

How Christian Were Viking Christians?

by *Elena Melnikova*

Once the most religious Emperor took pity on their [the Northmen's – *E.M.*] envoys, and asked them if they would be willing to receive the Christian religion; and, when they answered that always and everywhere and in everything they were ready to obey him, he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Him [...] The nobles of the royal palace adopted these Northmen, almost as if they had been children: each received a white robe from the Emperor's wardrobe, and from his sponsors a full set of Frankish garments, with arms, costly robes and other adornments. This was done repeatedly, and more and more came each year, not for the sake of Christ but for earthly advantages. They made haste to come, not as envoys any longer but as loyal vassals, on Easter Eve to put themselves at the disposal of the emperor; and it happened that on a certain occasion they came to the number of fifty. The Emperor asked them if they wished to be baptized. When they had confessed their sins, he ordered them to be sprinkled with holy water. As there were not enough linen garments to go around on that occasion, Lewis [Louis the Pious – *E.M.*] ordered some old shirts to be cut up and tacked together to make tunics or to be run up as overalls. One of these was forthwith clapped upon the shoulders of one of the elder men; and when he had looked all over it for a minute, he conceived fierce anger in his mind, and said to the emperor: 'Look here, I've been through this ablution business about twenty times already, and I've always been rigged out before with a splendid white suit; but this old sack makes me feel more like a pig farmer than a soldier. If it weren't for the fact that you've pinched my clothes, and not given me any new ones, with the result that I should feel a right fool if I walked out of here naked, you could keep your Christ and your suit of reach-me-down'.¹

This tale about a Viking with extensive experience in being baptized is most probably a creation of Notker the Stammerer,² who composed a collection of anecdotes about the deeds of Charlemagne for his great-grandson Charles the

1 Notker Balbulus, *Gesta Caroli Magni*. II. 19, ed. by Hans F. Haefele, MGH, SRG n.s., 12 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1957), pp. 89–90. English translation is from *Two Lives of Charlemagne*, trans. by Lewis Thorpe (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969), pp. 168–69.

2 Ian Wood, 'Christians and Pagans in Ninth Century Scandinavia', in *The Christianization of Scandinavia: Report of a Symposium held at Kungälv, Sweden, 4–9 August 1985* (Alingsås: Viktoria Bokförlag, 1987), pp. 36–67 (p. 50).

Fat on the occasion of his visit to the monastery of St Gall in 883. Notker does not conceal his belief in the traitorous nature of the Vikings and their baptismal practices being ‘not for the sake of Christ but for earthly advantages’, and the purpose of the tale is to prove this. However, whether this is pure fiction or a report of a real event only slightly exaggerated by the author, the tale is representative of that time in several respects. Firstly, Notker states that the tradition of baptizing Vikings emerged soon after the Viking raids to Western Europe started. Secondly, he views the baptism of Vikings as something of a mass phenomenon. Thirdly, he stresses the pragmatic purposes of the Vikings in undergoing baptism.³ Fourthly, he considers the Frankish emperors responsible for introducing the Vikings to Christianity. Finally, Notker accuses the Vikings of ignorance in terms of the meaning of the sacraments, but at the same time he notes their knowledge of Christian rituals. Writing in the last quarter of the ninth century, it is possible that Notker’s portrayal of Louis the Pious’s reign was coloured by events from later decades; nevertheless his account still provides us with an indication of how familiar the Vikings were with Christianity.

Every single feature in the account’s description presents a problem in itself, and some of them have been the focus of previous studies, especially in the last two decades. One of the most intriguing yet complicated aspects of this issue is the mental adaptation of Christianity by these northern heathens: what did the Vikings know of Christianity, how did they appreciate Christian teaching *per se* and in comparison with their native beliefs, in what way was Christianity enrooted in the minds of pagan Scandinavians?⁴ Some of these questions have been touched upon in previous scholarship, but mostly in connection with other topics and for the period after the ‘official’ Christianization,⁵ so that the Vikings’ early Christian phase has not been considered as a specific phenomenon.

A discussion of how Christianity was perceived by the Scandinavians in the ninth and tenth centuries is hindered by the scarcity of contemporary written sources that reflect their mentality directly. Frankish and Anglo-Saxon annals

3 Likewise suspicious of the ar-Rūs (i.e. Scandinavian) merchants was the Arabic writer Ibn Khurradadhbih (c. 820 – c. 890) who remarked that the ar-Rūs merchants coming to Bagdad alleged to be Christians in order not to pay taxes: Ibn Khurradadhbih, *Kitab al-Masalik wa'l Mamalik*, ed. and French tr. by Michael J. de Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1889). Russian translation is from Ibn Khurradadhbih, *Kniga putej i stran*, trans. by N. Velikhanova (Baku, 1986), p. 124.

4 Cf. the formulation of a similar problem by Anne-Sofie Gräslund, ‘Pagan and Christian in the Age of Conversion’, in *Proceedings of the Tenth Viking Congress – Larkollen, Norway 1985*, ed. by James E. Knirk, Universitetets Oldsaksamlings skrifter, ny rekke, 9 (Oslo: Universitetets Oldsaksamling, 1987), p. 90: ‘What did Christianity and the church service mean to the people who did not understand Latin?’

5 For a more general approach to the problem, see Möller Håkan, ‘Mentalitet och kristnande: Reflexioner kring ett tvärvetenskapligt studium – exemplet Jämtland’, in *Jämtlands kristnande*, ed. by Stefan Brink (Uppsala: Linne Böcker, 1996), pp. 189–99; Anders Hultgård, ‘Religios förändring, kontinuitet och ackulturation/synkretism i vikingatidens och medeltidens skandinaviska religion’, in *Kontinuitet i kult och tro från vikingatid till medeltid*, ed. by Bertil Nilsson (Uppsala: Linne Böcker, 1992), pp. 49–103; Henrik Williams ‘Runstenstexternas teologi’, in: *Kristnandet i Sverige: Gamla källor och nya perspektiv*, ed. by Bertil Nilsson (Uppsala: Linne Böcker, 1996), pp. 291–312.

report a number of cases of Vikings and their leaders being baptized, often in some detail, but they never address the question of what the state of mind of the baptized individuals might have been. Icelandic sagas provide many hints about the Vikings' attitudes towards Christianity, but the sagas were composed at a time when Christianity had long been established in the culture, and many notions of the transitional period had become obscure or incomprehensible and so were misinterpreted. Some references can be found in skaldic verses of the tenth century as well as in runic inscriptions of the eleventh century. Although sparse and sometimes obscure, these references when taken together throw light on the mental processes that accompanied the Scandinavian's familiarization with Christianity. The purpose of this article therefore is to demonstrate the peculiarity of the Norse perception of Christianity in the pre-conversion period by studying only one aspect, the image of Christ as it is presented in early sources.

Ways of familiarization with Christianity

The time of 'official' Christianization — i.e., that which was brought about by rulers who decreed Christianity to be the only religion of their countries (such as Harald Bluetooth in the 960s or Volodimer the Great in 988) — was preceded, as is now widely acknowledged, by a long 'pre-conversion period'.⁶ Contrary to the 'conversion moment', which depended heavily on royal power and predominantly involved the social elite, during the 'pre-conversion period' the seeds of the new faith were spread among individuals of different social standing; hundreds or perhaps even thousands of Vikings came across various manifestations of Christianity while raiding and trading in the West and East from the late eighth century onwards. They saw magnificent churches and cathedrals, observed Christian rites, came into possession of splendid church artefacts, captured monks and clergymen, dealt with traders from Christian countries and were in contact with local governors of various positions, as high up as Frankish emperors and Anglo-Saxon kings. A Rus' annalist from the beginning of the twelfth century introduces a fictitious episode that nevertheless characterizes the spontaneous nature of the Vikings' encounters with Christianity. He tells that having concluded a treaty with Kievan prince Oleg after his victorious attack on Constantinople in 911,

6 Definitions for the 'conversion moment' and 'conversion period' as two stages in the process of Christianization of the North were proposed by Peter Foote, 'Historical Studies: Conversion Moment and Conversion Period', in *Viking Revaluations: Viking Society Centenary Symposium 14–15 May 1992*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes and Richard Perkins (London: Viking Society for Northern research, 1993), pp. 137–44. This periodization should be supplemented by a 'pre-conversion period' preceding the 'conversion moment' and lasting for about two centuries from the late eighth century onwards. Three phases of Christianization process in Norway have also been identified by Fridtjov Birkeli: infiltration, mission activity and ecclesiastical organization. Fridtjov Birkeli, *Norske steinkors i tidlig middelalder: Et bidrag til belysning av overgangen fra norrøn religion til kristendom*. Skrifter utg. av Det Norske Videnskaps Akademi i Oslo, II. Hist.-filos. kl. n.s. 10 (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1973), p. 14.

the [Byzantine – *E.M.*] Emperor Leo honored the Russian envoys with gifts of gold, palls, and robes, and placed his vassals at their disposition to show them the beauties of the churches, the golden palace, and the riches contained therein. They thus showed the Russes much gold and many palls and jewels, together with the relics of our Lord's Passion: the crown, the nails, and the purple robe, as well as the bones of the Saints. They also instructed the Russes in their faith, and expounded to them the true belief. Thus the Emperor dismissed them to their native land with great honor.⁷

The tale must have been invented by the annalist, but during the talks preceding the conclusion of the treaty, Oleg's emissaries had to visit Constantinople, probably several times. The churches and palaces of the largest city of Europe could not have failed to attract their attention, and the first grains of knowledge about Christianity must have been absorbed by them. Similar chances presented themselves for the Vikings everywhere in Western Europe, and as their activities became more widespread and diverse, such opportunities became more frequent.

The earliest information about baptizing the Norsemen goes back to as early as the times of Charlemagne, whose expansion northward brought him into contact and conflict with the rulers of Southern Denmark (Hedeby) in the last decades of the eighth century.⁸ Frankish annals and other sources attest to vivid connections between the emperor and the rulers of Hedeby after Charlemagne's expansion into the lands south of the Elbe. These contacts included not only military confrontations but also the exchange of emissaries (in 782, 804 and 809 to name but a few), carrying out negotiations and concluding treaties.⁹ Charlemagne seems to have taken advantage of the struggles between the various claimants to the throne in Southern Denmark, employing different political tools to achieve his goals. One of these tools was spreading Christianity beyond the Elbe. He dispatched, or tried to dispatch, several missions to the Danes, the first being an unsuccessful campaign in 777 followed by a similarly unsuccessful mission in 809. The results of Charlemagne's missionary activities seem to be quite modest but it is in this context that the first baptisms of Danes are reported.

7 *Povest' vremennykh let*, ed. by Dmitrii S. Likhachev and Mikhail B. Sverdlov (St Petersburg, 1996), p. 20. English translation from *The Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text*, ed. by Samuel Hazzard Cross and Olgerd Sherbowitz-Wetzor (Cambridge, MA: The Medieval Academy of America, 1953), pp. 68–69.

8 Robert Levine, 'Baptizing Pirates: *Argumenta* and *Fabula* in Norman *historia*', *Mediaevistik*, 1991, no. 4, 157–78; Herbert Jankuhn, 'Karl der Grosse und der Norden', in *Karl der Große: Lebenswerk und Nachleben*, 4 vols (Düsseldorf, 1967), 1, pp. 699–707; Elena Melnikova, 'Ukroshchenie neukrotimykh: dogovory s normannami kak sposob ikh integratsii v inokulturnykh obshchestvakh', *Drevniaia Rus': Voprosy medievistiki*, 32 (2008), 12–26.

9 On the diplomatic connections between Charlemagne and the rulers of Hedeby, see Elena Melnikova, 'Ukroshchenie neukrotimykh', pp. 13–17. On early missions to Denmark see Reinhart Staats, 'Missionsgeschichte Nordeuropas: Eine geistesgeschichtliche Einführung', in *Rom und Byzanz im Norden*, 1, pp. 9–33.

Under the year 807, the anonymous *Poeta Saxo* relates that ‘a leader (*dux*) of the Northmen, called Halfdan (*Alfdeni*), submitted to the great Emperor, accompanied by a host of others, and strove to keep lasting faith’.¹⁰ Though the *Vita* was written between 888 and 891, its information is mostly based on *Annales regni Francorum* and is thought reliable.¹¹ Simon Coupland identifies this Halfdan with the one who headed an embassy to Charlemagne from *rex* Sigfried in 782.¹² If this was the case, Halfdan would have had to become acquainted with Christian culture long before his baptism. Even if this was not the case, the Halfdan of the *Poeta Saxo* would have had to have some previous connections with the Franks to be sure that his coming with ‘a host’ of Danes would be welcomed. The *Poeta Saxo*’s wording also suggests that Halfdan commended himself to Charlemagne (*subdidit*) and that he was baptized, probably together with his followers.

The same pattern characterizes the baptism of another group of the Danes two decades later. This episode is much better illuminated in the sources and it is frequently cited in the context of the ‘Christianization’ of the Danes. In 826, the Danish *rex* Harald Klak came to Louis the Pious and was baptized together with his family and retinue of about 400 warriors.¹³ That was an act of political necessity because Harald needed help in his struggle for overlordship in Southern Denmark and had been receiving military assistance from Louis the Pious since 815. After the baptism, Harald swore homage to Louis and received the territory of Rüstingen in Friesland as a fiefdom. He returned to Denmark while his son and a group of followers stayed with Louis. Two years later Harald suffered a final defeat in Denmark and moved south, settling in his new land.

Frankish, Anglo-Saxon, Byzantine and early Rus’ sources provide quite a number of other episodes regarding the baptism of Vikings throughout the ninth and tenth centuries. As a rule, they tell about the baptisms of Norsemen under two sets of circumstances: either in cases of the commendation of a leader of a Viking band, sometimes after he suffered defeat (such as Weland in 860–62¹⁴), or as part of the conclusion of a treaty with a Viking chief such as Guthrum who

10 *Poeta Saxo, Vita Caroli magni*, 4. 226–28, *s.a.* 807, in *Monumenta Carolina*, ed. by Philipp Jaffé, *Bibliotheca rerum germanicarum*, 4 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1867), p. 600.

11 On sources of the Saxon Poet, see J. Bohn, *Der Poeta Saxo in der historiographischen Tradition des 8.–10. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt: University of Frankfurt, 1965); Simon Coupland, ‘From Poachers to Gamekeepers: Scandinavian Warlords and Carolingian Kings’, *Early Medieval Europe*, 7,1 (1998), 85–114 (p. 87, note 8).

12 Coupland, ‘From Poachers to Gamekeepers’, pp. 87–88.

13 This episode is attested in Frankish annals, Ermold the Black’s poem *In honorem Hludovici imperatoris*, Rimbart’s *Vita Anskarii*, and Adam of Bremen’s *Gesta*. See Coupland, ‘From Poachers to Gamekeepers’, pp. 89–93.

14 Weland came to Charles the Bald with his sons, wife and retinue, commended himself to Charles and was baptized: *Annales Bertiniani*, *s.a.* 862, ed. by Georg Waitz, MGH, SRG, 5 (Hannover: Hahn, 1883), p. 58. Similarly, in 873 the Vikings asked for permission to pass the winter on an island in the Loire; Charles the Bald allowed those who agreed to be baptized to stay, while the unbaptized were ordered to leave: *Annales Bertiniani*, *s.a.* 873, p. 124. For the analysis of cases connected with commendation of Viking leaders in Francia, see Coupland, ‘From Poachers to Gamekeepers’.

was locked up by Alfred the Great in Edington in 878 or Olaf (Tryggvason?) who won the battle of Maldon and succeeded in imposing conditions on Æthelred the Unready in 991 but could not manage without an agreement with the king.¹⁵ A more specific case is reported in Byzantine sources concerning a Viking band that attacked Constantinople in 860.¹⁶ Several years after the siege of the Byzantine capital, Patriarch Photius informed East-Christian bishops that the most savage and bloodthirsty people of Rhos, who in previous times had dared to raise their hands against the Empire, had exchanged their pagan and godless faith for the pure religion of the Christians.¹⁷ The baptism of the Rhos became widely known in the Byzantine world and about a hundred years later *Vita Basilii* — ascribed to Constantine Porphyrogenetus and included in the *Chronographia* of Theophanes Continuator — relates that the emperor persuaded the Rhos people to accept a bishop who convinced them to accept baptism with the help of a miracle concerning an incombustible book of Gospels.¹⁸ It was not only the chief(s) but also at least some of the warriors who were converted at this time, and as on other occasions, the leading role in baptizing the Rhos — who are generally considered to be a warrior band from Kiev under the leadership of Askold (< *Höskuldr*) and Dir (< *Dýr* or *Dýri*) — belongs to the Byzantine authorities.

Seldom do the sources state explicitly that the baptisms of individual Scandinavians were carried out according to their free will, and if this information is conveyed it is only in passing, such as the mention of a Dane Sigifrid who was a Christian and served as an intermediary between the Frankish king and the Vikings,¹⁹ or an unnamed Christian Norseman whose advice helped the Frisians to repulse the assault of Rodulf in 873.²⁰ With certain caution one might take into account the information provided by Rimbert that during the first mission of Ansgar to Birka in around 829–31 there were some citizens who ‘desired earnestly to receive the grace of baptism’.²¹ According to the early Rus’ annalist, by 944 ‘many of the Varangians were Christians’.²² A case similar to Notker’s anecdote is

15 Elena Melnikova, ‘Zalozhniki i kliatvy: protsedura zakliucheniia dogovorov s normannami’, in *Imenoslov*, ed. by Fjodor Uspenskij (forthcoming).

16 For the compilation of Byzantine and early Rus’ sources together with their analysis, see Pavel V. Kuzenkov, ‘Pokhod 860 g. na Konstantinopl’ i pervoe kreshchenie Rusi v srednevekovykh pis’mennykh istochnikakh’, in *Drevneishie gosudarstva Vostochnoi Evropy, 2000 god* (Moscow: Indrik, 2003), pp. 3–172. On the event itself, see Alexandr Vasiliev, *The Russian Attack on Constantinople in 860* (Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1946).

17 Kuzenkov, ‘Pokhod 860 g. na Konstantinopl’, pp. 76–78.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 125–29.

19 *Annales Vedastini*, s.a. 883, 884, ed. by Bernhard vom Simson, MGH, SRG, 12 (Hannover: Hahn, 1909), p. 54.

20 *Annales Fuldensis*, s.a. 873, ed. by Fridericus Kurze, MGH, SRG, 7 (Hannover: Hahn, 1909), p. 80.

21 Rimbert, *Vita Anskarii*, 11, ed. by Georg Waitz, MGH, SRG, 55 (Hannover: Hahn, 1884), p. 32. English translation is from *Anskar, The Apostle of the North, 801–865*, trans. by Charles H. Robinson (London: SPCK, 1921), p. 49.

22 *Povest’ vremennykh let*, ed. by Likhachev and Sverdlov, p. 26; *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, ed. by Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzer, p. 77.

reported in *Annales Bertiniani* under the year 876. A number of Northmen were baptized by Margrave Hugo but after having received baptismal gifts they returned to heathen rituals (*pagano more*).²³

Three main features thus seem to be typical of descriptions in the chronicles of how Christianity was brought to the Vikings and most probably these features were also key in the process itself. First, as Notker stresses twice, the initiative for the conversion lay with Christian rulers or church authorities, especially in the ninth century. Second, the baptism of a leader of a Viking band was in most cases a precondition for his submission to, or for the establishment of peaceful and long-lasting relations with, a Christian ruler. Third, the baptism of a leader was not usually an individual act: his family (if present) and his followers, at least his closest retinue, were baptized at the same time, making the whole procedure a public occasion. Even if it were only a small number of individual Vikings who had been baptized, their total number was already large enough in the ninth century that certain notions of Christianity could be transmitted to Scandinavia.

The circumstances in which the Vikings of the ninth and tenth centuries usually adopted Christianity — their rather short visits to royal courts or negotiations in the course of their attacks — did not provide opportunities for prolonged instructions in Christian teaching.²⁴ In rare cases when we know or can calculate the time of their stay in a Christian milieu before their baptism, it usually turns to be not more than a month or two. For example, the accounts of the baptism of Harald Klak in 826 give the impression that the ceremony took place very soon after his arrival. However, he visited Louis the Pious for the first time in 814 and then stayed for at least two years (probably more) in Saxony waiting for military help and opportunity to invade Denmark.²⁵ Elsewhere, Guthrum was told to come with his thirty followers to Athelney to be baptized; his white garments were taken off on the eighth day and he spent twelve days more at Wedmore with Alfred celebrating the occasion.²⁶ It is obvious that the time span between Guthrum's arrival and the ceremony of baptism could have amounted to no more than several days. Princess Olga is supposed to have been baptized in Constantinople most probably in 957 where she spent at least a month and a half: as related in *De ceremoniis* by Constantine Porphyrogenitus, she was received by the Emperor two times on Sep-

23 *Annales Bertiniani*, s.a. 876, p. 131.

24 On the whole, catechumenate was not a widespread practice in Europe in the ninth and tenth centuries, according to Alexandra Sanmark, *Power and Conversion: A Comparative Study of Christianization in Scandinavia* (Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, 2002), pp. 91–93. Rather, it was more common in the process of converting Norsemen.

25 Rimbart, *Vita Anskarii*, 7, p. 26; *Annales regni Francorum*, s.a. 814, 815, in *Ausgewählte Quellen zur deutschen Geschichte des Mittelalters*, v, ed. by Rudolf Buchner (Berlin, 1956), pp. 141–42.

26 *Asser's Life of King Alfred together with the Annals of Saint Neots erroneously ascribed to Asser*, ed. by W. H. Stevenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1904) pp. 46–47; *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition*, ed. by D. Dumville and Simon Keynes, III: *MS A*, ed. by Janet M. Bately (Cambridge: D. C. Brewer, 1986), pp. 50–51.

tember 9th and October 18th,²⁷ but she most probably arrived to Constantinople at an earlier date. If the would-be converts were instructed during this short time, their information about the new faith would have been necessarily very limited, concerning only the most vital issues.

Christ — the God of the Christian Vikings

Both the missionaries and church authorities were fully aware of the ignorance of their new flock in Christian matters and their inability to appreciate Christian teaching in its complexity as well as its particulars. The case of Harald Klak is a good example of the attitudes of the preachers to the new converts. The Danish king is said to have been ‘ignorant and untaught in the faith, and unaware how God’s servants ought to behave. Moreover, his companions who had been but recently converted and had been trained in a very different faith, paid little attention’ to Christian norms and rites. One of the tasks entrusted to Ansgar, who followed Harald to Denmark, was ‘to devote the utmost care to his profession of faith and by their godly exhortations to confirm in the faith both Harald and his companions who had been baptized together with him, for fear lest at the instigation of the devil they should return to their former errors, and at the same time by their preaching to urge others to accept the Christian religion’.²⁸

We do not know precisely what the missionaries taught the new converts but there are indications that they had to adapt Christian dogma in various ways in order to accommodate it to the mindsets of those who had been heathen until recently. The practice of accommodating traditional pagan beliefs was sanctioned as early as 595 by Pope Gregory the Great, who instructed missionaries to the Anglo-Saxons not only to ban heathen traditions but to substitute them with Christian ones and imbue them with Christian meaning. Those who had to instruct the Scandinavian pagans in the Christian faith tried, it seems, to implant only a few of most essential notions in the minds of the neophytes and even these few ideas were radically simplified to be intelligible for former heathens, as is attested by Rimbert. He puts a kind of *Credo* into the mouth of his ‘perfect convert’, Herigar, who asks ‘My Lord Jesus Christ’ to cure him ‘in order that these unhappy men may know that Thou art the only God and that there is none beside Thee’.²⁹ The main ‘theological’ message of Herigar’s speech is twofold: there is only one God to be worshipped and this God is Christ. Herigar’s *Credo* reflects the author’s own opinion on what a ‘perfect convert’ should know and believe, and Rimbert

27 See Aleksandr V. Nazarenko, *Drevniaia Rus’ na mezhdunarodnykh putiakh* (Moscow: Iazyki russkoi kul’tury, 2001), pp. 219–310.

28 Rimbert, *Vita Anskarii*, 7, p. 29. English translation is from *Anskar, The Apostle of the North*, ed. by Robinson, pp. 42–43.

29 Rimbert, *Vita Anskarii*, 19, p. 41. On Rimbert’s presentation of the conversion of Sweden by St Ansgar, see Wood, ‘Christians and Pagans’, pp. 38–42.

consciously identifies God the Father with Jesus Christ. In the first quarter of the tenth century the English king Edward the Elder obligated the Danes of the Danelaw to ‘love one God’, and this demand was repeated a century later, in 1005, by Bishop Wulfstan for probably a newly arrived Norsemen.³⁰ Gro Steinsland has noted possible parallels between the Christian Trinity and the multitude of angels, saints, and so on with the numerous figures of the heathen pantheon previously worshipped by the neophyte Scandinavians, while Per Beskow has suggested that the notion of Trinity — i.e. the existence of three holy hypostasis of God — could have been interpreted as a form of polytheism by the heathens.³¹

The idea of the unicity of the Christian God and his identification with Christ remained common long into the ‘conversion period’. Amongst the numerous invocations on ‘Christian’ runic stones of the eleventh century, there are never any mentions of Christ as God’s son, and the interchangeability of the invocations ‘God’ and ‘Christ’ as well as a common prayer to ‘God and God’s Mother’ indicate that for those who ordered runic monuments, God meant Christ.³² On one occasion this identification is made explicit: the inscription on Vg 186 reads ‘God help his soul and God’s mother, holy Christ in the kingdom of heaven’.³³ The skalds of the eleventh and even twelfth centuries also identify Christ as the ‘sole’ (*einn*) God: ‘Christ, sole Prince of Mortals’ (Markús Skeggjason, second half of the eleventh century), ‘the sole King of the Sun’ (Eilífr Kúlnasveinn, end of the twelfth / beginning of the thirteenth century).³⁴

The earliest and unique mention of Christ as the son of God dates to the beginning of the eleventh century. In his *Lausavísur* composed in about 1001, Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld (d. 1007) distinguishes between the Son and the Father.

30 Felix Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsaxen*, 3 vols (Halle a. Saale: Niemeyer, 1903–16), 1, p. 128. See Judith Jesch, ‘Scandinavians and “Cultural Paganism” in late Anglo-Saxon England’, in *The Christian Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England: Approaches to Current Scholarship and Teaching*, ed. by P. Cavill (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 55–68 (p. 64).

31 Gro Steinsland, ‘The Change of Religion in the Nordic Countries – a Confrontation between Two Living Religions’, *Collegium medievale*, 3,2 (1990), 123–36 (p. 126); and Per Beskow, ‘Runor och liturgi’, in *Nordens kristnande i europeiskt perspektiv: Tre uppsatser*, ed. by Per Beskow and Reinhardt Staats (Skara, 1994), pp. 16–36 (p. 22).

32 Sawyer Birgit, *The Viking-Age Rune-Stones: Custom and Commemoration in Early Medieval Scandinavia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 140. The usage of the word *guð* with the verb *hjalpa* in conjunctive pl. (*hjalpin*) in several eleventh-century runic inscriptions is explained by Henrik Williams in the light of an obscure phrase in the prologue to the fourteenth-century *Kyrkobalk* of the Södermanland laws where the Christians are called to believe only in Christ ‘because he is threefold in name, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit’ as a reflection of the notion that Christ had the threefold nature spread since the time of conversion (Henrik Williams, ‘Runstenstexternas teologi’, pp. 305–6). This explanation based on a late, ‘absurd from theological point of view formulation’ (Beskow, ‘Runor och liturgi’, p. 22) has practically no correspondences in earlier texts (the only mention of God the Father is found in *Lausavísur* of Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld; see below), which makes Henrik Williams’ interpretation not wholly convincing.

33 For the texts of runic inscriptions see the Database of Runic Inscriptions <http://www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm> under the number given in brackets in the text.

34 Finnur Jónsson, *Den norsk-islandska Skjaldedigting*, BI (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1912), pp. 420 and 565 (further Skj.).

He appeals to both Christ and God for favour, not wishing to incur the displeasure of the Son whose authority was given to him by ‘the Father of the World’ (*Krist vilk allrar ástar, / Erum leið sonar reiði, / vald es á frægt und folder / feðr, einn ok goð kveðja*).³⁵ As this is the only mention of this division for a long period of time, God the Father seems to be practically unknown before the conversion, and Hallfreðr displays a familiarity with Christian teaching that is unusual for his contemporaries. One can agree fully with Per Beskow that Northern Christianity of the ‘pre-conversion period’ and even much later was characterized by ‘Christomonism’.³⁶

The image of Christ for those Norsemen who accepted him as a God seems to be far from the one current in the Christian world of that time. In skaldic poetry before 1050 as well as in pictorial art, he appears first and foremost as a strong and mighty ruler.³⁷ The earliest depictions of him, such as that on the Jelling stone, portray him as triumphant and glorious. The notion of the suffering Christ was not conceived by the Vikings and ‘would have been regarded as almost absurd’ by them,³⁸ although they could not have failed to see crucifixes with the suffering Christ in Western Europe and Byzantium. Furthermore, New Testament values such as charity and humility were as alien to the Viking Christ as they were alien to the Viking mentality.

Christ appeared first and foremost as a powerful *konung* whose authority spanned the whole world, both earthly and heavenly. This perception permeates his designations in skaldic verses. Most of the kennings collected by Snorri in *Skáldskaparmál* under the heading *Kristskenningar* are based on the notion of rulership and contain such terms as *konungr* and *dróttinn*. Snorri identifies kennings such as ‘king of heavens’ (*heims dróttinn*), ‘king of all things’ (*alls dróttinn*), ‘king of sun’ (*solar dróttinn*), ‘king of the hall of the earth’, i.e. ‘of the heaven’ (*folder hallar dróttinn*), and so on. He cites verses that stress the might of Christ as a ruler: ‘The King of Monks is greatest / Of might, for God all governs’ (*Máttir er munka dróttins / mestr, aflar goð flestu*, Skapti Thóroddsson, eleventh century), ‘Christ, sole Prince of Mortals, / Hath power o’er all that liveth’ (*einn stillir má öllu / aldar Krístr of valda*, Markús Skeggjason, second half of the eleventh century).³⁹ A Swedish runic inscription (U 942) names Christ as ‘the ruler of men’ (*gumna valdr*) thus underlining his concern for the fates of men.⁴⁰

Several skalds specify the earthly realm of Christ and single out Rome, Byzantium and Rus’ as the loci of his special care. Eilífr Goðrúnarson (tenth

35 Skj. BI, p. 159.

36 Beskow, ‘Runor och liturgi’, p. 22. This characteristic of early Christianity in Scandinavia is shared by Williams, ‘Runstenstexternas teologi’, pp. 305–7.

37 Edith Marold, ‘Das Gottesbild der Christlichen Skaldik’, in *The Sixth International Saga Conference 28.7 – 2.8.1985: Workshop Papers I–II* (Copenhagen, 1985), pp. 748–49.

38 Gräslund, ‘Pagan and Christian’, p. 87.

39 Skj. BI, pp. 291 and 420.

40 Williams, ‘Runstenstexternas teologi’, p. 304.

century) calls Christ ‘Rome’s Mighty Ruler’ (*rammr konungr Róms*),⁴¹ whereas Arnórr jarlaskáld (eleventh century) spreads Christ’s grace eastward: ‘the Lordly Warder of Greeks and Gardar’ (*snjallan Grikkja vörðr ok Garða*).⁴² Stressing the particular connection of Christ with Rome and Byzantium (and Garðar = Rus’), these skalds who lived at the ‘conversion moment’ or immediately after it seem to have perceived these regions as the two main centres from which Christianity was disseminated.⁴³

Christ is endowed with functions and qualities appropriate to a *konung* of the Viking Age. He is first and foremost a defender (*vörðr*) of lands and peoples, not only in spiritual sense but in physical way as well. This notion gave rise to a topos comparison of a warrior ruler with him as a guardian. Thus, Knut the Great ‘defends the country’ like ‘the keeper of Greeks defends the realm of heaven’ (*Knútr verr grund sem gætir / Griklands himinríki*).⁴⁴

As a *konung*, Christ possesses good luck (*gipta*) which he can transmit to a person, a *konung* or a Viking. Þórbjörn díarskáld (late tenth century) mentions a Viking who ‘received great luck of the White Christ’ (*fekk Hvítakrists hæsta giptu*) after having been baptized.⁴⁵ Another skald of the same time, Þórleifr járllsskáld, attributes the victories of the Danish king Svein Forkbeard (d. 1014) in England to the good luck bestowed on him by God, ‘prince of the sky’s radiance’ (*Opt með ærna giptu öðlings himnis röðla, / Jóta gramr enn ítri / Englandi rauð branda*).⁴⁶

If the representation of Christ as a mighty warrior overlord derived from the traditional Scandinavian culture and is attested in sources preceding the ‘conversion moment’, his endowment with other functions is witnessed by later texts. The spread of these notions in the eleventh century, however, may indicate their emergence some time earlier, i.e. in the ‘pre-conversion period’.

In eleventh-century poetry, Christ is designated as the creator of the world several times. Skapti Thóroddsson and Markús Skeggjason proclaimed that ‘Christ’s power wrought this earth all, and raised the Hall of Rome’ (*Kristr skóp ríkr ok reisti Rúms höll veröld alla*) and that ‘the King of the Wind-House fashioned Earth, sky, and faithful peoples’ (*Gramr skóp grund ok himna glyggranns sem her dyggvan*).⁴⁷ The creation function is attributed to Christ by Snorri too, who makes Olaf Haraldsson explain to Arnljot Gellini that among other essentials of

41 Skj. BI, p. 144.

42 Arnórr jarlaskáld, *Erfdrápa* for Harald Harðráði, 19, in Skj. BI, p. 326. On Christian elements in Arnórr’s poetry, see Diana Edwards, ‘Christian and Pagan References in Eleventh-Century Norse Poetry: The Case of Arnórr jarlaskáld’, *Saga-Book*, 21 (1982–85), pp. 34–53 (pp. 42–43).

43 On the significance of Eastern Christianity in the ‘pre-conversion period’, see *Frán Byzans till Norden*.

44 Þórarinn loftunga, *Höfuðlausn*, in Skj., BI, p. 298. On poetry dedicated to Knútr the Great see Judith Jesch, ‘Knutr in Poetry and History’, in *International Scandinavian and Medieval Studies in Memory of Gerd Wolfgang Weber*, ed. by M. Dallapiazza and others (Trieste: Edizioni Parnaso, 2000), pp. 243–56.

45 Þórbjörn díarskáld, a heroic poem (?), in Skj., BI, p. 135, l. 2.

46 Þórleifr járllsskáld, *Drápa* on Sveinn Forkbeard, in Skj., BI, p. 133.

47 Skapti Thóroddsson, in Skj. BI, p. 291; Markús Skeggjason, *Kristsdrápa* (?), in Skj., BI, p. 420.

the Christian faith he is ‘to believe that Jesus Christ created heaven and earth and all human beings’.⁴⁸ This concept contradicted the Christian dogma in which the creation of the world and human beings belonged to God the Father. On the one hand, the transference of the creation function to Christ — within the framework of Christian teaching — was necessitated by the fact that the figure of God the Father was not widely known. On the other hand, in Scandinavian mythology the same action was ascribed to the supreme god of the heathen pantheon, Odin. As the sole god of the Christianized Vikings, Christ could acquire the function of the creator of the world, thus combining similar Christian and heathen concepts.

Another characteristic of the Viking-Age Christ also reflected only in the eleventh century was the belief in Christ’s command over souls in the future life. This idea gained wide acceptance in the eleventh-century texts on rune-stones. In more than 300 inscriptions there appears a prayer ‘God (= Christ) / God and God’s mother help his / her soul’.⁴⁹ In several cases the formula is expanded: ‘God (or: God and God’s mother) help his (or: her) soul better than he deserved’.⁵⁰ As a guardian of the world and mankind, Christ is obviously supposed to take care of Christians not only in their earthly life but in their afterlife as well, choosing whether or not to admit souls into paradise: ‘May God and God’s mother help his spirit and soul, grant him light and paradise’ (U 160, early eleventh century), ‘May Christ let Tumme’s spirit come into light and paradise and into the world best for Christians’ (U 719, late eleventh century).⁵¹ If the notion of Christ being in charge of paradise emerged in the ‘pre-conversion period’, it might have been paralleled with Odin as the owner of Valhalla, which was ‘the world best’ for the warriors fallen in battles.

Exclusively Christian characteristics of Christ that could not be correlated with heathen equivalents are hardly represented in sources even of the eleventh century. Runic invocations never address Christ as the Saviour, nor do they reveal any knowledge of the concept of redemption. Both notions were basic tenets of Christianity in which Christ was first and foremost the Redeemer of the sins of mankind as well as of individuals. It is only in one inscription that the idea of sins finds expression: ‘May God help his spirit and soul and forgive him his guilt and sins’ (U 323, early eleventh century) but it implies forgiveness and not redemption. The versatile complex of notions connected with the idea of salvation therefore seems to be reduced to only one aspect: Christ’s ability to ensure that the souls of the deceased are admitted to paradise.

48 *Óláfs saga ins helga*, ch. 215, in Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla II*, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenskt fornrit, 27 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1979), pp. 369–70. Cf. ‘It is a great pity that such a warrior does not believe in Christ, his creator’, *ibid.*, ch. 200, p. 349.

49 Williams, ‘Runstenstexternas teologi’, pp. 292–96. See also Eric Segelberg, ‘God Help his Soul’, in *Ex orbe religionum*, ed. by Jan Bergman and others (Leiden: Brill, 1972), pp. 161–76.

50 Åke Hyenstrand, ‘...bättre än han förtjänade’: En parentes om runstenar’, *Tor*, 15 (1972–73), 180–90.

51 The author of the latter text seems to be not quite sure about ‘the world best for Christians’ as he separates it from paradise.

Christ and heathen gods

Accepted as the god of the Christians, Christ could occupy different places in the religious mind of Scandinavian neophytes. He could radically replace heathen gods and become a single divine force, just as Rimbert describes in the case of Herigar, Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld declares in the verses chronicling his own conversion and saga-writers detail in their descriptions of the Icelanders Hjalti Skegjason and Gizzur the White Teitsson who were active in the Christianization of Iceland. However, such a final rejection of traditional gods sometimes took place not without regret,⁵² which was more typical for the converts of the later part of the pre-conversion period or for those who spent long periods in Christian countries like Hakon the Good who was brought up by the English king Æthelstan,⁵³ or early Rus' Varangian martyrs who lived permanently in Kiev, were baptized in Constantinople and were sacrificed to the pagan gods in 983.⁵⁴

In earlier stages of the Christianization process, Christ is thought to have been appreciated as another god who could be included in the traditional pantheon. This seems to have been the case with one of the first settlers in the northern quarter of Iceland (c. 890), Helgi the Lean, whose 'faith was very much mixed: he believed in Christ but invoked Thor when it came to voyages and difficult times'. He must have become acquainted with Christianity before coming to Iceland because he 'believed in Christ and called his home after him' — *Kristness*. At least one of his sons might be also of 'mixed faith' if not a Christian. He obviously doubted the belief in Thor, for when Thor's 'oracle guided him [Helgi] north of the island [...] Hrolf asked Helgi whether he was planning to sail to the Arctic Ocean if Thor told him to go there'.⁵⁵ In Hrolf's opinion, unlike to Helgi's, following Thor's advice was not obligatory, on the contrary, it might be absurd or even harmful. A similar situation is attested in the letter of Pope Nicholas I to the Danish king Horic II a quarter of a century earlier in 864; the Pope thanked Horic for gifts sent to St Peter

52 Hallfred, the skald of Olaf Tryggvason, acknowledged in his verses that his rejection of heathen gods after the conversion evoked by his patron was a difficult choice. See Steinsland, 'The Change of Religion in the Nordic Countries', pp. 131–32; Russel Poole, 'The 'Conversion Verse' of Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld', *Maal og Minne*, 2002, no. 1, pp. 15–37. Cf. Paul Schach, 'The Theme of the Reluctant Christian in the Icelandic Sagas', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 81,2 (1982), 186–203.

53 Under the pressure of his heathen subjects he had to perform pagan rituals and was buried according to the pagan ritual in a mound. See Sverre Bagge, 'A Hero between Paganism and Christianity: Hákon the Good in Memory and History', in *Poetic und Gedächtnis: Festschrift für Heiko Uecker zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. by Karin Hoff and others (Berlin and Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), pp. 185–207. Some of the settlers in Iceland from England and Ireland who were Christians, such as Auð the Wise, were buried in a similar way.

54 *The Russian Primary Chronicle*, ed. by Cross and Sherbowitz-Wetzer, pp. 182–83. For more on the Varangian martyrs, see Elena Melnikova, 'Varangians and the Advance of Christianity to Rus in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries', in *Från Byzans till Norden*, pp. 119–24.

55 *Landnámabók*, in *Íslendingabók. Landnámabók*, ed. by Jakob Benediktsson, Íslenszk fornrit, 1 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenszka fornritafélag, 1968–86), pp. 250–53. English translation is from *The Book of Settlements: Landnámabók*, trans. by Hermann Pálsson and P. Edwards (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1972), p. 97.

and at the same time reproached him for worshipping idols.⁵⁶ In the mid-tenth century Hakon the Good secured the conversions of ‘the men who were dearest to him; and many, out of friendship to him, allowed themselves to be baptized, and some laid aside sacrifices’.⁵⁷ Those who ‘laid aside sacrifices’ and whose number is designated as *sumir* ‘some’, i.e. not very many, seem to accept the two main provisions of Christianization, the belief in one God — Christ — and the rejection of pagan gods, while others, though baptized, continued to worship traditional gods together with Christ.

The reckoning of Christ among pagan gods or at least the belief in both is supposed to find reflection in combination of symbols belonging to Christ — a cross — and to Thor — a hammer. The Thor’s hammer from Lungås (Västergötland) decorated with crosses has been interpreted by Anne-Sofie Gräslund as an example of this mixed religious beliefs.⁵⁸ The mixture of pagan and Christian symbols characterize graffiti on an Islamic coin struck in 910–30.⁵⁹ On one side of the coin a large Thor’s hammer is carved in the centre with a slightly smaller cross to the right. Below the cross there is an inscription in much smaller runes: **kuþ** *Goð*. On the other side, a cross and the word **kuþ** are inscribed near the edge of the coin. Two of the runes, **ku**, are placed between the branches of the cross whereas the rune **þ** is located beneath them. It is not only the combination of a Thor’s hammer and a cross on the coin that attracts attention; the most interesting feature of this graffiti is the location of the word *Goð*. In various forms (**kuþ** and **guð** in younger and older futhark) it occurs on many Islamic coins found in Eastern Europe, on Gotland and in Eastern Sweden, but the question always remained as to whether the word appealed to the Christian or pagan god (the latter being most probably Thor, whose name was carved on several coins, in two cases together with the word *goð*⁶⁰ and whose symbol, the hammer, appeared on about 150 coins).⁶¹ On the coin in question **kuþ** is obviously connected with the cross, thus meaning Christ. The same combination of a cross and the word **kuþ** appears on both sides of one Islamic coin from a Ukrainian hoard with the latest coin struck in 954/5.⁶² A very specific case concerns a trapezoidal pendant found in a burial in the Rozhdestvenskij necropolis (the Perm’ region, Russia) with a Rurikid symbol on one side and a Thor’s hammer with its handle in the shape of

56 Wood, ‘Christians and Pagans’, p. 49 and note 80. Adam of Bremen thought that Horic II was a Christian: *Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*, 1. 25 [27] and 1. 29 [31], ed. by Schmeidler, pp. 31 and 35.

57 *Hakonar saga góða*, ch. 13, in Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla I*, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Íslenzk fornrit, 26 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1979), pp. 168–69.

58 Gräslund, ‘Pagan and Christian’, p. 82.

59 Inger Hammarberg and Gerd Rispling, ‘Graffiter på vikingatida mynt’, *Hikuin*, 11 (1985), pp. 74–75. For the description of the coin, see Igor Dubov, Igor Dobrovolskii, and Iurii Kuzmenko, *Graffiti na vostochnykh monetakh* (Leningrad, 1991), p. 185, no. 422.

60 Hammarberg and Rispling, ‘Graffiter’, p. 71, nos. 16 and 32.

61 Elena Melnikova, *The Eastern World of the Vikings* (Gothenburg, 1996), p. 86; ead., *Skandinavskie runicheskie nadpisi: Novye nakhodki i interpretatsii* (Moscow, 2001), pp. 107–8.

62 Melnikova, *Skandinavskie runicheskie nadpisi*, p. 151, no. 18.1.

the handle of a sword.⁶³ About twenty trapezoidal pendants with Rurikid symbols are known in the territory of Rus' and they have been interpreted as a form of credentials for the emissaries of Rus' great princes.⁶⁴ The Rurikid symbol on the pendant from Rozhdestvenskij necropolis is identified as belonging to Volodimer the Great who was baptized and decreed Christianity the official religion of Rus' in 988. The burial is dated to the turn of the tenth / early eleventh centuries, so the pendant must have been produced, or at least employed after, the Conversion. The representation of a Thor's hammer on it points to the actuality of heathen symbols (and consequently beliefs) among the already Christianized elite of early Rus'.

The practice of combining baptism and heathen beliefs with or without the inclusion of Christ in the pantheon was a widespread phenomenon for practical purposes. In the 890s the Arabic writer Ibn Khurradadhbih mentioned that the merchants of ar-Rūs claimed to be Christians in order not to pay taxes. He doubted their Christianity but perhaps without justification, for Scandinavian merchants in Bagdad could be baptized and consider themselves Christians without being prevented from worshipping pagan gods. A highly tolerant attitude to such situations is attested in *Egils saga*:

England was thoroughly Christian in faith, and had long been so, when these things happened. King Athelstan was a good Christian; he was called Athelstan the Faithful. The king asked Thorolf and his brother to consent to take the first signing with the cross, for this was then a common custom both with merchants and those who took soldiers' pay in Christian armies, since those who were 'prime-signed' (as 'twas termed) could hold all intercourse with Christians and heathens alike, while retaining the faith which was most to their mind. Thorolf and Egil did this at the king's request, and both let themselves be prime-signed.⁶⁵

In Icelandic sagas written after the twelfth century, the rite of *primo signatio* is mentioned more than once in contexts similar to the episode quoted above, while Rimbart tells of a great number of citizens of Hedeby who were 'willingly signed with the cross in order to become catechumens'.⁶⁶ The Frankish and Anglo-Saxon annals and chronicles, however, refer to Viking 'baptisms' that, if they are described in detail, are presented as baptismal and not prime-signing procedures.⁶⁷ In spite

63 Natalia B. Krylasova, 'Podveska so znakom Riurikovichei iz Rozdestvenskogo mogilnika', *Rossiiskaia arkhologiiia*, 1995, no. 2, 192–97.

64 Arkadii A. Molchanov 'Podveski so znakami Riurikovichei i proiskhozdenie drevnerusskoi bully', *Vspomogatelnye istoricheskie distsipliny*, 7 (1976), 69–91.

65 *Egils saga*, trans. by W. C. Green (London: Elliot Sock, 1893), p. 88.

66 Rimbart, *Vita Ansgarii*, 24, pp. 52–53.

67 For general discussion of the problem of prime-signing which I can not discuss here, see Sandholm Åke, *Primsigningsriter under nordisk Medeltid* (Åbo, 1965), esp. pp. 23–47; and Else Mundal, 'Prima signatio', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 1357–58.

of Rimbert's explanation of their preference of prime-signing to baptism, which implies that they made a deliberate choice, it is difficult to say to what extent the difference between the two rites was realised. In any case, both the prime-signing and the baptism did not exclude 'belief in Christ and praying to Thor' at the same time.

Conclusion

The newly baptized Vikings' knowledge of Christian teaching seems to have been very limited in the eighth to tenth centuries. It was deliberately simplified by preachers and missionaries for the converts to be able to grasp at least some notions that were the core of the Christian faith. The first and the most vital was the notion of a single Christian god — Christ — which had to replace a variety of pagan gods in the minds of the new converts. However, the way in which the baptized Vikings of the pre-conversion period interpreted Christ differed radically from the way in which he was viewed in the established Christian world. Christ was a triumphant and mighty ruler of heavens, earth and mankind, the warder of Christians and the guardian of Rome and Byzantium, the two sources of Christian faith. He was also thought as the master of Paradise. His appreciation seems to have been influenced to a large extent by heathen traditional beliefs. Like Odin, he was regarded as the creator of the world and human beings, considered responsible for bestowing victory and good luck on the warrior lords whom he was said to resemble in terms of their relationship with their retinue.⁶⁸

Other Christian personages and concepts seem to be absorbed much later as they are mentioned only in sources from the late tenth and eleventh centuries, even then in simplified terms.

The veneration of the Virgin Mary is not directly attested in sources before the Conversion. According to Snorri Sturluson, Hakon the Good proclaimed the following rules for converts when he attempted to introduce Christianity into Norway: 'they should believe in one God, Christ the son of Mary, and refrain from all sacrifices and heathen gods; and should keep holy the seventh day, and abstain from all work on it, and keep a fast on the seventh day'.⁶⁹ These rules reflect the traditional concept of Christ as the only God of the Christians and include the demand to repudiate sacrifices and worship of heathen gods. The information about the observance of holy days and weekly fasts may well have been Snorri's own addition, but equally it might have stemmed from the tradition about Hakon who was brought up in Christian England and could learn the Christian customs,

68 See the description of Thor as a 'heaven's ruler' (*himnisjóli*) by Eilífr Goðrúnarson (late tenth century) in his *Dórsdrápa* (Skj. BI, p. 141, l. 9). Edith Marold briefly discusses three instances in skaldic poetry where similar praise is used in reference to Thor, and considers the possible influence of Christian liturgy: Edith Marold, 'Die Skaldendichtung als Quelle der Religionsgeschichte', in *Germanische Religionsgeschichte: Quellen und Quellenprobleme*, ed. by Heinrich Beck and others (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1992), pp. 689–90.

69 *Hákonar saga góða*, ch. 15, ed. by Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, pp. 169–70.

especially as these two specific prohibitions were part of Christian law.⁷⁰ The same may be true of the mention of Mary, but her veneration was widespread both in Western Europe and Byzantium long before it flourished in Europe in the eleventh century⁷¹ and became known to the baptized Vikings. Nevertheless, the use of her image seems to be limited to only one of her multiple functions, namely her role as the Mother of Christ. Her name appears in invocations on thirty-four ‘Christian’ runic stones, always in the formula ‘God and God’s Mother help his/her soul’.⁷² There are no invocations solely to Mary and quite a number of stones with this formula are erected by or for women.⁷³ The veneration of the Virgin probably did not have much appeal to the Vikings with their warrior culture and mentality and it found wider response among women, who, broadly speaking, have always been considered to be more willing recipients of Christianity.⁷⁴ Whether by women or men, Mary was venerated not as an independent saint but only as the mother of the Christian God, even in the eleventh century.

It seems that more abstract ideas began to permeate the minds of the Vikings mostly when they could be correlated with heathen concepts. Christian eschatological ideas were very vague and based on the belief of the existence of afterlife of the soul as reflected in the prayer of Hallfreðr vandræðaskáld for the soul of Olaf Trygvason: ‘may the spotless Christ have the wise king’s soul, above the world’.⁷⁵ The existence of the concept of paradise is witnessed by several eleventh century runic stones.⁷⁶ This paradise, however, seems to be imagined as a brightly lit place (cf. the combination of notions of light and paradise in the above-cited runic inscriptions) and governed by Christ. Even at the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the *Norwegian Homily Book* described paradise in the most primitive way by contrasting it with the hell, for while hell was a gruesome location, paradise was a good place to be.⁷⁷ This definition echoes the inscription on an eleventh-century rune stone where paradise is defined as the ‘world best for Christians’. To reach paradise it seems to have been enough to be simply a Christian, though later clerics insisted on the observance of moral prohibitions. None of these ideas were an utter novelty for the Vikings; Scandinavian heathenism developed a highly elaborate concept of the afterlife with a multitude of other worlds. For these converts, therefore, the dif-

70 Bagge, ‘A Hero between Paganism and Christianity’, pp. 185–207.

71 On the spread of the cult of the Virgin Mary in Medieval Europe, see *Marie: Le culte de la Vierge dans la société médiévale*, ed. by D. Iogna-Prat and others (Paris: Beauchesne, 1996).

72 The number of rune stones with a prayer to God’s mother is taken from Gräslund, ‘Pagan and Christian’, p. 92.

73 Anne-Sofie Gräslund, ‘Kristnandet ur ett kvinnoperspektiv’, in *Kristnandet i Sverige*, ed. by Bertil Nilsson, pp. 313–34.

74 Birgit Sawyer, ‘Women and the Conversion of Scandinavia’, in *Frauen in Spätantike und Frühmittelalter*, ed. by Werner Affeldt (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1990), pp. 263–81.

75 Skj. BI, p. 157; Edwards, ‘Christian and Pagan References’, p. 39.

76 See above.

77 *Gamal norsk homiliebok: Cod. AM 619 4o*, ed. by G. Indrebø (Oslo: Dybwad, 1931). See Edwards, ‘Christian and Pagan References’, p. 182.

ference between this previous system of belief and Christianity was simply a case of reinterpreting these concepts. The concept of a physical life after death in another world was substituted with the idea of the afterlife of a soul, although it is unclear in what way the idea of the soul was understood. Various other worlds such as Valhalla, Hel, as well as less well-defined places such as the green meadow or the abode of Freya, found close counterparts in the Christian concepts of paradise and hell.⁷⁸ Sophisticated notions of Christian theology were thus reduced to their most general kernels, which turned out to be similar to heathen beliefs. Those Christian concepts that had counterparts in Scandinavian traditional culture and mythology, however approximate, seem to have been adopted rather easily, whereas the notions that were absolutely alien to Scandinavians — such as that of the Trinity or salvation — were commonly ignored.

It is usually stressed that Scandinavian heathenism underwent *interpretatio Christiana* before being absorbed by Christianity.⁷⁹ This is true when we speak of the religious situation in the eleventh century and beyond,⁸⁰ but this interpretation seems to be an incorrect one when we turn to the earlier period,⁸¹ when the Vikings were only just starting to become familiar with Christianity. The representation of Christ as a *konung* and his endowment with the qualities and functions of a warrior overlord was one way in which traditional and Christian concepts were able to interact, which at the early stages led to the reinterpretation of new notions and images in terms of Norse culture and in accordance with existing models of Scandinavian mythology. This was the time of the ‘appropriation of Christianity’,⁸² and of *interpretatio norræna*⁸³ of Christian theology.

78 A scholarly emphasis on how Christian theology influenced heathen concepts of the afterlife and other worlds as they are presented in thirteenth-century sources seems justified, but the original similarities should be taken into account as well.

79 As one of the latest expressions of these views, see Williams, ‘Runstentexternas teologi’.

80 Surely already at the end of the tenth and beginning of the eleventh centuries there were individuals familiar with Christian theology like Hallfredr vandræðaskáld and Sighvat Thordarson, the skalds of the Norwegian missionary kings Olaf Tryggvason and Olaf Haraldsson (see Bjarne Fidjestøl, ‘The Contribution of Scaldic Studies’, in *Viking Revaluations*, ed. by Anthony Faulkes and Richard Perkins (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1993), pp. 110–120), just as there were genuine Christians having fully rejected heathendom like Rimbart’s Herigar. However, such cases seem to be the exceptions rather than the rule.

81 New archaeological finds seem to suggest that a more profound penetration of Christian ideas can be dated to the middle of the tenth century. A number of examples point to the existence of Christian communes, such as the isolation of specially enclosed parts in the necropolis of Birka (Gräslund, ‘Pagan and Christian’, p. 91), discoveries of Christian graveyards in Veøy in Romsdal (Norway) from c. 950 and in Sebbesund and a royal port or proto-town by Limfjord with a small church c. 1000 (Stefan Brink, ‘New Perspectives on the Christianization of Scandinavia and the Organization of the Early Church’, in *Scandinavia and Europe 800–1350: Contact, Conflict and Co-Existence*, ed. by Jonathan Adams and Katherine Holman (Turnhout; Brepols, 2004), pp. 163–75 (p. 166)).

82 The term was introduced by Gräslund, ‘Pagan and Christian’, p. 81; see also Steinsland, ‘The Change of Religion in the Nordic Countries’, p. 127.

83 Cf. ‘*interpretatio Scandinavica*’ in Sanmark, *Power and Conversion*, p. 96.