Nordic Strategies in Missionary Times

The Case of the Runestones[1]

Henrik Williams

The Europeanization of the western part of the Baltic rim begins in earnest as early as the Viking period. From ca. 800–1100 AD, Scandinavia goes through a number of highly important changes resulting from intensified contact with continental Europe, the most significant of which is the introduction of Christianity. Denmark is traditionally considered to have been Christianized by Haraldr Bluetooth Gormsson in the 960s and Norway somewhat later. Iceland's conversion occurs around the year 1000, but Sweden lags behind. Although parts of southern Sweden were Christianized in the tenth century, the central parts of the most important province, Uppland, are believed to have stayed predominantly pagan until the end of the 11th century.

Was there clash or compromise when Christian culture met Old Scandinavian? The question has been hard to answer, due to the lack of historical sources. Documents from the medieval Catholic church relating to missionary efforts in north-western Europe are generally scarce. In the case of Sweden we have a couple of papal letters from around 1080 as our first official evidence. Apart from this there are really only three historical sources relating to the Viking period of Sweden: the *vita* of the German missionary Ansgar, the history of Adam of Bremen, and, finally, information in Old West Scandinavian literature, but this latter source is sparse and often of a more fantastical than historical nature: the Norwegians and Icelanders obviously considered Swedes to be uncultured ruffians, still wallowing in heathen passions.

Given the scarcity of material, it is strange indeed that the only existing original documents from Sweden itself, contemporary with the missionary period, have been largely ignored. I am referring here to the runic texts on rocks, boulders or cliffs that were commissioned as memorials to deceased persons. We know of almost 3 000 of these runestones from present-day Sweden. More than 90% date from the very key century of the conversion, and about two-thirds come from the central part of Sweden, around Lake Mälaren, where the most intriguing Christianization process took place.

It is evident that Christianization was a slow process, affecting organisation first and mentality only gradually. Conflicts with the older system and the Old Norse religion seem to have been rare and not of a brutal nature. Little if any evidence points to violent conflict between the old cult and the new faith. There is more tangible evidence of a co-habitation of the two systems. This

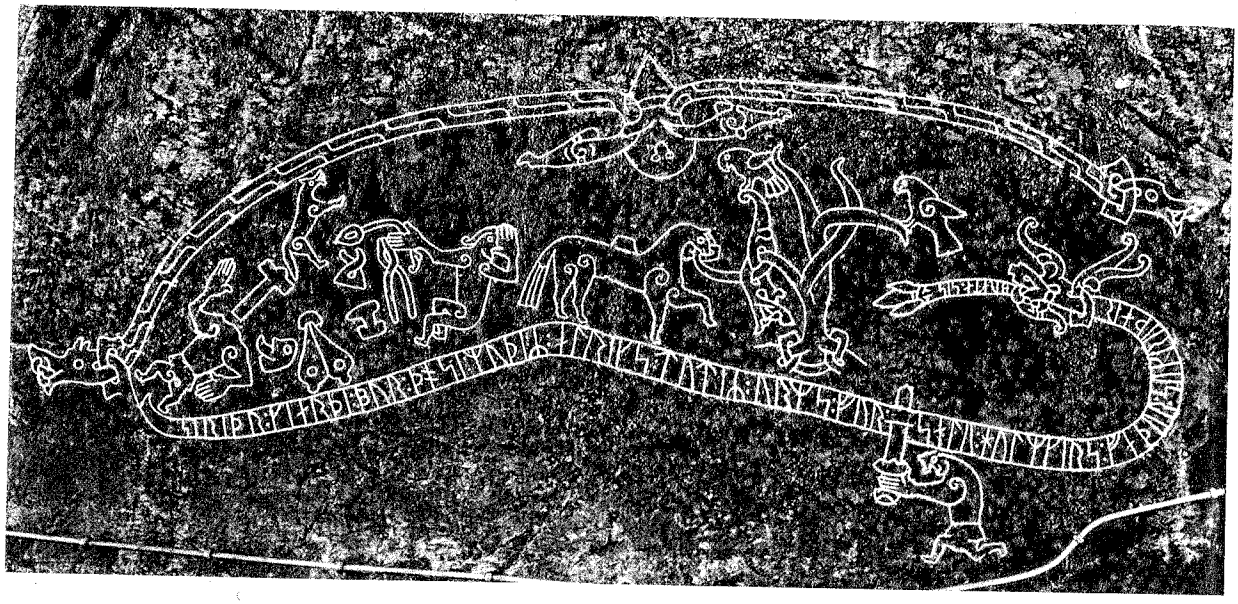

Fig. 1. The cliff at Ramsundet (Sö 101)

state may have been uncomfortable but it was not necessarily bloody.

If this is so, why have scholars associated conversion with hostilities? One reason may be that later Christian writers stress pagan antagonism to enhance the heroism of Christian missionaries. Some scholars have obviously felt the two systems to be so different and the demands of at least Christianity so uncompromising that conflicts simply had to ensue. Yet the evidence of the runic texts does nothing to support such a view. On the contrary, these texts tend to show the very opposite.

Runestones are in general memorials, more than 95% of them being introduced with the statement: 'so-and-so erected the stone in memory of so-and-so, her/his relative'. Many runestone inscriptions stop here. Others may briefly tell of where the death occurred and who carved the stone, and, quite frequently, include a prayer for the soul of the deceased person. There are hundreds of such prayers, always Christian, and even more common is the presence of a cross, often handsomely elaborated and a part of the general runestone design with its slithering snakes and other runic animals. Apart from ornamentation with crosses and the inclusion of prayers for the dead, there are several other ways in which the runestones reveal themselves to be predominantly Christian. There is Christian figurative art, there are statements regarding churches and related matters, there is the fact that runestones are sometimes placed in or close to church buildings, there is the occurrence of Christian terms and expressions, and lastly there is the existence of Christian personal names.

But the number of these Christian names in runic Swedish is extremely small. In fact we only have 5 Christian names out of well over 1 000 different personal names. Yet in the standard handbook on Old Norse personal names we can find the following sweeping statement:[2]

'The Old Norse names were intimately tied to the old religion. They were, so to speak, impregnated with paganism. That is why the champions of Christianity had to combat and exterminate them with all their power, as well as all other pagan witchcraft.'[3]

The fact that there are no signs of any such war of extermination has not worried the proponents of the heathen nature of Old Norse personal names. There is, however, no reason to believe that the Old Norse names were considered pagan. The misunderstanding is due to the preconception that the runic Swedish names had something to do with the Old Norse religion.

Most people simply kept their traditional names when Christianity arrived. As in Germany and England, it took half a millennium for Christian names to outweigh the old names. This eventually happened because both traditions share the same custom of naming people after dead relatives.

If the Old Norse names really had been considered pagan we would surely not have expected well-known Christians to bear them. The pious Danish Bishop Odinkar did not change his name, even though this name has (erroneously) been thought to mean 'dear to the pagan god Odin'. The diocese of Odense takes its name from the place name *Odhins-vi* 'the holy place of Odin' and there are many examples of names in Sweden such as *Torsåker* (the field of Thor) and *Fröslunda* (the grove of Freyr) in the modern language that still clearly signify cultic sites of pagan gods. Some of these place names also became names of the church situated there, and later the name of the parish or entire county.

Thus, it is quite clear that some important pre-Christian Swedish traditions were not seen as conflicting with the new creed. On the contrary, there are even indications that the missionaries did not need to fight native culture, but rather used it to make a new point. I am talking about seemingly pagan elements in runestone pictorial art.

Fig. 2. The runestone at Västerljung church (Sö 40)

There are a number of runestone pictures of clearly non-Christian origin. I would like to start with the famous runic rock-carving from Ramsundet (Fig. 1) illustrating the well-known tale of Sigurd the dragon-slayer. With an almost cartoon-like technique the carver shows us in this 5-metre-wide storyboard how Sigurd kills the dragon. This motif is found on other runestones as well. Is it evidence of pagan beliefs? Well, at least the Ramsundet inscrip-

Fig. 3. The runestone at Altuna church (Up 1161)

tion gives a clear answer: it contains a runic text proclaiming that the memorial was commissioned by a woman who also made a bridge for the soul of the deceased, a clearly Christian act.

What, then, is the meaning of the Old Norse motifs? We must look at other pictures. Sometimes we find another scene connected with the legend of Sigurd, namely the death of the hero Gunnar in the snake pit, into which he was thrown with his hands tied (Fig. 2.) He managed to prolong his life for a little while by playing the harp with his toes to charm the snakes. The link between Sigurd and Gunnar is that they are both heroes of Germanic legend who have fought against evil in form of a dragon or snakes. In the Christian tradition these animals were representatives of the devil, and Sigurd and Gunnar thus derive a Christ-like character by fighting the symbols of the evil one.

This observation is borne out by a rather striking picture on an Uppland runestone (Fig. 3). In the bottom panel we can see a man in a boat with a raised hammer in one hand, a fishing-line in the other and one foot sticking out through the bottom of the boat. The line is baited with an animal head with horns and this bait is about to be swallowed by a creature with huge jaws. Now, we happen to have a story in the *Edda*, Snorri Sturluson's book about old myths, where we are told that the god Thor and a giant once went fishing for the huge serpent lying in the sea all around middle-earth. When the serpent took the bull's head used for a bait Thor put his feet against the bottom of the boat so hard that they went through. He was just about to kill the serpent with his hammer when the giant cut the fishing-line.

This motif is also known from a stone cross in England (there are also other Old Norse motifs on other English monuments), and could obviously be used on Christian memorials. The picture was simply adapted to a Christian purpose. We have somewhat later documentary evidence that the serpent of middle-earth was seen as the direct counterpart of Leviathan, a biblical symbol of the Devil. There are also sermons that show Christ himself as a fisherman fishing for the middle-earth serpent, thereby symbolically defeating Satan. This is why the early Christians in Sweden dared use a pagan deity to impress on their fellows how God saves the world from evil.

There is further evidence that the Old Norse myths were suitable vehicles for carrying the Christian message to the Vikings.

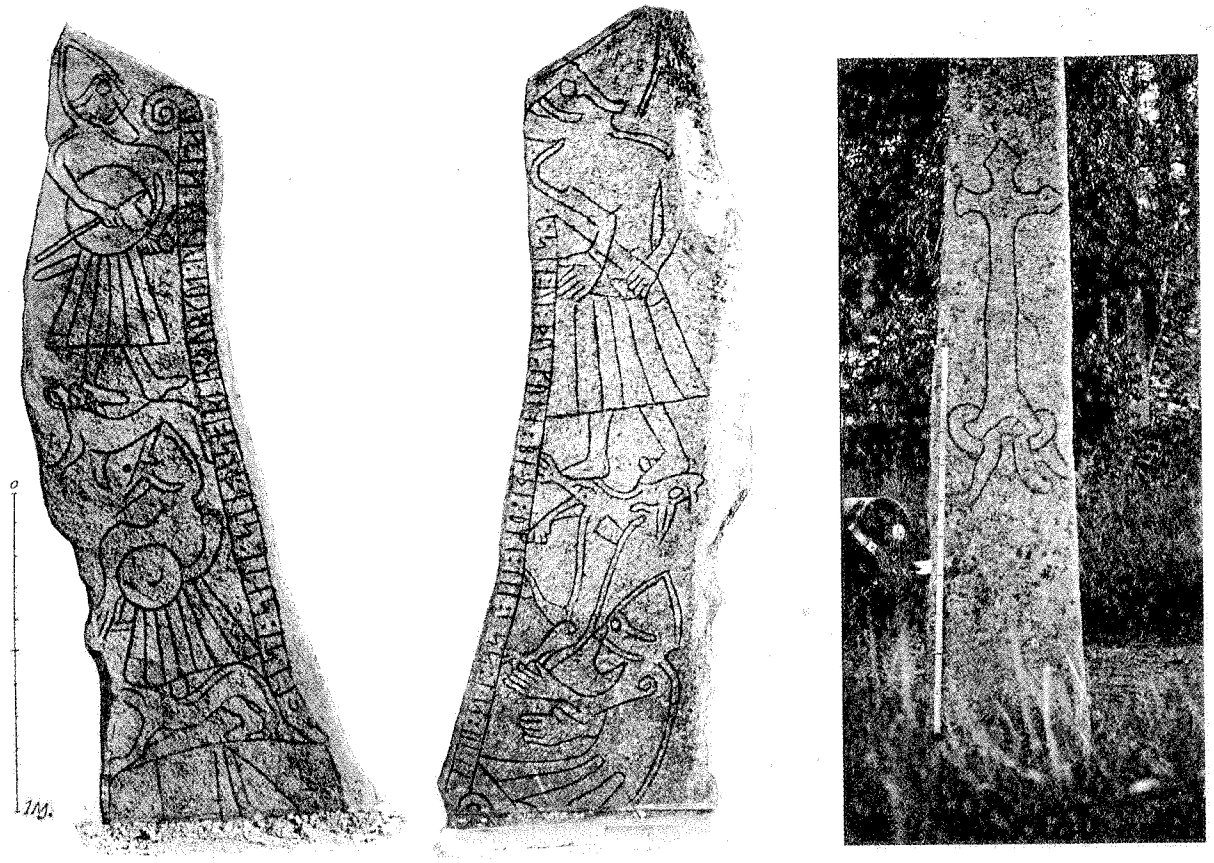

Fig. 4. The runestone at Ledberg church (Ög 181)

On a runestone at Ledberg church (Fig. 4) we find pictures on two of its sides that most likely depict scenes from the *Ragnarok*, the destruction of the world. We may interpret the ship on one side to be *Skiðblaðnir*, which sets sail at the last judgment. On the other side we see a warrior with one foot in the mouth of a canine beast, possibly Odin being bitten by the wolf *Fenrir*, but more probably Odin's son who then killed the wolf by stepping on its lower jaw and ripping the upper one.

Why must we study these scenes in a Christian context? If we look at the third side of the runestone we find a rather striking cross, which puts this monument in a Christian setting. What could be the reason for an allusion to the destruction of the world predicted in Old Norse myths on a Christian memorial? I can offer two explanations. First of all the purpose might be to remind the beholder that the end of the Old Norse pantheon was at hand, and hence it was time to embrace a new faith. Secondly it is conceivable that the destruction of the world was a 'current event' in missionary times, given the closeness of the year 1000, when the Return of Christ was due. This was certainly a Christian theme worth reminding the Swedes about. The missionaries may have taken the opportunity to preach on the Last Judgment, even though recent research gives less importance to the year 1000.

Fig. 5. The runestone at Hunnestad (Dk 284)

My final example is found among a group of related runestones from Hunnestad in the province of Scania. One of the monuments carries only a picture, that of a canine beast with a person on its back, in whose hands there are snakes (Fig. 5). Once again the *Edda* offers a means of interpretation. It tells us of the death of the mild god *Baldr*, who after dying innocent and betrayed is burned on a funeral pyre on a ship. No one present has the strength to push the ship off the shore, so a giantess called *Hyrrokkin* is summoned. She comes riding on a wolf, using adders as reins! To see a representation of this scene on the Hunnestad stone seems natural.

Again the Christian context is assured, because one of the stones in the Hunnestad group is marked with a cross. It only remains to fit the presence of *Hyrrokkin* into a Christian interpretation. I suggest that we are dealing with a scene that reminds us of the Last Judgment. *Baldr*, the most Christ-like of the Old Norse deities, is departing to the realm of death. Whether *Hyrrokkin* was used as anything more than an easily recognized reminder of *Baldr*'s death and, in extension, *Ragnarok*, is difficult to say. It may only serve the purpose of an allusion, like the cross a symbol of things to come.

The runestones show us something of what preoccupied the minds of the first generation of Europeanized Swedes. They were firmly rooted in old traditions, as is shown by the adherence to the Old Norse names, and they were perhaps more easily reached through interpretation of their old myths than through an exclusive exposure to the new.

A study of the runestones of Sweden shows a remarkable lack of conflict between the old and the new religion. This is no new discovery, but I have managed to confirm it in several ways in my own research, and it has implications for other conversion processes, in medieval Europe and else-where. We should speak less of *culture clash*, but perhaps *adaptation* is a better word than *compromise*. As anyone knows who has cohabited with another person, compromise is not always possible, but adaptation is.

Notes

1 This is an abbreviated version of Williams 1999.
2 Janzén 1947, p. 239.
3 The translation is my own.

Literature

Janzén, A. 1947. De fornsvenska personnamnen. In: A. Janzén (ed.), *Personnamn*. Nordisk kultur 7. Stockholm–Oslo–Copenhagen.

Williams, H. 1999. Runestones and the Conversion of Sweden. In: C. M. Cusack & P. Oldmeadow (eds), *This Immense Panorama. Studies in honour of Eric J. Sharpe*. Sydney Studies in Religion 2. Sydney.

The Reception of Medieval Europe in the Baltic Sea Region

Papers of the XII[th] Visby Symposium
held at Gotland University, Visby

Gotland University Press
Visby 2009

Editor: Jörn Staecker

The Project *Culture Clash or Compromise* is financed by
The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation

The costs of editing and publishing ACTA VISBYENSIA XII were defrayed by
The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation

Distribution: Gotland University Press
621 67 Visby
Sweden

The texts of the papers have been revised by Bernard Vowles (English), Detlef Kattinger and Jörn Staecker (German)

Front cover layout, production and typeset:
Gregor Julien Straube, Solveig Annukka Stratmann, Tübingen
lektorat.straube@web.de

Front cover: Detail of the graveslab No. 216, Visby cathedral

© 2009 Visby University and the individual authors
All rights reserved

This book or any part thereof must not be reproduced in any form without written permission of the publisher

ISSN: 0065-1702
ISBN: 91-973653-5-1

Printed in Sweden by Wallin & Dalholm Boktryckeri AB, Lund

C

Int

Jör

PA

De

Th

La

An

Jo

PA

Cl

Ar

Ar

Tr

Ar

ACTA VISBYENSIA XII

Visbysymposiet för historiska vetenskaper