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OLAF TRYGGVASON – REX NORWEGIAE 994-999

Christian ethics versus Teutonic heroism

The Norse sources agree that Olaf Tryggvason had been an outstanding missionary for Christianity. Besides to his home country Norway he brought the new faith to the Orkneys, Shetland, and Faroe Isles, and to Iceland and Greenland. That it was the king himself who took the initiative to the conversion was in harmony with the pagan model of the *asa* belief, in which the king would constitute the religious practise. Olaf was the third Christian king to reign over Norway. King Hakon the Good, fosterson of the English king Athelstan, was the ruler of the country for the long period 933-959. He was succeeded by his nephews, sons of Eric Bloodaxe, for the years 959-968. These rulers of Norway were also largely brought up in England and had adopted Christianity there. None of them did, however, attempt to introduce their Christian religion into their realm. During the long period 968-994 the 'state-carl' Hakon of Hlaðir ruled Norway, and he was a frenetic paganist. Olaf Tryggvason had been brought up at the Russian court, where eastern Christianity was being introduced. Here the youngster Olaf Tryggvason had most likely become acquainted with the new religion, while as a grown man he still conducted the typical life of a viking; and as such he became widely known in north-western Europe.

It was while dwelling on the British Isles that Olaf Tryggvason got inspired by the new religion of Jesus Christ. He got on friendly terms with the English king, who stood sponsor at his baptism. The new religion now became a must for Olaf, and with his considerable wealth – Danegeld and taxation – from his successful campaigns he decided to go to his fatherland Norway, hoping that the farmers at the assemblies there would be willing to cast their votes for his kingship. Olaf was the great-grandson of Harold Finehair, the founder of the Norwegian realm as a united kingdom. At the time there were not so few young men who could claim a legal inheritance to the throne as descendent of Harold Finehair. Olaf was successful, and he came to heed the Norwegian crown for five particularly important years.

For Olaf Tryggvason, kingship and Christianity went hand in hand. Not seldom did he resort to harsh means in converting his people to the right faith. Olaf's mission depended highly on English clerics who had followed him from England for that purpose. This caused the German historian Adam of Bremen to paint a malicious picture of the king in his *History of the archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*. The pope had given the archbishop here supremacy over all the Nordic peoples, and archbishop Adalbert's 'Patriarkatsplan' still held validity for the German metropolis. The Norwegian king, however, did not adhere to the policy of Hamburg-Bremen. In revenge Adam expresses doubt as to whether Olaf had been a Christian after all. The blessed king Olaf the martyr had likewise brought English bishops with him to Norway; but he did send them to the see of Hamburg-Bremen, where the archbishop received them graciously. Thus Adam attributes the christianisation of the Norwegian people to Saint Olaf.

Adam of Bremen is well informed about Olaf Tryggvason's death, his source here being the grandson of Olaf's enemy Swein Forkbeard. In Chapter XLI of Adam's second book we get a description of the naval battle, which ended with total defeat for king Olaf and his men. Adam says that after nearly all of his men had fallen Olaf met his end much befitting by throwing himself into the sea. And the next chapter begins as follows: Upon Cracaber's suicide Swein possessed two kingdoms. He then had idolatrous rites destroyed, and ordered by edict Christianity to be adopted in Norway. From these short quotations from the church

history we see that Olaf Tryggvason was *persona non grata*, being an enemy of the Danish king.

The earliest historians of the North, Sæmundr and Ari, wrote their works around 1100, more or less simultaneously with the earliest composition of Adam's church history as it is preserved today. In Icelandic works the word 'fell' seems to have been used in connection with Olaf Tryggvason's death at the end of the battle; and that word would usually imply dying in fight. Only a year or two after the battle of Svoldr Olaf's court poet Hallfreðr had made a long elegy over Olaf's death. Twice he calls the king his godfather, and the poem expresses in a most personal way deep fondness and admiration for the deceased king. Hallfreðr also says that he lost many of his closest friends who participated in the fatal battle in the south. In the latter part of the poem the skald tells that Olaf's body was missing, and this had led some people to imagine that the king must still be alive. Hallfreðr remarks that he only wished for that to be the case, but sadly enough it would be too marvelous to be true. And he ends his long poem with a typical Christian phraseological comment that the sincere Christ will keep the wise king's soul in heaven.

We seem to be confronted here with the well-known idea that great men have a sort of eternal life – they may disappear, but will return some future day. Famous is the role of Charlemagne in the minds of people in medieval times. And if there is no corpse to prove such a person's death – like in the drowning of the Maiden of Norway, or for that matter the disappearance of Adolf Hitler's last remains – then the person may go on living eternally. King Olaf jumped into the sea from his ship the Long Serpent; and the mystery is whether he has ever been seen thereafter. For an answer to this question we shall have to challenge the tales encountered in the clerical Norse sagas.

The earliest Norwegian historical work is considered to have been *Historia Norwegiae* from about 1160. Some twenty years later Theodoricus writes on the ancient Norwegian kings from Harold Finehair to Sigurd Jórðsalafari's death in 1130. And about 1190-1210 two monks in the Benedictine monastery of Þingeyri write each his own biography on Olaf Tryggvason. These four works were all written in Latin, but the two biographies were translated to Icelandic very soon after.

Historia Norwegiae is but a booklet, and it displays a considerable interest in geography and ethnography. At times one cannot help feeling that the author is describing the Norse world to people living outside it as well. He is also interested in the mythical past of the contemporary Norwegian kingship. The historical part of *Historia Norwegiae* covers the reign from Harold Finehair and until the coming of Olaf Haraldsson the martyr. The author more or less omits the years when the earls of Hlaðir ruled the country. Olaf Tryggvason is described as the king to be reckoned with as having brought Christianity to his fatherland. And the tale on him covers nearly half the saga of the rulers in historic time. Next it is told that Olaf Haraldsson continued the task of his namesake; and for that purpose he brings with him four English bishops. What may surprise the reader is the revengeful comments given here on the much-liked king Hakon, fosterson of Athelstan of England. During his long reign Hakon became popular enough to earn the cognomen 'the Good'. The author of *Historia Norwegiae* is bitter and resentful at king Hakon having abandoned his true faith and reverted to the paganism of his Norwegian ancestors. There is not even mercy for the much-liked king when the author comments on Hakon's dishonourable death by saying that "he deserved it". Still Hakon's people rewarded him with a scaldic poem displaying how well he was received in Odin's paradise of warriors.

The author of *Historia Norwegiae* displays much interest in the great naval battle where Olaf Tryggvason lost his life. The Norwegian fleet is described most minutely, especially the king's ship, the Long Serpent. Besides the warriors – all wearing armour – there were forty priests on board, as well as the queen Tyra. The third attack on what was left of the

Norwegian fleet proved fatal, and when the king was left with only a few surviving fighters he chose to throw himself into the sea; this is at any rate what people assumed, as Olaf's corpse was nowhere to be seen. But there are also those who say that Olaf had been seen in a monastery much later. The author of *Historia Norvegiae* raises, however, the question how the king should have overcome all the dangers of the sea and reached the mainland alive. And he adds that no one in his age knows whether the king had managed despite his armour to swim to the coast, or whether he had been rescued by a boat, or simply been saved by angels. All this taken into consideration, the author of the saga prefers to leave the problem unresolved. He closes his account of the battle by telling that the queen died soon after in deep grief over her husband's death.

This whole description of the last battle of the glorious king Olaf Tryggvason must seem somewhat strange to us in retrospect. For today's reader of the king's story the important thing is that Olaf had lost his kingship, and it would hardly make much difference whether he drowned in the waves at the mouth of the river Oder, or he chose to flee after the defeat to an unknown country. However, after practically all his men had fallen, no leader of renown would choose to save his own life. To his people the memory of the heroic suicide would have been honourable indeed, but to an adherent of the Christian faith a suicide would bring him the eternal abode in hell – the proper reward for a capital sin.

In the earliest Norse laws, like in the Grágás and the Gulathing law-codex, the committing of suicide is declared an exceedingly grave sin, whereby a person would forfeit his right to be buried in a churchyard. Since the times of early Christianity suicide has been criminalized even more severely than murder. According to the Bible suicide constitutes a violence against the power of God, who alone decides about life and death of every being---a fundamental idea in Christian religion up to our own time. This element in the new faith was alien to the peoples of northern Europe. In Teutonic philosophy, however, the honour and self-determination of the individual was something fundamental, and it was a person's own choice whether for example to live with shame or to die with honour. King Olaf's suicide granted him a respectful memory with his contemporaries. On the other hand, had the king chosen to fight to the bitter end and perhaps lain wounded or dead onboard the Long Serpent, it is quite possible that he might have earned the title of Sanctus, like his namesake Holy Olaf. For the church the way out to save Olaf Tryggvason from having drowned himself was to have him escape miraculously from the battle alive. That the clergy provided him with accommodation in a monastery was not so imaginative, now one had entered the time of the crusades. In *Historia Norvegiae* Olaf Haraldsson is once titled Sanctissimus, whereas Olaf Tryggvason is twice named Sanctus. To the royal missionary of Norway this was indeed a promising title, although there was in the church phraseology a clear distinction between the two titles. In the clerical world Olaf Tryggvason never reached a higher title than Sanctus, as given him only in *Historia Norvegiae*.

Around 1180 archbishop Eystein had the Benedictine monk Theodoricus write the book "*De antiquitate regum Norwagiensium*". Theodoricus was a most learned historian, who frequently cited classical literature and occasionally works from the new states of northern Europe. He is fond of Latin poetry, especially Lucan, whom he also admires dearly as a philosopher. Theodoricus often presents parallels between his homeland's past and foreign history back in time. Both of the kings Olaf carry a high prestige in this book. The author is proud of staying in Trondheim, where the remains of the holy martyr Olaf are kept. It is told in the book that after his arrival in Norway Olaf Tryggvason concentrated on bringing, with the help of God, the right faith to his people; and those who were obstinate got frightened at the king's holy wrath. Olaf laboured hard in his Lord's vineyard. Theodoricus also brings a detailed account of the great naval battle at Svoldr, where king Olaf had to fight against an army manifold bigger than his. We read in the book that when most of his men had fallen or

were seriously wounded then Olaf – according to some people – fled in a boat and went to a far-off country to seek salvation for his soul. But there are also those who say that Olaf jumped into the sea in full armour and drowned. Theodoricus will neither confirm nor reject one or the other opinion; what he likes to believe is that Olaf is now enjoying eternal peace with God. It is interesting to note Theodoricus' comment when Olaf Haraldsson has seized the young earl of Hlaðir, who declares that he is not willing to flee, but prefers to die along with his men. As readers of Theodoricus's saga we cannot but compare with the 'heroism' of Olaf Tryggvason.

Theodoricus is fully accepting the co-operation between the two Christian kings, and expresses it as follows: Holy Olaf's aim was to follow in the footsteps of the brave Olaf Tryggvason, who under God's leadership had planted and watered the Lord's vineyard. Neither in *Historia Norwegiae* nor in Theodoricus' work *De antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* is there any debasement of Olaf Tryggvason in comparison with Olaf Haraldsson; there is no trace of there having been any competition between the two in posterity. In that connection one may point to Denmark having had two holy kings Knud, and their cult was conducted by the church in a harmonious way. In Iceland the two Olafs were venerated with biographies of each of them.

During the latter part of the 12th century the monks at the monastery at Pingeyri had been writing sagas on Holy Olaf, but these are only preserved as parts of the later sagas on Olaf Haraldsson. The monks at this monastery have indeed been diligent; thus the brethren Oddr and Gunnlaugr were writing their biographies on Olaf Tryggvason while their abbot Karl Jónsson was composing a saga on the contemporary Norwegian king Sverrir Sigurdsson. In the introduction to his saga on Olaf Tryggvason, Oddr writes that he wants people to know the truth about king Olaf. Throughout his work Oddr refers to Olaf as the missionary, but he never gives him the title of Sanctus. Compared with *Historia Norwegiae* Oddr is considerably more reluctant in giving any hint of Olaf having become a Sanctus. In the prologue Oddr describes the relationship between the two namesakes Olaf by making Olaf Tryggvason represent St. John the Baptist while Olaf Haraldsson represents Jesus Christ.

Oddr begins his saga on Olaf Tryggvason by telling about Olaf's forefathers, his birth, and a most adventurous childhood. Olaf's activities as a viking are given only little attention by the author. And towards the end of the saga Oddr expresses concern as to the Lord being able to forgive Olaf for all his fighting. Oddr is hopeful, however, on account of the king's great deeds as an apostle for Norway and the countries settled from there.

At his disposal Oddr has a rich material on which to build his work; especially the scaldic poems are valuable to him. Though surely influenced by the international clerical literature, Oddr is first and foremost depending on his native Norse tradition. And towards the end of the saga, when Olaf's life is coming to a close, the author is much influenced by the vita-literature on saints, in his very long and detailed description of the king's death. The martyr literature, however, is not so prominent here as in the biographies on Olaf Haraldsson. Foreign politics and connections by marriage during Olaf's five years as king of Norway take up a lot of space in the saga. I regard such marriage relations largely as diplomatic relations within foreign politics, and not – as historians tend to view them – as fictive romantic 'sagas'. In all this, Olaf's ambitious foreign politics stands out clearly, and it is in this context that he is engaged in the great battle at Svoldr, most likely located at the mouth of the river Oder. In those days most place-names in that area were Slavonic, and the name Svoldr, otherwise unknown, for a place at a Polish river around the year 1000 should not – as it is often done – imply any obscurity of the records on this great event in Nordic history. – At the battle here Olaf Tryggvason was fighting the combined forces of the Danes, the Swedes, and the fugitive earl of Hlaðir. To the Norwegians the consequences of Olaf's crushing defeat were that

supremacy over their country was divided between the two conquering powers, represented in Norway itself by the earls of Hlaðir.

When the monk Oddr was writing on this important event in Nordic history he had scaldic poems from both sides. Of special interest are the memoirs and the poem of Skuli Þorsteinsson, grandson of Egill Skallagrímsson. Skuli was one of the leading warriors in earl Erik's troops. When the Long Serpent was finally conquered Skuli was on board accompanying Erik. Olaf is standing proudly on the elevation of his ship in a position most visible for everybody. The deck is tightly covered with fallen fighters, and Skuli bends down and moves some of the corpses lying in his way. When Skuli gets up Olaf has suddenly disappeared, and when seeking the king, earl Erik and his men find no trace of him, whether alive or dead.

Already *Historia Norwegiae* presents to its readers a similar scene, telling that towards the end of the battle one could see king Olaf against the sky, where he was standing high above in the stern of the ship; and when the battle was over he was not to be found neither alive nor dead. These tales are basically the same. Furthermore, in his saga of Olaf Tryggvason, Oddr tells that king Sverrir, when learning about this glamorous ending of Olaf's life, admits that never had he heard about such a heroic act as that of Olaf at the end of the fight on the Long Serpent. It should be noted here that Sverrir was one of the greatest warriors of his time, especially at sea in the function of an admiral. But Oddr has something to add to this well-known tale; he writes that there came a heavenly gleam of light over the elevation where Olaf was standing; and when shortly after the glare had extinguished, the king had vanished.

In this connection Oddr gives his reader a detailed account of something which *Historia Norwegiae* had already told about, namely that king Olaf as well as his warriors on the command-ship were wearing armour, and the author was contemplating as to whether Olaf had been able to swim while wearing it. Oddr offers the explanation that when he had jumped into the sea, Olaf held his shield above him under the water with one hand while using the other hand to pull off his armour. It is interesting to note that earlier in his saga Oddr has told that Olaf was an excellent swimmer, and that he at times for fun went swimming in full armour, and then as a sort of game got it off while still in the water. In view of the ending of Olaf's life one may ask if destiny was at work here, or whether this was rather Oddr's way of making posterity believe that Olaf after throwing himself into the sea from the Long Serpent had indeed been able to remove his armour while under water.

In Adam of Bremen's church history, as well as in *Historia Norwegiae*, it is told that queen Tyra was on board the Long Serpent. Adam tells us that after her husband's death Tyra spent her life miserably in hunger and want "as she deserved". Adam is merciless here to the sister of Swein Forkbeard, but his tale is in keeping with what Oddr tells about queen Tyra's destiny. We are told in the monk's saga that Tyra wanted to starve herself to death; but one of the many priests on board the Long Serpent told her that she should eat an apple, thereby evading from committing suicide and thus becoming a sinner. Tyra followed his advice, and died some ten days after her husband.

It is important to realize that in the circle around king Olaf suicide was considered a capital sin. And Adam advances the same opinion when declaring that Tyra died of starvation. — But what about king Olaf himself — was he forgiven because he had committed a heroic suicide at the battle? Three times in Oddr's saga of Olaf Tryggvason the king is cited for declaring that his men must fight to the end; and that a king fleeing a battle is no king. The two kings-sagas *Heimskringla* and *Fagrskinna* both refuse to accept that Olaf should have fled from the battle of Svoldr. Both authors find it unthinkable that king Olaf would have nearly all his men butchered and then saved himself. *Fagrskinna* says that such an accusation is a downright lie. The two sagas attach very little importance to the church and its role in Norse

society. They value traditional Teutonic heroism, and to them Olaf's flight would have been an outrageous disgrace and an indelible stain on the memory of the glorious king.

The well-known tradition of heroic suicide with the Teutones goes back to the Odinic warrior cult, with roots in younger Iron Age. Within the military profession this tradition seems to have had a long life; here are a few examples from our own time: During World War II, when the German capitulation at Stalingrad was imminent, Reichskanzler Hitler promotes Panzergeneral Paulus to field-marshal, thereby inducing him to committing a heroic suicide, in accordance with an unwritten code within the German army. But Paulus preferred Soviet captivity and thereby a Christian burial, when his time would come. Field-marshal Rommel had to choose – like Olaf Tryggvason – between committing suicide or suffering a disgraceful destiny in the hands of the enemy. Leaving Europe, the Japanese, with their Shinto religion, have maintained a long lasting tradition for heroic suicide, especially within the military.

If Olaf Tryggvason's memory should have survived within the world of warriors only, his drowning would have been most becoming. But Olaf was predestined also to play an important role within the new international institution – the church, with its ideology of peace and its new and alien concept of sin. According to Oddr, queen Tyra got saved from committing a grave sin by following a priest's advice of eating an apple. The problem of saving king Olaf from having committed the same sin was, however, vastly more intricate. The solution here must have been not to have Olaf drowning after he had thrown himself into the sea. Oddr takes advantage of Olaf having earlier been married to a daughter of the Polish duke, and now – according to Oddr – the dead wife's sister helped Olaf until he found his way to Syria, where he entered a monastery and became a sort of abbot for it. Towards the end of the saga Oddr says that there are those who have doubts as to Olaf having survived the battle of Svoldr. To such doubters Oddr wants to tell that the armour which Olaf had worn during the battle was later seen hanging in front of a church in Jerusalem; and furthermore Olaf's helmet as well as his spear had been seen there. In written sources we are told about quite a number of people having travelled to the Holy Land, but none of them seems to have contrived to find Olaf Tryggvason's grave there.

It is interesting to go also outside the Benedictine environment and see what archbishop Absalon's writer of history, Saxo, relates about Olaf Tryggvason's last battle. During this period the Norwegian archbishop Erik and most of the Norwegian bishops are staying for some years with Absalon in Lund. In the tenth book of *Gesta Danorum* Saxo tells about Olaf Tryggvason having chosen to take his own life rather than to fall into the hands of his enemies; and – Saxo continues – Olaf therefore jumped overboard in full armour, as if he was only too happy to give up his life in order to evade seeing the enemies as victors. Saxo can tell about well-known remarks exchanged by the king and his men during the last phase of the battle; these have probably been told Absalon or Saxo by their Norwegian guests.

Both *Historia Norwegiae* and Oddr write that there were many priests on board the Long Serpent, and we can assume that Oddr's knowledge of the date September 9th of king Olaf's death can be traced back to these. The battle of Svoldr has taken more than one day. It was at the end of the battle that the Norwegian fighters left the other ships and gathered on the command-ship in order to fight to the last man. Oddr brings the names of about forty men, as well as their homes in Norway. These were aristocrats, and the list of their names is not a 'mantal'. Oddr's source for this has presumably been obituary information.

In his *Íslendingabók* Ari informs us that king Olaf fell in the year 999; this is in accordance with the Icelandic abacus for year-dating, constructed on the basis of the lunar cycle and the cycle of the indiction. And we know from *Sæmundr* that Olaf was king of Norway for a period of five years. In his young days *Sæmundr* studied in France, and that was shortly after a large part of northern France had come to constitute the Anglo-Norman kingdom. There is some indication that *Sæmundr* may have known a version of the Anglo-

Saxon chronicles; these seem not to have been available otherwise to Nordic historians of the time. From this chronicle we learn that Olaf Tryggvason came to southern England with an army, and he probably took part in the battle of Maldon. In the beginning of September 993 Olaf was joined by Swein Forkbeard, and together they attacked London. It was after New Year 994 that Olaf was confirmed by the English king. Florence of Worcester writes that Olaf went home to his country in the spring after the ceremony with the English king. This dating is supported by an obituary note on archbishop Sigeric.

It has been the prevailing opinion among historians that Olaf Tryggvason did not obtain the status of saint because there was no body to place in a shrine. It is true that the majority of saints acquire their status because they died in some way as martyrs; and their corpse, or part of it, is subsequently made the object of saintly worship according to the rules and norms of the church. The need of having a human corpse to preserve is however not indispensable. St. Jacob of Compostella furnishes an example that one was able in 9th and 10th century Spain through snirklet channels to invent a saint to fit in an exclusive shrine. – The church would have been able to leave out of account the circumstance that the body of Olaf Tryggvason was not found; the real obstacle to Olaf's sanctification was his act of drowning himself voluntarily.

In spite of his great missionary achievements, Olaf Tryggvason, king of Norway 994-999, remained an unredeemed apostle for the 'Norse' peoples.

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