

The Medieval Dioceses of Norway.

The Norse Church, in its embryonic period, was, like those of Sweden and Denmark, part of the province of the archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen.¹ But it was an often querulous relationship particularly so since Norway was at an enormous geographical distance from Hamburg - at the outermost limits of the province.

Lesley Abrams says that, "the study of Scandinavia's conversion is a treacherous exercise," and she concludes that "no Scandinavian conversion history is reliable."²

A particular problem is that what appears, at first, to be an excellent source, the attractive "*Gesta Hammaburgensis Ecclesiae Pontificum*," written by Adam of Bremen in the 1070s, proves itself as a work of propaganda and a very unreliable source of history.³

To understand matters it is best to start with a brief overview of the introduction of Christianity into these northern lands.

The Faith arrived first in Denmark. At some point in the 9th-century St Anskar, known as "*the Apostle of the North*," became attached to the retinue of Harald, who called himself 'a king of Denmark', on the occasion of his baptism at the court of Louis the Pious (only surviving son the Emperor Charlemagne). Anskar, who died in AD 865, was the first Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, but his effect on the Scandinavian people was minimal and it was not until the later 10th-century, and the following century, that a real impetus came from England.

What we can confidently extract from the written sources is that Norway's conversion story is tied to a series of kings who were baptized abroad and who then brought the Faith home with them on their return to their own country. They also brought with them clerics and bishops, mostly from England, and an entourage of loyal followers who had become bound even more closely to their leader by having also been baptized.⁴ Some of these 'conversion' events took place as a consequence of having been brought up in an English environment or as part of a peace settlement that was the aftermath of Viking raids around the North Sea. But, what is most important is that we understand that these were not forced conversions obtained at sword-point. In fact, they were much sought-after events that allowed the Vikings and their followers to become part of a visible and very elite 'European' society which had its roots firmly planted in the great empires of the world both in Europe and further afield in Constantinople. The Norse noblemen met the great imperial rulers and valued being their companions. To be seen to be so closely associated with this élite carried great kudos and gave them a much stronger position when they returned to their homelands.

¹ In the earliest times the "Northern Mission" was under the authority of the Archbishop of Reims.

² Abrams, L. "The Anglo-Saxons and the Christianization of Scandinavia." *Anglo-Saxon England* 24 (1995): 213-250.

³ Anders Winroth gives a fine account of the problems and sets forward an excellent approach to the whole concept of 'conversion'. Winroth, A. (2012) *The Conversion of Scandinavia*, Chapter 8: The Story of Conversion. New Haven: Yale University Press.

⁴ Modern historians often now speak of *baptism* as signifying an intention to become a Christian and that a full commitment to the Faith was signified by the sacrament of Confirmation.

Håkon Aðalsteinsfóstri

Around AD 928, Håkon (later called Aðalsteinsfóstri), the ten-year-old bastard son of the ageing Harald Fairhair, was given as a foster son to King Æthelstan of England.⁵ As the boy grew into manhood at the English court he became a Christian, following the example set by his foster-father who was a renowned follower of the Faith. When Håkon became king of Norway in AD 934, he tried to spread the religion he had learned to his own country. He had brought a bishop and clerics with him from England and managed to build a number of churches, but the reluctance of the pagan chieftains, particularly the Jarl of Hlaðir or Lade, was too great to overcome and so, overwhelmed by the opposition, the king apostatized.

Harald gråfell

The same fate befell his nephew and successor, Harald gråfell who had grown up and been baptized in Northumberland, where his father, Eric Bloodaxe, was king of York.

Håkon, earl of Lade

For some years following Harald's reign, the western part of Norway was governed by Håkon, earl of Lade, but he was never called king. From about AD 970 – 995, he paid tribute to the king of Denmark, his foster-father, Harald Bluetooth. However, Håkon was, to all intents and purposes, the independent ruler of most of Norway.

Olaf I Tryggvason

We now come to Olaf I Tryggvason, a Viking in the true mould of the chroniclers and saga-writers. He raided extensively and very successfully in both the Baltic and the North Sea.

As a young boy,⁶ and after the death of his father at the hands of Harald gråfell, he and his mother fled from their home. After a period of captivity in Estonia, they were given refuge by St. Vladimir, grand prince of Kiev and of all Russia.⁷ Olaf grew and was trained in all the skills necessary to be a great warrior. So successful was he that he aroused great jealousy and Vladimir had to smuggle him away from court. By AD 986, the 18-year-old Olaf was embarked on a Viking career in the Baltic, obtaining local fame and considerable wealth. He sailed to more distant lands and his success was renowned - Snorri Sturluson (1179- 1241) records victories in Northumberland, Scotland, the Hebrides and the Isle of Man. Snorri attributes Olaf's conversion during this time to a legendary hermit, in the *Scilly Islands*, who correctly predicted Olaf's future and claimed to have acquired this ability from the Christian God. Olaf was so impressed with the accuracy of the predictions that he and his men were immediately baptized. But, he was still very much a Viking if now a Christian one!

Together with the Danish King Svein Forkbeard, Olaf attacked England again in AD 994 and was so successful that he was able to extract sixteen thousand pounds of silver as tribute. He also gained membership of the elite of Europe by receiving the Sacrament of Confirmation as a Christian from

⁵ <http://avaldsnes.info/en/informasjon/hakon-den-gode/>

⁶ He is thought to have been born c.AD 964

⁷ After the death of his father in AD 972, Vladimir himself had had to flee to Scandinavia in AD 976 after one of his brothers had murdered another brother to conquer the *Rus*. Vladimir was given support by Håkon Sigurdsson, the ruler of Norway, and assembled a *Varangian* army with which he reconquered Novgorod. He had reason to welcome Olav and his mother and a chance to re-pay his debt. Originally a Slavic Pagan, Vladimir converted to the Christian faith c.AD 988 and became famous for the Christianization of the *Rus* peoples.

Ælfheah (Alphege), bishop of Winchester, at *Andover*. We should be clear in this matter – Olaf was not converted by another; he sought Confirmation as a political manoeuvre so that he could join this elite band and reap the substantial benefits that came with membership.

Returning to Norway in the year AD 995, accompanied by a bishop called *Sigyrd* (Sigurd), Olaf I Tryggvason is said to have first made land-fall on the island of *Moster* in what is now *Hordaland*, just north of *Haugesund*. This would, indeed, have been the first point on the Norwegian coast that Olaf would have reached on a direct route from the English coast. It is said that he built a church at *Moster*.

If the story above is true, then it would seem that Olaf and his party then headed north to a superb landing-place within the inner reaches of *Trondheimsfjorden*. This was the centre of the politically vital district of *Hålogaland* and *Lade* where ruled the *Ladejarl*, one of the most important and powerful men in Norway. Here, Olaf would start to make his bid for the throne of Norway. In AD 997 he also began to build a wooden church here which was dedicated to St Clement (the patron Saint of seafarers) and for a short period, *Niðaróss* was the effective capital of Norway.

In the sagas, Olaf and his bishop *Sigyrd* are also credited with founding another church on the more southerly island of *Selje*. This was as the result of their having been told that the relics of St Sunniva and her colleagues had been found there.

Jarls Eirik and Svein

In the year AD 1000, Olaf was defeated at the Sea Battle of *Svolder* by a triumvirate of Eirik Hákonsson, Jarl of *Lade*, the Swedish king Olof Eriksson, and Olaf's former comrade in arms Svein Forkbeard, the Christian king of Denmark, Olaf's brother-in-law.⁸ Seeing the battle lost, Olaf Tryggvason is supposed, by some, to have preferred death by drowning and to have jumped overboard in full armour. But, by others, he was believed to have escaped somehow. Whichever fate he endured, his kingdom was split into three parts – *Heimskringla* gives the most detailed account of the division. Olaf the Swedish king received four districts in *Trondheim* as well as *Møre*, *Romsdal* and *Rånrike*. He gave these to Jarl Svein Hákonarson, his son in law, to hold as a vassal. Svein Forkbeard gained possession of the *Viken* district, where Danish influence had long been strong. The rest of Norway was ruled by Jarl Eirik Hákonsson as Svein's vassal.

The Jarls Eirik and Svein proved strong, competent rulers, and their reigns were prosperous. Indeed, most sources say that they, themselves, adopted Christianity but allowed the people their religious freedom. This led to a backlash against Christianity which undid much of Olaf Tryggvason's missionary work.

⁸ Olaf had married *Thyri*, Svein's sister.



Figure 1: Division of Norway after the Battle of Svolder according to the Heimskringla.
 © https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Svolder

Olaf II Haraldsson (1015-1028)

At some date around 1013, *Olaf II Haraldsson* came on the scene. He was a Christian, having been baptized in *Rouen*, Normandy, during the winter of 1013-1014. Returning home to Norway AD 1015 he declared himself king, obtaining the support of the five petty kings of the Norwegian Uplands. In 1016 at the Battle of Nesjar he defeated Jarl Sweyn, one of the earls of Lade and hitherto the virtual

ruler of Norway. He re-built the church at Niðaróss⁹ and attempted to Christianize the whole of his country. He seems on the whole to have taken the Anglo-Saxon Church as a model for the ecclesiastical organization of his kingdom. He is the same Olaf who is now recognised as the country's Patron Saint and is commemorated in Scotland too in a number of church dedications, all, with the exception of Cruden Bay, in the Northern Isles.

It is said that about AD 1030 a certain Thøger settled at *Vestervig* (Denmark) and built the first wattle and clay church in *Thy*. Thøger was a Thuringian missionary who had been living in England when Olaf II Haraldsson went there on a Viking expedition. Thøger's wonderful sermons earned him an invitation to return to Norway with Olaf as his personal chaplain. He also had, even as a young man, a reputation for being able to heal the sick. As well as being his chaplain, Thøger became a personal advisor to Olaf.

When Olaf was driven from Norway in AD 1028, Thøger went with the king eastward into Sweden and as far as Kiev. Olaf returned to Norway in 1030, raised an army and tried to take the throne again. He was killed at the Battle of Stiklestad 29 July 1030. It is probable that Thøger was with the King when he returned and that he settled at Vestervig after the battle. He died in AD 1067 and a light is said to have burned of its own accord over his grave.

During the period of Olaf's kingship other churches were also founded.

The *Kuli Stone* (Kulisteinen), probably one of the best remains which tells about early Christianity in Norway, is a wonderful survivor of the times. It was originally located at *Kuløy* in *Smøla* municipality, Norway. On one side it has a large cross, a feature that had been noted from the time of the stone's discovery. But what had remained un-noticed, for many years, was a *runic* inscription on the rim of the stone. It is said to read:

“Thorir and Hallvard raised this stone in memory of Ulfljótr(?) ... (for) twelve winters Christendom had been [or had been valid law] in Norway ...”

The inscription has been dated to 1034 because, originally, the stone was placed next to a Viking-age boardwalk that was built with timber felled in that year.¹⁰ If we accept this then the inscription would point back to some event in 1022. Scholars have taken this to refer to a *Þing* held in *Møster*, where Olaf II Haraldsson is supposed to have issued a Christian law code for Norway, thus formally converting the country. However, we should be aware that recent scholarship has presented difficult questions relating to the Kuli Stone. The only thing that now seems certain is its Christian significance.

Olaf III Haraldsson (Olaf Kyrre) (1067-1093)

After the death of most of the nobility of Norway at the Battle of Stamford Bridge (AD 1066), Harald III Sigurdsson's son Magnus II Haraldsson became King. His father had had him acclaimed as king before he had left to go on the ill-fated expedition to England. His other son, Olaf Haraldsson, who, aged just 16 years, had accompanied his father, survived the defeat at Stamford Bridge and returned

⁹ A recent programme of excavations has revealed a considerable amount about a succession of churches built on this site in modern Trondheim, including some very exciting dendrochronology.

<https://niku.no/en/2018/04/the-secrets-of-st-clements-church-in-trondheim-norway/>

¹⁰ Dates determined by modern dendrochronology.

to Norway in 1067 having over-wintered either in Orkney or Shetland. In AD 1069 his brother Harald died leaving the young Olaf to rule as sole king.

William I 'the Conqueror' wished to re-establish friendly relations with his northern cousins immediately after the battle and he sent an embassy to them in AD 1066. If we are to believe the stories, there was a stowaway on-board their ship as it set sail from Grimsby - *Turgot*, a Lincolnshire lad on the run from prison at Lincoln Castle.¹¹ As a youngster he had probably been educated at the Minster Church of St Mary in Lincoln, where he would have learned the ways of the Church. Arriving in Norway he found great favour with the local people, some of whom may have been relatives of his family, and when the King, Olaf III Haraldsson¹² heard of his presence in the capital he took him into royal service as *Master of Psalmody*. Turgot made his fortune in the capital. He is said to have been the primary force behind the founding of the *Miklegild* at Niðaróss and was very active in church affairs. Indeed, he must have been present to witness the founding of the great cathedral in the city which was built over a long period extending from AD 1070 to 1300. Olaf III was one of the most successful kings of Norway. He healed the schism with the archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen,¹³ founded the cities of Bergen and Trondheim¹⁴, and began substantial trade links with other countries. He also stopped the old system whereby the Norwegian bishops were "court bishops" who followed in the train of the king as he travelled around the country. Now the bishops were given fixed sees. Turgot was in the midst of all of these developments. In 1953 a writer on the Norwegian Church claimed that Turgot "was for many years the King's most trusted adviser ... to whom the Norwegian Church owed much of its early organization."¹⁵ Symeon of Durham records that Turgot became tired of the excesses of secular life and, in 1074, he determined to return home taking with him the 'vast fortune' that he had assembled. Had he remained in Norway it is difficult to imagine that the king would not have given him one of the 'new' bishoprics.

Olav's reign was a time marked by peace and commercial development. In founding the town of Bergen, both as a seat for the royal court and as a centre for trade, he laid the foundations of the commercial and political prosperity of the country. He also reversed his father's policy towards the church. Harald Hardrada had stoked the fires of a continuing feud with the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen who claimed authority over all of Scandinavia. As we have noted, Olav completely reversed Norway's approach to the argument and accepted the superiority of Hamburg-Bremen over the church in his lands. Political considerations may have been behind this conciliatory attitude, as may have been Olaf's concern with church organization, and it is now difficult to read his mind at such a historical distance.

By this time a community had become established at *Selje*, founded beside the church built by Olaf I Tryggvason. A bishop was resident in the community and it had all the characteristics one would expect to find in a *muinntir* of the Early Church in Scotland (or Eire). But the diocese of Bergen itself

¹¹ After a particularly 'enthusiastic' rebellion in the area called Lindsey, William of Normandy used his army to quell the locals. He built castles and took hostages who were held to guarantee the future good behaviour of the people. It is believed that Turgot (*Thorgot*) was one such hostage whose Scandinavian name signals the son of a family with possibly rebellious links abroad.

¹² Olaf III Haraldsson had himself been present at Stamford Bridge where his father, Harald Hardrada, was killed. It is though that he was left with the 'guard' watching the Viking's long-ships on the River Ouse at Riccall.

¹³ This only until the death of Adalbert, archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen in 1072, when the Norwegian Church again withdrew itself. This led to a period when it half-heartedly recognized the archbishop of Lund from 1113.

¹⁴ Dedicated 30 April 1077.

¹⁵ Stagg, F.N. (1953) *The Heart of Norway*. London: George Allen & Unwin, p.23. (Sadly, this book has no Bibliography or References.)

was not to be founded until AD 1070, the cathedral being dedicated to *St Sunniva*, and her saintly relics were transferred there at this time¹⁶ from Selje.¹⁷

In AD 1050, a church had been built at Oslo by Harald III Sigurdsson (Hardrada) and this was re-built as the cathedral (St Hallvard's - Hallvardskatedralen) of the new diocese when it was founded c.1070. The saint's remains were relocated to the cathedral which was finished in 1130.

The diocese of Stavanger was founded c.1125 and its cathedral's dedication to St Swithun reflects the close links that existed between it and Winchester cathedral in England.

The following table attempts to set out, in summary, the development of the Scandinavian Church and its dioceses but it should be noted that the *Sami* people of north Norway were not converted to Christianity until the 18th-century.

Country	Diocese	11th-century	12th-century	Metropolitan Diocese
NORWAY	Niðaróss	1068	†	(1154)
	Selje/Bergen (<u>Björgvin</u>)	1068	†	
	Oslo	1068	†	
	Stavanger		1112/1125	
	Hamar		1152	
FAROE ISLANDS	Kirkjubøur		c.1100	
ORKNEY & SHETLAND	Kirkjuvagr (Kirkwall)	c.1035	†	
THE ISLES	Suðreyjar (Sodor)		1154	
ICELAND	<u>Skálholt</u>	1056	†	
	<u>Hólar</u>		1106	
GREENLAND	Garðar		1124	
SWEDEN	Sigtuna & Uppsala	c.1060	†	(1164)
	Västerås		c.1100	
	Strängnäs		1152	
	Linköping		1100	
	Skara	990	†	
DENMARK	Lund	1060	†	(1103)
	Roskilde	before 1022	†	
	Børglum	1059	†	
	Viborg	1065	†	

¹⁶ 8 July 1170.

¹⁷ The first cathedrals, at Niðaróss, Oslo and Selje-Bergen, bore a 'primus' dedication to the Holy Trinity and all became known as Christchurch.

	Århus	1060	†	
	Ribe	1060	†	
	Schleswig	1060	†	

As we have seen, there was great activity in Norway around 1070. Adam of Bremen says that in 1060 there were four bishoprics in Norway, but, as we have seen, the building of cathedrals, which implies a fixed *locus operandi* for the bishops, came a little later. It was not until 1110 – 1130 that the diocesan boundaries became fixed and this was done primarily for tax purposes. In the Norwegian Church one-quarter of all church tithes went to the bishop's *mensa* from this time.

Going back to the 1070s, we must return to an event of monumental significance - the death in 1072 of Adalbert, the somewhat possessive archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen. King Olaf III Kyrre and his joint ruler Magnus II Haraldsson jumped at this opportunity and declared the Norwegian Church to be independent thenceforth of the province of Hamburg-Bremen.

When an archbishopric was founded at Lund in Denmark (1103) Norway became one of its suffragans. But the native independence of the Norse was ever present.

King Eystein I (who was joint King of Norway with Sigurd I) was responsible for introducing the tithe system to the country which placed the Church on a secure footing for the first time. Sigurd had become famous as the first King ever to go personally on Crusade. Thus, for some years, Norway was ruled by a single person. On Sigurd's return to Norway c.1111 he found the country to be flourishing. It was Sigurd who founded the (vide supra). He had been denied a divorce by the bishop in Bergen, so he simply installed another bishop further south and had him perform the divorce!¹⁸

The next date which is of major significance is AD 1150 when King Inge I, the strongest of a triad of kings who ruled Norway at this time (with Sigurd II and Eystein II) called a meeting at Bergen of all the secular and church leaders. This was a pre-cursor to the Legatine visit of the English cardinal archbishop of Albano – Nicholas Breakspear (later to be Pope Adrian IV).

The visit of Cardinal Breakspear was of monumental significance to the Norwegians. He exercised his legatine powers and established an archdiocese for Norway,¹⁹ establishing its seat at Niðaróss and there it has remained ever since, governing a vast province comprising:

- † Norway (Niðaróss, Selje-Bergen, Oslo, Stavanger & Hamar dioceses)
- † Greenland (Garðar diocese)
- † Iceland (Skálholt and Hólar dioceses)
- † Farøe (Kirkjubøur diocese)
- † Orkney & Shetland (cathedral at Kirkwall)
- † Sodor & Man (cathedral at Peel, St Germans)

It is useful here to note that the Norwegian dioceses correspond very well with the *Law Things* which were the source of secular administration. We can see here, as is so often the case in the Early

¹⁸ This, in itself, is interesting since Roman Canon Law and custom dictated that divorces could only be granted by the Pope. Sigurd's 'self-service' divorce implies a considerable measure of independence from the Vatican.

¹⁹ On 28th November 1154.

Medieval world, church marching side-by-side with state (e.g. the town/city of Bergen was also founded c.1070-75 - the same time that the diocese was being created).

The Norwegian Law Pings.	
Frostathing {which met at Frosta}	Niðaróss diocese
Gulathing	Selje-Bergen diocese
Eidsivathing {met at Sarpsborg}	Oslo diocese
Borgarthing (subsidiary to Eidsivathing but quite distinct)	Hamar Diocese

Jon Birgersson, the bishop of Stavanger (1135 – 1152), was consecrated as the first archbishop of Niðaróss but died in 1157.

It was from the time of Breakspear's visit that the Norwegian cathedrals all started to establish Chapters and Cathedral Schools. Kirkwall Grammar School in Orkney is in direct descent from the Cathedral School established at Kirkwall, possibly by Bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson (1188 – 1198/1223), in these post-Breakspear days. During all of its pre-Reformation history the diocese of Orkney included the Shetland (Zetland) islands. The bishop was based at Kirkwall and Shetland was governed by the Archdeacon of Zetland acting as the bishop's lieutenant.

Cardinal Breakspear went on to visit Sweden in 1153 for the purpose of creating an archbishop for a new Swedish Church province. But he found the country in a state of violence, so the creation of a new archdiocese, in Uppsala, had to wait until 1164.

The earliest permanent episcopal see in Sweden was Skara, which existed by the middle of the eleventh-century. Sigtuna became a bishopric in the 1060s, but its bishop moved to Uppsala about 1140, having, as its suffragans: Skara; Linköping; Strängnäs; and Västerås. There is mention of a possible fifth suffragans diocese in the 1120s, but it seems soon to have disappeared.

Of what importance is all this to Scotland. Primarily, it reveals the background which allows us to better understand the events which took place in Orkney Diocese (with Shetland) and the Diocese of the Isles, both of which were originally 'Norse' diocese. Even today the culture of these places is very Nordic and even the language has many loan-words. If you ask a Shetlander if he is Scottish or Norse, he will hesitate ... !