A Church History of Denmark

Martin Schwarz Lausten

A CHURCH HISTORY OF DENMARK

This page intentionally left blank

A Church History of Denmark

MARTIN SCHWARZ LAUSTEN
TRANSLATED BY FREDERICK H. CRYER

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2002 by Ashgate Publishing

Published 2016 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
Schwarz Lausten, Martin
A church history of Denmark
1. Denmark - Church history
I. Title
274.8'9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2001089790

Typeset by Manton Typesetters, Louth, Lincolnshire, UK

ISBN 13: 978-0-7546-0307-8 (hbk)

Contents

Sources of illustrations

Preface

The Christian mission in Denmark was implemented from England, France and Germany. In the course of history the Danish church was influenced particularly from these countries, at the same time as it developed its national character.

In this book, the principal lines of this history are sketched, starting with the first Christian missionaries – the Anglosaxon Willibrord, the Frank Ansgar, the German Poppo – through the Roman-Catholic Middle Ages, the Lutheran Reformation, Pietism, the revival movements, the Christian-Social movement, the theologians of the nineteenth century, such as Grundtvig and Søren Kierkegaard and others, until the national church (*Folkekirke*) of our time.

Even though the Christian faith also manifests itself in other churches, the history of the Danish church after the Reformation of the sixteenth century is in this book almost exclusively concentrated on the Lutheran church. This is due to the limited length of the book and the fact that since the Reformation in 1536 the Danish national church has been Evangelical-Lutheran.

The Selected Bibliography contains mainly books on Danish church history written in English, and Danish books containing résumés in English or German. From the list it should be possible to find titles of particular interest for further reading.

Finally, I wish to thank Dr Ole Peter Grell, Cambridge, for his engagement in publishing this book in English, Dr Frederick Cryer for the translation, sponsored by the Jens Nørregaard and Hal Koch Foundation, Copenhagen and Ashgate Publishing Limited for their kind cooperation.

Martin Schwarz Lausten, Professor, Dr of Theology
University of Copenhagen
December 2000

This page intentionally left blank

THE MIDDLE AGES

This page intentionally left blank

The missionary period

Viking heathendom

It is written on the Great Stone of Jelling, known as 'Denmark's baptismal certificate', that it was Harald (Bluetooth) who made the Danes Christians. The honour which the King thereby assigns himself should not be taken from him. After all, he was the first Danish King to command the introduction of Christianity into his kingdoms (*c*.965), but at this time the Danes had already encountered the new religion in a variety of ways for a couple of centuries. The geographical position of Denmark had attracted Christian traders from Europe, the Christian mission had begun to work directly in the country at an early date, and the Danish Vikings, who began to voyage abroad from around 800, had been to places like northern France and England, which had already been Christian for a considerable time. It was here that they encountered Christian culture; they observed the architectural sophistication of these foreign peoples with respect to the construction of houses, castles and towns. They further noted their technological sophistication and elegance with which they were able to transform raw materials into products. The introduction of Christianity into Denmark was prepared for by this cultural influence, but it is necessarily very difficult to estimate the significance of such influence, and it is difficult to say to what extent it contributed to the breakdown of Nordic heathendom already before the arrival of the first missionaries. We must be content to note that Denmark became Christian much earlier than the rest of Scandinavia and that it happened in a much more peaceful manner.

We do not know much about the religion which the Danes practised when they encountered Christianity. Admittedly, the Icelandic sagas allow us to read many stories and facts about the Nordic gods, their familial relations and achievements, and the worship paid to them. But these sagas were written down from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, which is to say during *Christian* times and by *Christian* authors. It is possible that the Eddas are somewhat more reliable, but it was long ago acknowledged that not all of that literature is believable, should one wish to find information in it relevant to our ancestors' heathen religion. Moreover, a degree of caution also applies to the accounts of then-contemporary monkish chroniclers, such as the one composed by Adam of Bremen (1070–76), since such writers were naturally enough concerned to depict heathendom as off-puttingly as possible.

We are on slightly better ground when we read the writings of the Arab travellers who met the Scandinavians at the trading centres along the Volga and elsewhere, although these accounts, too, are replete with misunderstandings and contradictions.

This is how Olaus Magnus depicted in his The History of the Nordic Peoples *(1555) the sanctuary of the heathen forefathers in Uppsala. He relates that the temple was surrounded by golden chains and that the roof shone with gold. Outside there was a tree which was green the whole year round, and a spring ran close beside. Thus led astray by heathen thought, he implies, it was here that the people of the North worshipped their foolish idols. Every ninth month there was a nine-day festival in which both animals and people were sacrificed. By way of conclusion, a man was drowned in the spring and subsequently hanged in the sacred grove. Later, however, Magnus goes on to say, the site became the seat of the Swedish archbishop, so that now Catholic sermons might be delivered on the divine truths. Olaus Magnus passes in silence over the fact that in his day also the Catholic sermons had ceased at the site. He and his brother John, the last Catholic Archbishop, were driven out of Sweden when the Lutheran religion was introduced. In Rome, the Pope elevated Olaus to the rank of Swedish Archbishop when his brother died, but he never saw his homeland again.*

We are provided with greater aid for the understanding of heathendom by archaeology, the analysis of placenames, linguistics and the history of religions, which allow us to make comparisons with other cultures.

The main deities appear to have been Odin, Thor and Frey. Odin was assuredly pre-eminent among them, and he will presumably have been the god of the upper classes. Thor was by far the most popular god; in fact, he is the only heathen god who is routinely invoked in the surviving runic inscriptions. Thor's hammer, whether incised in stone or worn on one's arm as an amulet, occurs much more frequently than any other divine symbol, and Thor's name figures in any number of proper names and placenames of the time. There was also a secondary group of deities known as the Vanir, who were fertility gods as well as a number of anonymous elves, sprites and gnomes which featured in the daily family cult.

We do not know much about the worship itself, except that it was the chieftain of the society who led the public cult and, since the king was the supreme chieftain of the country, he was the greatest figure in public worship. There was thus no specialized priesthood involved; there may, however, have been a common sanctuary for the whole country somewhere or other. The Swedes, for

example, maintained their common sanctuary in Uppsala. Worship ordinarily took place outdoors at certain sites in the countryside at which deified stelae played some sort of role. However, the most important aspect of the entire religion was the sacrifice, or *blót* as it was called in Old Norse, so that the bloody cultic festivals enjoyed a privileged position. A chronicler named Thietmar (*c*.1012) relates that all the people assembled every ninth year in camps where they sacrificed 99 humans to their gods, plus an equal number of horses in addition to dogs and roosters. Adam of Bremen says something similar of the worship in the great temple in Uppsala. We do not know what went on in detail, but Adam claims that the bodies of the sacrifices were hanged in the sacred grove, after which songs of such indecency were sung 'that it would be best to keep silent about them'. There can be no doubt that these nine-year festivals were the high points of the religion or that the human sacrifices were regarded as the most extraordinary thing one could offer the gods.

Worship was intended to provide security for one's daily existence, to enhance the fertility of the fields and of people and cattle, to create 'good yearing and peace' and to strengthen both the internal fellowship of men and the relationship of men to the gods. The sun's seasonal course, taken together with ancient tradition, determined when these festivals were to take place. Everyone took part, since life could not be sustained if one failed to perform these acts.

There was also private worship alongside of the public cult, though we are even more poorly informed about it. An Arab traveller who visited Hedeby – later to become Schleswig – around 950 tells us that the town lay on the furthest edge of the world-sea, and that the heathen inhabitants of the town had a festival in which they gathered together to honour the god and to eat and drink. Whoever sacrificed an animal first erected a wooden scaffold at the door of his house on which he placed the animal, whether it happened to be an ox or a ram, a goat or a pig. In this way, people could see that he was presenting the animal as a sacrifice to honour his god. But also an ancestor cult was an important aspect of Viking religion. Both archaeology and some Arabic accounts are informative on this point. Finally, it should be mentioned that in contradistinction to Christianity, *morality* was not bound to worship. Human life was led according to such laws and concepts as honour, bravery, loyalty and blood-revenge; moreover, the individual's primary sphere of obligation consisted of his kinship group. One was expected to show appropriate respect to the gods, who in turn ensured life and strength for one's everyday life. But they made no moral demands of people, of the sort with which people subject to Christianity were familiar.

The first missionaries

As far as we are aware, Willibrord was the first Christian missionary to the Danes. An almost-contemporary chronicle informs us that he was an English

monk who had travelled (around 700) from Friesland – modern Holland – up to 'the very savage people known as the Danes to proclaim the gospel'. It was a daring undertaking, for the ruler there at the time was 'King Ongendus, who was more terrible than a wild animal, and harder than a stone'; furthermore, English monks who had previously journeyed to the European mainland to spread the gospel had been murdered, their bodies being thrown into the water. Willibrord was luckier; he escaped from his journey alive, but his life was virtually all he took away with him. The Danish King had received Willibrord honourably, but he became angry when he heard the latter's Christian proclamation, for he 'was hardened in his deeds and given to idol worship, and there was no hope in him of a better life'. Thus Willibrord had to depart in haste, but before leaving he managed to buy 30 boys whom he baptized during the sea voyage home to God's chosen people in the kingdom of the Franks. During their journey, the missionary and his companions were driven off course and landed on an island, which may have been Helgoland. There he conducted himself provocatively; he profaned one of the sacred heathen springs, and he urged his companions freely to hunt and butcher some of the islanders' sacred oxen.

The above account was written by the famous Alcuin (died *c*.804), court theologian of the Emperor Charlemagne, and in it one senses the author's shudders at the thought of the heathen barbarians in Denmark, as well as admiration with respect to the courageous efforts of the missionary. One also gets an idea of the missionary methods involved: Willibrord first addressed himself to the leader of the people, and when he failed to make an impression on him, Willibrord took on some boys. The idea was that the boys might, after a Christian upbringing, be used for a new effort at some time in the future, since they were familiar with the language of the country. The missionary's behaviour on the island also shows an equally well-known missionary method, namely demonstrations of power to illustrate the superiority of the Christian god to the heathen deities.

But Alcuin's account also contains information which naturally leads one to wonder just how it came about that an English monk journeyed from the kingdom of the Franks, through Friesland and up to Denmark in order to proclaim Christianity. The background for this is to be sought in ecclesiastical developments in the British Isles and in the political situation on the European mainland.

England was enjoying an ecclesiastical rejuvenation in the seventh to eighth centuries in which the monasteries played a most important part. It was in the monasteries that the brothers lived the complete Christian life in asceticism and piety. They praised and did honour to the Christian faith through scholarly studies, poetry, book illustrations, architecture and other arts, so that at the time in question England was the culturally leading country in Western Europe.

Now an important feature in this Anglo-Saxon Christianity was the great veneration paid the apostle Peter. He had the keys which could permit or deny

access to heaven; he was the leader in Christ's army, which combated Satan, evil, and false gods; and his city, the holy city of Rome, was the goal of countless English pilgrims. It was only natural that this petrine veneration should be transferred to his flesh-and-blood successor, the Pope; thus the ground was laid for the vast respect for the Papal See and its political significance in the Middle Ages.

Voluntary homelessness was also a concept of importance for the Anglo-Saxons; they had adopted it from the Irish monastic world. This idea emphasized that it was the highest expression of asceticism and self-denial for a monk to undertake a 'pilgrimage for the sake of Christ', meaning that he abandoned his homeland and monastery and travelled to distant places to proclaim Christianity, the further away and the more dangerous the better.

This was the background behind the fact that a number of Anglo-Saxon monks began to journey to the European mainland in the beginning of the eighth century to convert the heathen Saxons and Frieslanders to Christianity. These missionary journeys often had tragic consequences for the monks, although this situation improved when they established contact with the Frankish kingdom. It was right at this time that the kingdom in question was in the process of being converted into a sizeable kingdom under the leadership of the Carolingians. These regents accepted the offer of the missionarily enthusiastic English monks with alacrity. After all, if the strongest heathen neighbours to the north and east of the Frankish kingdom could be made Christian, there would be one less problem of external security to deal with. Hence, when Willibrord left England in 690 to begin his mission to the heathen among the Frieslanders, he received material help and political support from the Frankish regent, Peppin. A few years later, Willibrord visited the Pope in Rome; on this occasion he was made Archbishop of Utrecht. At this point he was no longer simply an idealistic monk who had risked all by visiting savage heathens; he had become a highly-ranked cleric who conducted his mission according to a pre-planned scheme, with the papal authority behind him and the support of the Frankish regent. As an Archbishop, he would in future be able personally to ordain missionary bishops, who in turn would be able to ordain priests in their newly won territories. But all of this consisted of distant goals at the time. Although the whole of Friesland was eventually conquered by the Franks, the missionaries succeeded only in Christianizing the southern part of the country.

It was in the midst of these efforts that Willibrord conceived the idea of a mission to Denmark. He will surely have met Danes in the important trade-centre Dorestad, at the mouth of the Rhine; so he simply followed the trade route from Friesland to the land of the Danes. Willibrord died in 739. There must have been some sort of mission to the Danes in the following period, whether conducted by individual clerics or by traders, but not on any sizeable scale. The political presuppositions were lacking. A letter written by the above-mentioned Alcuin to an abbot in Germany remarks, towards its close, 'Will there

ever be any hope of the conversion of the Danes?' The letter was written almost a century after Willibrord's conversation with King Ongendus.

Ansgar

The next planned attempt to import Christianity into Denmark was also closely connected with the political developments in the southern regions as well as in Denmark. By now the Frankish kingdom had expanded its sphere of power so much that by 798 it had achieved a common border with Denmark, following the Eider river in what is now Schleswig-Holstein. Emperor Louis the Pious had the same view of the imperial office as had his predecessor, Charlemagne, namely that the Emperor was not only to rule over all of Christendom, he had also the responsibility of seeing to his subjects' spiritual wellbeing. His kingdom was to be a Christian empire in which specifically Christian culture was to be favoured as much as possible, the monasteries were to be supported, heretics were to be combated and the heathen converted, the latter being a goal which might naturally also prove to have useful political consequences. It was here that Denmark came into the picture.

After the death of the Danish King Godfred in 810, a conflict about the succession broke out. One of the parties to the conflict, Harald Klak, then sought the aid of Emperor Louis. During the ensuing negotiations, the Northmen encountered Ebo, who was then Archbishop of Reims and a member of the inner circle around the Emperor. It was Ebo who suggested at the time that a mission among the Danes might again be attempted. He was appointed 'missionary vicar' by the Pope, with the task of proclaiming the gospel 'in the lands to the north'; Ebo's certificate of appointment, dating from 822, became the foundation for the entire Nordic mission.

Ebo established a missionary station in the vicinity of the modern Itzehoe, which had been granted to him by the Emperor, but it remains uncertain the extent to which Ebo actually conducted his mission in Denmark, as Harald had trouble asserting himself as King. Ebo had to content himself with purchasing some Christian slaves from the Danes; he did, however, make it clear to Harald that he would have to convert to Christianity himself if he expected additional aid from the Emperor.

In these circumstances Harald will scarcely have been difficult to convince, and in June 826 he and his wife, son and a sizeable retinue came and allowed themselves to be baptized in St. Alban's church in Mainz. At this time he was charged to abandon his false gods, Odin and Thor, and instead turn to the worship of 'the God of the Franks and the Emperor, the true God'. Harald confessed to belief in God, 'the creator of the heavens, the earth and the seas, who created man and sent His son to earth'. He touched additionally on such weighty matters as Christ's atonement for our sins, the Trinity and the devil in

hell; he even commented on the worship of images: God is eternal, but idols formed by human hands are nothing. He confessed that he now therefore worshipped the true God and despised pictures hewn out by man. Harald and his associates can scarcely have understood very much of what was put into their mouths on this occasion; indeed, he concluded his little confession with the remark that it had all been told to him by Ebo.

By the same token, however, the Danes were completely overwhelmed by the ceremonial of the Mass, by the baptism itself and the hunts and celebrations attendant on it. The Emperor was Harald's godfather, and it was he who pulled him up from the baptismal waters, clad him in his white baptismal gown and presented him with expensive garments such as, for example, a purple robe with gold border and precious gems, and a gilt sword and belt which the Emperor himself had worn. The Empress and the rest of her retinue were likewise showered with gifts, and the whole group went in ceremonial procession to the church, where the high arches, rich decoration, bell-ringing and song made a lasting impression on the Northmen. We are informed about much of this by a poem that the monk, Ermoldus Nigellus, wrote at the time in honour of the Emperor. Here, too, we are also appropriately told that the kingdoms of the Franks and the Danes had now been conjoined to form a single country. It was clear to all participants that what had transpired was both a religious and a political event. Harald had become Christian, but he had also by the same token become politically dependent on the Emperor.

There was one unfortunate aspect to all this, namely the fact that at the time Harald possessed no political power in Denmark worth the name. It was not yet known whether or not he was to achieve any power; indeed, the Emperor trusted greatly in Harald's abilities, and in order to ensure that he remained in the Christian faith and would be able to ensure its further development in Denmark the Emperor gave him a pair of missionaries to accompany him back home. One of these was Ansgar.

The first period was entirely without result, as Harald was driven out of the country already in the year after his return. Since the political presuppositions for his mission were absent, Ansgar realistically set his sights on other goals and travelled to Sweden, where he both founded a congregation and had the first Christian church in the north constructed in the important trading centre of Birka (830). A year and a half after his return, Ansgar was appointed Archbishop of the newly constituted see of Hamburg. However, we do not know what he did in the 830s. In Denmark, the heathen King Horik I, as well as Viking raids and internal difficulties in the Frankish kingdom, limited the possibilities for missionary activity. Things went from bad to worse when the Vikings burned Hamburg in 845. The church and its little monastery were destroyed, and Ansgar himself escaped from the town with his life only with difficulty. Although recent archaeological excavations have contradicted the claims in the ancient sources that the town was totally destroyed, the catastro-

Ansgar never became a popular saint. Admittedly, he was early on given a place in the 'Book of Deaths' in Lund Cathedral as a man who was to be honoured on the anniversary of his death, but he was later forgotten because of rivalry between the Danish Archbishop in Lund and the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen. His name was reintroduced, but his memory disappeared during the Middle Ages. Neither churches nor altars seem to have been dedicated in his name. This chalk fresco of Ansgar and his friend and successor Rimbert is found in Skive Church; it was painted in 1522, that is, just before the Catholic church in Denmark was dissolved.

phe was nevertheless so extensive that missionary work had to be abandoned there.

It was instead Bremen that became the centre of Ansgar's mission. Although he had to begin completely from the beginning, he nevertheless made some progress when the Danish King was forced for reasons of state to establish contact with the Frankish kingdom. Ansgar became employed as a negotiator between the two sovereigns. In this connection he played the part of a generous diplomat towards the Danish King and aided him with good advice, eventually winning his confidence to such an extent that he received permission to build a church, with a living for a priest, in Hedeby (Schleswig). The King also granted that any who wished to do so might convert to the Christian faith; he himself, however, chose not to profess the new religion.

The reign of Horik II began with a wave of heathen reaction. The church was closed, Christian worship was forbidden and the priest had to flee abroad. Later, however, the King found it politic to be open to Christianity. The church was reopened and the King even granted that there might be a bell in the church. This was an important advance, as bell-ringing was abhorred by the heathen. Horik furthermore granted land for a church in Ribe and permitted a priest to dwell there. Also Horik II failed to go so far as to allow himself to be baptized, but in the course of time his attitude became friendly. His wish to favour the infant church is attested to by the fact that he sent some gifts to Pope Nicholas I. The latter's reply, dating from 864, is the first direct contact between the pontiff and Denmark; it is a typical missionary pastoral letter in which God is depicted as the Creator and as the one who repays faith with both spiritual and temporal wellbeing. Moreover, although the Pope rejoices in the fact that the remote Nordic King is inclined to friendship with the Church, he does not hesitate to urge Horik in forceful language to abandon the Norse gods who, or so he says, in reality are devils!

Ansgar died the following year. The chroniclers of the Middle Ages could not find enough praise to describe his achievement. As one of them says, its consequence was that 'the frigid northern ice melted bit by bit in the face of the heat of the word of God', although Ansgar will hardly have looked at it in this light. One might summarize Ansgar's work by noting that he obtained cult freedom, the right to build churches in the three sizeable trading towns of Hedeby, Ribe and Birka, which were already being visited by Christian traders; he further obtained the right to hire priests for the sites in question, to perform worship services there and to establish congregations that both foreigners and local citizens might join. With the exception of the unfortunate Harald Klak, however, no Danish King had as yet acquiesced to becoming baptized, and it was seemingly impossible to do fruitful Christian work in other towns.

These were not great results, as the missionaries themselves acknowledged; Ebo is supposed to have admitted to Ansgar that 'our work is delayed once in a while because of sin'. However, he was also confident that it would 'bear fruit in the Lord' sooner or later.

Let us briefly examine the man himself, this 'apostle to the North'. Our knowledge about him derives from some then-contemporary letters, from some historical sketches composed by men who were close to the imperial court and from the description of Ansgar's life, which his successor, Rimbert, wrote. Earlier historiography made diligent use of the latter work to describe Ansgar's character and the events of his life; this, however, was not entirely its author's intention. Rather, his ambition was to compose a hagiography, a treatise to demonstrate that Ansgar had been a holy man who suffered martyrdom in the course of his fulfilment of the missionary task in the north on which God had sent him.

We must therefore treat many of Rimbert's announcements and personal characterizations with appropriate caution. Seen against this background, Ansgar appears as a typical representative of the ideal of piety that was then flourishing in the French monasteries, where the monks lived in poverty and asceticism, always concerned to do pious acts that might secure them rewards from God. Ansgar chastised his body by living abstemiously with respect to food and drink, and he wore a hair shirt next to his body to chafe himself continuously. Now and again he withdrew into solitude in order to pray and meditate. His intimate relationship with God was further established through a number of visions in dreams in which God spoke to him. Also typical of this entire type of Christianity is Rimbert's claim that Ansgar would have preferred to live his life in sorrow and tears, and that, indeed, in the last years of his life he received as a special divine gift: the propensity to burst into tears whenever he wished…

But this is only one side of Ansgar's personality, since the picture of a great man also emerges from the sources. Bathed as he was in all the authority and power that the superior Frankish culture, political superiority and the power of the papacy could lend him, Ansgar was able to serve as a generous diplomat and advisor to the heathen Danish Kings, and he resourcefully exploited whatever political possibilities he encountered to aid his Christian mission. Ansgar was both a humble, world-renouncing monk and a prince of the church, and it was because of this that he lived up to the then-contemporary Frankish episcopal ideal.

The heathen Gorm the Ancient and the Christian Harald Bluetooth

The Christian mission had not yet made its breakthrough in Denmark when Ansgar died, and a good deal of time was to elapse before it resumed. The political presuppositions for progress were simply not present. The German empire was dissolving. Moreover, it was just at this time that the turning point in the Viking period took place, in that there was a pause in the Viking attacks on the European continent. On the other hand, the Vikings began a series of attacks on England, not for purposes of plunder or theft, but to seize territory.

This process was so effective that in the end the Danish King Gudrum (died 890) controlled almost half of England. This, however, appears to have caused problems in Denmark, although we can no longer determine precisely what the problem was. It appears that Swedish Vikings took control in the southern part of the country for a while, followed by a period of German sovereignty. During these unquiet years, the mission to Denmark ceased completely. Christian influence, however, continued, not least because of the increased contacts with Christian England.

With Gorm (the Ancient) and his son Harald (Bluetooth) a new dynasty came into power, but this was matched by developments in Germany, where Otto I proved to be a powerful ruler. He was enthroned as Emperor and entertained the same high evaluation of his office as the previously mentioned Frankish Emperors had done (see p. 8). With him, religion and politics accompanied one another, and it was precisely in the ecclesiastical sphere that he attempted to secure some influence in Denmark. Archbishop Unni of Hamburg-Bremen was sent to King Gorm to investigate the prospects for a Christian mission in Denmark.

The future, however, did not look bright as, according to Adam of Bremen, King Gorm was 'a wretched worm, and not a little hostile to the Christians. In order to wipe out what Christianity there was in Denmark he expelled God's priests from his country and even slew many of them with much suffering'. Unni proved unable to 'bend Gorm's savage nature'; he did, however, find some sympathy with Gorm's son Harald, who was presumably Gorm's co-regent, and under his protection Unni was able to travel and attempt to build up the Christian church.

These developments must have been encouraging to those Christians who lived in the country, although our sources do not mention this at all. However, we do find one surprising fact. There was a large international ecclesiastical gathering that took place in Ingelheim in 948. Here the Kings of both Germany and France, as well as representatives for the Pope, plus many bishops, were present, as was Archbishop Adaldag of Hamburg-Bremen, together with his three Danish subordinate bishops, Ored of Schleswig, Liopdag of Ribe and Reginbrand of Aarhus. We know no more about these three figures than their names. There can hardly have been extensive Danish dioceses with bishops, priests and congregations, but the detail mentioned above nevertheless serves to give a good impression of the extent of German influence in Denmark, as the establishment of bishoprics was a matter for the German sovereign and the Archbishop of Bremen. There is additionally preserved from this time a document (dated 965) in which the Emperor intervenes powerfully in Danish ecclesiastical matters.

Against this background, it is hardly surprising that when King Harald became sole King when Gorm died around 950, he found it necessary to convert to Christianity by allowing himself to be baptized. The story about the Poppo-miracle relates how the King became convinced of the superiority of the Chris-

tian faith. During a discussion about the respective merits of the two faiths, some claimed that, while Christ may have been a god, there were others who were just as strong as he. This was rejected by the monk Poppo, who claimed that the truth was only to be found with God, his son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. On being examined by Harald, Poppo declared himself willing to prove the truth of his faith by 'bearing glowing iron', and he did so for as long as the King desired him to. Poppo's hand remained undamaged, and he thus 'convinced all of the truth of the Catholic faith'. King Harald became a Christian and commanded his entire people to cast off their idols and pay the respect due to the Christian priests.

So much, at least, is related in the legend. It derives from the Saxon Widukin, who wrote it down around 970, only a few years after Harald's baptism; it is, however, known in other versions and with other names. It is just possible that a kernel of historical truth resides in the story, as it is of a piece with the thought of the times that a trial of strength was necessary to determine which god was the stronger. Moreover, we are also informed that the 'burden of iron' might be used on such occasions as proof during the Nordic Middle Ages.

Whatever the truth of the matter, Harald's transition to Christianity through baptism was a reality, as was his command to his subjects to follow him into the new religion. This emerges from the inscription that he had engraved on the Great Stone of Jelling. Recent archaeological investigations also suggest that he had a church of quite impressive dimensions built in Jelling. We have no way of knowing how he went about making the Danes Christians. Perhaps, being the leading figure in the national worship, he travelled around to the Althing sites and demanded that the new religion be accepted. At any rate, Adam of Bremen says a hundred years later that Harald was obliged in some instances to force the acceptance of his Christianity.

The great conflict between Nordic heathendom and the Christian religion had started in earnest, and it is possible to follow it in the runic inscriptions in the subsequent time. Some call upon Thor and invoke his hammer, while others call upon God and bear the Christian cross, while still others, playing it safe, display both heathen and Christian symbols!

English influence

Towards the close of the tenth century the Viking expeditions to England accelerated again. In the process, a Danish–English empire was created; all of England was in Danish hands from 1013 to 1042, and both the growing royal power over society and the English influence were felt in many respects back in Denmark. This also applies to the church. We are told by Adam of Bremen that King Svend (Forkbeard) installed an English bishop, Godebald, in Skania, and during the reign of Knud (Canute) the Great, Archbishop Ælnoth of Canterbury

The great runestone in Jelling, which King Harald had made in the 960s, bears the inscription 'Harald King ordered death-memory this for Gorm his father and for Thorvi (Thyre), his mother; that Harald who won [for] himself all Denmark and Norway and made the Danes Christians.' Another side of the stone bears an illustration of a four-legged animal circumscribed by a snake, which is perhaps intended to symbolize Christianity's struggle with and victory over heathendom, although other interpretations have also been suggested. We find on the third side of the stone a picture of Christ, the oldest representation in Denmark. He stands with outspread arms, palms forward, legs stretched out, feet gathered together. This is how Christ on the cross was depicted in early Christianian art, but the cross is not present here. It is merely suggested by the halo behind Christ's head. The entire figure is surrounded by a serpentine band. All three sides bear the symbols of the Trinity. Recent archaeological investigations have suggested that there once were three wooden churches on the site in Jelling before the present stone church was built. The oldest of these, which must have been many times larger than was usual in the missionary period, was presumably built by Harald in around 960. Studies of a burial chamber found beneath the church have been published recently. It is possible that Gorm the Ancient was reburied here, in Christian fashion, by Harald.

ordained three bishops in Denmark: Gerbrand in Roskilde, Bernhard in Skania and Reginbert in Fuenen. Furthermore, Odinkar, who was later to be ordained bishop in Ribe, was sent by Knud on an educational journey to England. Knud no doubt imagined that the church would be the organ that came to link Denmark and England, and he may have thought that the Archbishop of Canterbury would be the leader of the joint church. This probably seemed more natural to him than the then-current system did, in which the leadership of the Danish church derived from the archbishopric in Hamburg-Bremen, which lay outside of Knud's sphere of influence. However, the Germans managed to halt this development so that Knud recognized the sovereignty of the Archbishop of Bremen over the Danish church. It is possible that he did this because the German Emperor assigned a territory in Holstein to Knud at this time.

At all events, this was a period which bore witness to considerable English influence in Denmark. Art history shows this clearly, and linguistic studies have revealed the fact that such Danish ecclesiastical terms as, for example, Christian, church, chalice, confession and incense derive from early English.

The papacy manifests itself

Knud the Great was in reality more an English than a Danish King; he had realistically acknowledged that it would be necessary to establish close contacts with the church and above all with the papal see. In a programme of rule announced to the English people and clergy in 1020 he promised to follow the papal requirement to reign in Christian fashion, to advance the honour of God as well as righteousness and peace. He demanded that the bishops observe God's law and commanded the people to abstain from all evil, murder, perjury, witchcraft, magic and fornication and hence to obey the ecclesiastical laws, to go to church, to be sorry for their sins, to fast and to respect holy men so that by the grace of God and through the intercession of the saints both the King and his subjects might attain to the joys of the kingdom of heaven.

The King was the protector of the church, and for a ruler of Knud's stature it was fitting that he, like other European princes, at least once in his life visited the head of the church, the Pope. In 1027 Knud accordingly undertook a journey to Rome, as he intended, or so he said, to pray for his sins, for the salvation of the kingdoms, and, additionally, he sought to secure the papal protection for his lands. Such journeys were generally called pilgrimages, and there were in fact a number of things in Knud's life which might have required considerable repentance. Once, in either rage or drunkenness, he had slain one of his servants, and he had had his brother-in-law, Ulf Jarl, murdered in a church after the two had quarrelled over a game of chess about the ongoing struggle with Olaf of Norway. But, of course, the journey had other purposes, too, including Knud's attendance at the imperial coronation of the German Emperor in Rome.

A report addressed by Knud to his people shows the extent to which he was overwhelmed by the southern European splendour and by the reception that was accorded him by the Pope and the princes. He also negotiated an agreement providing greater security for Nordic pilgrims journeying to the south. In return he promised the Pope that in future the so-called 'Peter's money' would be paid to Rome. This was a sort of ecclesiastical tax which the Popes demanded as acknowledgement of the fact that the Prince in question had actually received his land from St Peter's hand, and, further, that the reigning Pope was now the protector of the kingdom. This impost was now introduced into Denmark, as previously in England.

This is one of many indications that Denmark was at this time in the process of developing from a Viking kingdom into a national state with ever-increasing links to western European culture, a tendency which grew even more pronounced under King Svend Estridsen (1047–76). As Knud had done before him, Estridsen acknowledged in his efforts to strengthen the kingdom and centralize power the necessity to co-operate with the church. But he speedily discovered that the Pope tended to make demands on him. Already in Estridsen's first years of rule Rome demanded that he divorce his wife Gunhild, as the Canon Law decreed that they were too closely related. This was Svend Estridsen's first encounter with the remote papal throne, and it is significant that he ultimately obeyed the papal directive. Nor did the King remarry, although this did not prevent him from siring numerous children with a number of women.

> At this time, European politics were entirely dominated by the conflict between the Pope and the German Emperor. The great estates that were entailed on the bishoprics made the bishops influential vassals of the Emperor, who in turn demanded the right to have a say as to who was to be appointed to such politically important positions. This demand was only natural, seen from the point of view of German law. When an investment was made, the crozier and episcopal ring were accordingly presented by the Prince, who in return received an oath of obedience from the bishop. However, this procedure conflicted with the papal view, and successive Popes increasingly demanded ecclesiastical freedom from such profane interference. Naturally, it was feared that the bishops' position as imperial vassals would conflict with their obligations as ecclesiastical personnel towards the Pope. It was in particular Pope Gregory VII and his immediate successors who advanced this view and demanded reforms in this and other areas. Among other things, they also demanded that all clergy should live in celibacy; they asserted the unlimited mastery of the Pope over the entire church and indeed over the entire world. They further held that the spiritual power was superior, and that worldly rulers received their offices from God via his vicar, the Pope (Gregorianism).

The papal throne also tightened its grip on Denmark. Some surviving letters to King Svend and his successor, Harald, (dated 1079/1080) show the extent to which the Nordic countries, too, had come into the Roman ambit. The royal duty of obedience to the papal throne is strongly emphasized, as are the duties to

defend the church, honour the priesthood, rule righteously and judge mercifully. It was intended that there should no longer be any doubt as to the fact that it was now the Pope who sought to set general policy for the government of the Danish Kings and the behaviour of their subjects. The letters also provide us with interesting insights into Danish society and the relationship of the populace to Christianity a century after its introduction. Under pain of apostolic indictment, his Holiness forbids the Danish people to continue to 'put the blame on the priests for unusual variations in seasonal temperatures, storms and all possible physical illnesses'. He further invests the King 'with apostolic authority that you may quite eradicate this wretched practice in your kingdom and no longer allow priests and clerical personnel, whom you are bound to honour and respect, to be exposed to such outrageous accusations, to the peril of your salvation'. Such matters are subject to divine punishment, and the King is further directed not to imagine that it can be correct 'to deal godlessly with respect to women, who for the same reason and by similar injustice are guilty by virtue of an inhuman and barbaric custom'.

The development of the church and the establishment of the archbishopric

In the course of Svend Estridsen's efforts to turn Denmark into a state on the European model – that is, in which the King enjoyed centralized authority – one of his most important goals was to create a completely organized church with its own Danish Archbishop. The church was to be the ally of the King, part of his superior authority, and it was accordingly difficult for him to continue to accept the old arrangement. Estridsen therefore began negotiations with the Pope to whom he, among other things, made a gift of a bird that was taught to say 'I journey to the Pope' (*Ad papam vado*). However, Estridsen's plans encountered heavy resistance from Adalbert, the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, who was then one of the most eminent men in European politics. The Archbishop was additionally a papal legate with the sole right to ordain bishops in the north, a move that was designed to counter the growing English influence.

Svend Estridsen shelved his plans for independence for a time and instead together with the Archbishop took steps to develop the existing ecclesiastical organization. He had churches built and new episcopal sees established so that the church now attained a permanent division into nine dioceses: Lund, Dalby (which was shortly afterwards combined with that of Lund), Schleswig, Ribe, Aarhus, Roskilde, Odense, Viborg and Vestervig (Børglum). This structure was to endure until the Reformation.

Gifts from the King created the economic basis for the new dioceses. In fact, both the King and his family were generous to the men of the church and its institutions. In the cathedral in Lund his memory was fittingly enshrined as 'the most Christian King', and Adam of Bremen, who had met the King, ultimately

The approach to western European culture and social life which took place in the reign of Sven Estridsen may also be seen in the coins of the time. These reveal both Anglo-Saxon and Byzantine influence, and the motifs reflect the growing religious interest and the King's church policies. On the coin at the top we see the King receiving the support of Christ. On the coin below we see the Saviour standing, with hands folded and a halo. Other coins depict the blessing of Christ, angels, the Bible, the lamb of God, the Cross and saints.

praised him greatly even though he made no attempt to conceal the fact that King Svend 'suffered from immoderation with respect to women'. However, he felt that this was pardonable to a certain extent, as it was not a vice that was specific to the King alone, but was shared by all Danish men.

However, the relationship between the King and the Archbishop was soon to cool. Svend Estridsen showed in a number of ways that he was dissatisfied that his Danish bishops were subject to the German archbishopric. Thus Adalbert sought on one occasion to hold an ecclesiastical synod with all his Nordic subject bishops, but the plan had to be abandoned as the bishops 'across the sea' simply failed to appear. They did not even respond to the Archbishop's summons.

There were otherwise plenty of matters in Denmark that the archiepiscopal see thought were in need of improvement, such as the fact that the bishops accepted honoraria for performing their various functions, that the people neglected to pay their tithe, and that 'everyone is fearfully immoderate with respect to victuals and women'. On these issues the Archbishop had hoped in vain for the 'willing assistance' of King Svend. There was also a problem with Bishop Eilbert, of Fuenen, who had committed offenses against the Canon Law. Although the Archbishop summoned him repeatedly to an interview, he refused

to come, and there is no doubt that he enjoyed royal support in this. Finally, Svend Estridsen was also successful in frustrating the Archbishop's plan to undertake a personal missionary journey to the north to convert those heathen who had not yet become Christian.

Towards the end of Svend Estridsen's reign, the Pope became somewhat more obliging to the desire to establish a Danish archbishopric. The reason for this will surely have been that at this time the Pope needed the King in his conflict with the German Emperor. However, it was first under King Erik Ejegod that the plan was actually accomplished. We do not know about the details of the negotiations, as the official records have been lost. However, there was a 'Book of Deaths' in the cathedral in Lund in which it was customary to write the names of those who were to be remembered in the church on the anniversary of their deaths. In conjunction with the day of Erik Ejegod we find the note 'Erik, who secured by his persistence the *pallium* from Pope Paschal II'. The *pallium* was the archiepiscopal sign of distinction, a white woollen band with a black cross that was borne on the Archbishop's shoulder on special occasions. Asser, the first Danish Archbishop, will presumably have received this together with his letter of investiture, delivered in 1104, which also no longer exists, after Erik Ejegod had secured permission from the Pope the previous year during his pilgrimage to Rome.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, the famous theologian Anselm, sent a letter of congratulation to Asser, and there was also good reason for celebration. The newly constituted ecclesiastical province comprised not merely Denmark, but also Norway, Sweden, Island and Greenland, so that the whole of the Christian north was now subject to the Danish Archbishop in Lund. Denmark had finally become ecclesiastically independent, Danish bishops were in future to be ordained by a Danish Archbishop, and the archbishopric also had consequences for domestic politics, as the Archbishop was second only to the King. This political side of the office was to be every bit as important as the ecclesiastical side.

Holy St Knud

Erik Ejegod also succeeded in another important matter with the Pope, namely having his brother Knud, who had been murdered in 1086, made a saint. On this subject we are well supplied with source material. Erik Ejegod was considerably interested in English ecclesiastical life, and from the Benedictine monastery in Evesham, England, he had imported 12 monks (1095–96) to Odense to, among other things, tend the cult of his deceased brother Knud. It was presumably from this milieu that 'the martyrdom of St Knud' derives, a product of the English monk Ælnoth, as well as 'the sufferings of St Knud', which was also composed by an Englishman. There is also a brief inscription which was deposited in the

reliquary, as well as a short text inscribed on a slab which had been deposited in Knud's stone sarcophagus.

Earlier historiography made rather uncritical use of this so-called 'Odense literature', as of the narratives of Saxo Germannicus, until the Swedish historian Curt Weibull demonstrated on the basis of thorough textual analysis (1915) the legendary character of this hagiological tradition. Weibull concluded that one can only to a limited extent derive historical information from it. The writings in question were intended to show that Knud had in reality been a holy man, and the background of the accounts was the peculiar medieval understanding of history which is traceable back to Augustine (died *c.*430). Knud is depicted as the righteous King who had been chosen by God, and who strove to expand 'the kingdom of God' for the betterment of both church and people. Moreover, it was in the struggle against Satan and all the forces of evil that he at last was martyred.

Now we do actually possess one assuredly historical witness as to Knud's ecclesiastical interest, namely a deed of gift from him to the cathedral in Lund in which he donated some estates and declared it free of certain taxes and imposts. But we otherwise get quite a different picture of him as ruler: the connection to the Pope in Rome apparently ceased during his reign, he introduced previously unknown imposts, he had his men brutally compel the payment of fines and he demanded such heavy payments of the peasants that they ultimately killed him for it.

It was a daring undertaking to canonize a King who had so clearly been despised, but it was successful. On 19 April 1101, Knud's earthly remains were transferred from the stone sarcophagus to a reliquary on the main alter in St Knud's church. The move was intended to favour the royal power of Erik Ejegod and presumably also the monastery in Odense, but Knud never became a popular saint in the piety of the people. Moreover, the entire matter met violent resistance in those ecclesiastical circles that were opposed to the expansion of royal influence. When Eskil became Archbishop (see p. 29), Knud's name was removed from the 'Book of Deaths' in Lund so that the canons were no longer obliged to remember him in their prayers!

The change of religion

The point at which Denmark received her own archiepiscopal see was a watershed in the history of the Danish church. The missionary period was now concluded.

The most important presuppositions for the entrance of Christianity had been the spiritual influence the Danes had been exposed to through trade or through their attacks and conquests in the civilized Christian countries. In addition to this were the political interests in the Danish territory of the French and German

rulers, as well as the duty to conduct mission obligations, which both they and the missionaries acknowledged and which was shared by the missionaries, the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen and the papal see.

The Christian mission was forced to work among the Danes for close to three hundred years. The reasons for this were not merely political. There was much in the Christian teaching, manner of worship and ethics that seemed incomprehensible to the heathen Vikings, as well as inexpedient as far as daily life was concerned, and in some cases it appeared to be simply repulsive. In Nordic heathendom it was the task of the gods to ensure 'a good year, with peace'. The most important part of the worship was the *blót*, which culminated with human sacrifices. It was against these activities, which were performed by the cultic fellowship, that Christianity appeared with its demand for the belief of the individual in God. To the Northerner, the gods were to give life and power to the course of the year; they were to ensure wellbeing, fertility and happiness in the kin group, in the fields and among the animals. The Christian conception that God's son, Christ, achieved reconciliation between God and man was a wholly foreign idea. Heathendom was prepared to tolerate Christ as a god among the other Nordic gods, whereas Christianity had no room for anything besides God.

Adam of Bremen depicts the Danes' manliness with a slight shudder. If they are to be punished, they would rather be decapitated than whipped; they despise tears, complaints and shows of remorse. He thought that this, together with the Nordic concept of honour, the obligation to avenge – including, on occasion, blood revenge – quite contradicted the Christian message of love for one's neighbour, forgiveness, mercy and goodness to the poor and poorly situated.

Nevertheless, the heathen Vikings did change their religion – or did they? Is it not rather the truth that the Northerners exchanged Odin, Thor, Frey and the other gods with God and Christ, as they had become convinced through demonstrations of power and in other ways that the latter two were the stronger, but that in 'other respects' the populace adhered to their old ideas and conceptions? There is much to suggest that this was the case. We read in one of the old Nordic laws that:

> This is the very beginning of our laws, that we must say no to heathendom and yes to Christianity and all of us are to believe in one almighty God and to pray to Him for help, that He may give us years and peace, victory and wellbeing.

Apparently, the Christian God had just taken on the tasks that were previously assigned to the Nordic gods. To this it might be added that in several areas Christianity was in a position consciously to build on top of the old heathen ideas. This may have enabled the people's purely external transition to Christianity to run smoother, but by the same token it would have meant that in reality there was not a true transition to a new religion based on faith and conviction, but only a change of cult.

In heathendom there were, for example, the great annual *blót*, which comprised, among other things, the beer feasts at harvest time and winter solstice, and these festivals were taken over by Christianity. They retained their sacral character, only in Christianized form. It was a religious duty to participate; noncompliance was punished by fines payable to the bishop. The old heathen forms were changed in such a manner that the beer was now blessed 'so as to receive thanks from Christ and Sancta Maria' and 'for a good year and peace'. When a Viking saw a priest carry a representation of one or another saint across the fields to further fertility, he was able to think of similar processions in which his parents had participated with a picture of the god Nyord. Likewise, the common meal aspect of Holy Communion will have directed his thoughts to the eating and drinking bouts at the heathen *blót* festivals.

It has been questioned whether or not the first Christian churches were consciously constructed on sites that were sacred to the heathen in order to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity. Alternatively, perhaps on this issue, too, it was thought desirable to arrange for 'continuity of cult', which might ease people's transition to the new religion. This was a common assumption in earlier scholarship, and there is at least one notable example of it, as the church in Old Uppsala was probably built on the site where the heathen shrine had once resided. But as far as Denmark is concerned, recent archaeological church excavations have been unable to show that heathen sites lie beneath the Christian churches.

In some cases there will, of course, have been people who became Christian out of conviction, or in other words that a true change of faith had taken place, while in others the change will have first taken place quite some time after the change of cult. Inscriptions and symbols on the runestones bear witness to this. On the Ålum-stone, a father expresses the following wish on behalf of his son: 'God help his soul well', and on the slightly younger runestones from Bornholm we may read such inscriptions as 'May God and the Mother of God help their souls', 'Christ help his soul for all eternity' and 'May the Lord God and Saint Michael help his spirit'. It had been understood that the new religion had to do with man's spirit, the salvation of the soul, eternal life, and people had faith in God, Christ and the aid of Maria and other saints in the event of death. Already from the eleventh century Nordic poetry bears witness to Christian faith and a Christian understanding of life.

But no matter how deeply the new religion had established itself in the consciousness of the Northerners from the very beginning, they were in any case confronted with a demand for a change in ethics. Christianity was bound to transform inherited conceptions and people's ways of life in many respects, and this would naturally have occasioned great difficulties. The cultivation of the ancestors, which had been an important part of the religion of the Vikings, was forcibly forbidden by the church, and whether or not the legend about the chieftain called Radbon should happen to be true, it nevertheless is well suited

to illuminate the problem in question. Immediately before his baptism, Radbon is said to have asked the missionary if he would one day meet his ancestors in the Christian heaven. When the latter replied negatively, Radbon refused to allow himself to be baptized, with the remark that 'I would rather live wretchedly in Hell together with my ancestors than wondrously in heaven without them!'.

Christianity naturally also forbade human sacrifices, the taking of blood revenge, and the exposure of children, just as it levied demands for brotherly love, mercy, monogamy, observance of the Christian holidays, baptism, the rites and customs of Christian burial and, furthermore, asserted that an ascetic way of life was particularly pleasing to God.

It was probably possible to convince the Vikings that the Christian god was the strongest when they observed the great achievements of the Christian lands to the south. But it will no doubt have been difficult for them to comprehend the idea that this god was at one and the same time both a loving god and a just and severe one who made moral demands on his subjects. This will have been particularly difficult because of the Northerners' concepts of religious belief and morality (see p. 5), and it will surely have taken a while before Christianity was victorious on these issues. One recalls Adam of Bremen's outrage at the propensity of Danish men to immoderate feasting, drink and women, remarks that were written at a time when there were already hundreds of churches and priests in the country. We have also seen how 'the most Christian King' Svend Estridsen had difficulties with the sexual ethics of Christianity (p. 17), just as we have seen how the Pope found it necessary to forbid certain misapprehensions on the part of the Danes (p. 18).

The conflict between heathendom and Christianity lasted a very long time, and it is difficult to say with certainty just how long it actually took before Christianity had penetrated the hearts of the people. The fact that the first Christianized generations preferred the Christian god because he was the strongest did not, of course, mean that the Nordic gods – Odin, Thor, Frey, and so forth – had ceased all at once to exist for them. The Christian missionaries claimed that the old gods were devils in reality, but it is difficult for us to know what the populace actually thought about it all. It is, however, interesting that archaeology is able to inform us that the most richly appointed heathen graves derive from the close of the Viking era, when the Christian mission had been active for a long time. Furthermore, the heathen amulet known as Thor's hammer (*Mjölnir*) experienced great popularity after the introduction of Christianity, and runic inscriptions reveal that heathendom persisted for several generations after the days of Harald Bluetooth.