denmark

Denmark was the trendsetter of Scandinavia and the dominant political force for most of the Viking Age. The power of Denmark came from its population, which consistently dwarfed its

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<sup>44</sup> Winroth, 43.

<sup>45</sup> Sigurðsson, chap. 7, “Religion and Power – Kings and the Christian God.”

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

Scandinavian neighbours. Denmark's densely populated coastal regions hugging the Kattegat straight encompassed half of the approximately 650,000 people living in Scandinavia around the ninth century.<sup>51</sup> Sometime in the eighth century, due to pressures from its continental border in the South, the Danes began consolidating under "war leaders".<sup>52</sup> Evidence for these early centralizing rulers can be seen in the massive engineering projects of the eighth century, the Kanhave Canal and the Dannevirke<sup>53</sup>, projects that asserted geographic control and would have required substantial resources. However, this early kingship was unstable, with partitioned inheritance and new kings elected through assemblies (*þings*).<sup>54</sup> The integrity of the kingdom was weak, and power remained "fluid"<sup>55</sup> amongst rival chieftains. One of these early Danish war leaders turned to Christianity for an edge. In 826, at the hands of Louis the Pious, exiled king Harald Klak became the first Scandinavian ruler to be baptized, along with his network of 400 supporters<sup>56</sup>. He joined Christendom to gather support from the Frankish network and gain an advantage over his rival, King Horik.<sup>57</sup> He failed to retake the kingship, but he was not the last Danish king to turn to Christianity to secure his throne.

Denmark fundamentally changed under King Harald Bluetooth (911-984). Side by side, at the king's residence in Jelling, two monuments tell the story of Harald and Denmark's conversion. The first are the Jelling Grave mounds, which Harald dedicated to his father, Gorm, after his death in 958 or 959. These graves were consciously and flagrantly pagan.<sup>58</sup> Filled with grave goods and richly furnished with outdated pagan fashion, Harald was gesturing to times of old. As a pagan king and a war leader of Denmark, he was using a traditional identity in asserting their independence from Christian rulers seeking to extend their influence across his border in the South.<sup>59</sup> Already, Frankish and German missionaries, like Ansgar of Corvey, christened as the "Apostle of the North"<sup>60</sup>, had been carrying out missions into Denmark from their seat at Hamburg-Bremen. Harald's homage to paganism was about securing his network by associating

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<sup>51</sup> Sigurðsson, *Scandinavia in the Age of Vikings*, chap. 1, "The Powerful Danish Kings – Haral, Svein, and Cnut."

<sup>52</sup> Sigurðsson, *Scandinavia in the Age of Vikings*, chap. 1, "The Powerful Danish Kings – South Scandinavia: The Realm of the Danish Kings."

<sup>53</sup> Sigurðsson, *Scandinavia in the Age of Vikings*, chap. 1, "The Powerful Danish Kings – South Scandinavia: The Realm of the Danish Kings."

<sup>54</sup> Sigurðsson, chap. 1, "The Powerful Danish Kings – South Scandinavia: The Realm of the Danish Kings."

<sup>55</sup> Winroth, 157.

<sup>56</sup> Garipzanov, 12.

<sup>57</sup> Tracey Marie Legel, "The Introduction of Christianity to Scandinavia" (M.A. thesis., University of Louisville, 2006), 20.

<sup>58</sup> Winroth, 112-3.

<sup>59</sup> Winroth., 113.

<sup>60</sup> Legel, "The Introduction of Christianity to Scandinavia," 24.

his dynasty with tradition and enacting “a conscious attempt at building community”<sup>61</sup> to resist Christianity. Yet, in a few short years, Harald’s strategy changed.

The second monument is the Jelling Stone. Deliberately laced at the exact midpoint between the two grave mounds, this runestone tells Harald’s own story. Below a gloriously crafted depiction of Christ, it reads: “King Harald had this monument made in memory of his father Gorm and in memory of his mother Thyre; that Harald who won for himself all Denmark and Norway, and made the Danes Christian”.<sup>62</sup> Harald changed his alignment to the Christian world and did so with just as much flair as when he defended paganism. His motivations, however, remained the same. This was about guarding his influence and independence from rival powers. Unlike Harald Klak, Bluetooth would not be under the sway or obligation of another ruler giving him the gift of Christianity. As the first ruling Christian in Scandinavia, it was not Germans that gave him Christianity or converted the Danes, it was Harald himself and Harold alone. In styling himself as the converter of the Danes, he signaled his authority over the kingdom and the Danish church to come.<sup>63</sup> He further established garrisons throughout Denmark<sup>64</sup> and outlawed paganism in the mid-960s CE<sup>65</sup>, until there was no room left for rival chieftains or religions. As Dr. Winroth puts it, for the first time there was “a king *of* Denmark, rather than a king *in* Denmark or a king *of* the Danes”.<sup>66</sup> In 965, the Jelling stone signaled the beginning of Christian kings of Northern Europe, and a consolidation process that built the first and most dominant Scandinavian state.

## Sweden

In contrast to Denmark, Sweden was the slowest kingdom to consolidate and convert in the North. This was not for lack of interest or effort. Sweden developed kingship early on<sup>67</sup>, but the region was chronically fractious. The area known as “Sweden” was divided amongst two peoples: the Swedes of Mälaren and the Geats in Götaland.<sup>68</sup> These regions and people were split by a vast forested area between them, dampening communication and cohesion. Despite the Swedes developing kingship early on, their authority was diluted by various chieftains that held

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<sup>61</sup> Winroth, 13.

<sup>62</sup> Winroth, 114.

<sup>63</sup> Winroth, 151.

<sup>64</sup> Winroth, 145.

<sup>65</sup> Winroth, 151.

<sup>66</sup> Winroth, 145.

<sup>67</sup> Sigurðsson, *Scandinavia in the Age of Vikings*, chap. 2, “Kings and Chieftains – Geats and Swedes.”

<sup>68</sup> Sigurðsson, chap. 2, “Kings and Chieftains – Geats and Swedes.”

sway. As early as 827, a year after King Harold Klak's conversion, King Björn of Sweden invited Louis the Pious to send a mission to his realm<sup>69</sup>, likely to gain his favour and support. This mission was led by Ansgar of Corvey, the most famous of the North's "missionary pioneers"<sup>70</sup>. In the first of his two evangelizing missions, Ansgar and his companion, Witmar, set sail for the town of Birka on a merchant ship in 829.<sup>71</sup> They were almost immediately attacked by pirates and had to swim to safety. Although Ansgar and Witmar eventually make it to Birka, founding a church and returning home safely<sup>72</sup>, the dangers of conversion were present to see. The mission of Birka would be destroyed by an anti-Christian riot in 839.<sup>73</sup> The early kings of the Swedes could not protect missionaries or effectively promote Christianization without popular support, and anti-Christian sentiment flared up into violence. In 852, when Ansgar asked to return to Birka on a second mission, the new King Olaf communed a counsel of chieftains to determine if he should permit him. They cast lots to see if the Norse gods favoured it<sup>74</sup>, and, after he had secured their support, the king then convened the *þing* of Birka, which also gave consent. These meetings and councils demonstrate how diluted the king of the Swedes' power was at this time. It also demonstrates a crucial trend amongst all Scandinavian kings, which was the need to rule with "the greatest possible consensus surrounding their choices".<sup>75</sup> So long as the king and his supporters were weak, the balance of power between chieftains was maintained and Christianization was out of the king's control.

Following Ansgar's missions to Birka, conversion in Sweden lapses into a long period of infighting and disorder. Sources are not always in agreement as to what occurred during this time, but they share a narrative of political violence, and "an epic struggle between Christianity and paganism".<sup>76</sup> The Swedish kingdom had not yet come together. It appears that missionary kings used violence when persuasion failed to turn chieftains to their side. This narrative of a religious war reflects the tendency amongst chroniclers and saga writers to paint Christianization as a war of black and white, the great battle between heathenism and Christendom. The imagination is fueled by the presence of Uppsala, a pagan site like no other, and an apparent stronghold of the

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<sup>69</sup> Legel, 75.

<sup>70</sup> Winroth, 104.

<sup>71</sup> Winroth, 103.

<sup>72</sup> Legel, 76.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Sigurðsson, chap. 2 "Kings and Chieftains – Geats and Swedes."

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Winroth, 117.

old faith. While pagan resistance continued to flourish in central Sweden among stubborn chieftains<sup>77</sup>, Christian kings tried to bring them to heel.

King Olaf Skötkonung (990-1022) was the first Christian king of Sweden<sup>78</sup> and the most zealous of the missionary kings trying to pacify the realm. He aligned himself with the Christian authority of Hamburg-Bremen, rigorously sought to convert his subjects, and attempted to destroy the temple of Uppsala.<sup>79</sup> The pagans did not yield. Ultimately, Olaf and his disgruntled subjects gathered at a *þing*, in which the king's religious authorities were restrained, not the other way around. Olaf was permitted to build churches, enabling the worship of Christianity to continue, but the king was prohibited from enforcing conversion any further.<sup>80</sup> This settlement continued to slow Christianization and Swedish kings were not able to consolidate a religious monopoly. In 1080, King Inge the Elder would continue where Skötkonung left off, outlawing sacrifices at Uppsala and attempting to destroy it.<sup>81</sup> He was defeated and banished by an anti-Christian uprising, who crucially asserted that Inge had failed in his religious duties as king by not performing the necessary sacrifices to gods.<sup>82</sup> Kingship had obligations to pagans too.

Although Inge later returned and finally defeated pagan opposition, Swedish kingship struggled to gain an advantage over the various obstinate authorities of their realm. When dealing with Christianization, the violent conflict between kings and pagan holdouts reflected “raw realities of power”.<sup>83</sup> Without the willing support of local chieftains joining kings in “friendship”, the introduction of Christianity was a centuries-long conflict between irreconcilable positions. Christian Kings could not perform the rites heathens required or facilitate the autonomy chieftains demanded, and kings would accept nothing less than their conversion, and thus, subjugations. Friendship was impossible when chieftains decided not to convert willingly. While Sweden eventually consolidated and Christianized, it was the last of the three kingdoms to do so, with no glorious conversion moment, or mass baptism in religious fellowship. Instead of bringing the chiefdoms together, cultural networks drove the country apart.

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<sup>77</sup> Legel, 85.

<sup>78</sup> Legel, 82.

<sup>79</sup> Legel, 84.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Legel, 86.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Winroth, 118.

## Norway

Perhaps the most impressive and dynamic success story of Scandinavia is the development of Norway. The chiefdoms of this Northernmost region were the least centralized, the most sparsely spread, and lacked the early kingships of Denmark and Sweden. And yet, between the ninth and twelfth centuries, this nation would be built and defined by charismatic, well-travelled kings, both pagan and Christian. These kings shaped the political and religious developments of Norway and influenced the political order of the whole of Scandinavia.

The first king to consolidate Norway was the pagan Harald Fairhair. From his domain in Vestfold, Harald conquered chieftain by chieftain, and made a critical alliance with the earls of Lade, securing the key territories of Trøndelag.<sup>84</sup> At the battle of Hafrsfjord in 880, Harald defeated the chieftains of Vestlandet, carving out a burgeoning kingdom in the western counties and fjords of Norway. Harald was a pagan through and through, but made great gains through the old Norse ways, garnering him support and influential connections in an expanding network. His son, Erik Bloodaxe, married Harald Bluetooth's sister<sup>85</sup>, while his other son, Håkon "Adalsteinfostre", was fostered in the court of King Æthelstan of England. When Harold sent Håkon to a Christian court, he certainly knew baptism would follow. In sending Håkon to Æthelstan, Harold built a personal friendship with the English king and a bridge between Christianity and Norway.<sup>86</sup> When Håkon returned to Norway and took the throne from his brother, Erik, he did so as a Christian.<sup>87</sup>

The first Norse Christian king had a simple goal: introduce the English model to Norway. Having been raised Christian and under English organization, Håkon sought to imitate their centralized institution, to turn his inheritance of "an overgrown chiefdom" that stretched across Vestlandet<sup>88</sup>, into a kingdom. It was essential to consolidate if Norway and his kingship were to survive. After developing his *hirð*, his retinue of warriors and managers, he reformed the kingdom in three ways. Firstly, he replaced the democratic and grand gathering of the *þing* with regional *lawthings*<sup>89</sup>, which effectively isolated chieftains. This strengthened the king's ability to

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<sup>84</sup> Sigurðsson, *Scandinavia in the Age of Vikings*, chap. 2, "Kings and Chieftains – The Kingdoms of Vestlandet."

<sup>85</sup> Sigurðsson, chap 2. "Kings and Chieftains – The Kingdoms of Vestlandet."

<sup>86</sup> Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "Conversion and Identity in the Viking Age: Conversion and Identity in the Viking-Age North: Some Afterthoughts" *Parergon* 34, no.2 (2017): 229.

<sup>87</sup> Sigurðsson, chap. 2, "Kings and Chieftains – The Kingdoms of Vestlandet."

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Sigurðsson, *Scandinavia in the Age of Vikings*, chap. 2, "Lawthings, the Naval Levy, and Christianity."

negotiate and establish new laws separately, laying the foundation for royal law. The second reform was a naval levy, the *leidangð*, modeled off the system of Alfred the Great.<sup>90</sup> While it remained largely organized by local chieftains, it strengthened Håkon's defenses against Danish incursion and continued to develop into a royally administered system.<sup>91</sup> Finally, in 934, he attempted to introduce Christianity.<sup>92</sup> Despite importing English bishops<sup>93</sup> and making headway in his core of Vestlandet<sup>94</sup>, Håkon met fierce opposition from his chieftains. He became the first king to propagate and apostatize Christ. But his reign did not last. Seeing this new Norway as a threat, Harald Bluetooth deposed Håkon and supported the sons of Erik Bloodaxe to the throne.<sup>95</sup> Although Håkon failed to make Norway Christian, he converted its institutions to an English model, tilling the ground for further consolidation and Christianization under future kings.

Two kings fulfilled what Håkon could not. Both were named Olaf, and, like Håkon, both were converted abroad. Olaf Tryggvason gained his fame, his fortune, and his faith, as a viking raiding the Baltic and North Sea. Alongside Svein Forkbeard, the Christian king of the Danes, Olaf attacked England and pressured king Ethelred into making a settlement. In 994, they exacted a *danegeld*, a war-ransom, of sixteen thousand pounds. At the same time, King Ethelred baptised Olaf, bringing him prestige and a new network.<sup>96</sup> Olaf now had "two kinds of capital he could spend to gain followers: silver and Christianity".<sup>97</sup> With this new wealth, Olaf returned to Norway and confronted the pagan king Håkon Sigurdsson.

Like Harald Bluetooth before his conversion, King Håkon had attempted to consolidate power in the old ways, promoting paganism by building temples and expanding his social network through gift-giving until he became known as "the generous chieftain".<sup>98</sup> In 995, Olaf and Håkon confronted each other, rallying support using their wealth and religious networks. They used the same techniques, but Olaf's were more effective.<sup>99</sup> Håkon's supporters flocked to Olaf's side. This was thanks to his loot, but also his religious fellowship. His network extended

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<sup>90</sup> Sigurðsson, chap. 2, "Lawthings, the Naval Levy, and Christianity."

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Winroth, 115.

<sup>93</sup> Sigurðsson, chap. 2, "Lawthings, the Naval Levy, and Christianity."

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Sigurðsson, *Scandinavia in the Age of Vikings*, chap. 2, "The Earls of Lade."

<sup>96</sup> Winroth, 115.

<sup>97</sup> Winroth, 143.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

to the kings of England and beyond. Christianity was paying dividends for Olaf, which explains why the next five years of his rule would be dedicated to the destruction of paganism and the promotion of Christianity. He broke down temples and outlawed sacrifice, doing the work of a missionary king, but also an ambitious man.<sup>100</sup> In annihilating paganism, he persevered his advantage and uprooted the religious networks of his enemies. In the year 1000, Svein Forkbeard turned on his former viking-ally and invaded Norway with the help of the king of Sweden, Olof Skötkonung, and the pagan Earl Erik, defeating King Olaf at the battle of Svolder.<sup>101</sup> Olaf's rise and fall proved that Christianization had never been about piety. Christian kings fought Christian kings and allied with pagans when they felt their power was under threat. The Christian network had grown across Scandinavia, but its threads were overlapping into each other's domains.

The king to secure Norway's kingship and Christian identity would do so at the cost of his life. Olaf II Haraldsson was baptised in Rouen, Normandy, in the winter of 1013-1014.<sup>102</sup> A distant member of the Fairhair dynasty, he returned to Norway to play for the throne and met with Earl Svein Håkonsson in the sea battle of Nesjar in 1016.<sup>103</sup> According to an eyewitness, Sigvat Throdarson, Olaf conquered through his generous reputation which preceded him. Men flocked to Olaf's banner as the "generous leader", while the forces of "friendless" Svein, who "saved his wealth", dwindled and died away.<sup>104</sup> Despite being Christian, Olaf II could still play the dynamics of Viking Age gift-giving politics, and his rule reflects a much gentler integration of Christianity into Norse norms. He was organized, introducing Christianity by laws rather than arms. In 1024, at the *þing* in Moster, he helped to establish the church of Norway, and he further established a law code that promoted Christian rituals and prohibited pagan practices.<sup>105</sup> To make the transition easier, he is supposed to have preserved the traditions of beer feasts, integrating the practice by blessing the beer and making toasts "in honour of Christ and the Blessed Virgin for good years and peace".<sup>106</sup> Despite playing his cards well, entrenched pagans joined Cnut of Denmark in deposing Olaf II, who fled to Russia in 1028.<sup>107</sup> When he returned to regain his throne, he died in the battle of Stiklestad in 1030.<sup>108</sup> While being popular in life, Olaf

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Sigurðsson, chap 2. "The Earls of Lade."

<sup>102</sup> Winroth, 116.

<sup>103</sup> Winroth., 41.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Legel, 46.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 46-7.

<sup>107</sup> Winroth, 116.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

II became folklore in death. His attempt to retake the throne from Danish interference was seen as a story of Norwegian independence; he became a national hero. His passion for Christianity became part of that spirit of independence<sup>109</sup>, entwining Christian and national identity. In 1041, Olaf became the patron saint of Norway, and “only the Virgin Mary was more popular”.<sup>110</sup> Christianity was now part and parcel to the Norwegian identity. According to Karen Larsen, by 1030, “any return to the old faith was out of the question”.<sup>111</sup> The cult of Saint Olaf unified Norway under the banner of divine kingship, creating a kingdom to rival that of the Danes and the Swedes.

## Conclusion

At the Göta River, two meetings took place which marked the end of the Viking Age social arms race. The first was in 1041, when the son of Olaf II, Magnus the Good, made an agreement with Harthcanut of Denmark. The rivals agreed to inherit each other’s kingdoms in the event of each other’s death, drawing up the borders of their kingdoms, and apparently leaving as friends.<sup>112</sup> The second was in 1101, when the three kings of Scandinavia finalized the first official borders of their kingdoms.<sup>113</sup> Not only did these face-to-face meetings formalize the formation of the kingdoms of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, they also recognized them as peers. The new reality of Scandinavia was not one of many chieftains competing over social networks, but one of stable monarchies with recognized domains of influence and under the same religious fellowship. Although the fluidity of paganism and gift-friendship was over, it was from this competitive environment that local warlords became feudal kings, striving to formalize their networks into nations. Christianization and consolidation went hand in hand: “Just as there could be only one God and one church, there could be only one king.”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Legel, 48.

<sup>110</sup> Sigurðsson, *Scandinavia in the Age of Vikings*, chap. 7, “Religion and Power – St. Olaf.”

<sup>111</sup> Legel, 48.

<sup>112</sup> Sigurðsson, chap. 2, “The Earls of Lade.”

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Winroth, 160.

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