

TRANSCRIPT

An Undeceptions podcast.

John Dickson:

An Undeceptions podcast. Oh, that's a lovely sound.

Buff Dickson:

Oh, yeah.

John Dickson:

[Inaudible 00:00:16] great background sound.

Buff Dickson:

I'm here in the very well-kept hedges of a-

John Dickson:

Jelling.

Buff Dickson:

Jelling.

Josie Dickson:

Dad, Jelling. It's Jelling, dad.

John Dickson:

What do you mean? It's Jelling, it's pronounced ... it's got a J on it.

Josie Dickson:

But that's not normal, you say Y for dramatic languages.

John Dickson:

Oh, do you?

Buff Dickson:

I'm not yelling.

John Dickson:

How do you know Danish is a dramatic language?

Josie Dickson:

Because I read about it on Google when I was learning Danish. I'm 4% fluent in [inaudible 00:00:47].

John Dickson:

Oh, really?

Josie Dickson:

Isabella told me. I learned hey and hey hoo.

John Dickson:

Oh, this is gorgeous. That's my daughter, Josie, correcting my pronunciation at the Jelling ... Jelling Stones in Denmark, where we travelled also with my wife, Buff, earlier this year, somehow managing to dodge COVID all the way.

So, we're here in Jelling, not Jelling, Jelling, an old Viking town, in front of these amazing Jelling rune stones that are just in the middle of two giant Viking-made mounds. This first one is about almost as tall as Josie, a little bit smaller. This was made by King Gorm, the father of Harald Bluetooth, but next to it is the larger rune stone, this was made by King Harald Bluetooth in the mid-1900. It is often described as Denmark's birthstone, because on it we have the first Christian King of the Vikings, dedicating this stone to his father. But what it says is, that Harald, who won for himself all Denmark and Norway, and made the Danes Christians. Then on the Southwest face is the earliest depiction of Christ in Scandinavia, marking the conversion of these Scandies to Christianity. Quite amazing.

You heard that right, the greatest Viking of the era, the man who had united all Norway and Denmark, declares himself a Christian. How on earth did that happen? I'm John Dickson, and this is Undeceptions. Undeceptions is brought to you by Zondervan's new book, *The Sexual Reformation* by Aimee Byrd. Each episode, we explore some aspect of life, faith, history, science, culture, or ethics, that's either much misunderstood or mostly forgotten. With the help of people who know what they're talking about, we're trying to undeceive ourselves and let the truth out.

The Vikings were proud farmers, and traders, as well as brave adventurers and explorers. When they went viking, remember, the word starts as a verb, to go viking, they saw it as a part-time expedition to ensure financial stability back home. For those on the receiving end of Viking activity, though, whether in the Baltic, England or Europe, this was nothing but piracy, which is the essential connotation of the word Viking. It's these violent expeditions that have shaped our thoughts about the Vikings all these centuries later, and as we saw in the last episode, the violence was real. The raping, pillaging, and desecration of Christian communities might have only been a small part of life from the Viking perspective. But for those

communities themselves, whether in Dublin, Lindisfarne, or Paris, the Viking presence was a catastrophe. These heathen northerners were the enemies of Christ, and they were the enemies of decency and peace.

Christian lands were trying to build heaven on earth in anticipation of the heavenly kingdom come, the Vikings, on the other hand, not only enjoyed vengeance here and now, they expected violence in the afterlife. One famous Viking idea about the afterlife, you see it in all the modern Vikings TV series, is Valhalla, the great feasting hall of the god Odin. Upon death, some lucky Viking warriors would be escorted by the Valkyries, semi divine maidens, into the great hall where they will be eating, drinking, storytelling and more fighting, all eventually leading to the final battle of gods and humans, and everything in between known as Ragnarok. Beyond Ragnarok, well, the world will be reborn in some way, and then, well, we don't really know what happens then. Actually there's quite a bit we don't know even about Valhalla, as I found out when I put the question to Professor Søren Michael Sindbæk from the Department of Archaeology at Aarhus University in Denmark.

I'm struck by, it might be a cliché so it's lovely to chat to you, to tell me what is true and what is false, that even the afterlife is portrayed, not as entering into final rest and peace, but more warfare. Is that right?

Søren Michael Sindbæk:

So, we get this information that there was a lot of different beliefs that we don't get to hear about. We get to hear the [inaudible 00:06:27] versions because they were the ones who sponsored the poetry, and that was what was kept. But there were a lot of ideas that, for better or worse, were not handed over to us, at least in the written sources, and maybe that's what we sometimes see reflected in other materials such as the burials practices.

John Dickson:

Whatever the precise details of the Viking afterlife, it's a long way from the Christian ideas of the resurrection of the body, eternal justice and peace, and living in the presence of the one true God. The mental frameworks of Christians, and Vikings were radically different, both their ethics, and religion in the here and now, as well as their conception of eternity. So, any brave Christian missionaries who ventured into Scandinavia had their work cut out for them. King Harald, Bluetooth, as we heard at the top, would one day declare himself and Denmark Christian, and after him, slowly but surely, Christianity would take hold of Scandinavian culture in a profound way. But what about in the early centuries of Viking history? How on earth did English or European missionaries from say AD 700 to 900 approach, these terrifying northerners, and what sort of success did they have?

Søren Michael Sindbæk:

We also know, of course, that missionaries were active. We can see the spread of Christianity through Western Europe.

John Dickson:

Is Ansgar one that's connected with him?

Søren Michael Sindbæk:

Yes, he's an important missionary, but there were actually missionaries who came to Scandinavia already in the 8th century. Willibrord, he's buried in Luxembourg, in a monastery called Echternach, that he founded, he was a famous missionary, and he met with a Danish king probably in 695.

John Dickson:

I'm speaking with Morten Søvstø, a medieval archaeologist based in Ribe, the oldest town in Denmark. He's the Head Curator of Archaeology at the Museum of Southwest Jutland. We'll get back to my bestie, Ansgar, in a moment, but this Willibrord, way back in 695 is fascinating. He wasn't part of a formal missionary movement to Scandinavia, because that wouldn't happen for a century or more, but this was a missionary era.

Some of my heroes in medieval Europe are people like Bishop Eligius, who, as early as the 650s was freeing slaves with his own money, whatever their nationality or religion, and preaching Christ in the still pagan parts of Europe like Flanders, and Antwerp, basically Belgium, as Christianity creeps up to the North. He had a lot of mission failures, and was initially treated roughly by the locals, but somehow he eventually convinced them to follow Christ. A near contemporary source records, "He gradually began to introduce the word of God among them by the grace of Christ, and eventually a great multitude left their idols and converted. You would see many people hurry to repent, give up their wealth to the poor, free their slaves, and many other works of good, in obedience to his presets."

Another hero working in the same Northern region is Boniface, he was an English academic and monk who preached among the Frisians in the north of The Netherlands, a few decades after Eligius. He also had some success, converting quite a few of the idol worshippers, before he was attacked by locals, and killed on the banks of the Borne River. All that's to say in the 600 and 700s, there were a number of brave, independent missionaries from England and Southern Europe inching North, with varying degrees of success. Willibrord was one of these, he worked among the Frisians, just like Boniface did, then in the mid to late 690s, he took a deep breath and headed for Denmark, boldly going where no missionary had gone before.

Morten Søvstø :

But he didn't have any success. It says in his vita that he came back with 30 young boys, and you can speculate whether they were converts or whether they were freed slaves, or anything. We don't know, but he was here already around 700, but-

John Dickson:

Willibrord returned to Frisia, and managed to train a whole bunch of local clergy to preach, and establish churches in Northern Europe, but beyond his 30 young converts, whoever they were, he didn't make any further inroads into Viking territory.

Morten Søvstø :

Well, you have to imagine when and how did Scandinavians engage with Christian societies. One of the most important places where different cultures met, were actually in the trading towns, because the merchants who travelled to Ribe in the 8th century, well, most of them were Christian, and by 800, the great majority of them must have been Christian. So there we had sort of a meeting place for Christianity, and pagan belief already in the 8th century.

John Dickson:

In our last episode, we heard how trading towns like Ribe, on the Southwest coast of Denmark, introduced Viking peoples to the vast wealth of Europe. It was part of what inspired the Vikings to go viking, but a trading town was also a marketplace for European ideas, and Europe's biggest idea was Christianity.

Morten Søvstø :

But, if you look at a map of Europe, it's quite clear that it was the Franks who were very active in the Christian mission, and from the 770s, and so on, they launched the Saxon Wars against the Saxon tribes, living in what is lower Saxony.

John Dickson:

Charlemagne or Charles The Great, was the leading figure of the Carolingian Dynasty. He was the head of the Holy Roman Empire, as anointed by Pope Leo III. When Charlemagne was crowned emperor in AD 800, he ruled over most of Western Europe, France, Northern Italy, parts of Spain, and Western Germany. The areas North and East of Charlemagne's empire, including Scandinavia and large tracks of Germany, weren't yet Christian, and they weren't really organized into states. It was Pope Leo's hope that Charlemagne would extend the faith, especially to the North, into the territory of the Saxons, who lived just to the South of Viking, Denmark and Charlemagne went for it, with trademark ferocity. Between about 770 and the early 800s, Charlemagne conducted what scholars have actually described as a Christian Jihad. You can read about that in my book, Bullies and Saints, if you really want to. I think we actually did a short Undeceptions single on it back in January, so you might want to search for that.

Anyway, Charlemagne overturned centuries of formal missionary doctrine, that doctrine was that the only tool of mission is persuasion, but Charlemagne brutalized, terrorized, and heavily taxed the Saxons, until they accepted baptism. Then he turned his attentions to the Avars of Austria and Hungary, to do basically the same thing. It's a sorry tale in Christian history. There was, though, a bright spot, his name is

Alcuin of York, Alcuin was one of Charlemagne's advisors, from time to time anyway. We have two letters from him to Charlemagne's court, pleading for a return to simple persuasion. I won't give you the details because I'm trying to convince Producer Kaley that Alcuin really deserves his own entire episode. Suffice it to say, Alcuin's pleas were heard, and Charlemagne did change his approach to the pagan religions, but it was too little, too late for the Saxons, Christianity was pretty much imposed on them.

Morten Søvstø :

We know that they were Christianised with the sword.

John Dickson:

Although, you know we have a letter, two letters from Alcuin of York.

Morten Søvstø :

Yeah.

John Dickson:

Begging Charlemagne not to use the sword, but only to use persuasion.

Morten Søvstø :

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, but-

John Dickson:

There's two rival traditions.

Morten Søvstø :

Yeah, but we can actually see that this tribe, the Saxons, were the direct neighbours of the Franks, they were Christianised by force, and because the Franks were good at writing stuff down, we also know quite how it happened. We can see how monasteries and churches were founded shortly afterwards, so that this pagan Saxon landscape also was converted, because Christianity is not just about persuading people, it's also about building structures out in the landscape. Because the landscape of the 8th century was quite different for what we see today from the [inaudible 00:15:42], and there were ... it was a live landscape full of creatures and beasts, and it was very dark at night, and so on, stuff we have difficulties imagining today. But it was very important to fight paganism with Christian structures and symbols, and so on.

So, we can see how the Franks, they did it when they converted the Saxons, but they didn't have the military force to convert the Danes, or to win a war against the Danes, so for a long time, the river Elbe, the Elbe River was sort of the border between Christian and pagan areas. Then from the 820s, we know

that the Frank's launched high status missionaries to travel to Scandinavia. In 823, the Archbishop Ebbo of Reims, along with Ansgar and so on, travelled and met with the Danish king.

John Dickson:

And now we get to my man, Ansgar, later Saint Ansgar. He lived from 801 to 865. He was a son of a noble Frankish family, but he was raised and educated in a Benedictine monastery. He began his own pastoral and teaching ministry at age 23, and a few years later, in 826, he launched a little mission to Denmark. This one had official support, there was an exiled Danish king named Harald, not the later Harald Bluetooth, who himself had become a Christian, we don't know how, and he invited the young and gifted Ansgar to help him evangelize the Danes. He had a few important meetings with royalty in Denmark. It'd be lovely to have listened to those conversations, but the mission didn't last longer than a year.

Morten Søvstø :

So that has been a very ... It would be very nice to find out what exactly happened at these meetings, we know they were ... they met with the Danish king, but not a lot came out of it. He also went to Birka in Sweden in 826, sorry, 829. The Swedish king called Björn, he actually ... they hit it off with him, and he allowed that church was built at Birka, this trading town close to Stockholm.

John Dickson:

That's right, Ansgar was also the first to preach the Christian gospel in Sweden.

Morten Søvstø :

In 829, the first church in Scandinavia was built, but we don't know where it was, it hasn't been found or excavated, but we can actually trust these chronicles quite a lot. Most people actually agree that a church actually must have been built back then, but it was slashed and burned later on, but there was a church, and it was the first church in Scandinavia. But due to some family problems in the Royal Danish lineage, the missionary efforts of the 820s, they failed towards the Danes.

John Dickson:

So Ansgar himself didn't have much success?

Morten Søvstø :

Not at first.

John Dickson:

Not at first. See, Ansgar was a persistent guy, Morten tells me that he was also somewhat compelling, or at least strange. Everyone knew he was Frankish nobility, but he was known for unnerving mildness, plain dress, and a very simple diet. He preached the old message of the God who loved everyone, humbled

himself on a cross, and all of that. This was the opposite of pagan religion and culture, but it made him an oddity worth listening to, at least for some. He was made Bishop of Hamburg in 831, and if you look at Hamburg on a map, it's basically Germany's doorway to Denmark in the North. But he still had Scandinavia on his mind, and eventually in 850, there was a new king in Denmark, Horik I, so off Ansgar went as the apostle to the North, as he was later known.

Morten Søvstø :

There he was allowed to build another church, a few years later, around 855 or so. He was allowed, again, by the new Danish king to build a church in another town, in the Danish realm, here in Ribe, around 855.

John Dickson:

This is Ansgar we're talking about?

Morten Søvstø :

This is Ansgar, yeah. So, we can see now that the first three churches mentioned in Scandinavia, they are not built in the Royal Court where the Danish or Swedish king lived, but they are built in the trading towns. They are built in the places where the foreign merchants come, and so on, and of course also where Christian people live and meet up with others. So, that's sort of the politics behind it, we have to start by building churches where the Christians come and so on. Also, because if you are a Christian, of course, and you die in a pagan trading town far away, it's very important that you can get a decent Christian burial, for instance. When you have a church you also have a churchyard with a consecrated ground and so on.

John Dickson:

Fun fact, Ansgar helped introduce church bells to Denmark. King Horik's successor, Horik II, allowed Ansgar to introduce bells to the churches in Ribe and Hedeby, which had earlier seemed horrid to the pagans, says one record. Archaeologists have since discovered a large Viking-age church bell at the bottom of the Hedeby Harbor, where it was probably dropped from a ship, and proved too cumbersome to recover, either that or some pagan was trying to put an end to the Sunday morning bell-ringing.

Morten Søvstø :

So these early churches were all built in the trading towns where the Christian merchants also were present.

John Dickson:

And the one in Ribe is the oldest in Denmark?

Morten Søvstø :

Well, we know that the one in Haithabu was founded in 850 or so, but it hasn't been found by archaeologists. It has, of course been looked a lot, they've looked a lot for it, but it hasn't been found yet. But in Ribe, in 2009, we did an excavation at the cathedral, and there we actually found early Christian graves, and we could date them to the 9th century. We later did large excavations, and we're actually been able to reconstruct the entire early cemetery at the cathedral in Ribe. There we can see that we have a large burial ground with Christian graves, going back to the 9th century, with graves also from the 10th and 11th century, and so on. Actually, in Ribe we have been able to find Ansgar church art as we call it, and of course the church that Ansgar built was a wooden church, like all churches were in Scandinavia in the beginning. This church must have been situated somewhere underneath the present cathedral, but no excavations have been done inside the church ever so-

John Dickson:

But the graveyards are a pretty good indication of [inaudible 00:22:40].

Morten Søvstø :

The graveyard is there still, and you can actually see that it was a circular graveyard, and it was even larger than the present cathedral. I don't know if you've been there.

John Dickson:

I'm about to go there, straight after talking to you. So the church that's standing there today, how far back does that go?

Morten Søvstø :

It has a direct continuity. The present church is consecrated to the Virgin Mary, and we also know from the life of Ansgar that the church in Ribe, sorry, not from the life of Ansgar, what we know from a 10th century source, that the church in Ribe was also consecrated to the Virgin Mary. There's a direct continuity, and now we've got a [inaudible 00:23:14] ... Yeah. So it's the oldest existing church site in Scandinavia.

John Dickson:

How wonderful, I can't wait to go down there. So Ansgar had a little bit of success, let's give him a little bit of success.

Morten Søvstø :

Yeah, yeah, I know he [inaudible 00:23:27].

John Dickson:

Okay. Here I am at the beautiful Ribe Church, the oldest church, still standing in Denmark, going right back to the, what was it? 850s. Yikes. I was proud of the history of my church, St. Andrews Roseville, built in 1913, but I think 850 is pretty darn good. Right on cue, here is a massive statue. to Ansgar, huge statue, maybe three, four meters high. They give his dates here, 801 to 865. This is the guy who brought Christianity to Denmark. The reason we know he had some success is because right there, in this area, they've uncovered a grave from this period, from the 800s, and the graves from this period are Christian Graves, so people buried with crosses and everything. It's brilliant evidence of actual Christianisation. Isn't it cool?

Buff Dickson:

Is that right?

John Dickson:

Of what?

Buff Dickson:

Christianisation?

John Dickson:

Christianisation, yeah, that's a word. It's a word. Before we found Ansgar churchyard here in Ribe, when you read the works on the conversion in Denmark, you could read that it was a top down process. The king was converted, and then he converted the rest of the people, and that's 950s, isn't it?

Morten Søvstø :

Yeah, 963 or so. He was probably baptized in 963, and everybody was a pagan, and then he started converting the Danes to Christianity, and he built some fortress and so on, and then slowly people became Christian. It was a process that went on into the 11th century, but after we've done the excavation here in Ribe, you could actually see here we have a church, it was founded in 855 or so, and it has been standing. It was 100 years old when Harald was baptized. We actually have Christian structures that were accepted, and people were buried there in a Christian manner, not thousands of people every year, but some people were buried every year. So there was a small Christian minority that was accepted in Denmark.

Again, metal-detecting, thousands of people in Denmark have it as a hobby, to go on the fields and so on, and it is magnificent what they find, and so on. But, what has also been some ... there has been some new Frank groups, lots of early Christian crosses and so on, dated to the 9th and 10th century that has started to appear, and we can see some clear patterns. They have a concentration here in the Southern part of Jutland, and so on, we can see that we have a Christian minority, but it's a small proportion of

society. I don't know if it's 1%, or 5%, or something, but it was a possibility to live as a Christian in Denmark, also before Harald's conversion.

John Dickson:

So, we know that some Danes lived as Christians a century before Harald Bluetooth proclaimed an official conversion of the Danes. The more archaeological evidence they uncover, the more it seems that the old Nordic religion, and Christianity existed side by side for quite a while. One cool piece of evidence for this, is a soapstone mould found at Trendgarden in Jutland, Denmark, which could be used for the mass production of Christian crosses, as well as Thor's hammers. Its owners were able to ensure the customer got their perfect pendant, whatever religion they preferred, and we'll put plenty of photos of all this stuff in the show notes for this episode. Back to Søren Sindbæk.

Søren Michael Sindbæk:

I think what people say today is that there was a tipping point. We have, today, evidence that in some places like big trading towns, places like Birka or even Denmark, we've got Christian burials from the 9th century, so quite far back into the Viking age. They were a minority, and they were living in an overwhelmingly pagan society, but at some point they were a significant minority. Then in the 10th century, there comes a point when it's politically feasible, probably dangerous, but still feasible for the king to accept Christianity, and that's what happened there with Harald Bluetooth's Christianisation probably in 963, certainly in the 960s.

John Dickson:

So now we return to Harald Bluetooth in the 960s. This is the guy who proclaimed on those giant rune stones that he had conquered all Norway and Denmark, and by the way, made all the Danes, Christians. What motivated him to embrace Christianity, and did that Christianity trickle down to affect the lives of the average axe-wielding Viking? All of that after the break.

This episode is sponsored by Zondervan's new book *The Sexual Reformation* by Aimee Byrd. People in the church can really get ourselves tied in knots when it comes to sex and gender, but Aimee Byrd reckons it doesn't have to be that way. Her book explores the theological meaning behind our sexes. Why did God make us male and female? She tries to clear away much of the cultural stereotypes to come to an understanding of our sexuality as a gift that can actually tell the story of Christ's love for his church. In her book, Aimee does this by weaving her theological reflections with the Book of Song of Songs in the Old Testament. This is known as the most raunchy, and misunderstood book of the Bible. In fact, I'll admit, I've steered clear of preaching on the Song of Songs for fear of just getting it wrong. Aimee's book gave me a fresh perspective, and I reckon it'll help you see sexuality, and what our bodies mean to God in a new way. You can find *The Sexual Reformation* by Aimee Byrd on Amazon, of course, or head to zondervan.com for more details.

15-year old Sawadi stopped going to school when a deformity in her lower limbs progressed to a point where she just couldn't make the long journey on foot. Sawadi's mother sold part of the family farm in rural Tanzania to get help from traditional healers, but Sawadi continued to deteriorate. When a medical worker from the Karagwe Program saw Sawadi, she was sent to a local hospital for treatment and began receiving physiotherapy. Now, Sawadi can walk with crutches, and she's started leather work classes, learning to make school shoes, which will provide ongoing employment. The Karagwe Disability Program, supported by Anglican Aid, offers assistance for people in rural Tanzania living with a disability. Services like this are all too rare, but for people like Sawadi they are life-changing. You can help Anglican Aid support more people like Sawadi by going to anglicanaid.org.au, that's anglicanaid.O-R-G.au. Thank you for supporting this organization I trust.

Harald Bluetooth was the son of the great King Gorm, and he reigned from 958 to 986, so that's a really long reign in Viking society. The Vikings loved to give each other nicknames, Ragnar Hairy Pants, Ivar The Boneless, and so on. Bluetooth probably just refers to a prominent dark tooth, due to the lack of dentistry, or a good punch in the face that killed the tooth, but didn't knock it out. Anyway, Harald's giant rune stone is often called the birth certificate of Denmark, a united nation under one faith. His depiction of Christ on a cross, on the opposite side of the rune stone features on the Danish passport to this day. It's wonderful, you should check it out online, or go to the show notes. But Harald was more than a religious and political reformer, he's credited with several massive public works programs, including a series of circular fortifications at key points around his kingdom, and a 700-meter bridge over the Vejle River Valley. They reckon it took more than 300 hectares of oak forest to build the things, that's 300 rugby fields.

Here's another fun fact, Bluetooth technology, invented in Scandinavia, is named after our Harald, uniting the world through innovation, that's the idea. If you look closely at the Bluetooth symbol right now on your phone, or your computer, it's formed from a Viking H and a Viking B, Harald Bluetooth. True story. Perhaps a true story is the report of how and why Harald Bluetooth embraced Christianity in the first place. It comes from the chronicle of a Saxon monk and historian named Widukind, written in the 960s, so it's a contemporary account.

Widukind:

In times past, the Danes were Christians. Nevertheless, they continued to worship idols in their traditional manner, but then there was a dispute in the presence of the king during a feast regarding the worshiping of their gods. The Danes affirmed that Christ was a God, but they claimed that there were other greater gods who manifested themselves to people through even more powerful signs and prodigies. Against this, a certain cleric named Poppo, who is now a bishop and leads a religious life, proclaimed that there is One True God, the Father, along with His Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. The images, he proclaimed, were of demons, and not gods. King Harald, who it is said was quick to listen, but slow to speak, asked if Poppo wish to demonstrate this faith through his own person. Poppo responded without hesitation that he wished to do so.

The king then ordered that the priest be placed under guard until the next day, when morning came, the king ordered that a very heavy piece of iron be heated in the fire. He then ordered the cleric to carry this glowing iron for his Catholic faith. The confessor of Christ seized the iron without any fear at all, and carried it as far as the king had ordered. The priest then showed everyone his unharmed hand, and gave proof to everyone there of his Catholic faith. As a result, the king became a Christian, and decreed that God alone was to be worshiped. He ordered all of his subjects to reject titles, and gave all due honor to the priests and servants of God. But these events also are to be ascribed to the virtues and merit of your father, by whose efforts, the churches and orders of missionary priests shined forth in these regions.

Søren Michael Sindbæk:

I think what's quite fascinating with that episode, is that for all we can see there was no big dissent. We don't see any evidence that there was a religious war, people accepted the fact back then, and we can even see that pagan burial customs ceased very quickly after that. The million dollar question for that is, "What exactly was the Christianity which was propagated there?" Because I think that we would probably struggle to identify it with what we have learned in school about Christianity. It was a different version, but that's the kind of flexibility which enabled Christianity to gain a foothold, the offer of very strong protection, and a hope for the afterlife, combined with a very pragmatic attitude to culture, and well, indeed religious feasts.

John Dickson:

Professor Sindbæk goes on to quote the Apostle Paul to me, "I've become all things to all people, so that by all possible means I might save some." Søren isn't really into Christian theology, but he points out that Christianity had a long history of accommodating to every new culture in order to win that culture to Christianity. It was one of Christianity's strongest features, and it's no doubt part of what made it the first world religion, but it's also a vulnerability, because it means that compromises with culture are always a possibility, whether compromising to 10th century Viking culture, or to 21st century celebrity culture.

All the missionaries of this era, Eligius, Boniface, and the priest Poppo, believed and taught the Nicene Creed, the thing that united all Christianity, but Søren Sindbæk is no doubt correct, that Christian missionaries often took a pretty flexible view of the pagan add-ons held by some of their converts. Whatever the details, we can see in the literary and archaeological evidence, a slow move toward Christianity prior to Harald in the 960s. Even after Harald, Christianisation is superficially obvious, lots more people are buried with crosses, for example. But Christianisation proper, as in the heartfelt embracing of the faith, took several generations after Harald, and complicating everything, of course, is politics. Back to Morten Søvstø in Ribe.

Morten Søvstø :

I think there was a live Christian minority in at least parts of Jutland when Harald Bluetooth decided to become a Christian.

John Dickson:

Do you think his, and maybe we can't know the answer to this question, but was he converted simply for political reasons? Or can we allow that it was sincere? How do we access any of that? I've heard some people argue that it was only political, he just wanted to be like the other kings of Europe.

Morten Søvsø :

Yeah. No, I don't ... I think it's very difficult to separate what is your motive for doing this or that, is it purely this or purely that, or is it a mixture of different motives? I think it's always a mixture, but of course the sort of old explanation, that was also a sort of a Marxist explanation, and Marxist, they don't understand religion, so it's all about power and politics, and so on, so it was the idea that it was a way to secure his power, and to imitate the other kings and so on.

He didn't believe in anything, and so on, but I think, well, we don't know, but Harald Bluetooth was a very remarkable king, with a vivid interest in architecture and arts and so on, and he did some crazy stuff that no one had ever done in Denmark before, building these geometrical ring fortresses and so on. But, I think you can actually see a whole lot of Christian symbolism in his architecture, and so on, so I think there are just as many signs to indicate that this was something that he really meant, but we don't know anything for sure.

We can see that lots of people converted independently. We can also see that what people certainly do respect a lot is power. One of our early written sources, Widukind of Corvey, his chronicle actually has this dressed up, but probably a semi-authentic description of Harald Bluetooth of Denmark, King of Denmark, and his conversion. The sort of, what I think is a semi-authentic part of it, is the discussion which precedes his acceptance of Christianity, and that discussion is not about which is the true religion. This is a discussion about which god is the strongest. What people in Scandinavia could very clearly see, at least in some terms of history, was that the Christian societies were very strong and very successful, and those are the periods also when they tend to convert. So they were impressed individually by the power of those societies, and by extension the power of their God, and they wanted that projection as well, so this is one part of it.

Then, another part, when we're talking about the individuals, is probably the real concerns that people had for their afterlife. The reason why I think this is a concern, is that the early missionaries talked about it in their letters and [inaudible 00:42:02]. There are these very practical of descriptions of, "This is what you have to tell them, and this is how you can argue against them." They have to do with things we can recognize also like, "What will happen when you're dead? Do you really want to believe that you will be sitting in a dark place for the rest of time? How about coming over to our side, and you have a better offer?" I think people did believe in that offer.

John Dickson:

There's another proposal for why some Vikings converted, women led the way. Birgit Sauer is a Viking specialist in the Department of History at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. She wrote an influential paper a decade ago, arguing, well, here's producer Kaley reading from the essay.

Kaley Payne:

There are many indications that women were among the first and most eager converts, most of the early Christian graves at Birka were of women. Further, most of the Runic monuments commemorating men, who were converted in their last days and died in white clothing, were erected by women. It is not surprising if women were especially attracted by the new faith, much Christian teaching must have been welcomed by them. A point obscured by the misogyny that colours so much medieval literature. They must have found the prospect of the Christian paradise far more attractive than the gloomy realm of hell, to which they had previously been consigned.

Many of them must also have been glad to believe that in the sight of God, they were men's equals, and that their worth did not depend on their fertility, family, or social status. The community of Christians had room for all, including women who were barren or unmarried, as well as orphans, and the poor. Christian teaching that all had an obligation to help those in need, was especially welcome to women without near kinsfolk, for they had far more limited opportunities to support themselves than men in a similar situation. It may also be supposed that many mothers were gladdened by the attempts of the church to prohibit, or at least severely restrict the custom of infanticide, despite the increased burden that this must often have imposed.

John Dickson:

I like it, and a number of scholars like it, but I asked Sarah Croix about it, and she wasn't so sure.

Sarah Croix:

No, it's a long time ago, I read it. I think it's, I mean, the data is as it is. I think part of the bias might also be more likely use of ornaments as well, maybe in the burial process that it was more customary to have ... well, to bury women with ornaments, or that they were just more used to having ornaments. Whether women were necessarily more attracted to Christianity, that's something I've been very much in doubt about. But this argument, she's making the argument that women were more attracted to Christianity because, well, in the pre-Christian faith, there was no heaven for women and children. There was Valhalla for the fallen warriors, and then there was hell for, basically everyone else. Women were attracted to this possibility of a better afterlife, on the one end, but also because Christianity forbid infanticide, which the author of this paper made to be like a particular female concern.

John Dickson:

Well, I don't know what to make of that one. Did women lead the way in the conversion of the Vikings? I like to think so, but we might have to just leave that as a maybe. The conversion of Scandinavia was multifaceted, a generation after Harald Bluetooth, Norway won its independence from Denmark, but its new ruler, King Olaf II, wanted Christianity. He'd embraced the faith for himself, we don't know why, and when he won control of his homeland, he made zealous efforts to convert everyone. He did this partly through coercion, I'm sorry to say, partly through legislative changes, and partly by importing English missionaries to establish a strong network of churches throughout Norway.

Then there's Iceland, another proud Viking territory up to this point, it provides another piece of the Viking conversion puzzle. In Iceland, the Christian doctrine of forgiveness, God forgives us, we forgive others, was seen as a way out of the cycle of violence that had encircled Viking culture for centuries. I'll let professor Michael Drout tell us about that. You may remember him from our previous episode, he's the Director of the Center for the Study of the Medieval at Wheaton College in Massachusetts, where he teaches the Icelandic sagas. He sees evidence of the Vikings attraction to Christian ideas of mercy in the great Njál's saga, it's an epic tale of generations of Viking blood feuding that ends in their conversion to Christianity.

Michael Drout:

Without going through all the giant story of Njál's saga, the essential idea in Njál's saga is that the most admired, and peacemaking man in Iceland, Njál, ends up being burned alive in his own house, with his wife and his son, and his grandson. Every single step of everything that happened was purely legal, according to all the laws, and it takes place ... it takes many, many, many chapters, and all the other things that happen. The way this is framed in Njál's saga is it happens right after Pangbrandr, the missionary, came and brought Christianity to Iceland. Pangbrandr wasn't your typical missionary, to prove that Christianity was better, he would fight duels to the death with people, except he would hold a cross instead of a shield in his left hand, and then when he killed someone, it proved that Christianity was the better god.

The essence of the Njál saga story is that this was this brave, wonderful, heroic thing, and we are all disgusted with it at this point. So, sort of the idea by the end of Njál's saga is that there's this just, "We're tired of it. We're disgusted with all the violence, and the murdering. We are going to become Christian." Iceland converted as a whole country in the year 1000. The law speaker supposedly put his head under his cloak for two days, to think really hard about everything and came out and said, "I think we have to-

John Dickson:

The law speaker presided over the superior court called the Althing. He was also responsible for memorizing the Icelandic law, and he would recite huge chunks of it each summer at the Althing. Anyway, this one year, around AD 1000, according to the Njál saga, the law speaker was fed up with his people's disunity and violence, and after three days of pondering, he appeared with a proposal.

Michael Drout:

... tired about everything, and came out and said, "I think we have to have one religion here, and I think Christianity is the one." Then they threw the idols of the gods over the waterfall, and-

John Dickson:

You can still visit the Godafoss Falls today. In Iceland, they're a bit like Harald Bluetooth's rune stones in Denmark, a physical place marking the birth of a Christian nation. That said, the conversion initially involved some serious compromises with pagan life.

Michael Drout:

... and there were some exceptions. We can still eat horses, and we can still expose infants if we don't have enough food, and you can still practice your sacrifices as long as no one ever sees you do it. So, it was some accommodations for paganism, but the story of Njál's saga, and sort of the ... I'm sure this is a post-Christian, looking back on it, was that the reason Christianity was accepted, is there is no way otherwise to stop these eternal back and forth feuds. The end of Njál's saga is beautiful, in that Kári Sölmundarson, who's been like the real hero, like breaking through windows, and chopping someone's head off when they're telling lies, and the head falls in front of the king that he's telling lies to, Kári has Flosi the guy who burned Njál, completely at his mercy, and he decides to forgive him instead of kill him.

Actually, I know that's probably post facto and everything, but I think there's something real in there. I think that that disgusts at all the killing, and that never ended, never chance to even rest and relax, because someone may burn your house down and kill you in it, because of something that three generations ago was done, and I think they saw Christianity as, "This is a way out." It's a way out with honor within the system of Christianity, because of course forgiving someone who's done something really terrible to you makes a Christian, that's one of the best things you can do as a Christian, as opposed to in the old Norse system that was a cowardly thing.

John Dickson:

Let's press pause. I've got a five-minute Jesus for you. Forgiving others is now just seen as a regular part of Western culture. It's hard for us to imagine that in many other societies throughout history, vengeance and blood feuding were the more popular ideals, they were truly seen as morally good, as ways of preserving your honor when wronged. This was certainly true of Viking culture, but it was true everywhere in the ancient Greek, and Roman world as well. It has to be said that there is something logical about revenge. If I've been wronged, and equilibrium can be established by inflicting on you or those you love an equal harm, indeed, there's a certain logic in inflicting greater harm, after all you initiated the wrong, you therefore deserve more than the wrong done to me. This is the logic of generational blood feuding, it re-establishes good order.

If we've come to believe in forgiving people who have wronged us, that's only because this is one of Christianity's weird gifts to Western society. In a day when cancel culture is increasingly common, I

reckon we do well to remember that gift, it comes from Jesus, of course. Back in Matthew chapter 18, we're told that Peter one day came to Jesus and said, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister when they sin against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you not seven times, but 77 times," which is just a way of saying, "More times than you could imagine." This prompts Jesus to then tell one of his really famous parables.

A man owed a king a huge sum of money, he said he was unable to pay, so the king, in his mercy, forgave the debt. Happy days. But then, Jesus continued, this man meets a fellow servant who owed him a relatively small amount, the servant begged him for relief, but he refused to extend the same mercy toward the servant that the king had granted to him. The king, then of course, hears about it, calls the man in, declares him to be a wicked servant, and then the key line is, "I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to, shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had mercy on you?" The king threw him in jail. Right here, Jesus cancels the logic of vengeance, He cancels cancel culture, He replaces it with an entirely different logic, an entirely different cultural outlook.

The new logic begins not with what we've done to each other, but the nature of God, every one of us has had a debt cancelled, if we have asked God for mercy. God grants that forgiveness as a free gift. If that reality becomes the animating principle of our life, which it ought to for Christians, it is unthinkable that we wouldn't forgive those who seek our forgiveness, just as God forgave us when we sought His mercy. Following this teaching of Jesus, the Apostle Paul in one of his later letters, makes the point with crystal clarity. "Bear with each other," he writes in Colossians 3, "and forgive one another, if any of you has a grievance against someone, forgive as the Lord forgave you." There's the logic, God's forgiveness leads to our forgiving each other.

The vengeance ethic tries to establish an equilibrium by repaying someone with the harm they've done to us or with worse harm. Public cancel culture operates with a similar logic. The forgiveness ethic seeks to reflect something even more fundamental, the love and mercy of God Himself. There may be good practical reasons to avoid the cycle of violence characteristic of blood feuding. I'm sure there are, but Christianity provides a deeper rationale than simply forgiveness works. Jesus insisted that when humans forgive one another they're participating in the very mind of God. You can press play now.

The history of how the Vikings became Christians is really two stories at the same time. On the one hand, there was conversion from the top down, Viking leaders like Harald Bluetooth or King Olaf II became Christians themselves, and then declared that their lands should also be Christian. The spiritual and the political are mixed, you've got belief and pragmatism, it's a point made well by Sarah Croix.

Sarah Croix:

Ultimately, I think it's a pragmatic decision. It was the new times. It was how the world was evolving, and that's the whole Harald Bluetooth story, that if you want to be a recognized king, recognized by the other kings who are telling themselves and others that, "Well, God is there," and that they are defender of God and the church on Earth, and so on, and so on, then you are just not part of the club if you are not one of them, and converting yourself as king, and just living it at that is not being a true defender of the church.

Your people has to follow, and of course that as such takes time, it was not an unknown thing, of course not, especially in South Scandinavia.

John Dickson:

But I've also got the caveat of Morten Søvstø in my ear. Remember what he said?

Morten Søvstø :

But, of course the sort of old explanation, that was also a sort of Marxist explanation, and Marxist, they don't understand religion, and so it's all about power and politics and so on. It was the idea that it was a way to secure his power, and to imitate the other kings and so on.

John Dickson:

I think this is a really important point for the study of all history. Through the 20th century, there was a tendency to read everything in history as a struggle for power. The reformation, for example, wasn't really about people coming to have new ideas about Christianity, it was mainly just European city states, jockeying for independence. Again, the enlightenment wasn't really about expanding our knowledge of the world, it was largely a quest for financial and technological superiority, and so on.

On this view, the Vikings couldn't have actually found something true and good in Christianity, they had to have been trying to make Scandinavia another great European power. There is, of course, a truth there, I'm not denying it. There was obviously a top down aspect to the conversion of the Vikings. Sarah's point stands, Harald Bluetooth in the 960s did simply declare the Danes to be Christian. We can only speculate how many of those Danes truly knew the crucified and risen Christ. What Sarah says, holds for quite a bit of Christian history, but there was also something going on from the bottom up with everyday people, traders, warriors, and women accepting Christianity long before their leaders did. These ordinary Vikings listened to the Willibrords, the Ansgars, and the Poppo, and they believed, decided to go to church, recite the creed, wear crosses, and even entrust themselves to a Christian, not a Viking burial.

Morten Søvstø :

I think the archaeological material, which is growing year by year, tells the same story. We have a long conversion process, a lot of more bottom up processes in it.

John Dickson:

In the mixed story of Viking conversion, I think we see a microcosm of the whole history of the church. We've got tons more Viking content that we couldn't squeeze even into this double episode. I returned from the US, and Scandinavia with more than five hours of recorded material, which is barely enough, in my view. But, if you want to hear some of that bonus content, and tons of other extras, we've started a new service at undeceptions.com, you can become one of our undeceivers, and get access to uncut interviews, and invitation to join a private Facebook group to get the inside [inaudible 01:00:46] on stuff

we're doing. Plus, invitations to special events and a whole lot more. Just go to undeceptions.com and click on the big link, Become an Undeceiver, it'll set you back just \$5 Aussie a month, that's £2.73 P for British listeners. Every penny goes back into the show, so we can keep bringing you this kind of content. Along with the donations, thank you especially to those who clicked the Donate button, this is how we're going to keep the Undeceptions thing thriving.

While you're there, check out Laurel Moffat's new podcast, Small Wonders, and Michael Jensen and Megan Powell du Toit's excellent With All Due Respect. They're both part of the growing Undeceptions Network. Next episode, we're asking one of the most frequent and fraught questions I ever come across as someone who talks about the faith for a living, "If God is good, what's with all the suffering?" See you.

Undeceptions is hosted by me, John Dickson, produced by Kaley Payne, and directed by Mark "one ear" Hadley, editing by Richard Hamwi, social media by Sophie Hawkshaw. Special thanks to our series sponsors Zondervan, for making this Undeceptions possible. Undeceptions is the flagship podcast of undeceptions.com, letting the truth out. An Undeceptions podcast.