

# WINNING THE VIKINGS TO CHRIST

—by Peter Hammond



The Vikings were Norse (Scandinavian) explorers, warriors, merchants, and pirates who raided, explored and settled in wide areas of Europe and the North Atlantic islands from the late 8<sup>th</sup> to the mid-11<sup>th</sup> Century. Nobody could have predicted that these violent Vikings would become some of the most enthusiastic missionaries in Christianity.

The Viking marauders from pagan Scandinavia wreaked havoc throughout Europe. Throughout the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Centuries, Vikings raided, killed and plundered. Soon a new prayer was added to the Church liturgy: "From the fury of the Norsemen, O Lord, deliver us!"

At the time, probably nobody could have predicted that the violent Vikings would be conquered by the Prince of Peace (Jesus) and become some of the most enthusiastic missionaries in Christianity.

## Ansgar: the apostle of the North

When the Vikings were the terror of Europe, God placed a great missionary burden on young Ansgar. With his own money, Ansgar redeemed several Danish youths who were slaves. He educated them to be his co-workers in bringing the Gospel to their countrymen.

Harold, King of Denmark, heard the Gospel in France and turned to Christ, submitting himself to being baptised. Ansgar eagerly joined the King to preach the Gospel to the Danes. At Hedeby, Ansgar built a small wooden church, but persecution forced him to flee the country. Ansgar narrowly escaped with his life when Norsemen burned the churches in Hamburg. Ansgar crossed the Baltic Sea to begin ministering in Sweden, on the way his vessel was plundered by pirates and they arrived destitute in Sweden, yet built the first church in the country.

At an assembly the question was debated as to whether the missionaries should be allowed to continue to preach Christ and so invite the anger of the Viking gods. An old Viking stood up and declared

with great force that it was clear that the Christian God was stronger than Thor! This decided the matter and the missionaries received freedom to continue to preach the Gospel in Sweden.

The Scandinavian people were evangelised and disciplined by the conviction that Christ is a mighty Victor who has risen triumphant over death. The power of Christ impressed the hardened Viking warriors. In

twelve years old, the Tsar put a dozen ships under his command and sent him off into battle. By the time he was twenty one years old, Olaf Trygvesson was renowned as the ultimate Viking, tall, strong, handsome and unequalled in martial skill.

After devastating the Dutch and looting France, Olaf was converted to Christ in England. Olaf determined to avenge the death of his father, the exile of his mother,

Olaf was renowned as the ultimate Viking after devastating the Dutch and looting France. Yet even this brutish man bowed his knee to Christ.

Norway, the King commanded his people to be converted to Christ or be prepared to die. However, in Denmark and Sweden the Vikings were converted through persuasion rather than force.

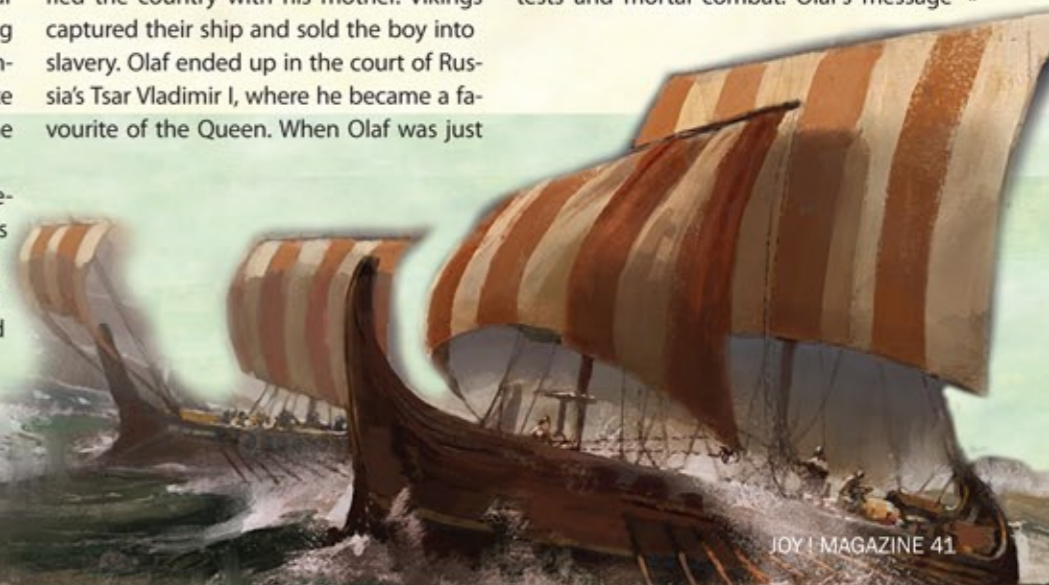
## The ultimate Viking

Olaf Trygvesson was the son of the King of Norway. His great grandfather, Harald Haarfager (Fair-hair), had initially established the Kingdom of Norway. When Olaf's father was murdered in 968AD, Olaf fled the country with his mother. Vikings captured their ship and sold the boy into slavery. Olaf ended up in the court of Russia's Tsar Vladimir I, where he became a favourite of the Queen. When Olaf was just

the slavery of his youth and to end the pagan misrule of Earl Haakon. With just five ships Olaf landed in Norway and claimed it for Christ. Olaf was renowned as the Viking warrior without parallel. His height, strength, athletic stature, superior skills in all the warrior arts, his boldness and ruthlessness were renowned.

## An ancient missionary campaign

King Olaf challenged the followers of Thor and Odin to swimming races, archery contests and mortal combat. Olaf's message »



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was clear: repent or die! Those who chose to fight were quickly defeated by Olaf's superior strength and skill. King Olaf declared that the heathen gods were demons; the powers behind the idols were evil spirits. All sorcerers, and those who promoted idolatry and heathenism, were to be banished. Those wizards and priests who resisted,

year he had convinced everyone that Christ was greater than Thor and Odin.

#### Heathen sacrifice

At Trondheim, which had been the stronghold of the late heathen King Earl Haakon, Olaf burned the heathen temples and destroyed the idols. The local chiefs rose in

lived, rejoicing that he had succeeded in his mission to convince the Vikings of Norway to abandon heathenism, to destroy their idols and to commit to following the Christian Faith.

#### Winning enemies to Christ

Another prominent Norwegian king who consolidated the Christian Faith in Norway was Olaf Haraldsson. In 1007, when he was just twelve years old, Olaf Haraldsson was sent out as a sea king to raid. Then Olaf had a traumatic spiritual experience and he saw a terrifying vision of Christ. Olaf abandoned his heathen ways and committed to being a Christian. In 1015AD he arrived in Norway and appointed himself king, proclaimed the Christian Faith and built numerous churches throughout Norway.

At Gulbrandsdal, local pagans confronted him with their huge wooden idol of Thor. Olaf distracted them by drawing their attention to the bright sunrise behind them as a herald of his God. As his enemies turned to face the sunrise, one of Olaf's warriors smashed the idol of Thor and revealed that its wood was rotten. As gold spilled out, large rats, which had evidently been living off the food offerings, scattered.

King Olaf pointed out that the gold they had wasted on offerings to Thor's rotten idol would look far better as jewellery on their wives and daughters! This demonstration of Christ's superiority over Thor

convinced the locals to be baptised. They who met as enemies, parted as friends.

#### The vikings surrender to Christ

And so, by a combination of pioneer missionary work, royal favour and combat, the ferocious Vikings were convinced to abandon heathenism, destroy their idols, abate their aggression, cease their violent raids, submit to baptism and commit to following the Christian Faith.

The Vikings came to be convinced that the Christian God is more powerful than all other gods. They saw how He answered the prayers of the Christians. They witnessed miracles. They watched as Christians were able to destroy idols and defy the heathen gods - without suffering any ill effects. They noted that their pagan gods were powerless before the all powerful Jesus Christ. Christ was honoured and worshipped as the Mighty Warrior who had triumphed over all the powers of death, hell and the grave. He is the risen ascended Christ,

King of kings and Lord of lords, with all other authorities in subjection to Him.

*"Yes, all kings shall fall down before Him; all nations shall serve Him."* Psalm 72:11

Today, the prominence of the Cross in every Scandinavian flag serves as a dramatic testimony to the conversion of the Vikings. ■

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Through missionary work, royal favour and combat, the Vikings were convinced to destroy their idols, abandon their aggression and follow Christ.

were killed and some incorrigibles were marooned on a rock far offshore at low tide. By the end of the

rebellion against him. Olaf gave them a straight challenge: "Baptism or Battle!". He held eleven leaders hostage until everyone was baptised. At nearby Trondheim the local Chief Ironbeard demanded that the king offer sacrifices. Olaf said he would make a sacrifice, walked into the temple and smashed the idol of Thor to pieces with his axe. He then killed Ironbeard and persuaded the rest of the village to abandon their heathen ways and to be baptised as Christians.

After eradicating paganism in Norway, Olaf focused on winning Iceland and Greenland to Christ. In 1000AD King Olaf was killed in the spectacular sea battle of Svold. Olaf died as courageously as he had

