

### Olaf's Saga: A Study of the Christianization of Norse Culture

There is an ongoing debate as to whether the Christianization of a place or culture—such as Norse culture—takes place at a single point in time, as with the conversion of a king, or if it is a centuries-long process. The purpose of this study is to argue for a middle way, a “yes” to both sides of the argument—to argue, namely, that the Christianization of the Norse culture began as an event with the conversion of its kings and continued as a process over long centuries until Christianity predominated the culture. Enter Olaf Tryggvason, one of the most renowned of the Christian Norwegian kings. He has had sagas written about him, such as *The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*, and has even made his way into papers centered on Charlemagne.<sup>1</sup> One of the reasons for which Tryggvason is so well known is for his expansion of Christendom by forcing the conversion of other rulers and nations to Christianity, with promises of good upon their compliance, and threats of death upon their disobedience. Olaf may therefore come across to the modern reader as an evil king coercing the people he conquered into a religion they would never have chosen for themselves. However, it is nevertheless undeniable that, perhaps despite Olaf's means of forceful conversion, vast swaths of Norse culture were deeply affected by Christianity.

In Oddr Snorrason's account of Tryggvason, Snorrason makes or highlights several parallels between Tryggvason and biblical figures from the New Testament. Snorrason begins by speaking of Tryggvason as a John the Baptist figure in his prologue, creating this connection both directly and indirectly. He says that Tryggvason baptized Olaf Haraldsson, “just as John the

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<sup>1</sup> Oddr Snorrason, *The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*, trans. Theodore M. Andersson, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Claudia Bornholdt and Jon Paul Heyne, “The Impact of Charlemagne on the Native Literary Tradition in the North,” in *Charlemagne in the Norse and Celtic Worlds* (Boydell & Brewer, 2022), 73–74.

Baptist did with the Lord,” intimating that Tryggvason was himself a prophet like John.<sup>2</sup> Snorrason then refers to Tryggvason as a “precursor” to Olaf Haraldsson, “as John was [the Lord’s] precursor,” which in the end would necessitate Haraldsson’s exaltation and Tryggvason’s diminishment.<sup>3</sup> Haraldsson would go on to allegedly perform miracles and be canonized by the Church, while Tryggvason—who nevertheless performed great deeds—would purportedly die at the hands of his betrayers.

In his introduction to the saga, Theodore Andersson notes that Walter Baetke argues for a comparison between Olaf Tryggvason and Christ, with Sigvaldi being compared to Judas Iscariot.<sup>4</sup> Jarl Sigvaldi was one of the chieftains who agreed to betray Olaf Tryggvason in an ambush and kill him. Baetke likens Sigvaldi to Judas by comparing Sigvaldi’s lies to Tryggvason with Judas’ betrayal of Christ. Andersson then concedes that this may be the case when he points out an additional comparison saying, “the early portions. . . focus on Olaf’s escape from a Herod-like pursuit into an Egypt-like indenture prefacing a return to Norway in the capacity of preacher and proselytizer,” which establishes another connection between Olaf Tryggvason and Christ.<sup>5</sup> Tryggvason’s escape from the murderous Gunnhildr as a babe recalls Christ’s flight from Herod in Matthew 2, while Tryggvason’s period of slavery only faintly resonates with Jesus’ exile in Egypt. His eventual return as a preacher-king come to convert his people—similar to his flight from Gunnhildr—resembles the Lord Jesus’ own return, His office as the King of Israel, and His work as a teacher during His time on earth.

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<sup>2</sup> Snorrason, *Saga*, 35.

<sup>3</sup> Snorrason, *Saga*, 35.

<sup>4</sup> Snorrason, *Saga*, 22.

<sup>5</sup> Snorrason, *Saga*, 25.

Later in the saga, Tryggvason's conversion to Christianity displays connections with the Apostle Paul's conversion and commission. Tryggvason ascends to a rock where there are "bright men," and where "[Tryggvason] heard a voice speaking to him," to which he replies, "who are you, lord, that I may believe in you?"<sup>6</sup> The brightness, hearing a voice, and Tryggvason's words, "who are you, lord," all parallel closely with the Apostle Paul's Damascus road experience in Acts 9.<sup>7</sup> With the words of God, Tryggvason is commissioned to go to a certain location (namely, Greece) where God will further reveal Himself to Tryggvason. God's words to Tryggvason echo the words of Christ to Paul, commanding him to go into the city to await further direction. Then, God further commissions Tryggvason with a task, "you will turn many others away from error and toward salvation," once more resonating with the words of Christ to Paul in Acts 26.<sup>8</sup>

These parallels between Tryggvason and biblical figures like John the Baptist, Christ, and Paul the Apostle evince at least two significant details. First, the parallels illustrate the profound effect of Christianity upon Norse culture, such that it has affected how they tell stories and recount history. The objection may be made that one cannot be sure of Snorrason's account as historical, which may be conceded; however, in Snorrason's own perspective, he is relating history. The aim of this argument—that Christianity affected how the Norse related history—is not to convince readers of the accuracy or lack thereof in Snorrason's account, but to assert that Snorrason's account inherently contains the atmosphere and worldview of Christianity. Furthermore, there are arguments in Snorrason's saga for both Christianization of the Norse as

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<sup>6</sup> Snorrason, *Saga*, 54.

<sup>7</sup> Snorrason, *Saga*, 54.

<sup>8</sup> Snorrason, *Saga*, 54.

an event and a process. One assertion is more intrinsic to the text, and flows from Christianity's influence upon Norse historical narrative. This argument is for the Christianization of the Norse as a process, which took time to work its way into their literature and the way in which they recount history. Snorrason's comparisons between Tryggvason and biblical figures is clear evidence of the process of Christianization. It took time for the Norse to familiarize themselves with the Bible and its stories for them to relate their history to it and draw connections with historical figures. Though Snorrason's other argument may be unintentional, still he asserts that there were immediate consequences to Tryggvason's conversion. The effects were not just felt by Tryggvason alone, but by his closer followers, and in time by Norway itself, and eventually other countries as well. For instance, when Tryggvason and his men submit themselves to baptism, this was an event that had instant results and began the process of Christianization of Norse culture. Kjartan Richter agrees with this assessment, claiming that Tryggvason "was instrumental in the Christianization of Norway, Iceland, and other North Atlantic lands," and that "by the twelfth century. . . he was regarded [by learned men in Iceland] as the most important agent in the Christianization of the Nordic lands."<sup>9</sup> John Lindow recognizes Tryggvason's significance as the "zealous" catalyst that began the conversion and Christianization of Norse culture through his "activities in Norway" and Iceland.<sup>10</sup> Other narratives concur, such as the "Acts of the Saints on Selja," wherein the writer states that "through [Tryggvason's] diligence

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<sup>9</sup> Kjartan J. Richter, "Stories of Nordic missionaries on the eastern way," in *The Making of the Eastern Vikings: Rus' and Varangians in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sverrir Jakobsson, Thorir Jonsson Hraundal and Daria Segal (Turnhout: Brepols, 2024), 121, 122.

<sup>10</sup> John Lindow, "St Olaf and the Skalds," in *Sanctity in the North: Saints, Lives, and Cults in Medieval Scandinavia* ed. Thomas A. Dubois (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2008), 107.

and actions. . . the people of Norway put aside their idolatry and received the sacraments of the Christian faith.”<sup>11</sup>

The second significant detail, then, concerns Oddr Snorrason himself. He demonstrates a level of devotion to Tryggvason that surely would have been present in Tryggvason’s day among his own people. That same loyalty would have caused converts devoted to Tryggvason to follow their king in the Christian religion. This adherence to their king can be seen in the episode where Tryggvason and his men are “sanctified. . . with holy baptism.”<sup>12</sup> Sverre Bagge reinforces this idea when he asserts that kings were generally in greater command of the culture’s direction than others might claim it impossible to “Christianize a group of people” or a culture “within. . . thirty-five years, as the sagas claim happened in Norway.”<sup>13</sup> Bagge points out that kings could initiate religious parties, ingratiating themselves with the people, as well as replace dissenting chieftains with loyal men in the cultural struggle for Christianity.<sup>14</sup> Bagge argues that, “the conversion of Norway. . . [was the result of] Norwegians invading other countries,” where they would settle and be converted.<sup>15</sup> Tryggvason himself was converted outside Norway in Greece

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas A. Dubois, “Sts Sunniva and Henrik: Scandinavian Martyr Saints in Their Hagiographic and National Contexts,” in *Sanctity in the North: Saints, Lives, and Cults in Medieval Scandinavia*, 91.

<sup>12</sup> Snorrason, *Saga*, 56.

<sup>13</sup> Sæbjørg Walaker Nordeide, “Conversion to Christianity in Scandinavia: A Historiographical Overview,” in *The Introduction of Christianity into the Early Medieval Insular World, Converting the Isles I*, ed. Roy Flechner and Máire Ní Mhaonaigh (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 114; Sverre Bagge, “Christianization and State Formation in Early Medieval Norway,” *Scandinavian Journal of History* 30, no. 2 (2005): 115, <https://doi-org.libproxy.library.unt.edu/10.1080/03468750510014088>.

<sup>14</sup> Bagge, “Christianization,” 115.

<sup>15</sup> Bagge, “Christianization,” 114–115.

and Scilly and, when he eventually returned, sought the conversion of his countrymen.<sup>16</sup> The fact that Tryggvason commanded enough respect to be obeyed by so many, even in accepting a foreign religion, is noteworthy. Furthermore, the loyalty of his people and the respect Tryggvason seemed to effortlessly command should certainly be taken into consideration in the discussion regarding the Christianization of Norway. A king may not win the hearts of his people, but he may still institute law and religion, such that they last for centuries. Yet according to the saga, Tryggvason had won that esteem. Certainly Olaf Tryggvason, having the affection of his people, the ability as king, and great zeal, impacted Norse culture significantly and himself began the advancement of Christianization.

It should be noted that “[Oddr] is concerned. . . that Olaf [Tryggvason] is not. . . a saint on a level with Olaf Haraldsson but is. . . a close approximation.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, at least part of Snorrason’s purpose in writing is to emphasize Tryggvason as a candidate for sainthood. Canonization is the process of being declared a saint by the Roman Catholic Church. It requires a number of elements including a biography, “miracle collections, and relics.”<sup>18</sup> When Snorrason notes that, “Olaf Tryggvason was not known. . . for. . . miracles,” it is clear that Snorrason still wishes to make the case for Tryggvason’s canonization.<sup>19</sup> Tryggvason, or any king of Norway (such as Olaf Haraldsson) would have needed to affect Norway profoundly to even be considered

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<sup>16</sup> Snorrason, *Saga*, 54–56.

<sup>17</sup> Snorrason, *Saga*, 22.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Mills, "canonization," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Online: Oxford University Press, 2022). <https://www-oxfordreference-com.libproxy.library.unt.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780199642465.001.0001/acref-9780199642465-e-1214>.

<sup>19</sup> Snorrason, *Saga*, 35.

for this distinctly Christian honor. Snorrason's work proves that, though the culture was not changed overnight, the work of Tryggvason and others like him left a deep impression upon Norse culture. In fact, the impression they left was uniquely Christian and significantly shifted the cultural tide in their day. Consequently, Snorrason, through writing Tryggvason's saga, arguing for Tryggvason's canonization, and comparing Tryggvason to biblical figures, evidences the event of Norse culture's Christianization "in which initiative by royal authority and the Church is assumed."<sup>20</sup>

Christopher Abram contends for a slower process of Christianization, saying, "[Hallfreðr Óttarsson and Óláfr Tryggvason] were both participants in . . . the 'macroconversion' of Norway, part of an ongoing process of national Christianization," that only ended with Haraldsson.<sup>21</sup> Abram focuses on the personal conversion of two kings—Óttarsson and Tryggvason—and its effects upon Norway. Additionally, he points out that there is a difference between conversion and Christianization; however, while his claim may be granted, it actually strengthens the middle view that Christianization was both an event and a process. Tryggvason's personal conversion does not negate either a one-time event in the Christianization of Norway—Norse culture—nor a long, slow process. Tryggvason's conversion was one of the defining events that led to the process of Christianization, until it culminated in the Christianization of Norway, and eventually Norse culture.

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<sup>20</sup> Nordeide, "Conversion," 114.

<sup>21</sup> Christopher Abram, "Modeling Religious Experience in Old Norse Conversion Narratives: The Case of Óláfr Tryggvason and Hallfreðr Vandræðaskáld." *Speculum* 90, no. 1 (2015): 114.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43577274>.

Nonetheless, to Abram's point, Christianization is also a process, which is demonstrated by "Scandinavians [changing] from an oral society. . . to a literate society" over a matter of decades and centuries.<sup>22</sup> This gradual change is a portrayal of Nordeide's "'bottom-up' conversion [which] has Christianity. . . [spreading more individually]" and where "the transition. . . is deemed to have been more gradual."<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the change in "the burial customs, the cult practices, the artefacts and the iconography," as well as "the runestones" within Norse culture cannot be ignored.<sup>24</sup> Once more, Bagge is helpful, "the runic inscriptions from the conversion period [in Norway]. . . also seem to point in the direction of gradual Christianization."<sup>25</sup> Thus, while the Christianization of Norse culture began as an event—Tryggvason's conversion and subsequent proselytization of other nations—it continued as a centuries-long process until the culture was transformed.

According to Snorrason's saga, Tryggvason brought Christianity to many rulers, peoples, and lands, especially in the North. The effects may have taken centuries to take root and bear fruit, as Stefan Brink says, "Christianisation is more of a process, a slow cultural change and an adoption of new ideas."<sup>26</sup> Even so, when a ruler like King Haraldr from Tryggvason's saga chooses—even by force—to deny his ancestors' and culture's religion for a relatively new religion, it is sure to have some influence. Therefore, considering the evidence regarding

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<sup>22</sup> Stefan Brink, "Christianisation and the Emergence of the Early Church in Scandinavia," in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink and Neil Price (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 621.

<sup>23</sup> Nordeide, "Conversion," 114.

<sup>24</sup> Anne-Sofie Gräslund, "The Material Culture of the Christianisation," in *The Viking World*, 639.

<sup>25</sup> Bagge, "Christianization," 110.

<sup>26</sup> Brink, "Christianisation," 621



Tryggvason, and taking into account the slower changes to Norse culture, I contend that the Christianization of Scandinavia was both an event and a process that took place over centuries. It began with the conversion of kings like Tryggvason and Haraldsson, which was the event that took place before the process began. Tryggvason especially served as the stimulating agent that effected Christianization and its process. Then, like yeast working its way through a lump of dough, Christianity slowly leavened the lump of Norse culture. However, this slower process by no means refutes the effect of the first few moments when the yeast is first introduced to the dough and begins its work.

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