

The Evangelization of the Arctic in the Middle Ages: Gardar, the "Diocese of Ice"

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Strange land under the Great Bear, the Arctic North is by turns shrouded in the darkness of a sunless winter and sparkling in the brightness of unending day. At the summer solstice, the thousand and one crystalline facets of the mountains catch the light, and in the deep blue vistas of a vast landscape, the tundra flowers unfold their tender colours. It is a land of the starkest contrasts, of beguiling charms and deadly hazards. No wonder, then, that for over 2500 years it has continued to fascinate and ensnare men who, though born amidst the smiling prospects of the inhabited world and imbued with the concepts of humanist harmony, have nevertheless resolved to force their way through the "doors of ice" and head for the Pole.

And yet, for more than 10 000 years small sunburnt men with high cheekbones and narrow slanting eyes, clad in thick furs, have lived out their solitary lives in one of the harshest environments on earth. Behind their fleet-footed dogs or their reindeer, they traverse the vast snowy tracts in search of game. With piercing gaze, they scan the vast horizons of their desolate world for some imperceptible sign of the quarry on which their precarious survival depends.

What were those first travellers seeking when they launched their frail barques on the dark waters of Pliny's "sluggish sea", that black and icy (*caligans vel rigens*) ocean which can suddenly congeal into crushing pack ice, but can also, as Plautus says, boil and roar in the fury of the tempest?

Was this intrusion of oar and billowing sail not in itself a sacrilege, an ill-omened desecration of the secret abode of the gods of the North? And what interest could there have been, since "*Ita est rerum natura, post omnia oceanus, post oceanum nihil*" — it is in the very nature of things that the ocean should be at the end of all things and nothing should lie beyond it?

True, these were not the first great northward migrations. Some 40 000 years ago Neanderthal man hunted the bear, the bison, and the mammoth on the Arctic steppe. There followed tribes, strongly marked by Aurignacian influence, who crossed Asia and then passed into North America over land, as the water level in the Bering Strait had fallen following the great Würm-Wisconsin glaciation. The Ertebølles, people of the megaliths, Bronze Age conquerors, came from the Danube

plains in search of the magic amber of the Jutland shore. One after another, the great human migrations moved north before scattering southward once more. The Cimmerians got as far as Asia Minor, while Celtic influence grew till the beginning of the Christian era. Almost everywhere, however, bastions crumbled before the Roman advance. The fleets of Drusus invaded Frisia, and shortly after, Tiberius pushed back the Cimbri and Cherusci at the entrance to the Baltic. But the Pax Romana could not contain the turbulent peoples of the North, and more than once they burst across their borders and streamed in devastating hordes towards the southern Roman provinces. In 101 B.C., Catulus and Marius crushed the Cimbri on the plain of Vercellae in the north of Italy, and for many centuries to come, aggressive swarms continued to sweep down from the north. The Eruli, after assaulting the Scythians, ravaged the coasts of western Europe till the fifth century, penetrating deep into the Mediterranean lands. Relations between Europe and the North in the first centuries of the Christian era are most frequently represented as a long history of insecurity, savage fighting, violence, and merciless rapine.

THE PILGRIMS OF GOD

What a contrast to all this seems the marvellous ingenuousness and naïve purity of the Irish Abbot of Clonfert (Cluainfer-ta), Saint Brendan, the son of Findlung, who shortly before 550 rowed across the northern waters with his brothers, singing praises to God, in search of the Promised Land. Saint Barind, a descendant of Niall, had told him that after leaving the Delightful Island with his son Mernóc, who was the Abbot there, he had come to a wonderfully fertile land with lush fields and abundant springs. All the plants were in flower and every tree bowed down with fruit. The ground was strewn with precious stones and the sun never set. The two monks were lost in wonder and would have liked to stay there forever, but as they were trying to ford a great river, a strange messenger appeared in a dazzling light and said: "Well done, good brothers. For the Lord has revealed to you the land which he will give to his saints. The river there marks the middle of the island. You may not go beyond this point". Saint

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Barrind and his son Mernóc were astonished and wanted to know who this man was, but they got this answer:

Why do you ask me where I come from or how I am called? Why do you not ask me about the island? As you see it now, so it has been from the beginning of the world. Do you feel the need of any food or drink or clothing? Yet for the equivalent of one year you have been on this island and have not tasted food or drink! You have never been overcome by sleep nor has night enveloped you! For here it is always day, without blinding darkness. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the light of this island. And now, brothers, you must return to where you came from.

So they put to sea again and were enveloped in a thick mist which veiled the sky and the water, and miraculously their barque arrived back at the Delightful Island. They had hardly set foot on land when the monks came, "like bees swarming, from their various cells" and surrounded them, marvelling to see them.

"Think, brothers, only of good," said Saint Barrind. "You are living undoubtedly at the gate of Paradise. Near here is an island which is called the Promised Land. Your abbot Mernóc went there. An angel of the Lord guards it. Do you not perceive from the fragrance of our clothing that we have been in God's Paradise?"

So Saint Brendan and 14 of his brother monks, trusting in divine help and protection, steered west on a voyage that was to last several years. The surviving accounts of these peregrinations are very old: the first Irish text dates from the sixth century, but the most trustworthy manuscript was written in Latin about 800. It has a brisk and vivid style and invests the voyage of the Saint and his companions with an heroic vision, reflecting the intense faith which at that time bathed Ireland, the "island of saints". It can be regarded as an authentic Christian allegory, a singular combination of what Renan called "Celtic naturalism and Christian spiritualism". This means, of course, that the account loses in historical authenticity; the reason the events are included is that they serve to highlight the calm and courageous determination of the hero who entrusts himself to Providence. The geographical setting is a means of bringing out the courage of the travellers in the face of danger, rather than a realistic description of actual places. One can even go so far as to think that *The Voyage of Saint Brendan* was inspired by epics like *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid*, or even by contemporary secular accounts like *The Voyage of Mael Dúin*, unconsciously transformed by Irish monastic rigour into an apologia for divine power. So, when, after 40 days at sea, an immense creature appeared in the water, furiously lashing the waves and breathing foam through its nostrils, and threw itself on to the pilgrims, Saint Brendan calmed his terrified disciples saying: "Do not be afraid. You have little faith. God, who always defends us, will deliver us from the mouth of this beast and from other danger."

The message is clear: the only solid bulwark against adversity is absolute submission to the divine will and deep and unswerving humility. *The Voyage of Saint Brendan* takes on a didactic character, but despite this prophetic side it still gives some interesting pictures of the North Atlantic, which do not seem to have been chosen by chance, and which are certainly

based on the real experience of seafaring Irish hermits who crossed the northern waters in search of solitude for their prayers and meditations.

On the way to the Paradise of Birds, Saint Brendan discovered a group of islands separated by narrow stretches of water, with steep cliffs thronged with birds, and where sheep grazed on the green hillsides. This description fits the Shetlands and Faroes well enough, and when the monks reached the Island of Smiths, the reader is struck by its resemblance to Iceland:

The island is very steep and rocky, covered with slag, without trees or grass and full of glowing forges. Flaming rocks are hurled into the sea and fall spitting into the waters which start to steam. Nearer to the island, thousands of evil beings were moving around their hearths and hurling incandescent rocks a long way. Soon the whole island is like one huge furnace and the sea boils like a cooking pot full of meat on the fire. It grows dark and on all sides blazing projectiles whistle through the air while a strong smell of burning spreads far and wide.

Then the holy abbot said to his terrified companions: "Soldiers of Christ, be strengthened in faith unfeigned and in spiritual weapons, for we are in the confines of Hell. So, be on the watch and be brave."

True, it is not possible to fit all the descriptions to geographical locations. If, as some claim, the "coagulated water" in which the pilgrims drifted for 20 days is the Sargasso Sea, then it would have to be recognized that Saint Brendan could have reached the New World and even its subtropical latitudes, but the whole mystery remains unsolved. There are a number of conflicting theories about an early "discovery" of North America by Irish monks. A recent voyage, made in a wooden boat covered with tanned, greased oxhides and rigged with a primitive square sail, showed that Saint Brendan could have reached the coast of Labrador, and even crossed the drifting pack ice. Was it not on this stretch of the journey, represented by a miniature on Piri-Reis's map (Fig. 1), that the Turkish Admiral, referring to the Jasconius episode, shows the good monks quietly picnicking on the back of a whale? In fact, to quote the legend:

It is said that in olden times a priest named Sanvolrandan sailed the seven seas and landed on a fish. He and his

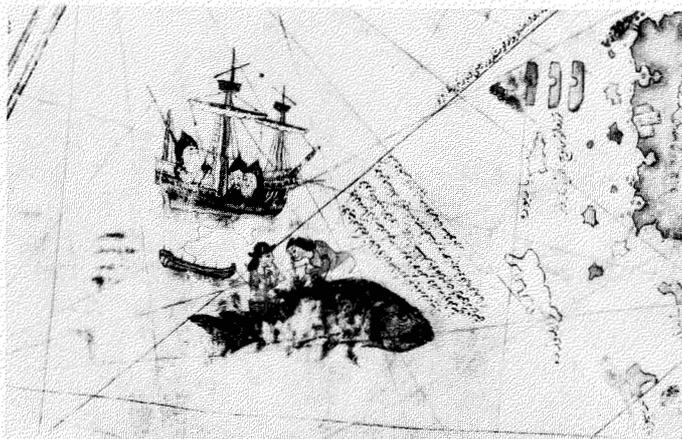


FIG. 1. St. Brendan and his brother monks enjoying a campfire on the back of a whale, as portrayed in Piri Reis's map. (Topkapi Museum, Istanbul.) Reprinted with permission from Flammarion, Paris.

companions, thinking they were on dry land, lit a fire, but when the monster's back began to burn it dived into the sea and they all had to get quickly back into their boat. This event was not related by Portuguese infidels but is taken from the old *mappae mundi*.

It is curious to note that the same story is told in the "incomparable peregrinations of Sindbad the Sailor" in *The 1001 Nights*!

Saint Brendan died around 580 in his monastery at Clonfert, surrounded by the monks to whom he had recounted at such length the "wonders and marvels God had deigned to show him in the course of his long voyage". Having settled all the details of his succession and received the comfort of the holy sacraments, he slipped away from his disciples and ascended to the glory of the Lord.

THE SEA WOLVES

In 787 the great Roman Empire was still divided and the rulers of the two poles of Christianity were trying to unite it, each to his own advantage. Charlemagne, master in the West, sent his victorious armies everywhere, trying to impose a rudimentary, authoritarian Christianity on rebellious peoples by force. He was driven by a burning faith which left no room for compromise, but at the same time, being a subtle politician, he saw this as a way to gather around him peoples who had once been dispersed and would now be united by a common faith.

At Constantinople, the same dream was being pursued, but there by a woman. Empress Irene combined Greek subtlety, Byzantine resourcefulness, and burning ambition. This intelligent woman, who had been brought up on Platonism, was nevertheless despotic, proud, and passionate. She could be charming, obstinate, and devious, and delighted to be at the heart of intrigues of her own making. Her desire was to fulfill the old Constantinian dream and restore the unity of the Roman Empire under the aegis of Constantinople. Having failed the previous year to end the iconoclastic controversy, she turned her energies to preparing a council at Nicaea, where she was sure to triumph.

Further east, in Baghdad, the mysterious capital of the Orient, a magnificent, powerful and enlightened sovereign, Harun al-Rashid, reigned as the fifth Abbassid Caliph. For over 20 years this subtle man of encyclopedic learning managed to combine the glory of arms and the delicacy of the arts. He is revered to this day as a symbol of balance and culture.

This was the great age, when the Western and Mediterranean world was beginning to take shape amidst diverse cultures and beliefs; an age rich in exceptional personalities who have left their indelible mark on our civilizations.

It was then, according to *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, that there appeared on the English coasts three long ships with proud, curled swan-necks, maneuverable Viking ships from Hordaland. Beadheard, the king's equerry, came from Dorchester, the capital of the region where they landed, to welcome them in the name of his lord. Alas! the next instant he lay on the ground, his skull shattered by an axe blow. This was the first appearance of the sea wolves and a sad and bloody appearance it was: six years later, on 8 June 793, the Vikings at-

tacked Lindisfarne. They massacred the monks, sacked the priory and disappeared over the horizon in their boats beneath a sky aglow with fire. The learned Irishman, Alcuin, one of Charlemagne's most trusted advisors, wrote expressing his horror to King Aethelred in Northumbria: "Great Britain has never known such terror nor suffered so horribly at pagan hands. Saint Cuthbert's sanctuary was desecrated and the blood of the monks spilled on the altars. In the temple of God the tombs of the Saints were trampled on. Nothing remains of this house of hope save desolation and blackened walls."

But this was only the beginning: one year later, in 794, the monastery at Jarrow was sacked. Then came Iona in 795. No place was safe from the sinister fleets, and in 799, less than a year before Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor, they ravaged Aquitaine. The violent and bloody Vikings (Fig. 2) burst on to the historical scene at the beginning of the ninth century and for more than 300 years left in their wake misery, destruction, burnt-out ruins, and the charred bodies of their innocent victims. All Christendom was filled with consternation and tried to resist or negotiate, but often in vain. In monasteries and towns the same prayer was repeated each evening: "A furore Normannorum Libera nos Domine!" (from the fury of the Norsemen, O Lord, deliver us!).

But these wild, merciless, restless warriors were not crude barbarians — even their violence was part of the Norse tradition of bellicose, aggressive independence.

The Scandinavian hero, as seen through the heroic sagas and the epic poetry of the bards, is a man of noble descent, always precocious, gifted from childhood with uncommon physical strength and possessing a strong personality. In his early youth he goes overseas to fight, holds populations to ransom and pillages the countries of the South. But, on the way, he also visits foreign courts where he dazzles everyone with his brilliance. He is violent and given to bursts of mad rage, but he always triumphs over adversity by his courage, and when in danger, or at the approach of death, bears himself heroically. Here is how a future king of Norway, Harald Hardrade, described himself at Constantinople when seeking the hand of the fair Yelisaveta (Elizabeth), princess of Kiev:

I know how to brew Odin's favourite beer, I am a skillful horseman and an excellent swimmer. I understand runes and I can read. I am also familiar with the gentle art of the harp, with hunting, games, the handling of oars, woodwork, the use of skis on snow, and the daily practice of poetry.

The art of runes, like that of poetry, was of considerable importance in Scandinavian society. When a Viking cut runic characters in stone or wood, he was doing more than simply writing a message; he was performing an act of incantatory magic. Poets moved in court circles, and certain privileged bards lived on intimate terms with princes and had the job of extolling their deeds and giving an epic dimension to their policies and feats of arms, so that they might be handed down from generation to generation. In their heroic poems, sometimes opaque and weighted down with long, tangled sentences, the bards expressed the feelings and actions of their heroes, happily blending the exploits of gods and men and weaving

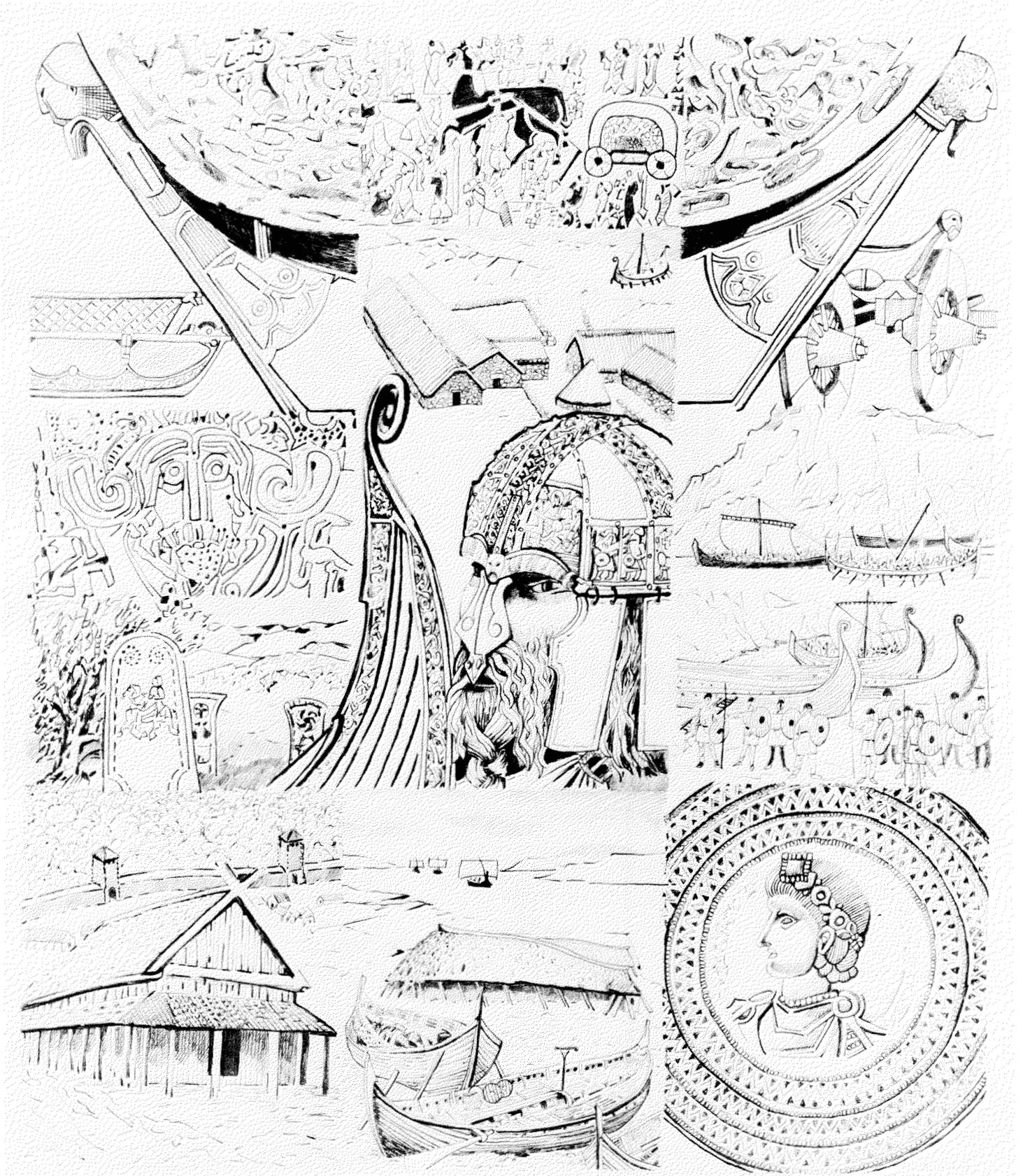


FIG. 2. The Viking Days (original etching by Brigitte Courme).

together descriptions of earthly kingdoms and timeless paradises.

When a Scandinavian hero died in battle, he entered Odin's kingdom in triumph, where, in the company of Asas, he revelled in eternal joy of banquets and beer orgies, interspersed with overflowing bumpers of mead poured by voluptuous Valkyries. Powerful, free, cruel, and generous, the Vikings lived in a world dominated by a pantheon of primary and secondary gods in perpetual struggle with one another, who played with the destiny of men in the company of a crowd of semi-divine beings such as genii, trolls, Valkyries, and elves. It is this intense, living history that is revealed by the sagas, those amazing epic frescoes, most of which come from oral accounts and are terse to the point of obscurity, but always enlivened by a powerful inspiration exalted in the long passages of bardic poetry.

How far removed all that is from the medieval Latin world, with its turgid, often, pedantic and deliberately redundant phrases. How widely all that diverges from courtly romance and the *chanson de geste*, and how different was the Scandinavian religious understanding of the world from the Irish ideal of purity, chastity, and humility, and solitary meditation in the silence of the moor!

THE APOSTLE OF THE NORTH

This was the state of things when the North was evangelized, and it is easy to see what a task it was going to be to get the fierce Vikings to practice charity, love their neighbours, and spread sweetness around them. The Christian message was not heard in the same way throughout the Scandinavian world; each nation interpreted it in its own way. In the Germanic marches of the Empire, Charlemagne used his army to impose the Christian faith, and went so far as to proclaim that all those who refused to be baptized would be executed. This can hardly surprise us in that imperious man, who did not hesitate to write to Pope Leo III:

My task, with the help of divine protection, is to defend with arms and in all places, Christ's Holy Church against pagan invasions and attacks by the infidel and to strengthen it by a deeper knowledge of the Catholic faith. Your task, Holy Father, is to raise your hands to God, as Moses did, and pray for my soldiery!

When Witikind refused to be converted, Charlemagne put 4500 prisoners to the sword in one day. It is not surprising that conversions effected in this way were superficial, to say the least, for under the veneer of Christianity were deeply-rooted pagan practices.

However, at the beginning of the ninth century, there appeared in this violent world an enlightened man with a deep faith. His mind was bent on the salvation of men and he longed to end his life with a martyr's crown. This man was Anshaire, a Benedictine monk from the monastery of Corbie, who was set on the road to the North by his friend Ebbon, Archbishop of Rheims. In 814 Charlemagne had been succeeded by Louis the Pious, whose gentleness and deep sensitivity contrasted with his father's cold determination. His great desire was to see the Scandinavian kingdoms, and

especially Denmark and Sweden, converted to Christianity. Encouraged by the rapid conversion of King Harald of Jutland at Ingelheim, he asked Anshaire if he was willing to take on this mission. Anshaire accepted with alacrity and, till his death in 865, he travelled all over the North, using gentleness and example where force had failed. Anshaire's story is long and beautiful. His arduous task took him, burning with missionary zeal, from Germany to Denmark, then on to Sweden. All along his way, he grappled with incomprehension, violence, and failure. After one or two ephemeral successes, Anshaire went to Sweden, where he ran into Odinism in its most rigid and intolerant form. King Björn, supreme religious chief, practiced its rites in a remote temple in the middle of a sacred wood, where hung the bodies of humans and animals sacrificed to Thor, Odin, and Sicco. At the end of a perilous journey, Anshaire and his companion, Witmar, arrived at Birka on Lake Mälär, and were given permission to preach for two consecutive winters. But Viking and Christian ideals were too radically different and the preacher's voice fell on deaf ears.

Undismayed, Anshaire returned to Hamburg, where in 831 Louis the Pious had created an archbishopric whose charter was confirmed by Pope Gregory IV. He continued modest, discreet, and helpful, at the service of all; submitting to a strict discipline, he distributed his goods and income among the most needy. He was often blessed with heavenly visions and dreams, from which he drew strength for his spiritual development. He wanted to erase the bloody traces left behind by Charlemagne's armies and to convert people by winning their hearts. Unfortunately, his diocese went up in flames in 845, when Hamburg was sacked by the Danes, and he had to flee to Bremen. Nevertheless, he returned to Sweden and managed to preach at Birka once again, but with no success. He never ceased to dream of the supreme reward, the martyr's crown, but it was denied him. He never resorted to help from the secular arm, as did so many other missionaries; his only weapons were prayer, sacrifice, and example. Although he obtained very few positive results in almost 40 years of missionary work, his luminous faith, quiet heroism, and edifying life made a great impact and, in the end, had a determining effect on the spread of Christianity in the North. Nor is it surprising that soon after his death, his sanctity was recognized and the humble Benedictine missionary became Saint Anshaire, "Apostle of the North".

TURBULENT SCANDINAVIAN CHRISTIANITY

Norway developed along very different lines and adopted the Christian faith with the fiery energy that the Vikings put into everything they did. In fact, with the conversion of the rulers towards the end of the tenth century, Christianity became a state religion, taking firm root throughout the kingdom and in the most remote territories.

Actually Norway was evangelized by way of the British Isles, where the terrible Norsemen had managed to establish settlements here and there. Once the clergy had tamed the passions of the Celts and Saxons, they began to lay siege to the citadel of Odin. But this was an uphill task, as all too often the

Vikings would stop at the *Prima Signatio* and go no further. What they enjoyed was the baptism service, when they put on beautiful white robes, and they did not hesitate to go through it again and again. But when they finally did adopt Christianity, they became its most ardent defenders because it suited their authoritarian character to put their trust in a single all-powerful God, though they still kept traces of Odinist practices. This is why, in the British Isles — particularly in the Isle of Man — there are wayside shrines incorporating the crucifixion of Christ along with the punishment of Loki, and it is not unusual to find models of the Christian Cross and the hammer of Thor side by side.

The story of Haakon I the Good, king of Norway in the middle of the tenth century, is a case in point. He was brought up and baptized in Great Britain at the court of Athelstan, and on returning to Trondelag in 933, he immediately sent for priests and a bishop. In an attempt to assimilate Odinism into Christianity, he moved the feast of Jul (Yule) to 25 December, and in 950 suggested to the Frosta Thing that the Christian faith should be officially introduced. The *bønder* (the ruling barons) listened to these new ideas with interest, but violently opposed the introduction of rest on Sunday and fasting on Friday. Despite the strong support of Sigurd Jarl of Hlade, Haakon could not get Christianity accepted and had to give in to the *bønder* on many occasions. Numerous plots were hatched against him and he even found himself opposing his own nephews, the sons of Eric I — Eric of the Bloody Axe — in a battle against Harald Grafeldr at Stord. There is a vivid description in the sagas of Haakon the Good fighting valiantly while all around him arrows and javelins flew like snowflakes in a tempest. "If I survive," said the king, "I shall go and do penance in a Christian land." But fate had decreed otherwise, for Haakon died on the battlefield, his heart pierced by an arrow. After his death, the bard Eyvind Finnsson composed this poem, in which all the old Scandinavian beliefs come to the fore, making it a strange epitaph for a Christian king:

In the hall of Odin there is an empty place for the King of the race of Yngve, and the prince of the Asas said in a loud voice: "Go, Valkyries, go angels of death, to the desolate place soaked in blood of battle, go and say to the dying Haakon that Valhalla shall be his abode.

Haakon, the cause of the gods has triumphed, and henceforth you shall dwell in the hall of Odin, for, if you die, the battle is won. Don't you hear the cry of the fleeing rebels? This is our day, when the king of the Norsemen, dripping with blood, shall enter Valhalla.

Oh happy day, when men like him are born, gallant men, who disdaining common things, die at dawn and win endless renown'...

The time may not have been ripe and perhaps the king had been lacking in determination, but there were no hesitations when Olav I Trygvesson, the grandson of Harald Haarfager, the unifier of Norway, succeeded to the throne. He was baptized in the Isles of Scilly, and after a long stay at the court of Aethelred II in Dublin, continued his education in England. His convictions and his methods of evangelization were equally firm. On his way back to Norway, he stopped in the Orkneys where he baptized Jarl Sigurd Lodvisson by threatening him with immediate execution. As soon as he set foot on his

native soil, Olav had a solemn mass celebrated by the Saxon bishop Sigurd, who accompanied him, after which he set out to carry his rough-and-ready faith to the north of Trondelag. Such were his prestige and power that all bowed to his will. When, in 996, he founded Nidaros, which was to become the great See of the North, he, too, had to confront the *bønder* at the Frosta Thing, but his speech was much more convincing than that of his unfortunate predecessor, Haakon the Good. He offered the barons a simple choice: either they were baptized, or they "offered" themselves as human sacrifice for the feast of "*blot*". On the feast day itself, in January 998, the king went still further: he broke the idols, and when Jern Iron-Beard (Jern Skiaegge), the chief *bønder*, protested, Olav killed him on the spot. He tolerated no opposition, and his missionary zeal had all the violence and inflexible cruelty of the Vikings. Eyvind Kinnrif perished at his hand with burning coals in his guts, and Raud the Strong was devoured by a snake which was forced into his mouth. Both had refused to be converted.

And yet, Olav's court was brilliant and he entertained with traditional Scandinavian hospitality. As always, the bards and Icelandic writers received a particularly warm welcome, for it was well known that beautiful poetry was worth more than a grand estate, and that an ironic verse was more dangerous than the bite of a serpent.

In the summer of 999, Leif Ericsson, one of Olav's distant subjects, arrived in Trondheim from the new colony of "Green Land" across the treacherous waters of the North Atlantic. Old Eric the Red, who had remained a staunch Odinist, thought it would be useful for his son to acquire some of the refined and varied education that one got in the company of princes. This was, in fact, a very old Norse tradition mentioned in *The King's Mirror*. After being received with extreme courtesy, Leif was baptized and spent the winter at court.

In the spring of 1000, laden with presents, he steered west to Greenland. The winds carried him off course and so, nearly five centuries before Christopher Columbus, Leif Ericsson, the discoverer of Vinland, became Leif "the Lucky".

In that same year many strange events took place in Christendom. In Rome, Otto III, the visionary Roman Emperor, was trying to revive the splendours of the Caesars in his Aventine Palace. Sylvester II, the French mystic Gerbert d'Aurillac, occupied the papal throne, and Charlemagne's secret tomb at Aix-la-Chapelle was found. The Emperor's body, sitting up on its golden chair, was miraculously preserved and struck terror into all Christian hearts. At the same time, thousands of miles away, the Icelandic high assembly, the Althing, officially adopted Christianity. A new era had dawned for the northern Mission, but Olav Trygvesson was not to see the spread of his policies in Norway because Sven Forkbeard, King of Denmark, King Olaf of Sweden, and Count Eric had united against him and forced him to fight. In the best Viking tradition, the battle took place at sea, near the Isle of Svold. The conspirators had assembled a huge fleet and many people advised Olav to take to the high seas, but he scornfully rejected the idea, saying: "Lower the sails, my life is in God's hands. I have never fled from battle," and he prepared for the fray. The battle was cruel; many men fell under a

hail of arrows. Olav stood in the midst of it urging on his men, but there were too many of the enemy and they soon overcame the last of the king's guards. Then, holding his weapons aloft, Olav uttered a great cry, leapt into the fjord, and disappeared forever. That is how the saga describes the death of this Christian Viking, but some legends relate that the king managed to escape the carnage by swimming a long way underwater, and ended his days in a Sinai monastery in the Holy Land.

THE DIOCESE OF ICE

The winter of 1188 in Iceland was not quite like other winters. For the first time, there were three prelates gathered there: the bishops of Skalaholt and Holar and the new bishop of Greenland, Jon Smyrill Arnason, whom Archbishop Eysteinn of Nidaros had consecrated just a few days before he died. The bishop had stopped there for a few months on the long journey to his diocese of Gardar. He had to wait for summer to unlock the formidable barrier of pack ice at the mouth of the Greenland fjords, and he used the time to talk "wisely and privately" with his fellow bishops, Brandr Saemundarson and Thorlakk Thorhallsson. It was probably towards the beginning of August that Jon Smyrill, after several weeks at sea, came within sight of the Greenland coast and was at once struck by its majestic grandeur. High jagged mountains stood out against the pale northern sky. On their steep sides lay white patches of névés and gigantic blue glacier tongues bristling with ice pinnacles. In the background rose the vague mass of the icecap, its immaculate dome pierced here and there by the black peaks of coastal nunataks, merging into a sky which stretched into infinity. The blue-black waters were thronged with thousands of drifting ice floes, which seemed to escort

majestic icebergs whose shimmering sides reared high out of the sea. A strange silence engulfed everything, broken only by the occasional harsh cry of the seabirds or the dull, echoing growl of a great iceberg rolling over and breaking up in the current.

The bishop still had three days at sea — possibly a week — before his boat reached Cape Farvel, to the west of which was the narrow mouth of the fjords that penetrated deep into the coast for hundreds of miles. Propelled by wind and oar, Jon headed north to Gardar, right at the end of Einar fjord on a narrow isthmus leading to Eric fjord. The episcopal estate, with its thatched, grey stone buildings, was situated on a grassy plain; behind it steep hills stretched south to a crater lake. The land had been carefully irrigated and the bishop's sheep and cattle were grazing peacefully in great fields full of colourful flowers. In the middle stood the cathedral of Saint Nicholas (Fig. 3), built in 1126 for Arnald, the first bishop. It was a fine church with thick walls and a wide nave with wooden pillars, well lit by high windows, and was as big as the church at Nidaros. Around it in the graveyard lay the departed faithful, segregated according to ancient custom — the men on one side, the women on the other — all with their heads to the east. A paved walk led from the church to the residence, a large dwelling of no fewer than 14 rooms, including a great hall more than 16 m long. Further on was the farm with its barns, sheep-folds, and long underground stables, carefully insulated with peat, where during winter the cows, huddled together between shale slabs, survived arctic temperatures unharmed.

The "Diocese of Ice" certainly presented a surprising picture at the beginning of the twelfth century, and when Jon



FIG. 3. St. Nicholas Cathedral in Gardar (now Igaliko, in southern Greenland). Photo: L. Rey; reprinted with permission from Flammarion, Paris.

Smyrill, now Jon II, arrived to take it over, he immediately fell under the spell of its serene beauty. Here he would hold everything in his hands. As both judge and pastor, he would embody spiritual and temporal power in this attractive community. He knew that he had only himself to rely on. And yet he still thought of Rome, of the Holy Land, where, in 1189, the three greatest Western kings were making their way with tens of thousands of knights and men-at-arms. Philippe-Auguste, Richard Lion-Heart, and Frederick Barbarossa had gone there to fight Saladin for control of the Holy Places, but they ran into many difficulties. Frederick Barbarossa drowned trying to cross a river on horseback and his army, discouraged, decimated by sickness, and overcome by heat and exhaustion, gradually broke up.

In faraway Greenland, life flowed timelessly on according to the rhythms of the seasons. When, at the beginning of autumn, the old folk saw the surface of the fjord freeze over and the first whirling flakes of snow, they knew they were in for a long, hard winter. Cut off in the Arctic night, shut up in their houses buried deep in the snow, they prepared to weather the storm, and when at its height the very walls shook, the inhabitants of Gardar gathered round their pastor and prayed to the God in whom they trusted. Although lost on the edge of the inhabited world, they remained an integral part of the Christian community, joined to it by the tenuous thread of faith, hope, and prayer. They knew that their bishop was their permanent link with the universal church.

During his ministry in Gardar, Jon Smyrill went to Rome. It is easy to imagine what an undertaking such a journey must have been in the twelfth century. Although he was glad to revisit Iceland on two occasions — to see his Western colleagues again and to meet the highest church dignitaries from Rome — the call of the North took him back to Gardar, to his own people. This great priest — quiet, intelligent, and generous — served his flock in Gardar for 22 years and died there in 1209. He was buried in the north chapel in his robes (Fig. 4), his gold ring on his finger and his wooden crozier, tipped with a delicately carved walrus tusk, held to his breast. He still lies there today, eight centuries later, a symbol of the attachment of a pastor to his flock.

Gardar had 14 more bishops after Jon Smyrill, but the last ones were only "*in partibus*", for as the climate grew harsher and Greenland became increasingly cut off from Scandinavia, the colony dwindled and finally disappeared. How sad and tragic is the story of these Christians at the "end of the world", imprisoned in the ice, abandoned by all, left alone without support or hope, and confronted by the formidable grip of the polar cold. No one bothered about them; the Black Death had ravaged the ports of Europe, the Hanseatic League controlled maritime trade, and long sea voyages had become a royal privilege. Although the former chancellor of Denmark, Erik Walkendorff — who had become Archbishop of Nidaros — thought of re-establishing contact with his distant Greenland suffragan, he lacked the men and means to do so; he then had to go to Rome to seek help against his former pupil, King Christian II, who had become a cruel despot; while there, he died.



FIG. 4. A medieval bishop in ceremonial dress. (Arnماغnean Collection, Copenhagen.) Reprinted with permission from Flammarion, Paris.

Meanwhile, in the solitude of the great North, the lights were going out one by one and nobody seemed to notice. So it is all the more surprising that at the beginning of the Renaissance, a voice from Rome — that of Nicholas V, the learned Pope who founded the Vatican Library — should speak out loudly. In 1448, worried about the fate of the faithful at Gardar and receiving no reply from Nidaros, where mild disorder prevailed, he wrote directly to the Icelandic bishops, ordering them to go to the aid of their Greenland brethren. His wonderful apostolic letters (Appendix A) are still in the Secret Archives of the Vatican. His request, unfortunately, went unheeded because the Icelanders remembered nothing, and the Greenland Christians were forgotten for another 50 years, till Alexander VI tried again to send them help.

His concise, moving brief, "*Cum ut accepimus*" (Appendix B), also preserved in the Secret Archives of the Vatican, shows how well informed the Pope was about the difficult living conditions in the far North. However, nothing came of this Pontiff's letter either, for out there on the edge of the great white blizzard-swept desert, "Gardar, the Diocese of Ice" had fallen asleep forever in the arctic silence.

APPENDIX A

Nicholas V EX INIUNCTO 20th September 1448

Apostolic letters from Nicholas V (1447-1455) addressed to the bishops of Skalholt and Holar in Iceland, the metropolitan of Drontheim in Norway being absent, enjoining them to verify information about the lamentable state of the Church in Greenland and conferring on them powers to institute priests, vicars and a bishop there.

It is incumbent upon Us in view of the apostolic duty entrusted to Us to watch over the whole Church. Faithful to the call of Our Lord to surround with Our concern the souls of those redeemed by His precious blood, We are now exerting Ourselves to bring peace and tranquillity again to those churches too often buffeted by the tempests of impiety and error and more especially to those which have been assailed by the convulsions and painful torments of persecution.

To wit, concerning Our dear sons, native dwellers and settlers in the island of Greenland (situated We are told at the extreme limits of the Ocean, in the region north of the Kingdom of Norway in the ecclesiastical see of Nidaros) a pitiful lament has come to Our ears and thrown bitterness into Our heart:

in this island the inhabitants and indigenous peoples have, for nearly 600 years, preserved their faith in Christ (received through the teaching of His glorious and blessed apostle King Olaf) according to the laws of the Holy Roman Church and the Apostolic See;

throughout the years numerous sacred edifices and a notable cathedral have been erected by the fervent piety of the peoples of this island;

Divine service was regularly celebrated until (according to the will of Him who in His wisdom and hidden purposes chastizes and chastens by temporal reverses those whom He loves, to purify them) thirty years ago, when barbaric pagans came by sea from the neighbouring coasts and invaded the country, bringing low all the people established in this island with their bloody aggression, devastating their native land and its sacred edifices by fire and the sword until there was nothing left in this island (which is said to be very extensive) but nine parish churches difficult of access to the raiders because of the steepness of the mountains. The unfortunate indigenous people, men and women, particularly those who looked strong and fit enough to withstand the yoke of slavery were deported into captivity in their own regions, as if they were under the sway of this tyrannical power.

To continue the same lamentation, after a number of years a good many of the native inhabitants returned to their country and having rebuilt their ruined villages they were then desirous of reestablishing divine worship as in the past and even of augmenting it if possible. However, the effect of the calamity which had befallen them was such that they suffered want and famine themselves to such a degree that they were unable to supply the needs of a few priests or a bishop; they have therefore been deprived of the ministry of priests and a bishop for the last thirty years except in one or two instances where those, desirous of taking part in Divine worship, have undertaken a long and arduous journey and succeeded in reaching one of the churches left intact by the barbarians. They have therefore sent Us a humble petition asking Us to come to their aid and to look upon their salutary plea for help with a paternal eye that in Our charity and with the grace of the Apostolic See We should fill the spiritual void in which they find themselves.

Touched as We are by these just and worthy requests and by the desires expressed by the indigenous people and the general inhabitants of this island of Greenland nevertheless We do not have at Our command sufficient information about the described situation. We are therefore asking for your fraternal help:

In the event that both of you or one of you decide that the grounds of their plea is well founded after mature perusal of the information provided and that the number and resources of the inhabitants and native

peoples are in a sufficiently good state to warrant carrying out their wishes We give you, who are the nearest bishops to the above mentioned island, the authority to ordain suitable worthy priests, to appoint pastors and to install rectors able to govern the rebuilt parishes and churches and to administer the sacraments.

If, in addition, it seems opportune to one or both of you, having taken the advice (distance permitting) of your metropolitan bishop on this point, to give them a bishop in the person of an upright and able man in communion with Us and the Holy See,

We invest one or both of you with the authority to consecrate a bishop in Our name and following the usual practices of the Church to confer on him the spiritual and temporal government in his charge, provided he has taken the oath of fidelity to Us and the Holy Roman Church.

We entrust you with all this in conscience and We grant to both or one of you full and unconfined papal authority according to the terms of the present disposition and We derogate, if need be, any law to the contrary even if promulgated by the Papal See or the General Synod.

Written at Rome, near to Saint Pudencienne, in the year 1448, the 12th calends of October, in the 2nd year of Our Pontificate.

— Without charge, at the demand of His Holiness —

A.S.V. Reg. Vat: Nicolai V, vol. 407, fol. 251 v. and 252 r.

APPENDIX B

Alexander VI At the beginning of his pontificate (1492-1493)
CUM UT ACCEPIMUS

A brief from Alexander VIth (8.1492 - 18.8.1503) to the Chancellery and Apostolic Chamber instructing them to issue, on the grounds of poverty, free of charge and without argument, the Papal bull nominating to the bishopric of Gardar, one Mathias Knutsson a Benedictine monk, already promoted to this same bishopric by Innocent VIIIth (9.1484 - 25.7.1492).

We have heard that in the church of Gad (Gardar) situated in the country of Greenland at the ends of the world, the inhabitants, being short of bread, wine and oil, are accustomed to feed themselves on dried fish and milk produce; in addition, because of the rarity of communication with this land, navigation being hindered by the thick freezing of the waters, it is believed that no ship has called there for eighty years for it is considered only possible of access in the month of August when the ice has melted. This being so it is also thought that no bishop or priest has dwelled in this country for about the last eighty years. The absence of Catholic priests has alas resulted in most of the parishioners, formerly Catholic, repudiating the baptism they had received. It is said that a communion cloth on which the last surviving priest in the country consecrated the Body of Christ, over a hundred years ago (and which is presented to the faithful once a year) is the last witness to Christian worship.

Taking this and other information into account, Our predecessor of happy memory Pope Innocent VIIIth, having decided to appoint a capable and efficient head to this episcopal see deprived of a pastor, on the advice of his councillors (of which We were one) chose and instituted as Bishop of Gad (Gardar) Our venerable brother Mathias, a professed monk in the order of St. Benedict. We were then but a member of the lower orders and We insisted that this nomination should become effective, knowing that Our brother is filled with a burning zeal to lead back to the path of eternal salvation all those who have strayed, that he is impatient to root out the errors of the recreants and that he is ready to affront the dangers of the journey even at the expense of his life.

We wholeheartedly approve of his praiseworthy determination and desire to alleviate a little the extreme destitution from which it has come to Our notice that he suffers.

For this reason, on Our own initiative and sure of Our knowledge of the facts, having listened to the counsel of Our brethren and obtained their consent, We order Our dear sons the reporters, copiers, promoters, keepers of the seals, archivists and other officials of the Chancellery and Apostolic Chamber to send without charge, tax or due, under pain of excommunication if this is disregarded, to the bishop designated above, all the apostolic letters concerning his promotion to the church at Gad (Gardar): all such letters should reach him entirely free, without question. The same terms are to apply to the clerks and notaries of the Apostolic Chamber who are to register and send the letters and bulls of office to the designated bishop without levying a tax or claiming any payment for their services.

— (This decree is) to be sent free in view of the extreme poverty of the recipient. —

Written...(1st year)

A.S.V. Fonds Alexander VI, Div., Arm. 29, vol. 50, fol. 23 and 24.

NOTES

Anschaire is also spelled Anskar, Anschar, Ansgarius. . . .
Eyvind Finnsson is also called Eyvind Skaldaspillr.

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