

From Mjöl­nir to the Crucifix: The Means and Motives of Viking Conversion

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The tales tell of a woodcarver forced to his craft. His hands—steady, the tools—the same, but he did not carve wood. Answering the call to vengeance, the sons of Ragnar Lodbrok supervised the ritual. King Ælla unwillingly served Odin as a sacrifice. The blood from the Northumbrian king welled into the grooves of the eagle forming on his back under the craftsman’s chisel.¹ Tradition holds that the ritual would continue. The blade would reenter the king’s trembling flesh, this time separating rib from spine. The executioner would reach inside, and grasping the lungs, would pull them outside the body cavity to render the “wings” of the *blood eagle* ritual.² About that time, not far away, a monk sat at his scriptorium, illuminating a manuscript containing the statement, “But I say unto you that you hear, Love your enemies, do good to them who hate you, Bless them that curse you, and pray for them who despitefully use you. And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek, offer also the other; and him that taketh away thy cloak, forbid not to take thy coat also.”³ The woodcarver and his masters, as well as the monk firmly believed in the validity and purity of their actions stemming from two religions vastly different. How then, could the Viking culture—immersed in gore—embrace the call to forgiveness and gentleness prescribed by the Christian scriptures?

Religion embodies the essence of a culture, and of a people. Therefore, in order to better understand these influential figures, we must come to terms with a landmark in their belief—their conversion to Christianity. The Vikings accepted Christianity on several different levels and for several different reasons. To the kings and lords, the new religion served as a means of unifying kingdoms and making peace with foes. Actual conversion, however, had to take place

¹ *Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok*, trans. Chris Van Dyke (Denver: Cascadian Publishing, 2003), 68.

² Paul Cavill, *The Vikings: Fear and Faith* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2001), 13.

³ Luke 6: 27-29, NKVJ.

among the people themselves. Similarities with the old pagan religion, as well as parallels in way of life, facilitated the shift from paganism to Christianity.

In order to fully understand and appreciate the causes and effects of this conversion, we must first establish a basic knowledge of the Vikings as a people. For our purposes, the Vikings came from the modern Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland. Scholars generally confine the Viking Age to the years spanning between the late eighth- and mid-eleventh-centuries, with a few isolated raiding attempts occurring into the thirteenth-century. During these years, Norsemen savaged the coastlines of medieval Europe, earning the name *Vikingr*, which means “sea-borne pirate or raider”⁴ in Old Norse.⁵ The seasonal looting of monasteries and other vulnerable establishments throughout Europe supplemented their regular income from farming, fishing, and trading. The Vikings focused their initial attentions on monasteries because of the abundance in gilded religious objects, left in the hands of monks ill-equipped to fend off the Northern invaders. How ironic that their most lucrative targets represented a faith they would eventually embrace.

More often than not, conversions to Christianity originated as a bargaining chip: European rulers frequently included baptism in the appeasement agreements they arranged with the invading Vikings. Although an undisputed point among scholars, we must acknowledge this imposition as imperative to the spread of Christianity amongst the pagan aggressors. The Europeans hoped that if the Viking leaders should convert to Christianity, then the former devotees of the old religion would feel a sense of loyalty toward, and an alliance with, the victimized Christian nations. In theory, the raids would cease.

⁴ Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald, eds., *The Viking Age* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), xvi.

⁵ In these endeavors, the Vikings expanded their scope of influence west to North America and as far east as Constantinople and the Middle East.

From such arrangements—as first seen in the agreement between the victorious Anglo-Saxon king Alfred the Great and the Danish Guthrum (c. 886)—the Viking leaders stood to gain *land* in exchange for allegiance to law and Lord, and the desperate Europeans, a reprieve from the northern onslaught. Alfred’s conditions gave the Danes equal value under the law, as well as English land that would eventually form the region known as the Danelaw⁶. This agreement brought about a period of relative peace, as well as a general adherence to Christianity.

The security of land proved the key to maintaining Christian ties and, therefore, peace. In dealing with Hæsten, another Danish chieftain, Alfred made no promise of land. Therefore, the Dane did not have to abide by the new law or religion since land possession did not secure his allegiance. Over a hundred years after Alfred’s first successful pact with the Danes, Æthelred the Unready attempted to alleviate the new wave of raids that had once again plagued the English coastline, but he, too, neglected to make land or law provisions. As Paul Cavill, professor of Old English at the University Nottingham, astutely observes, “The Vikings did not all embrace baptism, they certainly did not confuse tribute with gift-giving, and raiding remained for them an attractive alternative to trading. Without the Vikings being tied to the land, religious, social, and commercial sanctions could have little effect.”⁷

In his *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, Adam of Bremen describes these desired political effects of Harold Bluetooth Gormsson’s conversion. The German chronicler writes:

Harald [Bluetooth], the king of the Danes, noted for his piety and bravery, had long before benignantly admitted Christianity to his kingdom and held it firm until the end. Hence, also, he strengthened his rule by holiness and justice and extended his authority

⁶ This immense geographical area extended to the northeast from the line drawn between London and Chester, and it provided a place for the Danes to settle and form a new life intermixed with the existing Anglo-Saxon inhabitants.

⁷ Paul Cavill, *Fear and Faith*, 226.

beyond the sea over the Norwegians and the Angles. Emund, Eric's son, then ruled in Sweden. Since he was allied with Harald, he was favorably disposed toward the Christians who came there. In Norway, Haakon [the Bad, ca 971-995] was the ruler. When the Norwegians drove him from the realm because he had acted haughtily, Harald valorously restored him and made him well-disposed to the worshippers of Christ...⁸

Not only did Christianity have a unifying effect between nations, but it also solidified a king's authority over a single kingdom. As with most of medieval Europe, lesser kings and chieftains ruled over smaller kingdoms that lay within our modern demarcations of nations. "The fact that these so-called Vikings for Christ were also state-builders is not a coincidence," report Viking experts at Brock University Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald, "and they, like Harald Bluetooth and others, recognize the potential of Christianity, in terms of both doctrine and church organization, as a means to strengthen kinship and promote unity."⁹ In short, Christianity bonded the independent kingdoms together under a king enterprising enough to use the religion as a cultural adhesive.

Scholars have long-attributed the conversion of Denmark to Harald Bluetooth because after an unsuccessful war with the Christian emperor Otto the Red of Germany (r. 955 – 983), "King Harold adopted Christianity...Everyone in Denmark was converted to Christianity since the emperor would settle for nothing less."¹⁰ The famed Greater Jelling Stone (a rune-stone) sings the king's praises in this respect to this day:

King Harold ordered this monument
to be carved in memory of Gorm,
his father,
and Thyrvе [Thorvi], his mother.

⁸ Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, trans. F.J. Tschan, in *The Viking Age*, eds. Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 386.

⁹ Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald, *The Viking Age*, 423.

¹⁰ *Knytlinga saga*, trans. Angus A. Somerville, in *Danakonunga sögur*, ed. Bjarni Gudnason, Íslensk fornrit XXXV (Reykjavík, 1982), in *The Viking Age*, eds. Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 431.

[This was] the
Harald who conquered
Denmark
and all Norway
and made the Danes Christian.¹¹

Iceland underwent a similar unification near the turn of the eleventh-century. The *Íslendingabók*, an early Icelandic history, describes how the lawgiver Thorgeir used the religion to bring the Icelandic people together: “Thorgeir began speaking, and told them he considered that their affairs were in a sorry state if they could not all have the same law code throughout the land. He used many arguments to exhort them not to let this happen, saying that it would lead to trouble and there was a strong likelihood of civil unrest, which would ruin the country.”¹² The account goes on to credit the solution to Thorgeir. “And I think it would be a good idea,” the lawgiver allegedly determined, “not to leave the decision to the extremists, but to arrive at a compromise, so that each side gets something and we will have one law and a single faith. For sure, if we tear up the law, we tear up the country.”¹³

Viking Christianity may have originated at the top of the social stratum, but its survival depended on the receptiveness of the common man. In a democratic display, King Olaf of Sweden informs the missionary Saint Anskar (d. 865) that although he may approve the practice of Christianity, the power to accept it ultimately rests with the people. Saint Anskar’s hagiography (written by the saint’s pupil, Rimbert) records the king’s words at Birka:

In former times there have been clergy who have been driven out by a rising of the people and not by the command of the king. On this account I have not the power, nor do

¹¹ Lis Jacobsen and Erik Molte, *Danmarks runeindskrifter* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaards Forlag, 1941-43), in *The Viking Age*, eds. Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 430.

¹² *Íslendingabók*, trans. Angus A. Somerville, ed. Jakob Benediktsson, *Íslensk fornrit I* (Reykjavík, 1986), in *The Viking Age*, eds. Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 403.

¹³ *Ibid.*, qtd. on 404.

I dare, to approve the objects of your mission until I can determine our gods by the casting of lots and until I can determine the will of the people in regard to this matter. Let your messenger attend with me the next assembly and I will speak to the people on your behalf. And if they approve your desire and the gods consent, that which you have asked shall be successfully carried out, but if it should turn out otherwise, I will let you know. It is our custom that the control of public business of every kind should rest with the whole people and not with the king.¹⁴

Evidences of democracy appear on several other occasions. Adam of Bremen's *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum* (*The History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*) gives one such example. "They [the Swedes] have kings of ancient lineage," he writes, "nevertheless, the power of these kings depends on the will of the people, for what all in common approve, that the king must confirm, unless it be that his decision, which they sometimes reluctantly follow, seems preferable."¹⁵ Former professor of Nordic Archaeology at the University of Copenhagen Johannes Brønsted provides insight that further reveals the tendency to leave religion up to the people—King Haakon the Good of Norway (d. 960) "was sensible enough to refrain from forcing Christianity upon completely heathen peasants."¹⁶ We see this same phenomenon in Denmark, as well, where Brønsted states that "in general, it may be asserted that Christianity was established in Denmark with effective assistance from the monarchy, but not by royal compulsion."¹⁷

The Scandinavians adopted Christianity in, by no means, a neat and uniform pattern. Some regions, such as Denmark, demonstrated a generally receptive attitude to the new religion. Others, however, namely Sweden, hostilely routed Christianity and its proponents more than

¹⁴ Bishop Rimbert. *Vita Anskarii*, trans. C.H. Robinson (London: 1921), rev. P.E. Dutton (Ontario: 2004), in *The Viking Age*, eds. Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), qtd. on 381.

¹⁵ Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, 10.

¹⁶ Johannes Brønsted, *The Vikings: The Background to a Fierce and Fascinating Civilization*, trans. Kalle Skov., 1960 reprint (New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1986), 79.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 309.

once. Upon Saint Anskar's arrival to Birka, the people had received a threat from the gods. The messenger warned, "...now you are keeping back the usual sacrifices and are slothful in paying your voluntary offerings; you are, moreover, displeasing us greatly by introducing a foreign god in order to supplant us. If you want to enjoy our good will, offer the sacrifices that have been omitted and give greater vows. And do not receive the worship of any other god, who teaches that which is opposed to our teaching, nor pay attention to his service..."¹⁸ As we shall later examine in more depth, at times the old ways still held great power over the people—even after conversion.

Unlike the relative religious freedom offered during the previous reigns, Norway under Olaf Tryggvason (Olaf I, r. 995-1000) had no choice but to convert. The great Icelandic chronicler Snorri Sturluson writes of Olaf Tryggvason's converting methods in his *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*: "Olaf immediately informed all his people that he could impose Christianity on everyone in his kingdom...When everyone in the eastern part of the Vik was baptized, King Olaf moved to the northern part and ordered the population there to accept Christianity. He inflicted terrible punishments on those who opposed him: some were killed, some were mutilated, and others were driven from the country...The people submitted to Christianity because none of the farmers dared rebel against King Olaf and so, wherever he went, everyone was baptized."¹⁹ The account continues to relate Olaf Tryggvason's mission and includes a situation where the king gave an assembly an ultimatum—either they convert, or he will sacrifice their nobles to the old gods. A poem from the same time period describes the poet's feelings toward the obligatory conversion:

¹⁸ Bishop Rimbert, *Vita Anskarii*, 380.

¹⁹ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, trans. Angus A. Somerville, ed. Bjarni Adalbjarnarson, Íslensk fornrit XXVI-XXVIII (Reykjavík, 2002), in *The Viking Age*, eds. Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 387.

...reluctantly—for Odin's rule
 always pleased the poet—
 I show hostility to the husband
 of Frigg [Odin], for I follow Christ

...
 For the followers of the faith
 of Sogn's prince [King Olaf], sacrifices are banned;
 we must shun most of all the
 age-old ordinances of the norms;
 all men throw Odin's
 tribe to the tempest;
 I am forced to forsake Njord's
 kin [the gods] to pray to Christ.²⁰

To a lesser (and less bloody) degree, Alfred the Great used his political control over the Danelaw to introduce his new subjects to Christianity. As a devout Christian, the Anglo-Saxon king heavily relied on biblical law—specifically Exodus and the Ten Commandments—when he established his decrees, especially the prohibitions against other gods and making idols. Cavill interestingly notes that Alfred began with the words of Moses as quoted by Christ and the Apostles and then affirmed and promoted himself in the lineage of lawgiving.²¹ Because the Danes considered Alfred to have a just claim to the throne based on a common descent, this subtle influx of Christian principles would have fallen on ears that already respected the law of the land.

Aside from the external pressure of rulers, internalizing the beliefs of the new religion by the common Scandinavian, rested with his or her own volition. Plainly put, the individual would have had to make a personal decision to replace the old with the new. Similarities between the content of the pagan myths and that of the Christian Scriptures would have undoubtedly facilitated this transition. Both traditions tell of a colossal flood that destroyed the earth. British

²⁰ *Halfredar saga*, trans. Angus A. Somerville, in *Vatnsdoela saga*, ed. Einar Ól Sveinsson, Íslensk fornrit VIII (Reykjavík, 1939), in *The Viking Age*, eds. Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 394.

²¹ Paul Cavill, *Fear and Faith*, 90.

translator Kevin Crossley-Holland's modern retelling describes the catastrophe. "His [Ymir, a frost giant] wounds were like springs; so much blood streamed from them, and so fast, that the flood drowned all the frost giants except for Bergelmir and his wife. They embarked in their boat—it was made out of a hollowed tree trunk—and rode on a tide of gore."²² This should recall the biblical account of Noah (found in Genesis 6 – 7), in which Noah and his family escape God's judgment with an ark filled with animals. Many argue that religions from across the globe share this story, making its origin dubious. We, however, seek to find parallels, not to procure a pedigree of the myth.

Before further analyzing these two traditions, we must first familiarize ourselves with the Norse deities. Examining the entire pantheon of pagan gods would only overcomplicate and detract from the issue, but noting several key figures will shed light on their significance in the cross-religion similarities. At the head of the gods sits Odin, the ruthless *Allfather* who presides over everything. Mythology casts him as the god of war, poetry, and sorcery, and Adam of Bremen describes the terrible god as "the Furious"²³ after his journey to the great temple at Uppsala. Odin fathered several sons, two of which particularly interest our study. The better-known son Thor ruled the hearts of the common man. Adam of Bremen continues to describe this more affable deity: "...the mightiest of them, Thor, occupies a throne in the middle of the chamber... Thor, they say, presides over the air, which governs the thunder and lightning, the winds and rains, fair weather and crops."²⁴

²² Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Norse Myths*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 4.

²³ Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, 65.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

Odin's other son, Baldr, does not play a large part in the overall scheme of the lore until the end of the world, Ragnarök.²⁵ Snorri describes Baldr as being “the best of them and everyone sings his praises. He is so fair of face and bright that a splendour radiates from him, and there is one flower so that is likened to Baldr's brow; it is the whitest of all flowers. From that you can tell how beautiful his body is, and how bright his hair. He is the wisest of the gods, and the sweetest-spoken, and the most merciful...”²⁶

Loki, conversely, embodies the exact opposite character of the faultless Baldr. This god—a frost giant by birth, and Odin's foster-brother by chance—causes the majority of the gods' strife. Again, Snorri elaborates: “[Loki] is handsome and fair of face, but has an evil disposition and is very changeable of mood. He excelled all men in the art of cunning, and he always cheats. He was continually involving the Aesir²⁷ in great difficulties and he often helped them out again by guile.”²⁸ Loki frequently crosses the line between mischievous and malevolent, as seen in the episode of Baldr's death, especially in the version Snorri Sturluson scribed.

In this telling, all the earth's creatures and substances swore oaths to never harm Baldr, except for the mistletoe tree. Upon learning of this exclusion, Loki devised a plan to kill the fair god. While the other gods enjoyed a game that entailed throwing all sorts of weapons and objects at Baldr—knowing he could suffer no harm—Loki uprooted the mistletoe and brought it to the blind god, Hodr. Unable to recognize the plant as Baldr's only bane, Hodr launched the

²⁵ The etymology of *Ragnarök*: *Ragna-* from “reginn” (meaning pertaining to the gods) and *-rok* (meaning fate or doom). It literally means “the doom of the gods.”

²⁶ Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Norse Myths*, qtd. on xxviii.

²⁷ Norse tradition divides the gods into two groups, the Aesir and the Vanir. The Aesir originally began as ruling gods, and the Vanir as fertility gods. Over time, these two groups mixed together, and the distinction faded.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, qtd. on xxix.

tree at Baldr, killing him. This unjust death of an innocent being would have greatly resembled Christ's crucifixion. One hears the echo of Christ's words on the cross: "Father, Forgive them, for they know not what they do."²⁹ Unlike Christ's relatively quick resurrection, Norse prophecy intended for Baldr to rise again after Ragnarök and to rule over the new earth with the other (surviving) blameless Aesir. The *Völuspá*, found in the Icelandic manuscript the *Codex Regius*, predicts this occurrence:

...Baldr will return;
Hod [Hodr] and Baldr will dwell
in Hropt's victory halls,
shrine of the gods of the slain.³⁰

This parallels Revelation's account of Christ's reign over the new heaven and the new earth following Armageddon, "for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away..."³¹ The book continues, "And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall serve him...And there shall be no night there; and they need no lamp, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light, and they shall reign forever and ever."³²

These end times and their onset deserve special attention as well. The *Völuspá* describes the conditions leading up to Ragnarök:

45. Brothers will fight
brothers to the death,
sisters' sons will corrupt
their kinship [incest];
in a harsh world
whoredom is widespread;

²⁹ Luke 23: 34a, NKJV.

³⁰ *Völuspá*, trans. Angus A. Somerville, in *Die Lieder des Codex Regius*, ed. Gustav Neckel (Heidelberg, 1983), in *The Viking Age*, eds. Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 53.

³¹ Revelation 21:1, NKJV.

³² Revelation 22:1 & 5, NKJV.

ax age, sword age—
 shields are shattered
 wind age, wolf age—
 till the world collapses.
 No man will show
 mercy to another.³³

This brings to mind Jesus' warning in Mark: "Now brother shall betray brother to death, and the father, his son: and children shall rise against their parents, and shall cause them to be put to death."³⁴ The abominable events preceding Ragnarök further mirror a passage in Matthew. "But as the days of Noah were," Christ foretells, "so shall also be the coming of the Son of man be."³⁵ A quick flash back to Genesis reveals the moral climate of those days. "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth," it relates, "and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."³⁶

What is more, the actual sequence of Ragnarök's events themselves resembles Armageddon. In both instances, two supernatural armies fight a brutal battle with good winning in the end. The Norse victory does not come without a price, however; all of the gods meet their death at the hands of their marked foes. Yet in both traditions exist the idea of two final destinations for souls. Revelation depicts the Christian version of the last judgment: "And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away, and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God, and the books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and hades delivered up the dead that were

³³ *Völuspá*, 49.

³⁴ Mark 13:12, NKJV.

³⁵ Matthew 24: 37, NKJV.

³⁶ Genesis 6:5, NKJV.

in them; and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast in to the lake of fire.”³⁷

Crossley-Holland’s restating of the final judgment follows the same themes. He writes:

Many courts will rise once more, some good, some evil. The best place of all will be Gimli in heaven, a building fairer than the sun, roofed with gold. That is where the rulers will live, at peace with themselves and each other. Then there will be Brimir on Okolnir, where the ground is always warm underfoot; there will always be plenty of good drink there for those who have a taste for it. And there will be Sindri, a fine hall that stands in the dark mountains of Nidafjoll, made wholly of red gold. Good men will live in these places.

But there will be another hall on Nastrond, the shore of corpses. That place in the underworld will be as vile as it is vast; all its doors will face north. Its walls and roof will be made of wattled snakes, their heads facing inward, blowing so much poison that it runs in rivers through the hall. Oath breakers and murderers and philanderers will wade through those rivers. Nidhogg [a dragon or snake-like entity], too, will outlive the fire and the flood and under Yggdrasill he will suck blood from the bodies of the dead.³⁸

In the same vein, both the old Nordic polytheism and Christianity agree on the implicit value of blood—one in spilling it causing glory, the other in “Glory” Himself offering it freely. Beside the *blood eagle* ritual and the cataclysmic flood of gore mentioned earlier, seasonal Viking ceremonies demanded the shedding of blood. “All sorts of cattle, including horses, were slaughtered there” Snorri writes in the *Saga of Haakon the Good*. “The blood that was drained from them was called *hlaut*, and bowls to contain it were known as hlautbowls. Hlautsticks were used to sprinkle the whole altar with blood. The walls of the temple, both inside and out, and the people there were sprinkled with blood, too.”³⁹ The story of the Exodus, beloved by Christians and Jews, tells of the shedding of the Passover lamb’s blood applied to the doorpost and lintel of

³⁷ Revelation 20:11-15, NKJV.

³⁸ Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Norse Myths*, 176.

³⁹ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 64.

the home.⁴⁰ Much like the use of the hlautbowls and hlautsticks, the consecration of the Old Testament tabernacle, and later the temple, required the sprinkling of blood upon the furniture and priests, as did the rituals of Yom Kippur.⁴¹

Adam of Bremen explains even more in his description of the temple at Uppsala: “The sacrifice is of this nature; of every living thing that is male, they offer nine heads, with the blood of which it is customary to place gods of this sort. The bodies they hang in the sacred grove that adjoins the temple.”⁴² The Judeo-Christian tradition states the significance of blood in these terms: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul... For it is the life of all flesh; the blood of it is for the life thereof...”⁴³ Amidst a myriad of other biblical references to blood and redemption, the author of Hebrews specifically articulates the bond between blood and life in the Christian mind. “Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”⁴⁴ As the Vikings relished blood as a component of their culture of death, the Christian—through Christ—revels in the blood as a source of life.

The two religions converge on less tragic points, as well. Let us next examine the mentions of trees. The Bible tells of two trees in particular, the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, both of which make their first appearance in Genesis 2:9. As one

⁴⁰ Exodus 12: 1-28, NKJV.

⁴¹ Exodus 29 & 39 and Leviticus 1: 8-9, 16, NKJV

⁴² Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, 66.

⁴³ Leviticus 17: 11, 14a, NKJV.

⁴⁴ Hebrews 13: 20-21, NKJV.

will remember, the latter played an integral role in the shaping of human history—original sin and the fall of man. The Tree of Life appears again throughout Scripture, but most importantly after the establishment of the new heaven and the new earth: “In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river was there the tree of life, which bore twelve kinds of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.”⁴⁵ Norse mythology similarly holds a particular tree in high regard, Yggdrasill. Crossley-Holland tells of its significance. “And all that has happened,” he explains, “and all the regions of the world, lie under the branches of the ash Yggdrasill, greatest and best of trees... It gives life to itself, it gives life to the unborn. The winds whirl round it and Yggdrasill croons or groans. Yggdrasill always was and will be.”⁴⁶ This last bit undeniably resonates with the permanence of the biblical Tree of Life.

Some characteristics of the gods themselves resemble those of the Christian. Period expert R.I. Page looks to Snorri for a description of Thor’s accouterments. Our beloved Icelander asserts that the god “has three valuable properties. The first is the hammer [Mjölfnir] which the frost-monsters and the cliff giants recognise the moment it is raised on high (which is not surprising—it has bashed in the skulls of many of their fathers and family.) A second splendid thing he owns, his belt of strength; when he buckles it round him his godlike power doubles. A third thing he has which is of the greatest value: his iron gloves. He mustn’t be without them when he swings his hammer.”⁴⁷ This undeniably brings to mind the armor of God found in the New Testament. Paul writes to the church at Ephesus, “Wherefore, take unto you the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to

⁴⁵ Revelation 22:2, NKJV.

⁴⁶ Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Norse Myths*, 6.

⁴⁷ Raymond Ian Page, *Norse Myths* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), qtd. on 41.

stand. Stand, therefore, having your loins girded about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness, and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith, with which ye shall be able to quench the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God...”⁴⁸

The Bible also places particular emphasis on the value of wisdom. Solomon’s request for the virtue greatly pleased the Lord, as 1 Kings records, “Give, therefore, thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad. For who is able to judge this thy great people? And the speech pleased the Lord, that Solomon had asked this thing. And God said unto him, Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies, but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern justice. Behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart, so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee.”⁴⁹ Similarly, Odin went about acquiring wisdom through several different feats. Snorri explains the first quest for knowledge: “But under the root [of Yggdrasill] which stretches toward the Frost-giants lies Mimir’s Well, in which wisdom and understanding are kept. The well-keeper is called Mimir; he is full of wisdom because he drinks well-water from the Gjallarhorn [Bellowing Horn]. All-father went there and asked for a single drink from the well, but he did not get it until he had laid down his eye as a pledge.”⁵⁰ In another unconventional pursuit, Odin hangs himself from Yggdrasill. The *Poetic Edda* gives further detail:

⁴⁸ Ephesians 6:13-17, NKJV.

⁴⁹ 1 Kings 3:9-12, NKJV.

⁵⁰ Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning*, trans. Angus A. Somerville, ed. Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1988), in *The Viking Age*, eds. Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 47.

138. I hung, I know,
 on the wind-tossed tree
 for nine nights in all,
 suffered the spear wound,
 was offered to Odin,
 —myself to myself—
 tormented on the tree

...

139. No one brought me bread,
 drink was denied me,
 groundward [sic] I gazed,
 raised up the runes,
 screaming I sought them,
 but fell back from there.⁵¹

Moreover, this additional tree imagery extends once again in Christian scripture as the earthly tool for redemption. “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.”⁵² There, Christ becomes sin and reconciles the world.⁵³ As the God-man/Christ’s death was required to himself as a part of the Trinity, Odin’s death was required to himself. Contrastingly, Odin’s death served only his own desires, whereas the self-sacrifice of Christ uniquely and totally served to justify the sinners of the world. In summary, therefore, Odin’s hanging reiterates the importance of wisdom to the god, and it also evokes a clear connection to Christ’s crucifixion—self-sacrifice, piercing by spear, and denial of food or water.

Norse myth may not have originally contained these echoes of Christian elements. Much of the extant documents date from the thirteenth-century, well after Christianity’s arrival. Nevertheless, their authors’ reworking and rewording to reflect the Bible must have carried significance. What better way to convince someone to convert than to introduce Christian

⁵¹ *Hávamál*, trans. Angus A. Somerville, ed. David A.H. Evans (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1986) in *The Viking Age*, eds. Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 60.

⁵² Galatians 3:13, NKJV. This quotes the even older reference found in Deuteronomy 21: 22-23.

⁵³ 2 Corinthians 5:21-22, NKJV.

elements and themes to an already accepted body of beliefs? In a tradition that relied on oral retellings of myths, the stories may have changed, so Christian ideas could have easily appeared without shaking the entire premise of the myth. This tinting of the old beliefs with Christianity undoubtedly eased the transition from one religion to the next. With this in mind, we must carefully read the surviving texts and not count everything as original. However, Crossley-Holland reassuringly asserts, “Inevitably the sagas reflect the religious beliefs and attitudes of their protagonists, and they make available to us a great deal of information about pre-Christian belief and practice—much of which appears to have persisted well into the Christian period of Iceland.”⁵⁴

Although Christianity has permeated the surviving myths, we can draw parallels between the Norse way of life and those depicted in Scripture. Such a comparison relies more heavily on known archeological facts and stable Christian texts. Our first point examines a period document in relation to the known Viking mentality of seeking reward. The last line of The Old English Beatitudes (taken from Matthew 5) would have especially appealed to these people, so determined to seek out reward. Its translation reads: “Rejoice and be glad because your reward is great in the heavens.”⁵⁵

The Bible makes frequent references to farming and fishing, ventures on which Viking life depended. Adam of Bremen makes note of the farming in his overview of the Scandinavian lands. “The Swedish country is extremely fertile;” he writes, “the land is rich in fruits and honey besides excelling all others in cattle raising, exceedingly happy in streams and woods...”⁵⁶ A Viking would have undeniably associated with the dreams of Joseph and other Old Testament

⁵⁴ Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Norse Myths*, xxxiii.

⁵⁵ Paul Cavill, *Fear and Faith*, trans. Paul Cavill, qtd. on 295.

⁵⁶ Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, 10.

accounts dealing with agriculture and animal husbandry, as well as those found in New Testament parables. The presence of farming implements, along with fishing gear, in Viking graves underscores the importance of these two livelihoods to the Norsemen. The New Testament consistently mentions fishing as a prevalent occupation of Christ's followers. His miracle of feeding the four thousand (found in Matthew 15 and Mark 8) stems from both fishing and agriculture.

The New Testament appeals to another intriguing—if not surprising—aspect of Viking life: personal hygiene. Contrary to popular belief, most Viking communities valued cleanliness. Brønsted refers to a collection of proverbs, the *Hávamál*. “One of the earliest sentences in the *Hávamál*,” he observes, “relates of a guest being met at the table by his host ‘with water, a towel, and a hearty welcome.’ Later on it says: ‘Freshly washed and well-filled with food should every man set off to the Thing [the local assembly], even if he is not too well dressed.’”⁵⁷ This habit brings to mind the account of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet. John records, “He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments, and took a towel, and girded himself. After that he poureth water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded.”⁵⁸

Aside from the spiritual aspect, Christianity also appealed to the human nature of the Vikings. For some, it provided them with incentive. Rimbert gives us another episode of conversion in search of reward in the *Vita Anskarii*: “Many among them, who were overcome with the sickness, when they saw that their sacrifices offered to idols in order to secure their recovery were of no avail and when their neighbors despaired of their getting well, took refuge in the Lord’s mercy and vowed that they would become Christians. When a priest had been

⁵⁷ Johannes Brønsted, *The Vikings*, 253.

⁵⁸ John 12: 4-5, NKJV.

summoned and they had received the grace of baptism, by divine help they forthwith recovered their health.”⁵⁹

This frequently coincided with a syncretic attitude—they already worshiped many gods, so why would one more make a difference? Let us consider this while continuing with the account of Saint Anskar and the deliberating Swedish people. After consulting with the counsel, an elder declared:

Listen to me, O king and people. In regard to the worship of this God it is well known to many of us that he can afford much help to those who place their hope in him. For many of us have proved this to be the case on several occasions when in peril from sea and in other crises. Why, then, do we reject that which we know to be both needful and serviceable? Some of us who have on various occasions to Dorestad have of our own accord adopted this form of religion, believing it to be beneficial. Our way there is now beset by those who lie in wait for us and is rendered dangerous by the attacks of pirates. Why then do we not take that which is brought to us and which, when it was at a distance, we sought eagerly to obtain? We have frequently proved that the help afforded by this God can be useful to us. Why should we not gladly agree to continue as his servants? Consider carefully O people, and do not cast away that which will be to your advantage. For, inasmuch as we can not [sic] be sure that our gods will be favorably disposed, it is good for us to have the help of this God who is always and under all circumstances able and willing to succor those who cry out to him.⁶⁰

Other sources reveal this syncretism as well. Adam of Bremen, for example, recalls the theistic favoritism of the Swedes. He observes, “Whenever in fighting they are placed in a critical situation, they invoke the aid of one of the multitude of gods they worship. Then after the victory they are devoted to him and set him above the others. By common consent, however, they now declare that the God of the Christians is the most powerful of all. Other gods often fail them, but he always stands by, a surest ‘helper in due time in tribulation’ [Ps. 9:10].”⁶¹ For some of the Vikings, though, the Christian God did not always provide the anticipated protection. In

⁵⁹ Bishop Rimbert, *Vita Anskarii*, 379.

⁶⁰ Bishop Rimbert, *Vita Anskarii*, 382.

⁶¹ Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, 11.

the *Landnámabók*, we learn of Helgi the Lean, who “was very mixed in his faith; he believed in Christ, but invoked Thor in matters of seafaring and dire necessity.”⁶²

This amalgamation of Christian and Norse religion manifested itself in a variety of physical forms. First of all, Christianity overtook one of the most quintessential elements pagan worship: the rune-stone. For the Vikings—and Germanic tribes in general—runes had possessed powers that only initiated individuals could unleash. Upon the advent of Christianity, though, these carvings took on a new meaning and purpose entirely. They now served as an alphabet fitting for inscriptions, many of which—such as the Greater Jelling Stone—bore Christian messages.

These stones also incorporated a mix of old and new iconography. On more than one occasion did strictly mythological elements accompany Christian imagery—the Gosforth Cross of Cumbria’ includes a Valkyrie⁶³ at the Crucifixion, and a cross found on the Isle of Man depicts Fenrir the wolf devouring Odin. Paul Cavill describes these markers as speaking a language that “is recognizably Christian, but the dialect is Scandinavian with traces of distant heathen meanings in the vocabulary.”⁶⁴ Scholar Haakon Shetelig concurs: they are certainly “Christian memorials inspired by Celtic culture, but Norwegian in their language and runes, and showing conspicuously the survival of pagan traditions.”⁶⁵

Combined symbols and figures again appear on Anglo-Scandinavian coins (found in the Danelaw). Those minted during the reign of the Christian king Cnut the Great⁶⁶ prove

⁶² Johannes Brønsted, *The Vikings*, qtd. on 306.

⁶³ These supernatural maidens escorted warriors slain in battle to Valhalla, the hall in which Odin feasted with the fallen heroes.

⁶⁴ Paul Cavill, *Fear and Faith*, 232.

⁶⁵ Johannes Brønsted, *The Vikings*, qtd. on 209.

⁶⁶ Cnut reigned as the first Viking king of England from 1016 – 1035, ruled Denmark from 1018 – 1035, and controlled Norway from 1028 – 1035.

particularly interesting in that they bear his likeness on one side, and either a distinctly Christian or distinctly pagan symbol on the other. Other coins exhibit vague imagery that could represent either religion—a bird could represent either the dove (a Christian symbol for the Holy Spirit) or Odin’s raven, a triangle could refer to the Trinity or a shield from the old ways. The findings of certain graves reveal other notable evidence of syncretism. Archaeologists have discovered bodies wearing pendants of both the Cross and Mjöltnir, Thor’s famed hammer. Cavill explains, “With the tolerance which seems so characteristic of the Vikings, the Christian cross and the hammer of Thor are found in the same grave, as though these ancient people wished to secure the favour of both gods, disregarding the rivalry between them.”⁶⁷

As one can suspect, introducing a new religion, and even blending it with the old, met with resistance and reversal. Time and time again, chronologists and hagiographers tell of the Northmen reverting back to their pagan ways, many a time leaving a martyr in their wake. Once again, Rimbart sheds light on the situation. He records:

...It happened, too, at this time, at the instigation of the devil, that the Swedish people were inflamed with zeal and fury, and began by insidious means to persecute Bishop Gautbert. Thus it came about that some of the people, moved by a common impulse, made a sudden attack upon the house in which he was staying with the object of destroying it; and in their hatred of the Christian name they killed Nithard and made him, in our opinion, a true martyr. Gautbert himself and those of his companions who were present, they bound and, after plundering everything they could find in their house, they drove them from their territory with insults and abuse. This was not done by command of the king, but was brought about by a plot devised by the people.⁶⁸

As much as they enjoyed reaping the benefits of Christianity, the Norsemen feared the wrath of the religion they had forsaken—essentially creating temporary angst-induced reversals. Brønsted looks to the *Ælnoth* of Canterbury for elucidation. “As long as things go well and everything is fine,” the monk scribes, “the *Síar* and the *Gautar* seem willing to acknowledge

⁶⁷ Paul Cavill, *Fear and Faith*, 294.

⁶⁸ Bishop Rimbart, *Vita Anskarii*, 377.

Christ and honour him, though as a pure formality; but when things go wrong—bad harvests, drought, tempests and bad weather, enemy attacks, or outbreaks of fire—they persecute the religion which they seem nominally to honour, and they do this only in words but in deeds; then they revenge themselves on the Christians and seek to chase them completely out of their country.”⁶⁹ Brønsted further correlates Christianity with hard times with an observation of Harald Greycloak’s reign (Harald II of Norway, r. 961 – 970). In the same breath, he notes that the king enforced Christianity, and during this period, droughts and famine plagued the land.⁷⁰

One cannot ignore this association, and additional evidence shows its continuance into the eleventh-century. In his *Ólafs saga Helga*, Snorri Sturluson relates a situation in which the old gods had reclaimed the fearful hearts of certain Norwegians under the reign of King Olaf II (Olaf Haraldsson, r. 1016 – 1028). “That autumn,” he writes, “King Olaf got word that farmers of inner Trondheim had held great feasts on the winter-nights [the three days beginning winter]. There had been a great deal of drinking and all the toasts had been dedicated to the Aesir in accordance with ancient custom. He was told also that cattle and horses had been slaughtered and altars covered with their blood; sacrifices had been performed, and prayers said for a good harvest. It was also reported that everyone was sure the gods were angry because the people of Halogaland had turned to Christianity.”⁷¹ This same account reveals the lightness with which the people had accepted baptism, or at least its situational inability to halt pagan festivities. The historian quotes the king’s steward as observing, “nearly everyone from the Inner Trondelag is heathen, even though some have been baptized.”⁷²

⁶⁹ Johannes Brønsted, *The Vikings*, qtd. on 312.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁷¹ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 395.

⁷² *Ibid.*, qtd. on 397.

Sweden held on to the old ways longer than its fellow Scandinavian nations,⁷³ but it finally bowed to Christianity toward the beginning of the twelfth-century with the Danish takeover of the Swedish bishopric. Greater Norse Christianity, in turn, grew and flourished. For example, the missionary voyage of Leif Eriksson to Greenland demonstrates the Christian initiative originating from Scandinavia. According to the thirteenth-century *Saga of Erik the Red*, King Olaf Tryggvason of Norway charged Eriksson to Christianize Greenland (somewhere between the years 995 and 1000), but the sailor inadvertently arrived at Vinland instead. Even if chroniclers added this religion-driven explanation⁷⁴ for Eriksson's discovery in retrospect, it still shows the firmness of the Viking commitment to Christianity and the spread of the Gospel. Much like the retelling of the myths, this attention to Christian motives undeniably signifies an internalization of the religion to such a great extent as to rewrite events. Moreover, this tale fits into the broader context of Scandinavian missions. As a result of that same Norwegian king's missionaries, Iceland and the Orkney Islands converted.

Furthermore, King Sigurd Magnusson of Norway (r. 1103 – 1130) undertook one of the first European crusades to Jerusalem, indicating not only the stability of Christianity in the home country, but also the desire to act on this faith on a global scale. Somerville and McDonald consider this a pivotal shift “from Vikings to Crusaders.”⁷⁵ *The Saga of the Sons of Magnus Barelegs* illustrates King Sigurd's voyage toward the Holy Lands, with intervals of fighting against the “heathen”⁷⁶ Muslims in Spain and Syria. How interesting that a Norse writer uses

⁷³ Brønsted attributes Christianity's solidification in Denmark to King Swein Estridsson (r. 1047 – 1076), who freed the Danish church from the control of German powers (309). In Norway, Brønsted notes that in 1000, Christianity “became legally the faith of the country” (310).

⁷⁴ Another text, the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, tells of Vinland's discovery, devoid of religious aims entirely.

⁷⁵ Angus A. Somerville and R. Andrew McDonald, *The Viking Age*, 408.

⁷⁶ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, 408.

that term when not long before, other Europeans ascribed it to his own people. Of this crusade Snorri evaluates, “It was the general opinion that there had never before been a more splendid expedition for Norway than this one.”⁷⁷

In the recent past, the study of the Vikings has been relegated only to the grade school depictions of the fearless seafarers. Steadily, however, historians have begun to uncover and realize their significance in the context of both medieval and modern society. In the words of Andrew Moore, President of the Archaeological Institute of America, “The Vikings erupted suddenly on a medieval world in formation, opening routes and connecting people over vast differences—to great effect. They made important contributions to the development of the societies of Europe and the North Atlantic that we know today. The Viking story continues to unfold.”⁷⁸ Cavill affirms the Vikings’ significance in world history: “They changed the political face of England forever. In the process, they changed much else.”⁷⁹

At times this new faith met with resistance from the old, pagan ways, but it still managed to dictate the actions of these heavily influential characters of the early modern world. As one can see, Christianity in its various shades and stages—from its introduction and infiltration, to its adoption and adaptations—greatly impacted the Scandinavian nations. Through Christianity, kings united their people into nation-states and solidified alliances with their neighbors. Moreover, with the conversion of the common Viking to Christianity, the Scandinavian culture transformed to a culture binding them to greater Europe and the flow of its impending future. The *blood eagle* had claimed its last victim.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 416.

⁷⁸ Andrew Moore, “From the President: The Vikings, an Update,” *Archaeology*, September/October 2014, 6.

⁷⁹ Paul Cavill, *Fear and Faith*, xi.

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