

# The Transition from Paganism to Christianity

## A perspective from the Borg site, a Chieftains Farm in Northern Norway

By Geir Are Johansen, archaeologist and museum director of the Lofotr the Viking Museum, 2003

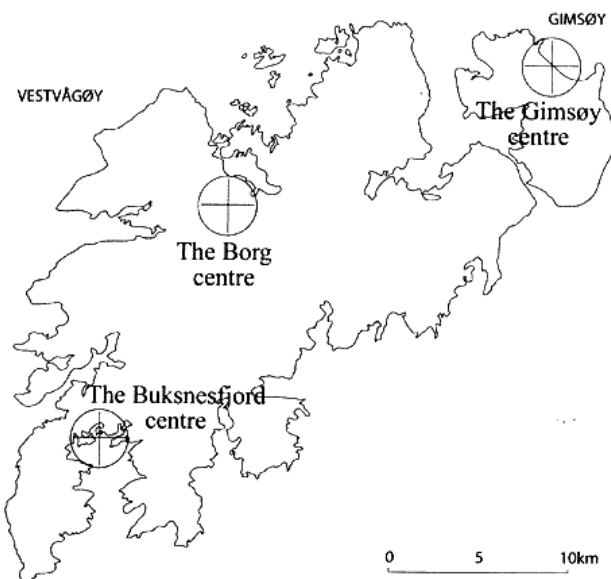
### Introduction

The transition from paganism to Christianity is a complex process which happens at different times in different places. In coastal areas there were Norse and coastal-Sámi populations which turned to Christianity at a much earlier stage than the Sámi people in the interior of the country (1600-1700 ad). In the following I will focus on the transition process along the coast, and mainly from a Norse perspective.

During this age of transition the Norse coastal population of Northern Norway was living in chiefdoms which were already established in the first centuries AD. The archaeological evidence shows a remarkable continuity of settlement in the coastal areas from the birth of Christ, through the entire Iron Age and up to the Black Death (1350 AD).

During the later Iron Age there is clear evidence of differentiated farmsteads. Some are large farms with a more central function, others are very small farms in remote agricultural areas. Also the artefacts from the different farms show a clear distinction between wealthy and poor farms, although there is often some evidence of imported goods at even the remotest and poorest farmsteads.

In the Lofoten area there were probably 3 chiefdoms during the Iron Age. Two of them in Vestvågøy, which more or less split the island into northern and southern parts, and one in Gimsøy the neighbouring Island to the east. This chiefdom must also have incorporated the area of the later city of Vågar, the only evidence of urbanisation in Northern Norway during the medieval period.



The three power centres of Viking Age Lofoten. From Munch, Johansen & Roesdahl 2003 : 31)

## **The Vikings and the Christian world**

The archaeological evidence from grave finds, and settlement investigations shows that the people even this far out on "the edge of the world" was part of Germanic culture and took part in trade on routes stretching south throughout western Europe and North Africa, but also East connecting through the White Sea area with the eastern trade routes of Staraja Ladoga, Novgorod, Kiev and down to the Black Sea, this route connecting again with trade routes coming all the way from the Ural mountains, and Asia.

Of course you cannot expect that one individual from northern Norway was travelling these vast distances, but he was part of a network in which goods were changing hands. Even so we have the account of Ohthere from around 890 AD, which describes how he lives furthest north of all Norsemen; to the north and west of him is the Sámi population. He talks about his travels both around North Cape and the Kola peninsula down to the "Bjarmi" at the White Sea. He also talks about travels along the coast of Norway to trading centers like Kaupang, Hedeby (Haithabu), and travels further on to England. He even met King Alfred the Great at his court, and the King found his story of such interest that he had it included in a rewrite of the World History that was being made at the time. This is how Ohthere's story came to survive until today. This account gives a distinct impression that travels over these distances were far from uncommon in those days. It is also interesting to note that Ohthere is not referred to as a "Viking" at all in King Alfred's account (although he was a Norwegian visiting in the Viking Age), because his intention in England was to trade furs and walrus tusks he had got from taxation of the Sámi population. There must have been close cooperation between the Norse and Sámi peoples at this stage, and it is also possible that the Sámi may have been incorporated into the redistributive system, and may even have been protected by the chieftains as important producers of valuable goods.

The newer translation of Alcuin also emphasizes that it is a misunderstanding that the British were surprised by the men coming from the sea, as though travel across the sea was something new. What was surprising in the Lindisfarne event, was that the men from the sea attacked the monastery. Alcuin's text should in other words not be interpreted as written evidence that this was the first contact between Scandinavians and people on the British Isles. (Myhre 1998 : 18; Sawyer 1995: 3)

## **The First Contact**

Traditionally we hear about the Viking era as the time when the contact between the British Isles and Scandinavia started. Two episodes are mentioned as the turning point of this era: the attack on the monastery of Lindisfarne in 793, and a slightly earlier episode around 787 when men from "Heredaland" (Hordaland) attacked Dorset. These are regarded by scholars such as Roesdahl and Sawyer as the starting of the Viking Age. (Myhre 1998 : 6-7)

Nevertheless, the archaeological record brings clear evidence of contact between the British Isles and Norway at a much earlier stage, including many earlier grave finds on the coast of Norway which contain imported artefacts of insular origin.

There are several arguments from the archaeological record which indicate a direct contact between Norway and the British Isles by the end of the Migration period. There is an ongoing

debate about contacts over the North Sea and the Atlantic in the seventh and eighth century. This is based upon radiocarbon dating of settlement sites in Iceland of a West Scandinavian type; the first indication of agricultural activities of the Feroe Islands (pollen analysis); the use of reindeer antler for comb making on early Pictish and Norse sites in Shetland and Orkney Islands; Viking age grave finds in the British Isles that might be of a late eighth century type, and last insular objects found in Norway that may be earlier than 790 AD. (Myhre 1998 : 7-8)

At the Borg site itself some of the oldest glass vessels come from the British Isles and can be dated back to 500 ad. ( ref.) This may indicate that some form of contact was established between the areas already at this stage, and the next question must then be what was the nature of this contact that is not mentioned in the British written sources? Looking at the archaeological record from the Borg site, the indications are of some form of contact, direct or indirect between Northern Norway and the British Isles going back perhaps as far as 500 AD. Since hostile contact begins around 790 we must suspect that the earlier contact was of a friendlier kind, and not something that was regarded as unusual or otherwise worth mentioning in the records of the British priests and monks.

The answer of regular trading is close at hand, and also is supported by the fact that there is an ongoing process of urbanization in the British isles with the emergence of the "*wic*"- sites (roman - *portus*) from 500 to 600 AD. These sites often emerged from the older Roman settlements, but were placed outside the fortified areas, where there were good landing places for ships. They are often "dual settlements" where the marketplace is lying unprotected outside the walls, while the church and administrative functions are lying within the fortified walls. These functions are then placed within the earlier Roman urban settlement areas. (Clarke & Ambrosiani, s. 15)

There is a striking resemblance between the "*wic*" word and the Norse (and modern Norwegian) "*vik*" which means a shallow bay suitable for ships to anchor or land. Already in the word itself from the British market places the Norse connection seems to be there. What later became towns around 700 AD had their origin in trading and industry that developed during 600 AD. (Clarke & Ambrosiani : 23)

At many of these *wic*-sites (Hamwic, Euphorwic (York), Ipswic & Quentowic) Frankish pottery has been found, including "black-ware" from the seventh and eighth centuries AD. At the Frankish pottery of the same period appears at the Borg site. With regard to other artefacts which clearly are insular imports, we cannot disregard the possibility that the Frankish pottery may also have come to Borg from the British Isles, traded at one of these *wic*- sites. (Clarke & Ambrosiani : 13, 17 & 21)

### **Development of central places and trading networks**

There is clear evidence of insular imports at trading centres in Norway, both in the Trøndelag area (Sognnes 1991), at Borre and Kaupang in Vestfold, and also places like Avaldsnes. What is also striking is that these sites seem to have developed earlier than 800 AD. The implication is that there was no dramatic change in Norwegian economy or culture around 800 AD, as is often postulated.

The real change appears in the 7th & 8th centuries when a few smaller petty kingdoms are established in Norway, with perhaps Northern Norway as one of the stronger of these

kingdoms (Storli 2002). This may be partly because of a continuity of settlement throughout the Iron Age in northern Norway (Trøndelag and some districts of eastern Norway); no demographic crises took place in these areas as are believed to have happened in other parts of Norway during the late 6th and early 7th centuries. From these centres, widespread redistributive economic systems were established. To these centres various goods from different ecological zones could be transported and converted into prestige and authority through gift exchange, feasting and administrative processes. From these strongholds it was also possible to exercise some control over important communication routes along the coast and fjords, and through the inland valleys up to the mountain plateaux. These petty kingdoms must have been incorporated into the large scale economic and political networks that developed around the southern shores of the North Sea during the late 7th and early 8th centuries. On both sides of the English Channel the first emporia and market places were established, and after 700 ad not only prestige goods were exchanged, but also commodities produced by craftsmen and specialists within the emporia. The long distance trade included natural products such as iron, whetstones, lava for quern-stones, antlers, whale bone and probably also furs and hides. (Myhre 1998 : 26)

The Borg site follows this general pattern as the house was rebuilt around 700 and extended to 83 meters, and at the same time there was a huge increase in imports at the site. One might ask what the produce of the Borg area might have been, apart from the well known walrus tusks and furs from Northern Norway. The Island was densely populated at this time, one of the densest in Norway. By each of the farms there are situated the remains of boathouses which are often the same size as more recent traditional boats used for winter cod fishing. It is reasonable to believe that one important asset of the Borg site was dried cod from the Lofoten winter fisheries, which in later medieval times became the most important export from Norway through the Hansa trading systems. There is also evidence at the Borg sites for production of small amulet whetstones of red/green slate. Slate stones like this have been found in, among other places, Haithabu and in graves in Birka. (Nilsen 1997; Muchn, Johansen & Roesdahl 2003)

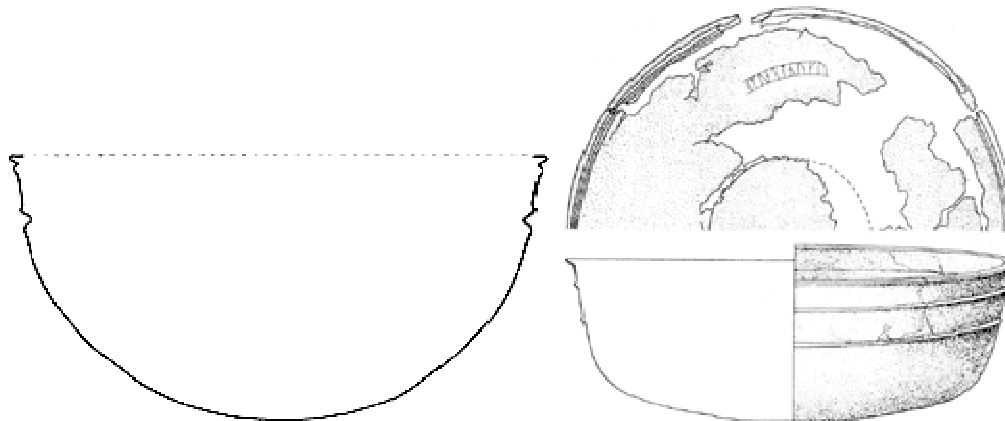
### **Christian insular imports in Scandinavian pagan contexts**

There are quite a number of insular imported artefacts along the coast of Norway, and not surprisingly many of them are found within a grave context. More surprising is perhaps that some of these graves and artefacts are dated to the period prior to the Viking Age. One has to raise the question of why these imports which also in some cases bore Christian symbolism ended up in Norwegian grave material. Did looting start earlier than the written records tell us - did the "Viking" age start in the Merovingian period ? What the imports show is a connection between the British Isles and Norway that goes back at least to the 600-700 AD. This contact appears to not have been reported in any surviving written records.

The Borg site itself gives us a glimpse of this, and what is striking here is the context of the objects found within the chieftain's house itself, and not as grave-goods. Most of the imports are connected with Borg I:a which was the later iron age phase of the house, and almost all of them are found within or near the room which is interpreted as the chieftain's Hall.

There are fragments of a bronze hanging bowl: though most of them are found in grave contexts outside Ireland, they are thought to have originated in Ireland because of the decorative elements and the Christian symbolism found on many of them. The Borg bowl shows similarities with another one found further south in Nordland County (Ytre Kvarøy,

Lurøy), and probably had the same shape and size as this. There has been some discussion about whether these bowls were used in a liturgical or ritual connection. Liestøl (1953) suggested that some of them might have been used for ritual washing of the hands in the Irish church. Others may have been used for hand washing among the upper classes, from whom the Norwegian chieftains may have adopted such manners. (Vinsryg 1979 : 69, Munch, Johansen & Roesdahl 2003 : 244-245)



To the left the hanging bowl from Lurøy, Nordland County which is very similar to what the Borg bowl must have looked like. To the right the hanging bowl from the southern Norwegian trading centre Kaupang, with the runic inscription "I MUNT LAUKU" meaning the bowl for washing. From Mikkelsen in Viking 2002 : 119, and Vinsrygg 1979 : 69.

The next artefact of interest is the gold filigree pointer. This is a peculiar pear-shaped sheet gold object which took the excavators quite some time to find a reasonable interpretation of. It seems the closest parallels are found in Anglo-Saxon items such as the Bowleaze fitting, the Minster lovell and the Alfred's Jewel, even though the latter is of quite different quality. (Munch, Johansen & Roesdahl 2003 : 246-247)



Gold filigree pointer from Borg. From Munch, Johansen & Roesdahl 2003 : 246)

The resemblance to the Alfred's Jewel are very interesting in two ways. First of all this Alfred is the English king who received the visitor Ohthere of Hålogaland (Northern Norway) around 890 AD. So Ohthere might have seen the Jewel of Alfred; but why bring similar gold pointers back home to Northern Norway? Were they merely status symbols? The other thing of interest is the interpretation of Alfred's Jewel, with the motif of Christ as the personification of wisdom. The pin might have been used for turning the pages of the Holy Bible (wisdom), but also as a symbol of Alfred's rule. Now this adds even more intriguing questions as to why such a symbol ends up in a chieftain's hall of northern Norway. Could it be that the chieftain wanted to use similar symbolism to express his power in a local setting in the Lofoten islands ? (Munch, Johansen & Roesdahl 2003: 246-247; Lund 1997: 58)

Other objects found in the chieftain's hall are the Tating ware pottery, and the glass vessels. Fifty-four sherds of pottery were found altogether, nearly all of them disturbed by modern ploughing activities. Nearly all of them are clearly in the context of room C of the chieftain's house - the Hall. The sherds are believed to represent two pitchers. There are only three more finds of this kind of pottery in Norway, in Gimmen in Østfold, Kaupang and Huseby in Vestfold. Outside Norway they are found several places, and most often in context with 8th century trading centers both in England, Germany and the Netherlands. (Munch, Johansen & Roesdahl 2003: 204-205)

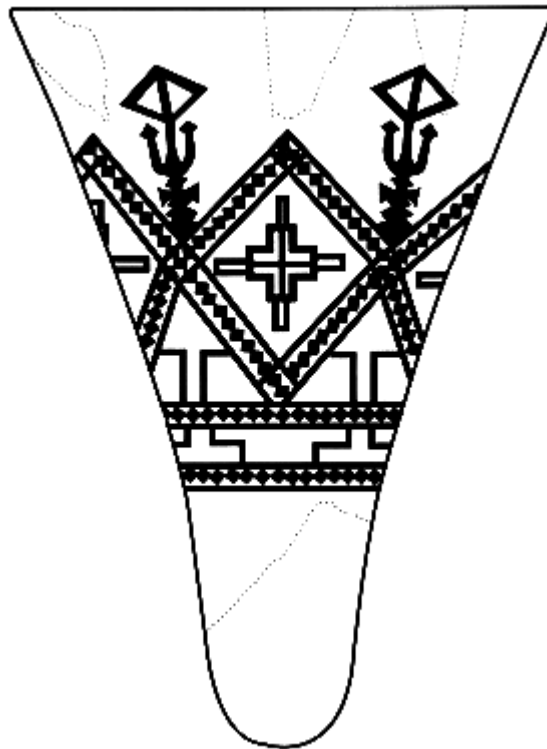


Tating ware pottery from Kaupang. Notice cross motif on the left hand pitcher. To the right the top of one of the Borg pitchers (from : Mikkelsen in Viking 2002 : 122; Munch, Johansen & Roesdahl 2003 : 207)

Unique for this Tating ware is the use of Greek crosses near the base of the pitchers. The closest parallel to the Borg pitchers is one found in Birka, which has the same elongated triangle decoration at the neck. The main production area of these pitchers are the Rhine region. The Borg pitchers are dated to 770 - 850 AD. Both Liestøl (1953), Selling (1955) and Lundstrøm (1971) suggested that this pottery was not a commercial commodity, but was closely connected with Christian activities. Liestøl suggested at Kaupang, in the context of a bronze bowl washing bowl, that the pitcher held the water for use with the washing bowl. Later suggestions have considered the possibility that they were liturgical wine containers.

This is not contradicted by the fact that most of them are found within the trading centers of northern Europe, as these were also the main areas of missionary activity at the time. Hodges (1981) suggests different functions in different contexts, some clearly associated with Christian influence. The vessels could be interpreted as "primitive valuables", non commercial commodities used in ceremonial exchanges. Since it is the only type of imported pottery found in Scandinavian graves, it would also indicate some special symbolic meaning. (Munch, Johansen & Roesdahl 2003: 206-209)

Among the glass vessels were 15 sherds of two unusual blue reticella bowls with arced yellow reticella cables. These are extremely rare and within the "vikng world" they are elsewhere found only in Ribe (Denmark), Whitby Abbey (England), and Staraja Ladoga in Russia. The Borg vessels are dated to the 8th and 9th centuries, and the unusual type of colour and cables point towards England as the production area. Reticella decoration was first used by the Romans in bead production, but re-emerged in the 6th - 7th centuries in North West Europe as a decorative element on glass vessels. Other types of reticella glass are found in three other sites in Norway - Kaupang, Hopperstad and Breviksstranden, and also in Birka, Sweden. (Munch, Johansen & Roesdahl 2003: 213 - 215)



Picture of gold foil glass from Borg, after Munch Johansen & Roesdahl 2003 : 213, 218

Twelve thin blue-green sherds are thought to represent a claw beaker. All sherds except one come from the Hall. Claw beakers are fairly common both on the Continent and in England during the Migration period. Only three other Norwegian finds exist, the most famous one from the cemetery at Borre, the others from Kaupang (Vestfold) and Øygarden (Western Norway). The suggested production area of the Borg vessels are England. (Munch, Johansen & Roesdahl 2003: 215-216)

Twenty-three sherds, nearly colourless or with a slight green colour, are thought to represent a gold foil decorated funnel beaker. The sherds represent one or two vessels of the same type with a geometric pattern of gold foil. An interesting element is several cross motifs.

Lundstrøm 1971 compares the gold foil vessels to early Christian chalices because of their shape and decoration, and therefore suggested a close connection between the gold glasses and the first Christian missions to Scandinavia. Lundstrøm concludes that both gold glasses and Tating ware "had a distinct connection with the ecclesiastical environment". (Munch, Johansen & Roesdahl 2003: 219- 220)

### Christian symbols in a pagan setting

The artefacts with symbolism originating from a Christian context are not few (see table below), and Christian symbolism is represented in several of the artefacts. In some cases you can even get a sense of the combined use of several symbolic artefacts: the washing of the hands in ritual Irish hanging bowls, with the cross motif water tankards in combination. After that participating in banquets with ritual drinking from glass vessels with cross motifs on them.

An interesting question is how these artefacts would be interpreted if they were found together like this in a Christian context, such as a chieftain's dwelling in Ireland, Scotland or England, in the same period. Clearly one would assess the artefacts for their Christian symbolic value, and suggest some Christian ritual performed within the Hall?

Artefact	Dating	Origin	Symbolic Function
Bronze hanging bowl	Merovingian-Viking	Ireland	For ritual washing of hands
Gold filigree pointer	AD850 - 900		Personification of Jesus (Alfred's Jewel); wisdom, for turning pages in holy manuscripts; emblem of the king's (wise?) rule.
Tating ware pottery	AD770 - 850	Rhine region	Liturgical wine containers or for holding water for ritual hand washing.
Reticella bowls	AD700 - 800	England	?
Claw beakers	AD550 - 600	England (Kent?)	Pagan drinking cult
Gold foiled funnel beaker	AD750 - 850	Rhineland	Christian chalices
Gold Foil figures	AD500 - 900	Scaninavian	Pagan Cult

On the other hand, we must be careful because we are far north of the Arctic Circle, within a land that was supposedly pagan, or more or less unfamiliar with Christianity, at the time in question.

The interpretation of these artefacts must have regard to the interpretation of the chieftain's hall as a whole. Munch sees the use of room C (the Hall) as being used most of the time as an ordinary living room, but that on special occasions it functioned as a banqueting hall where great feasts took place. The gold foil figures - 5 small golden amulets with pictures of a man and a woman embracing each other - are an indicator that the chieftain also conducted religious ceremonies within the hall. There is every reason to believe that the Hall at Borg was

also used as a pagan "*Hov*" - a place for worshipping the Norse gods and making sacrifices to them. (Munch, Johansen & Roesdahl 2003: 253)

However all these artefacts in the context of a pagan chieftain's hall and *hov* are puzzling. Why did he acquire these types of artefacts in the first place? If we are to believe the chronology, many of the artefacts must have been brought to the Scandinavian chieftain before the Viking Era. If it was looting, why do older written sources on the British Isles not reflect this?

I suggest that the imports at Borg show a direct contact between Northern Norway and the British Isles. These artefacts came to Northern Norway not as a part of regular trade, but as part of an ongoing gift exchange between the chieftain at Borg and chieftains he was visiting on the British Isles. This gift exchange already started around 500-600 AD and continued throughout the existence of the Borg site. One cannot overlook the possibility, however, that this gift exchange might have turned into more hostile activities during the Viking period, as described in English accounts like Alcuin's, and those of the Irish and Scottish monasteries.

Looking at these luxury artefacts from Borg all together, they should not be regarded as some random loot that the chieftain kept in the Hall merely to "show off" as status symbols. The artefacts fulfill each other in terms of function, use and symbolism. It seems reasonable to regard them as having a symbolic function within the context of the chieftain's seat of power and the pagan ceremonial Hall. This brings us to the question: Is it possible that a Scandinavian chieftain used a similar type of symbolism in a pagan setting as his Christian "colleagues" did in the British Isles ?

If one reflects upon this possibility a very interesting portrait of the local chieftain at Borg and the functions he performed within the Hall appears. The Gold pointer suddenly becomes of use as a token of the chieftain's power - or more precisely wisdom - to rule. This is an interpretation based on the Alfred's Jewel. We know that at least one person from Northern Norway (Ohthere) met King Alfred himself around 890, and probably witnessed the Alfred's Jewel, and it is not far fetched that they became aware of what symbolic meaning this artefact had in King Alfred's homeland, how he used this as a token of his powers and rights as ruler. Is it also possible that the hanging bowl and Tating ware pottery were also in ritual use for washing of the hands among the pagan upper class, as witnessed in Ireland?

### **Some perspectives on the transition processes of Northern Norway**

I agree with Holand in her argument that it is difficult to disregard the Christian symbolism and the special status of both the Tating ware and the gold glasses. The combination of hanging bowls, Tating ware and gold glasses also points towards these artefacts having a strong symbolic significance. The pagan setting is however very clear, and the objects must in that sense sought to understood as objects with ritual significance in Christian societies, which were transferred to a Pagan context emulating certain aspects of the Christian rituals. (Munch, Johansen & Roesdahl 2003 : 220-221)

If one is to accept this, then the question poses itself whether it was the practical or political functions of the artefacts that were transferred into the pagan setting, giving them a pagan meaning, or did the chieftain incorporate thoughts and practices about Christ alongside the pagan gods into the Nordic homelands as early as AD 600-700 ?

The impact of the latter thesis is quite extraordinary if one looks at the traditional historical account of Christianisation processes in Northern Norway. The northern Norwegians are regarded in the written sources as the "last to turn to Christianity". Christianity is connected with the process of making Norway into one kingdom, and it is very much the story of the victorious Christian king moving up from the south and gradually wiping out the power of the northern chieftains, forcing them to abandon the old gods in favour of the new religion.

In this sense the archaeology and the historical record really tell us two quite different stories about how Northern Norway came in contact with Christianity and what influence Christianity had on the minds of the northerners. The timing of this process, and how it happens, are also seen differently in the archaeological record.

Interpreting the *archaeological* record the way I have done here offers a story of contact and influence from Christian societies during several centuries before the nation-building process even starts.

This transition process is not contradictory to, but rooted within, the old pagan power of the chiefdoms. This transition is in that sense much similar to the development of Christianity in Ireland - though in Norway the transition happens at a later time. This process is interrupted by the nation-building process, in which it is in the king's interest to depict his political enemies as heathens. This is a way of legitimizing his actions in the nation-building process and wiping them out.

This is why the *written* record leaves us an impression of a very swift movement of Christianity from the south to the north by the end of AD 900 and the first half of AD 1000.

### **The challenge between the written sources and the archaeological record**

"Prehistoric archaeologists often have a background in subjects like social anthropology, geography and the natural sciences. They tend to see the Viking Age as a continuation of the Iron Age, the end of a long development. For scholars with a background in history and languages the Viking Age is thought of as an introductory period to the High Middle Ages. Prehistorians and historians sometimes have difficulties in understanding each other, we speak different scientific languages, we use different concepts and focus on different problems because of different scientific traditions. This is one of the main obstacles for future interdisciplinary Viking Age studies." (Myhre 1998: 4)

The traditional depiction of the transition from the ancient Norse mythology towards Christianity in Northern Norway is described by Snorri Sturlason as the victorious southern king's victory over the harsh pagan northerners. The question is if this picture is a fabricated one, for the sake of putting the king's actions in Northern Norway in a better light. Did he need something to legitimize his power struggle in Northern Norway, and did the story of conversion to Christianity provide this legitimacy?

There are indications of early church building in Northern Norway, at a site not far from Borg. The insular imports indicate contact and knowledge of the Christian belief system at a much earlier stage than the nation building processes of the southern Kings.

The archaeological record gives a glimpse that there might have been another transition taking place, within the local chiefdoms, rooted within this power system in much the same way as the transition happened in Ireland and Scotland.

But this transition ended or might even have been reversed by the king's nation-building process connected with Christianity by the end of 700. Many northerners then fled to Iceland because they ended up on the wrong side of these power struggles. Among others Olaf Tvennumbruni, who might have been the last chieftain at Borg.

A quite fascinating thought at the end, although not scientifically rooted, is that according to oral tradition among Icelandic local historians (written records were lost in fire around AD1600), the wife of Olaf was supposed to have turned to Christianity before she arrived on Iceland. They arrived somewhere around AD 775 -790 (Nielsen) Is it possible that there were people all the way up in the Lofoten area who had turned to Christianity within the old power system of the chiefdoms at the same time as the first Viking raids on the British Isles started ?

Only future research will be able to fill out this picture more clearly.

The paper was written in 2003 as theme 9 in the Culture 2000 project "Travels in Time", see <http://www.travels-in-time.net/e/norway09arteng.htm>

## Key References

Helen Clarke & Bjørn Ambrosiani 1991: *Towns in the Viking Age*.

Bjørn Myhre in *Ireland and Scandinavia in the early Viking Age*, edited by Clarke, O'Floinn, Ni Mhaolnaigh: 1998

Gerd Stamsø Munch, Olav Sverre Johansen & Else Roesdahl 2003 : *Borg in Lofoten. A chieftain`s farm in North Norway*.

Niels Lund 1997: *De hærger og de brænder - Danmark og England i vikingtiden*.

Synnøve Vinsrygg 1979: *Merovingertid i Nord Norge*

Egil Mikkelsen: Handel - misjon - religionsmøter, impulser fra buddhisme, islam og kristendom i Norden 500 - 1000 e.kr. in *Viking 2002*

Egon Wamers in *Ireland and Scandinavia in the early Viking Age*, edited by Clarke, O'floinn, Ni Mhaolnaigh: 1998

Nilsen, Gørill 1997: *Nusttufter på Vestvågøy*, hovedfagsoppgave UiTø