

The Christianization of Norway

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Introduction

A major change took place in Scandinavia around AD 1000: the emergence of a monarchy, the establishment of Christianity and urbanisation are the main elements of this change, followed by transformations in, for instance, social organisation, economy, technology and aesthetics. The order of events has since long been discussed in order to find the answer to the typical historical question: What came first and last in this historical sequence? What were the courses of events, and what were the consequences?

In a postdoctoral project I aimed to further knowledge about this chronology by focusing specifically on the change from Norse to Christian religion in Norway. I wished to analyse available information on chronology concerning three important aspects:

- how long did the old Norse religion persist after Christianity was imposed
- how early could a Christian cult be traced
- and, because many scholars previously have stressed the possibility for syncretism or acculturation and gradual change (see for instance Gräslund 2002, Hernæs 1995), I also aimed to demonstrate whether there was a gradual shift from a Norse to Christian cult. In order to investigate the later aspect, I began mapping traces of cults from the period prior to the infiltration of Christianity into Norway, and ended my research with the establishment of the archbishopric of Nidaros.

Thus the period for my investigations was between c. AD 560 and 1152/53.

Early written sources describe missionary Christian kings who were baptised, often abroad, and who returned to Norway with missionaries, the example of King Håkon den gode (reign 934–961), who was raised in England, is a prime example of such a king. King Olav Tryggvason, brought up in Novgorod, and King Olav Haraldsson (St Olav) who reigned in the late 10th and early 11th century respectively are also described as kings who were important for the Christianization of Norway. This is particularly true of St Olav, who died in a battle in Trøndelag in 1030 (Bagge 2005). The year 1030 has thus been seen as the ‘official year’ for the Christianization of the Norwegian population.

Contemporary written sources are, however, scant for this early period, and the reliability for later documents concerning this period are uncertain. Contemporary archaeological material has sometimes been interpreted to fit within the context of the written sources, but quite often the interpretation tells a conflicting story. In some areas, for instance in Rogaland, archaeological evidence has pointed to a slow and gradual change to Christianity after an early introduction, maybe as early as the 8th century (Hernæs 1995). But in the vast majority of areas in Norway material culture demonstrates a sudden stop in the Norse cult during the 10th – 11th century (see for instance Gellein 1997; Kisuule 2000), and eventually the appearance of Christian churches. The differences in interpretation depend on differences in archaeological material in various regions, but also on differences in theoretical background and methods.

Tor’s hammers as an indicator for Christianization?

I began by mapping the Tor’s hammers in Norway, which is the only symbol that has been identified with a Norse god, Þórr (in Norse spelling) with high degree of reliability. The Tor’s hammer symbol, particularly the pendants, have been interpreted as a counter reaction to

Christianity, and the symbol could thus indicate in which districts and when Christianity became so stressing that people felt the need of an alternative symbol (see for instance Staecker 1999).

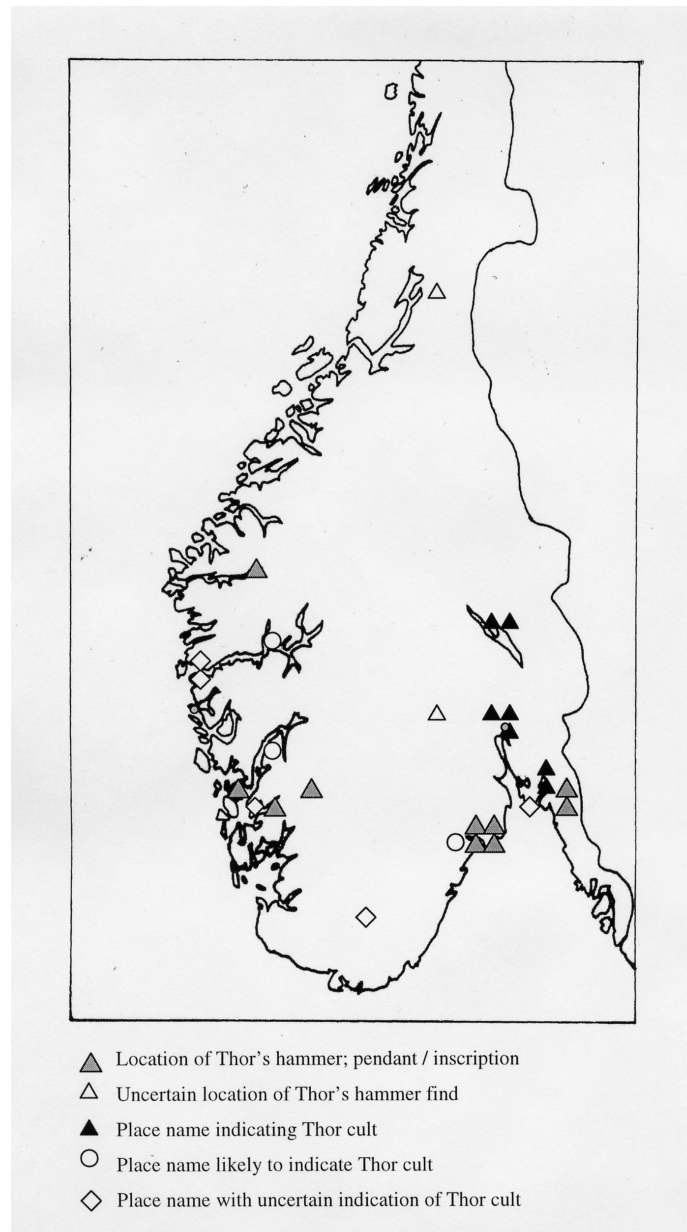


Figure 1: Distribution of Thor's hammer pendants and place name indicating Thor cult (Nordeide 2006)

The result was rather surprising: only twelve objects were found in Norway, including pendants, possible pendants, a mould and inscriptions. They were all dated to the Viking period, and only four of them were found in burials. Combining the information from these finds with place names that could indicate the existence of a Thor cult, it turned out that all places with any certain affiliation to cult of the god Thor were only to be found in the southernmost parts of Norway. My conclusion from this evidence was that the present comprehension of Norse religion is based on too many generalisations from written sources. The cult of Thor was not widespread all over the country, and the belief system might have differed more from area to area than has previously been thought. Moreover, the small amount of items is considered relatively representative, but the material is altogether too scant to make any conclusions concerning a conflict between Norse religion and Christianity (Nordeide 2006).

Prehistoric burials and associated structures.

Catherine Bell argues that it is only of theoretical interest to separate between different kinds of ritual behaviour, magic and religion (Bell 1997, p.52). I would argue, rather, that some rituals should be regarded as sacred actions, in contrast to profane ritual behaviour, such as school ceremonies, and I would argue that burials are among these sacred rituals, even if a funeral involves several other aspects than religion.

Graves and churches are the most frequent traces of any religious cult that we know from late Iron Age¹ and early medieval period in Norway.² This material has, however, been analysed only on a regional scale to date, and no systematic study of the relation between Norse / Saami and the earliest Christian graves and churches have been done on a national scale. There is a natural reason for this. The relevant archaeological material from Norway is incredibly rich, particularly considering the quality of the databases that have been compiled on the basis of material culture found in archaeological researches throughout the country. It was not possible to analyse the total material during a three year project, such as mine was. To maintain a national perspective and to avoid yet another regional study, and to address both general trends and individuality, I chose 22 municipalities in southern and central Norway, in addition to the oldest towns in the area, which were compared to previous results of regional studies. Selection criteria was based on the type of topography, geographical position, the existence or non-existence of interesting, relevant finds, in addition to the relation to central places such as *thing* places.

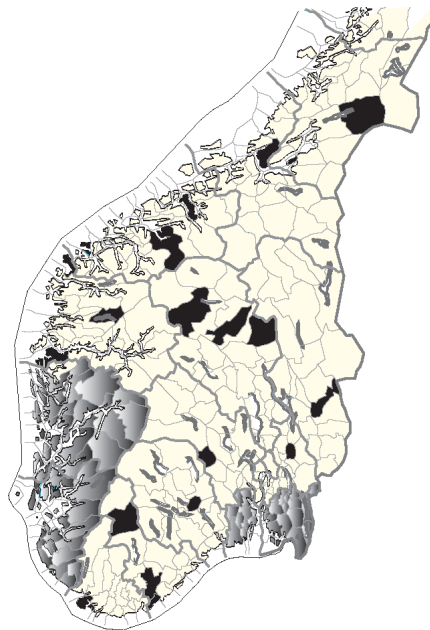


Figure 2: Selected research areas in Southern and Central parts of Norway, marked as black. For the grey areas it is possible to rely on previous analysis.

¹ The late Iron Age in Norway is normally viewed as the period between c. AD 560 – 1030/50

² The Medieval period in Norwegian archaeology is normally viewed as the period between c. AD 1030/50 – 1536.

Norway is characterized by very heterogeneous burial customs during late Iron Age. I have analysed the Norse burials in regards to the treatment of the body, the grave monument and the orientation of the grave, as well as the amount and types of grave goods and the occurrence of symbols of belief. However, I must note that traces of ritual are much more important than single artefacts.

I do not have the opportunity here to go into details of my results. Nevertheless, my results demonstrate that there were major differences in burial traditions between the districts. Some places were dominated by cremations, some by inhumations; in others several people were buried in one tumuli, and in other districts there was only one single grave in each monument. The way the burial monuments were constructed, and the use of resources, differed from place to place, as did the goods put into the graves. It was not unusual to include a boat among the grave gifts, but for instance at Herøy, at the coast of Møre, they sacrificed boats and other objects in the moors instead. The orientations of the grave varied between east-west, north-south and somewhere in-between. Even within one and the same municipality several very different traditions were practiced. It was also hard to see any correspondence between various "Christian" criteria in the same grave, rather, for instance, inhumations graves were found in North-South oriented graves etc. I could hardly see any changes in the burial cult that could have been caused by Christian influence. In many areas, such as in Hordaland, they just stuck to their old religious traditions, - in Norse called *siðr* (Steinsland 2005, p.423) - , until at one time the Norse burials suddenly stopped. In Rauma in Romsdal, for instance, where a sufficient statistical basis for the study of burial cult is recorded, it appears that people kept their own traditions at each place through time, rather than adapting to their neighbours or to Christian customs for burial. All kinds of variations in burial cult happened even within small districts in Rauma, where people must have been related and befriended to each other, and where they must have participated in each other's rituals. I can only imagine how dramatically different for instance a cremation must have been to a group of people practicing inhumation burials, but such differences must obviously have been accepted and maybe even appreciated.

This supports my theory from my study of Tor's hammers, that the 'Norse religion' was not one, homogenous body of religious thoughts and cult. Rather it covered a set of various ritual practices in a vast area, and the differences must have been regarded as a natural part of life. Despite the differences in cult, the belief was not necessarily very different from valley to valley, but it is hard to see that one and the same belief lay behind the various cultic expressions observed. This is also stressed in the concluding remarks from the Swedish project 'Vägar till Midgård':

"By switching the focus from myth to rite it has become highly obvious that pre-Christian Norse religion is not a uniform or stable category. Instead there were profound chronological, regional, and social differences in pre-Christian religion practice in Scandinavia. The archaeological traces of rites are in fact so different in time and place that one can seriously question the term "Norse paganism". Instead a picture emerges above all of regional rites." (Andrén, Jennbert, and Raudvere 2006, pp.13-14)

From a methodological point of view, this means that burial customs have to be studied on a small scale, village by village. Studied on a larger scale, the local traditions would easily be hidden behind statistical generalisations that could account for local differences.

Significant changes in Norse burial customs are not observed anywhere in the selected material, which could be explained by a positive influence from Christianity. I have, however, observed

that for some areas old burial tradition became even more vital and flourishing towards the end of the Viking period than previously, which could be a sign of a resistance to Christianity and its norms, and thus the indirectly indicating knowledge of its existence. In one example it is even observed a change of burial tradition, increasing the distance to Christian cult: in a barrow at Tingvoll they held an inhumation funeral in the early Viking period, and later during the period they held a cremation burial, buried in the same barrow on top of the former one. They thus changed their burial rite from inhumation to cremation, probably within the same family. Thus, as a result of this analysis, I found little evidence of an adaptation to Christian burial customs before they started with Christian burials, indeed I found rather the opposite.

The chronology of the grave finds is not very precise. Based mainly on typology and old radiocarbon dates most of the finds are not possible to date very closely. In spite of this and any alternative explanations, I would argue that the burials according to Norse rituals in South and Central Norway stopped at different times from place to place. The latest barrow that can be safely dated is from the inner parts of a valley in southern Norway, at Nomeland in Aust-Agder, where the dead person in addition to other rich grave gifts was given trading equipment, including a Norwegian coin struck as late as during AD 1065/80. The coins were German, Anglo-Saxon, Danish and Norwegian, which indicate that the woman hardly was isolated. She probably had contacts in various areas, although she did not necessarily have direct contact with these countries. This grave is rather typical for the district in Southeast Norway: Quite a few rather late Norse burials are found here, and also many objects that could indicate trade and exchange are found among the grave goods, such as coins, weights and balances. In other regions it is difficult to spot any graves later than 950, but in most areas Norse burials continues until c. AD 1000 – 1050, and these kinds of objects are rare.

The chronology of the burials seems to fit nicely with other places interpreted as arenas for Norse cult. Two examples from Central Norway is at Hove in Nor-Trøndelag, where there seem to have been an on-going cult for at least a thousand years, coming to an end around AD 1000 (Farbregd 1986); and at Mære, where house remains are interpreted as the traces of a Norse cult house, ending by the second half of the 11th century (Lidén 1969, Lidén 1999, Nordeide in prep.).

The appearance of Christianity

Bergljot Solberg has claimed that the Norse barrows belonged to the landowners, and that the social reorganisation during the late Iron Age might have caused the reduction of barrows towards the end of Iron Age to a certain degree (Solberg 2000, p.313). The frequency of barrows may thus be a result not only of the Christianization process, but also of how far the process of feudalism had come. Solberg may be right in arguing that Christianization may not represent a full explanation for changes in burial traditions, but the arrival of Christianity and the disappearance of Norse graves have a striking correspondence in time. Neither is it probably any coincidence that also in Britain when Christianity appeared, the old burial traditions disappeared at about the same time, although this is explained in different ways in Britain as well (Dickinson 2002). Also, it became impossible to continue with the old cult in any case after the early Norwegian Christian law became effective,³ with severe penalty for ‘pagan practice’ of various types.

As well as the date of the latest Norse cult varies, the appearance of the earliest traces of a Christian cult in Norway seems to differ in time from place to place. Christian graves are not easily detected unless they are situated in a church yard surrounding a still existing church, but

³ The chronology of the early laws is under debate.

according to Christian rules regarding funerals, the burial should take place on a churchyard, and the archaeological material indicates that this rule was closely followed. There are no obvious examples in Norway where Christian graves are established on a Norse cemetery, outside a churchyard. There are, however, several examples where a Christian church with a cemetery was established in the same area as Norse burials, for instance at Alstadhaug in Nord-Trøndelag and at Hen in Romsdal.

The earliest Christian cemetery found so far in Norway is radiocarbon dated to the first and second part of the 10th century or even earlier, at the island Veøy in Romsdalen (Solli 1996). Beyond this, the earliest Christian graves are found at Borgund, where an Anglo-Saxon coin from AD 1003/9 is found in a Christian grave (Herteig unpublished, Skaare 1976). The churchyard by the church of St. Clemens in Oslo was established by the start of the 11th century (Nordeide and Gulliksen 2007). A churchyard from the 11th century is also found in Tønsberg (Brendalsmo 1989). The city of Trondheim was founded by the end of the 10th century, and yet there are no corresponding Norse burial sites in the surrounding regions such as by Birka and Kaupang. There are, however, crosses and possible Christian objects in Trondheim dated around the very start of the urban settlement, and there was production of encolpions from the second half of the 11th century. This was surely done in connection to the cult of St Olav. These facts indicate that the people of Trondheim were Christian from the beginning of the town's existence.

Christianity and towns

As these examples demonstrate, some Christian communities seem to have been established during the 10th and the first half of 11th centuries. But as it appears, Christianity was not yet the dominating religion at this time in all districts, and at least in Rauma in Romsdalen, Christian and various Norse people co-existed for some period.

It should be no surprise to find the earliest Christian cult at Veøy, a close neighbour to Rauma, the municipality where people proved to be very tolerant to religious diversities. In general, the oldest traces from Christian cult also have a striking similarity to some of the earliest, medieval Norwegian towns and marketplaces, how few these however are (Figure 3). Trondheim, Veøy, Oslo, Tønsberg and Borgund are all among the earliest such places in Norway. The oldest town, the Viking Age Kaupang, dates from c. AD 800 to the middle of the 10th century (Pilø 2007). This town is, however, surrounded by Norse burial sites. No Christian Church or churchyard is found here, although some Christian influenced graves and Christian symbols may occur. By contrast, four Tor's hammer objects are found at Kaupang, while no Tor's hammers are found in the towns founded later, even after nearly 40 years of systematic excavations. The typical Christian town foundations seem to be slightly later than Kaupang. Many of these towns were founded by the missionary kings, according to documentary sources. Also Veøy seem to represent a variation in this picture as the earliest Christian graves seem to be older than the central place, and contemporary with Norse graves in the same area, in Rauma.

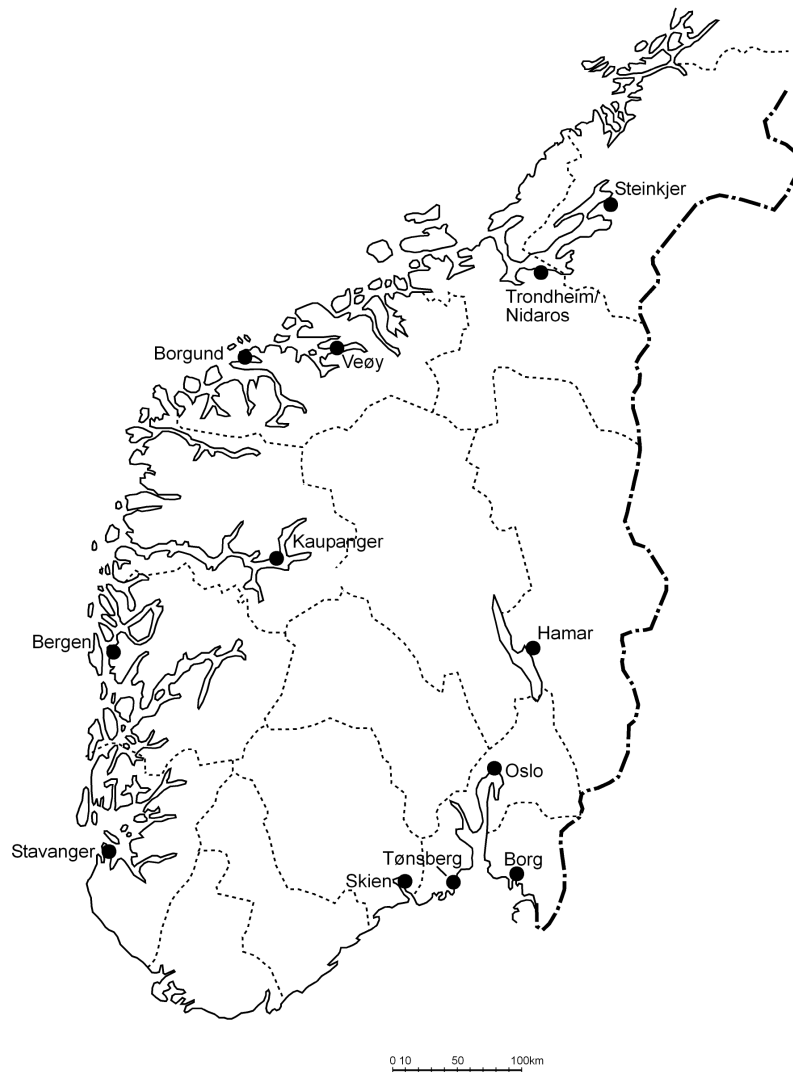


Figure 3: Medieval towns and central places of Norway (from Nordeide in press)

The southernmost part of Norway, Agder is an area with a striking lack of medieval towns and royal influence, and differs also from other areas in the frequency of Norse graves containing trading equipment and the late traces of Norse cult found there. The people in Trondheim in Central Norway worshipped St Olav during the time in which the noted dead female in the rural district of South Norway was buried in a mound, followed by many and valuable grave gifts. This could indicate that both trading and politics were decentralised and based on individuals or dynasties in Agder at a time when there were royal Christian centres in other parts of the country. The king appears in Agder through the royal manors which are not distinguished by special or rich finds from Iron Age, but they all have a connection to a (later) medieval church (Larsen 1978, p.90, 160). This indicates that the king was associated with Christianity in this area as well, but at a time later than when the towns were founded.

Conclusion

This could indicate that Christianity did not move simply geographically, from south to north. According to documentary sources, the kings were eager to promote Christianity in Norway, and King Olav Tryggvason and King Olav Haraldsson founded several of the earliest Norwegian towns. To a certain degree archaeological sources seem to confirm this story, and link the two events together. The kings' motivation could easily be explained: They needed Christianity as an ideological tool to establish the idea of a hierarchic system of power. In the case of Norway it

seems as if the kings founded towns in order to create a forum from where they could spread Christianity. They would probably seek neutral or Christian ground for the town, which could be one explanation why Veøy became a market place in the medieval period, while the area around Kaupang did not. But there seems to have existed an earlier Christian community before these missionary kings (at Veøy), and there were voids in the kings' sphere of influence where Christianity appeared later (in Agder). Against good old Henry Pirenne, I have argued that, in the case of Norway, the kings around AD 1000 founded the towns as 'ports of faith', not primarily as 'ports of trade' (Nordeide in press, Pirenne 1956(1925)). But of course, this does only explain the king's motivation. If the king was the groom, the church was certainly a willing bride, but it remains to explain why other people were positive to this kind of location for association of power.

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