

From Wessex to Western Norway: Some perspectives on one channel for the Christianisation process

Torstein Jørgensen

The version deduced – an “elephant in Malmö“?

The Norwegian author, Cora Sandel, once said that when reading presentations of historical persons she often came to be thinking of a visit she once paid to The Historical Museum in the Swedish town of Malmö. The zoological department of this museum contained the most paradised exhibition of peculiar creatures that she had ever seen. And the worst of them all was the elephant. This figure appeared as a stiff, clumpy monster totally out of proportion, with the skin of what had once been an elephant stretched around it. Presentations of historical persons very often remind me of that strange, unreal stuffed being, the famous author said.

As a historian dealing with historical persons and processes living and taking place some one thousand years ago it is not difficult to feel sympathy with the technicians of the Malmö museum. As for them also my situation is that the sources I have are very scarce. And their informative value very often is not in correspondence with the questions I find the need to ask. As often as not I find myself left with some pieces of skin that will hardly suffice for the covering of a whole body.

In this presentation I will make an attempt to put together some pieces from different sources, hoping that the figures of my reproduction will bear as much similarity as possible to the historical originals. What I want to do is to draw attention to what seems to have been one rather marked channel for the christianisation of Norway and the establishing of an organised Christian church in the country, and one that lasted approximately 130 years. I am speaking of the connection between the Wessex kingdom, the more or less only remaining free political unit outside Viking control on the British Isles during the 10th century on the one hand, and reigning monarchs of Norway and their supporters from the time of the last years of king Harald Fairhair in the 920's until about 1050

on the other. I will especially focus on the beginning and early phase of this line.

The complexity of the story

The christianisation process in Norway is, like similar processes elsewhere, a *complex story*. It is complex with regard to the time-aspect. It is complex with regard to the aspect of the different levels of society at which the process took place. It is also complex with regard to the question of the sorts of information that can be drawn from the different sources at hand. And finally it is complex in respect of differences between different traditions of scholars and disciplines being occupied with the matter. The particular channel to be dealt with here must therefore be seen as *one* line within this complex and variegated framework of events, efforts, and processes leading up to the change of faith and customs in Norway. But before going into details on this particular channel we shall have to throw a glance at some of the more general elements of this complex framework.

Some interpretative perspectives on the contact between Norway and Britain up to the 10th century – a general outlook

The process of interrelation between the peoples of Scandinavia and the peoples of the British Isles and the north-western coasts of the continent has very old roots. Archaeological excavations both in Eastern England and Norway bear witness of intercultural contact already from Roman times and onwards. Findings of Roman warrior equipment in graves both in the eastern and western parts of Norway are now being interpreted as a sign that Norwegians have been serving as assistant soldiers – *auxilarii* – in the Roman army, most likely on the British Isles. In fifth century graves in Eastern England brooches with a Norse style of ornamentation have been found. A fairly recent analysis of 6th to 9th century graves in the county of Rogaland on the south-western coast of Norway, has shown that of a total number of approximately 35 graves, 15 proved to contain what the archaeologist Per Hernæs has labelled “Christian indicators”, i.e. they contained crosses and other signs reflecting influence from Christianity, and 7 so-called “poor graves” which are all “younger”

graves from the 10th century. The clothes of the persons buried in this latter category show that they were rich people, and the fact that people of such high social rank were buried so poorly, is taken as an indication of Christian influence.¹

A number of different sources now bear witness that the Viking ship-traffic criss-crossing the North Sea, Skagerac, and the Baltic Sea waters increased considerably during the 8th, 9th and 10th centuries. Viking vessels were in this period improved and made more fit to stand the powers of the winds and waves of the North Sea.² Excavations at Kaupang on the Norwegian south-eastern coast³, and the famous visit paid by the Norwegian Hålogalandian merchant Ottar at the court of king Alfred the Great in the late 9th century, are in different ways testimonies of trade lines that seem to have been of considerable importance.⁴

One important element of the contact between Norwegians and Britons during this period was, of course, the many brutal Viking attacks on Britain starting with the well-known attack on the Lindisfarne monastery in 792. For a period of more than two hundred years Norwegian and Danish raids seem to have occurred as more or less regular annual events in different parts of the British Isles.

However, it is of vital importance for the understanding of how the process of interrelation between Norwegians and Britons came to develop, and in the next instance for the understanding of the process of religious change, to note that the occasional and transitory Viking attacks very soon turned into conquering and colonization of land, more permanent settlements, and the subjugation of the local population under Viking rule. This colonization process is known to have been well in progress in the early 9th century. Already in the 1950's Haakon Shetelig documented that Viking graves on the British Isles comprise "*the burials of men and women in fairly equal numbers*". And he is very definite in his conclusion that these graves cannot be regarded only as "*reminders of the*

¹ P. Hernæs, "Tidlige kristne impulser i Rogalands vikingtid", *Frå Haug ok Heiðni* (1994) No 1, pp. 17-22.

² B. Myhre, "The beginning of the Viking Age: Some Current Archaeological Problems", *Viking Revaluation: Viking Society Centenary Symposium 14-15 May 1992*, London 1993 pp. 182-205 + fig. 1-11.

³ C. Blindheim/R.L. Tollnes, *Kaupang: Vikingenes handelsplass*, Oslo 1972, C. Blindheim, "A Collection of Celtic(?) Bronze Objects found at Kaupang (Skiringssal), Vestfold, Norway", *Proceedings of the seventh Viking Congress Dublin Aug 1973*, Dublin 1976 pp. 9-27.

⁴ J. Hines, The Scandinavian Character of Anglian England in the pre-Viking Period, *BAR* 124(1984).

Norsemen's occasional descents upon and battles in the British countries", but were "evidently left by Norse colonists permanently established on the land".⁵ The women buried in these graves most likely came over from Norway and Denmark together with the Viking men, but some of them might very well also have been British or Irish women taken into the Norse settlements as part of the early assimilation process.⁶

Another noteworthy characteristic of the Norse settlements on the British Isles is the fact that they fairly soon seem to have started to bury their dead in the churchyards of the native population. In the 9th and 10th century settlements north and west of Scotland and in the countries surrounding the Irish Sea this seems to have been the case already among the second generation settlers. As a consequence the Norwegians from Dublin and other older colonies who invaded Northumbria in the 10th century did not observe traditional Norse burial customs, and the same also applies to the Danish invaders of Central and Northern England in the latter half of the 9th century who mostly seem to have been recruited from the Continent (Normandy and Brittany). The Norse burials in churchyards seem to have represented a transitional stage between pagan and Christian burial customs showing the gradual penetration of Christianity among the Norse settlers as early as during the 9th century.⁷ Generally speaking the pagan burial system did not survive the first generation of colonists. On the whole the traditional Norse worship seems never to have been firmly established among the settler communities in Ireland, on Man or on the British mainland.⁸ One rather special and distinctive indication of this is the well-known inscription on one of the stone crosses at Kirk Michael, Man, saying that a person with the Nordic name "*Gaut made this cross and all in Man*". Shetelig was of the opinion that Gaut was operating in the latter part of the 9th century⁹, but David Wilson and others have later established that this and other cross-stones with connection to the Viking

⁵ H. Shetelig, "The Viking Graves", *Viking Antiquities in Great Britain and Ireland*, ed. H. Shetelig, Vol. VI, Oslo 1954 p. 68.

⁶ A. Stalsberg has delivered convincing documentation that Viking women acted as merchants on an independent basis. A. Stalsberg, "Women as Actors in North European Viking Age Trade", *Social Approaches to Viking Studies*, ed. R. Samson, Glasgow 1991 pp. 75-83.

⁷ H. Shetelig, 1954 pp. 86,96.

⁸ F.M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, Oxford 1947 pp. 499f, A. Mawer and F.M. Stenton, *Introduction to the Survey of English Place-Names*, p. 56.

⁹ P.M.C. Kermode, *Manx Crosses*, London 1907, H. Shetelig, "The Norse Style of Ornamentation in the Viking Settlements", *Viking Antiquities in Great Britain and Ireland*, ed. H. Shetelig, Vol VI, Oslo 1954 pp. 125-127.

settlements are early 10th century products.¹⁰ Gaut's activities, and with this I am referring both to the very fact that he acted as a sculptor, and to the way in which he made use of Norse ornamentation on stone-crosses in Britain, is a remarkable example of how the relation between the Norse and the native population could develop, and how the traditions that the two groups were representing could melt together.

Thus, what appears from these very brief observations are the contours of an assimilation process which seems to have been triggered already at the very starting point of more permanent contact between the two population groups, and which very soon developed into an active interrelative process. Of course, the process also involved severe tensions, conflicts, and open fighting. The source materials almost swarm with evidence to testify that. But the testimonies of conflict must not overshadow the fact that the relationship between Vikings and indigenous inhabitants of the British Isles in the 9th and 10th centuries to a great extent also consisted of a process of more peaceful assimilation. One main tendency, however, seems to be clear: Although the Viking settler population certainly came to put their imprint on the way of life, customs and general behaviour in the new communities, *their religious faith and cult seems not to have been exportable to new settings and surroundings outside Scandinavia*, except into the areas in which the Norse settlers constituted the majority population.

A theoretical perspective

At this stage in our presentation it could be useful to draw the attention to a theoretical perspective based on modern sociological approaches to processes of religious change. Some sociologists today speak of religious change processes as something that normally takes place as a result of the emergence of what they call "*new plausibility structures*".¹¹ With this term they refer to the emergence on the historical stage of some sort of

¹⁰ D.M. Wilson, *Viking Art*,...and O. Klindt-Jensen, 2nd ed. London 1980, *The Viking Achievement*,...and P.G. Foote, London 1970/80, *Three Viking Graves in the Isle of Man*,...and G. Bersu, London 1966 (The Society for Mediaeval Archaeology. Monograph Series 1), "The Art of the Manx Crosses", *The Viking Age in the Isle of Man*, ed. C. Fell et al., Ninth Viking Congress Publications, London 1983. On the development in Scotland see B. Crawford, *Scandinavian Scotland*, Leicester 1987.

¹¹ P.L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy : Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, NY 1969, R. Jackson, "Religious Education and the Arts of Interpretation", in Starkings, D. (ed.), *Religion and the Arts in Education*, London 1993, pp. 157-166.

new elements, perspectives, and questions with regard to reality, existence, and life itself, to which the old religious explanations and structures no longer correspond. Openness towards religious change will, according to this model, presuppose some sort of incongruity, or, as the sociologists prefer to say, asymmetry, between the established religious patterns of explanation on the one hand and the new life-situations and life-questions on the other. It seems to me that this theoretical perspective renders a very plausible explanatory point of departure for the understanding of the rapid religious change among the Norse settler groups on the British Isles in the 9th and 10th centuries.¹² The traditional Norse religious ideas and cult were strongly connected to family, place of residence, traditional structures of society and ways of life, and when these factors came to be radically changed in the new settler communities on the other side of the North Sea, the old Norse religion proved not to have possessed the potential to relate in a meaningful way to the new structures and ways of thinking and behaviour that the Vikings encountered there. This by no means implies that the Norse religion in itself and within its own place and setting should have been weak or dying. I agree with the Norwegian religious history professor, Gro Steinsland, who has emphasized the vitality of the Norse religion in the Viking age,¹³ but in my opinion this vitality only applied to the traditional societies in Scandinavia, and not to the Viking emigrant communities in Britain and France.

Scenario at the entrance to the 10th century

Our observations so far should now provide the basis for the following scenario at the entrance to the 10th century:

- 1) *On the British Isles*, in Ireland, and along the coasts of Northern France Viking communities and settlements were established. The people in these communities seem to have found themselves in a fair way in their transition towards and conversion to Christianity, and the assimilation process with the local population seems to have been well in progress. Some of these societies were even strong

¹² T. Jørgensen, "Religionsskifteprosesser: Noen teoretiske overveielser," forelesning ved Senter for studiar i vikingtid og nordisk mellomalder, Universitetet i Oslo, 20 feb. 1995, *Norsk Tidsskrift for Misjon* 49 (1995) 169-176.

¹³ G. Steinsland/P.M. Sørensen, *Menneske og Makter i Vikingenes Verden*, Oslo 1994.

enough, if we can believe what Snorre writes in his Harald Fairhair saga, to represent a threat against the population on the Norwegian west-coast by raiding these areas in the summer season.¹⁴

- 2) *The connection* between the Viking home societies in Norway and Denmark and the settler communities abroad seems to have been very tight, and on the increase. The ship-traffic criss-crossing the waters seems to have included all classes of the population; – men and women, thralls, merchants, and kings and chiefs with their crews and soldiers.
- 3) Very little written information exists about *the society in Norway* before the beginning of the 10th century, and certainly not about foreign influence on this society. The above mentioned archaeological findings in Rogaland do, however, render some evidence that an influx of foreign impulses, brought in either by Norwegians who had been abroad for some time, or by foreigners brought home by them, has made itself felt at least along the coasts already at this early stage.

The Wessex kingdom and its particular strategy

The broad network of connecting lines as we have tried to depict it here continued and increased also during the course of the 10th century. Nevertheless, within this general picture one particular channel for Christian influence on Norway now comes into sight. And the point of departure for this channel is not to be found in any of the Viking ruled settler communities, but in the kingdom of Wessex with its subjugated and associated areas, at this time the only political unit in Britain that had maintained to withstand Viking rule. The fact that one of the Norwegian kings, and one whose reign also was rather long, was fostered and trained at the court of one of the Wessex kings, appears as a unique event in Norwegian history. It is not possible here to go into detail on the different theories put forward on relevant dates in connection with the life and reign of king Håkon the Good.¹⁵ The exact dating is also not necessary for

¹⁴ Snorre Sturluson, *Norges kongesagaer*, Vol. 1, Oslo 1979 p. 63.

¹⁵ O. Einarsdóttir, “Studier i Kronologisk Metode i Tidlig Islands Historisk Skrivning”, *Bibliotheca Historia Lundensis* XIII, Lund 1964, “Datering av Harald Hårfagres Død”, HT 47(1968).

the purpose of this study. But the basic facts are important, and these say that Håkon, the youngest son of Harald Fairhair, was brought to the court of king Athelstan for a 10 year period from the age of 10 to 20, and that this period lasted from approximately the year 925 to 935. After that he returned to Norway, became king and ruled for a period of 26-27 years, i.e. from 935 – 961/962. King Håkon's close contact with the Wessex kingdom and his reign in Norway are important as a platform for a particular mission initiative from Wessex to Norway which developed into what seems to have been a planned enterprise that should last for more than 130 years. For the understanding of Håkon's operations in Norway some characteristics of the society and culture in Athelstan's kingdom should be noted.

Some traits of the Wessex kingdom at the time of king Athelstan

1) At the time of king Athelstan the kingdom of Wessex with its royal court represented an important diplomatic centre with connections in many directions, towards the continent and also with king Harald Fairhair, the first king of a united Norway. The diplomatic relations were taken care of through agreements with other rulers and kings, exchange of gifts, by the marrying off of the king's daughters and sisters, and by inviting allied princes to send their sons to be brought up at the king's court. The Norwegian Håkon is known to have been fostered at Athelstan's court within a group of young princes including Ludwig, son of Charles the Simple, Alan, count of Brittany, and two of Athelstan's own younger brothers.¹⁶

2) Another important trait of Athelstan's reign was his initiatives for a better organisation of the administrative structure of the country, especially with regard to the so-called witenagemot i.e. special councils in which the chiefs of the kingdom participated together with the bishops. It is of interest to note that some of Athelstan's chiefs were carrying Norse names.

3) A third point to note is Athelstan's ambulant court. This by no means was specific for him, but in our context this ambulant court gives

¹⁶ T. Jørgensen, *Fra Wessex til Vestlandet : Om kristningen av Norge i tidlig middelalder*, Stavanger 1990 p. 9.

ground to assume that Håkon and the other foster-princes must have been brought about to different parts of the kingdom, and in this way also most likely must have visited the old and famous monastery at Glastonbury.

4) At Athelstan's court some of the clergymen that would come to play central roles in the development of the church later in the century were present. The famous Dunstan, abbot at Glastonbury 939 – 956, and archbishop of Canterbury 956 – 988, came to the court in 926. Also Ethelwold, a central person in the 10th century revival movement, was connected to the court. It is hardly possible to imagine that the young Norwegian prince did not make the acquaintance of these persons.¹⁷

5) King Athelstan was also a brave and clever warrior fighting many battles. Fridtjov Birkeli, who in a meritorious way has focused on the significance of Athelstan's influence on Håkon for the Christianisation process in Norway¹⁸, has a tendency to draw a picture both of the Wessex king and his foster-son as being too pious and peaceful. Håkon, when he came back to Norway, also entered into battles, not only in order to fend off rivals to the throne, but also to enrich himself by raiding the Gothaland coast.

6) The sixth and last point to be noted is the strong expansive power of the tradition of Anglo-Saxon Christianity. At Athelstan's time the tradition of sending missionaries to other parts of Europe had been going on for many years, counting names like Willibrord, Boniface, Lull, Willihad, Alcuin and others. The emergence of a mission initiative towards Norway, thus, forms a natural continuation of this tradition.

Håkon's missionary bishop

Church-historians have for long been aware of William of Malmesbury's list of 10 Glastonbury monks ending up as bishops, and living at the time of king Edgar's reign (958 – 975).¹⁹ D. Whitelock and F. Birkeli have demonstrated the probability that only the first five names belong to the original list.²⁰ Number four on this list is called *Sigefridus norwegensis*

¹⁷ P. Ashdown, *Dunstan: a millenial handbook*, Baltonsborough 1987.

¹⁸ F. Birkeli, *Norge møter kristendommen : Fra vikingtiden til ca. 1050*, Oslo 1979.

¹⁹ William of Malmesbury, "De Antiquitate Glastoniensis Ecclesiae", *Gesta Pontificum*, Ed. N.E.S.A. London 1870.

²⁰ D. Whitelock, *The Beginnings of English Society*, London 1952, F. Birkeli, *Norge møter kristendommen...*Oslo 1979, and *Tolv vintre hadde kristendommen vært i Norge: Historiske perspektiver på kristningsprosessen*, Oslo 1995.

episcopus, of the other four two became bishops in Wells, one in Crediton and one in Winchester. Since all the five bishops came from Glastonbury, they must in all likelihood have been monks in the monastery when Dunstan was abbot there.

There should be every reason to take it that Sigefridus norwegensis episcopus on William of Malmesbury's list is identical with the bishop whom Håkon the Good, after some time as king in Norway, sent for in England. This piece of information is given both by Snorre and by Ágrip, Snorre by stating that Håkon "*sent for a bishop and some other clergymen from England, and when they came to Norway he declared that he would order Christianity in all his kingdom*" and Ágrip by writing that "*he built some churches in Norway and appointed learned men to them*".²¹

In addition to these mutually independent English and Norwegian sources, also Adam of Bremen testifies the same by mentioning that Norway already before the reign of Olav Tryggvasson had received a bishop and missionaries from England.²²

By taking Håkon's growth and upbringing into account, his presence in the group of foster-princes at the very time when Dunstan served at the king's court, and his probable acquaintance and perhaps also friendship with him, it must have been very natural for him to send his messenger to his old friend who had now become abbot at Glastonbury, for a monk who could assist him in his enterprise of bringing Christianity to the Norwegians, and of establishing a Christian church in one of the Viking home countries.

Håkon's reign as testified in the saga literature

However, how can this picture of king Håkon the Good as a mission king be balanced against the picture of him that appears in the saga literature?

The saga description of Håkon the Good as king of Norway, and especially of his role in religious matters, is one full of contrasts. All seem to agree on his Christian upbringing in England, on the fact that he was a good ruler, loved by his people, and that he improved the naval defense –

²¹ Snorre Sturluson, Vol 1, 1979 p. 87, *Ágrip or Noregs kongesoger*, Transl. by G. Indrebø, *Norrøne bokverk* 32, Oslo 1973 p. 25.

²² *Adam av Bremen : Beretningen om Hamburg stift, erkebiskopenes bedrifter og øyrikene i Norden*, Transl. by B.T. Danielsen and A.K. Frihagen, Oslo 1993 pp. 89, 102, 106, 213.

the leidang – and the judicial system. But they differ considerably in the way they describe his religious aims and acts. Although the saga literature as a whole is a late source, put down some 200 – 300 years after Håkon's reign, and as such very questionable when it comes to historical credibility, it should be expedient in this context briefly to recount what the different sagas in the main say about him.

It is natural then to start with the only written source that dates back to Håkon's time, viz. the poem (kvad) – *Håkonarmål*.²³ The poem was produced by Håkon's own scald, Øyvind Finnson Skaldaspille, right after the battle of Fitjar, in which Håkon was fatally wounded and died a few days after. The poem only gives an account of the battle, it renders no depiction of Håkon's life. About Håkon's end the scald says that Håkon went to the heathen (heiðin) gods, i.e. the scald declares to the world that the beloved and honoured king ended where all honoured kings according to traditional Norse faith should end, in Valhalla. However, it is of interest to note that the scald also states that Odin was angry with Håkon, but he took it as a mitigating fact that Håkon had protected the pagan temples (hovene). It would have been of great interest for us to know why Odin was angry with Håkon. Could it have something to do with his activity in favour of Christianity? And why does the scald find it necessary to state that Håkon protected the pagan temples, which would simply have been a matter of course if he was an ordinary heathen king? The question is therefore, do we here in Skaldaspille's poem see an indirect indication that Håkon was not an ordinary heathen Norse king? The fact that Skaldaspille also uses the word heiðin, should indicate that the wordpair Christian – heathen was already well known and in use among his Norwegian contemporaries, i.e. in the mid 10th century.

The *Flateyarbook* and the saga of *Theodoricus monachus* only deal very succinctly with Håkon. *Flateyarbook* simply states in a very categorical manner that Håkon was a Christian (kristinn). *Theodoricus* gives no information at all about Håkon's religious faith and doings.²⁴

Historia Norvegiae describes Håkon in crass and critical terms, saying that "He, who had been fostered in such an appropriate way by the Christian king of England, turned into such a delusion that he chose the perishable kingdom before the eternal one and became an apostate, and

²³ Snorre Sturluson, Vol. 1 1979 pp. 101-104.

²⁴ Tjodrek munk, *Soga um dei gamle norske kongane*, Transl. by E. Skard, Norrøne bokverk 29, Oslo 1932 pp. 14f.

turned into idolatry by serving gods and not God".²⁵ Also *Historia Norvegiae* does, however, admit that Håkon better than his predecessors protected the law and the decisions from the things, and that this made him popular both with the chiefs and the common people.

The saga of *Ágrip* renders a more detailed and shaded account of Håkon the Good.²⁶ First he states that "*Håkon himself was Christian, but he had a heathen wife. For her sake and in order to please the people he deviated from Christianity*". On this point his version is in line with that of *Historia Norvegiae*, and perhaps also with *Håkonarmål*. But having said this, *Ágrip* goes on by listing up a number of elements indicating the opposite, i.e. that he did stick to his Christian faith also after he became king of Norway. Among other things he observed Sundays and fasted on Fridays, further he removed the celebration of the Norse mid-winter festival, the jul, to the time of the Christian Christmas, and as already mentioned, he sent for clergymen from England. *Ágrip* also adds that many people converted to Christianity during Håkon's reign for the reason that he was so well-liked. When he after the battle of Fitjar realised that he would come to die, his friends offered to take his body to England and bury him at a church. This he refused by saying: "*I would not be worthy of that. Like heathen men I lived in many ways. Therefore you shall bury me like heathen men. After that I hope for more mercy from God himself than I deserve.*"

It is, of course, difficult to place too much confidence in a late source like *Ágrip*. But it is of interest to note that it seems to go well with *Håkonarmål*'s version. If there is some historical ground behind the friends' offer to the dying king, this is a noteworthy indication of their knowing where the king after all felt that he belonged. And if it is true that Håkon observed Sundays and fasted on Fridays, this must have been noted as a very conspicuous and provocative challenge of customary behaviour and cult. Whether this was a risk for the young king in a situation when he had to fight for regal power, depends on how far the ground for such a step may have already been prepared among his new subjects in Norway.

If we turn to *Snorre*,²⁷ he in broad outline follows *Ágrip*. But *Snorre* adds that Håkon when coming to Norway related to his Christian faith in a

²⁵ "Noregs historie", *Den eldste Noregs-historia*, Transl. by H. Koht, *Norrøne bokverk* 19, Oslo 1950 pp. 37f.

²⁶ *Ágrip* 1973 pp. 23-29.

²⁷ *Snorre Sturluson*, Vol. 1, 1979 pp. 79-104.

secret (lønnlig) way. How this took place in practice is well illustrated in Snorre's accounts of Håkon's encounter with the chiefs of Trøndelag, in which he only pretended that he took part in the traditional sacrifice (blot). This make-believe performance was staged by his earl Sigurd of Lade as some sort of a compromise by which neither the Christian faith of the king nor the pagan cult of the people of Trøndelag were intolerably challenged.

Snorre also reports that the people in Trøndelag (mid-Norway) burnt down three of the churches that Håkon had built there, and they put three of his priests to death. On the whole Snorre gives the impression that all the dramatic events as far as religious affairs were concerned during Håkon's reign took place in Trøndelag. On the coasts further south it seems as if his religious innovations have been tolerated. Does this imply that the real frontline along the coasts of Norway between Christianity and paganism at Håkon's time was to be found somewhere in the Møre-area on the north-western coast?

If we combine these pieces of information with what we have already pointed out about the traffic across the North Sea and the assimilation between the British and the Viking settlers already in the 9th and 10th centuries, there should be fair reason to suggest that the ground along the Norwegian coasts to some extent was already prepared for religious change at the time when Håkon the Good became king. His own reign also probably contributed to accelerate this process. We have already mentioned that it must have been very natural for Håkon to send for clergymen in England with his old acquaintance Dunstan, abbot at Glastonbury, and with king Eadred, one of his own foster mates in Wessex. But this must also have been a most convenient opportunity for them to obtain some of their goals, for Eadred to reduce the threat from raiding Norwegian Vikings, and for Dunstan to include them into the sphere of Christendom.

The continuation of the line – Jon Sigurd and Grimkell

Also Håkon's successors continued to maintain contacts with Britain, but during the reign of the Eirik-sons and the earl Håkon of Lade these relations seem more to have been directed towards the Norse settlement communities and Denmark than towards Wessex. Some of the priests

coming to Norway together with bishop Sigefridus might, however, well have continued their work in Norway some years after Håkon's death.

But towards the end of the century the direct line to the milieu in Wessex was renewed. Four persons distinguish themselves as the salient links in the chain of continued contact; viz. the two Olav-kings, *Olav Tryggvasson* and *Olav Haraldsson*, and their respective bishops, *Jon Sigurd* and *Grimkell*. There is no room in this paper to go into details on the life-courses and the acts and doings of the four in more general terms. What is of relevance to note here are: 1) their vital roles in the continuation of the Christianisation process, and 2) their relations with the Wessex kingdom.

There is ample evidence in both Norwegian and British sources telling that *Olav Tryggvasson* had converted to Christianity before his installation as king of Norway in 995, and that his contacts with Wessex were of importance in this regard. Norwegian sources concentrate on Olav's contact with a wise man on the Scilly Islands, whereas British sources tell that he stayed in London, Canterbury and Winchester for some time during which he received ecclesiastical confirmation, even with king Æthelred standing sponsor, and also that he received some religious instruction.²⁸ The Norwegian sources are rather unanimous in their stating that Olav brought a bishop and priests with him from England at his return to Norway in 995. In the sources the bishop is alternately called *Jon* and *Sigurd*, Adam of Bremen refers to him as *Johannes*.

Like Olav Tryggvasson also Olav Haraldsson had a background as Viking chief in Normandy and England. Among other activities he took part in the conquest of Canterbury in 1012, as one of the Danish chief, Torkel the Tall's, men. On this event he probably witnessed the murder of Ælfheah the archbishop. After that some of the Vikings must have joined forces with the English, and both Torkel and Olav are known to have supported Æthelred against the invading army of king Swein in 1013.²⁹ According to the Old Norwegian Book of Homilii, Olav "started to believe in God in England, and in the city called Rouen he was christened".³⁰ When returning to Norway to take over the throne, he is known

²⁸ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Transl. by G.N. Garmonsway London 1953/1986 pp. 126-129, *Theodoricus monachus*, 1932 p. 18, *Agrip*, 1973 pp. 40f, Snorre Sturluson, Vol 1 1979 pp. 143-146, Odd munk Snorresson, *Soga om Olav Tryggvason*, Transl. by M. Rindal, *Norrøne bokverk* 46, Oslo 1977 pp. 46f.

²⁹ N. Ashdown, *English and Norse Documents*, London 1930 pp. 293f.

³⁰ *Gammelnorsk homilieboek*, transl. by A. Salvesen, Oslo 1971 p. 141. The question where Olav was baptised is discussed also by *Theodoricus monachus*, 1932 p. 25.

to have brought as much as four bishops with him from England together with priests and lay assistants.³¹ The names of the bishops were: Grimkell, Bernard, Rodolv, and Sigfrid. According to Theodoricus monachus Grimkell was "*the brotherson of bishop Sigurd whom Olav Tryggvasson had brought with him from England*".³²

What appears from these observations is that the leading ecclesiastical groups in Wessex as soon as the opportunity arose were more than willing to take up the effort from the days of Håkon the Good by sending missionaries to Norway. Neither of the two Olavs were staying very long in Wessex. Nevertheless, they both came to be well supplied with bishops and priests from this kingdom when they returned to Norway to become kings. There is still a lack of sources explicitly referring to any planned strategy on this point with the Wessex authorities and clergy. But the fact that the number of bishops mentioned seemed to have been ready to enter on such an enterprise on such short notice, can be interpreted as an indication that some sort of an explicit aim of pursuing mission work among the Norwegians must have existed in these groups of Wessex society. As far as the family-connection between Sigurd and Grimkell is concerned, we can mention that in turn, Grimkell's nephew, Asgaut, became bishop in Oslo by the mid 11th century.

The significance of Sigurd's and Grimkell's efforts for the further progress of the Christianisation process and the consolidation of a church organisation in Norway, is undisputable. Sigurd accompanied his king during the five intensive years of his reign on his journeys to the different parts of his vast kingdom, supporting him actively in his achievements. Grimkell did the same during the reign of Olav Haraldsson. Among other things he played a most active role at the so-called Mostra-thing of 1024, where the foundations were laid for the Christian legislation (*kristenretten*) to be decided at the regional things. But above all Grimkell's important role in Norwegian church history is connected to his activities after Olav Haraldsson's death at Stiklestad in 1030. According to Snorre, the rumours of miracles happening at Olav's grave seem to have come up very spontaneously, but Grimkell took an active and leading part in leading the strong reactions these events called forth among broad layers of the people into an organised worship of Olav as a saint.

³¹ *Adam av Bremen*, 1993, p. 102.

³² *Theodoricus monachus*, 1932 p. 42.

Concluding remarks

Looking at the impulses from Christianity making themselves felt in Norway during the 9th and 10th centuries, we have made an effort here to put together information from different sources³³ indicating that such impulses were brought to the country by different groups of people at different levels of society, and that these impulses must have created a prepared ground for the more organised missionary efforts that took place in the 10th and early 11th centuries. We have also tried to substantiate that among the organised efforts to christianise Norway the leading clergy of the Wessex kingdom played a decisive part. In fact the vast majority of bishops operating in Norway up to the reign of Olav Haraldsson inclusive, were recruited from Wessex. One can hardly escape the conclusion that some sort of a planned missionary effort for the christianisation of Norway must have existed among the leading clergy in this South-English kingdom.

In my presentation here I have by no means managed to collect all the pieces of skin contained in the source material to cover the body of my elephant. But I do hope that my observations and conclusions do carry some similarity to a living being.

³³ For a selection of the texts referred to, see T. Jørgensen, *Gjør døren høy; Kirken i Norge 1000 år,...* and I. Montgomery, J. Schumacher, Oslo 1995.