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HOW THE VIKINGS GOT THEIR COMEUPPANCE

“Iona’s Revenge”

by Mother Nectaria McLees

Part I: The Devastation

With all of Iona’s natural beauty, grace-filled history, and the joy of being with fellow pilgrims, a difficult moment of my first pilgrimage to the island was when I learned of the tragic destruction of this venerable monastery at the hands of cruelly rampaging Vikings.

In 563 Columba sailed to Iona from Ireland with twelve companions where he founded a monastery that would play a crucial part in spreading Christianity among the Picts and Scots. Kings were crowned and also buried on Iona, and the famous illuminated manuscript, the *Book of Kells*, was believed to have been produced here by Iona’s monks around 800.

In 806 Viking raiders massacred sixty-eight monks in Martyr’s Bay, and some of Columba’s surviving monastics returned to the Irish monastery at Kells, while others fled to the continent and established foundations in Belgium, France and Switzerland. Nineteen years later, St. Blathmac and fifteen

Opposite: Replica of a Viking sailing ship, Denmark.

monks who had returned with him to Iona were taken by surprise and martyred in a second Viking raid. This time the abbey was burned to the ground, but it was not forever left in ruins, as in 980 we read of the death and burial on Iona of Amlaib Cuaran, a Norse-Gael King of Northumbria and Dublin who had retired to the monastery. Monastery buildings were enlarged and rebuilt several times, and later both the Benedictine and Augustinian orders had foundations here. Monasticism finally came to an end on Iona at the Reformation.

Although there isn't a contemporary description of the destruction of 806, there is one describing the attack on Lindisfarne, founded by St. Columba's disciple, St. Aidan, and the account is close enough in time to give us vivid detail.

The 793 AD attack on Lindisfarne is dramatically recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*:

In this year dire forewarnings came over the land of the Northumbrians, and miserably terrified the people: these were extraordinary whirlwinds and lightnings, and fiery dragons were seen flying in the air. A great famine soon followed these omens; and soon after that, in the same year, on the sixth of the ides of Ianr, the havoc of heathen men miserably destroyed God's church on Lindisfarne, through rapine and slaughter.

A slightly more detailed description is recorded in the "History of the Church of Durham" by Monk Simeon:

On the seventh of the ides of June, they reached the church of Lindisfarne, and there they miserably ravaged and pillaged everything; they trod the holy things under their polluted feet, they dug down the altars, and plundered all the treasures of the church. Some of the brethren they slew, some they carried off with them in chains, the greater number they stripped naked, insulted, and cast out of doors, and some they drowned in the sea.

As the news spread to Charlemagne's court at Aachen, the Northumbrian-born scholar Alcuin of York wrote:

The pagans have contaminated God's shrines and spilled the blood of saints in the passage around the altar, they have laid waste the house of our consolation and in the temple of God they have trampled underfoot the bodies of the saints like dung in the street.

The attack on Lindisfarne was quickly followed by the destruction of the religious communities at Jarrow, Iona, Rathlin and Skye. "The sea heaved, vomiting up gaping prows of dread..." and hundreds, perhaps thousands, of monasteries, sketes and hermitages were to meet the same end. For the monks who survived, witnessing the desecration of these grace-filled holy places would have been its own martyrdom. The harrowing of centuries of beauty and toil: the sacred manuscripts, icons, relics, altar vessels, and monastery buildings, and the brutal murder of beloved fellow monks must have been almost impossible for those left alive to bear.

But in pondering this over the years my question became: What did this bitter harvest actually reap for the Vikings? Booty, livestock, women, slaves, and land, certainly—yet this could not only have been about the blood they shed; it also has to be about the blood that spilled on them.

Recently, quite a novel image came to mind to help me think about this. Those who are familiar with the Uncle Remus stories of the American writer Joel Chandler Harris, will certainly recognize the story of the Tar Baby, when Bre'r Fox crafted a small figure out of tar and turpentine to entrap Bre'r Rabbit. On touching it, Bre'r Rabbit found that he was stuck, and the more he struggled with the tar baby, the more entangled he became.

Now, if, as the Old Testament tell us, evil plays out to the third and fourth generations, wouldn't grace as part of God's eternal kingdom resound even longer? In fact for eternity?



Ruins of St. Lide's (Elidus) hermitage, Scilly Isles, where King Olaf Tryggvason was converted.



And might it be that when we touch holiness, whether to partake of it or to destroy it, it must somehow affix itself to us, and then it will be either an ongoing blessing, or, if we resist the blessing, an infernal nuisance.

And this, I submit, is what happened to the Vikings who raided Iona. The grace they touched with such irreverence did not leave them, but began to grow like a deep subterranean pool well beyond the third and fourth generations, until they too awoke to find themselves Christian.

Part II: Conversion

Over the next two centuries, as the Vikings raided, looted and ravaged the British coast, they were fiercely resisted and occasionally defeated. When they were beaten, the conditions of surrender dictated by the Christian victors often included the requirement that they accept baptism. Surprisingly, to our modern ears, these forced political baptisms often produced great missionary kings and chieftains. (And this is another example of the real grace of baptism, which enlightens regardless of circumstance.) In addition, chieftains might become Christian voluntarily or because of their fealty to their own baptized liege-lord, who would have them follow him into the Church. Other defeated Vikings were required to leave their sons as hostages, who were then baptized and raised in a Christian court, frequently becoming sincere and devout Christians themselves.

Haakon the Good

One of these was Haakon the Good, the son of Harald Fairhair and the third king of Norway. As a child, Haakon was sent to England to be fostered by King Athelstan as part of a peace agreement made by his father. Brought up as a Christian, he was recalled to Norway in 935 to rule.

“King Haakon was a good Christian when he came to Norway,” writes the Icelandic chronicler Snorri Sturluson in *Heimskringla* (c. 1220). “But as the whole country was heathen, with much heathenish sacrifice ... he resolved to practice his Christianity in private It was his intent, as soon as he had set himself fast in the land and had subjected the whole to his power, to introduce Christianity.” Local chieftains, however, were not so easily con-

Opposite: Saint Olaf II Haraldsson of Norway.

verted. Opposition to the change became so fierce that Haakon's rule was threatened, and without strength of arms or sufficient popularity to urge Christianity upon his people, Haakon was forced to allow the continuation of paganism. Norway's chiefs were not satisfied with this concession, however, and demanded that as a sign of good faith, Haakon also sacrifice to the Norse gods. Haakon gave way, making the sign of the Cross over the sacrifice (claiming it was Thor's hammer), but he eventually did apostasize, at least outwardly, and made frequent sacrifices to the gods.

Olaf I Tryggvason

Other Vikings, including Olaf Tryggvason who was King of Norway from 995 to 1000, were converted through contacts with holy men. According to the sagas, at three years of age, Olaf's highborn Norwegian mother had fled with him to the Orkney Islands to escape her husband's killers. The youthful Olaf, a descendent of Harald Fairhair and Haakon the Good, spent some years at the pre-Christian Varangian court of Vladimir of Novgorod (later St. Vladimir the Great of Kiev) and on his return to the British Isles, married Gytha, daughter of Amlaib Cuarán, the Viking Norse-Gael king of Dublin and Northumbria who spent his last years in religious retirement on Iona, dying in the monastery.

After Gytha's death a few years later, the pagan Olaf set out to ravage Essex, Kent, Hampshire, and Sussex and was only checked by the doughty Londoners. Landing soon after on one of the Scilly Isles, off of England's southern coast, he heard tales of a clairvoyant Christian hermit named Lide. To test him, Olaf sent one of his men, posing as himself. The hermit was not fooled and when Olaf afterwards went in person to visit him, Lide prophesied:

You will become a renowned king, and do celebrated deeds. You will bring many men to faith and baptism, both to your own and others' good; and that you might have no doubt of the truth of this answer, listen to these tokens. When you return to your people they will conspire against you, and then a battle will follow in which many of your men will fall, and you will be wounded almost to death and carried upon a shield to your ship; yet after seven days you shall recover of your wounds, and immediately you shall let yourself be baptized.

On returning to his ship, Olaf was indeed attacked by a group of mutineers, and when the hermit's prophecy of his startling recovery came to pass the Viking agreed to the English King Athelstan's offer of 16,000 pounds of silver as Danegeld tribute, under the condition that Olaf be baptized and never again return to loot England. As the hermit had predicted, Olaf was baptized by St. Alphege of Canterbury in 994, and this story is recounted in the Icelandic sagas and as local history in the Scilly Islands, where the site of St. Lide's hermitage is still shown.¹

Olaf Tryggvason's seemingly political conversion of convenience fell on such fertile ground that when he returned to Norway around 997 he set about trying to persuade his chieftains to convert as well:

From Sigrid Undset, the Nobel Prize-winning Norwegian novelist and essayist we hear:

...Olav was more than ever anxious to begin the struggle against the old gods in their stronghold of Trøndelagen [today's Trondheim]. He summoned a *Ting* [a regional assembly] and the bönder came in their full numbers fully armed. In answer to his speech they reminded him of Haakon the Good whom they had forced to abandon his attempt at conversion, and they threatened that they would do the same with Olav Tryggveson. Olav made as if he were willing to follow Haakon's example and to take part in their sacrifices at Maeren. First he invited a large number of Trøndelagen's foremost chieftains to visit him at Lade where he had taken up his abode. One morning, on his return from Mass, he called his guests together and explained that he was willing to follow the example of Haakon the Good and offer sacrifice but that it would not be slaves and malea-

¹ Now here our narrative folds itself into one of those brilliantly complex Celtic knots, the decorative motifs that embellish medieval manuscripts and stone carvings. At this time, Norway was ruled by Jarl Haakon (Sigurdsson) of Lade, (c. 975-995), a believer in the Norse gods who not only rejected the Christianity urged on him by his overlord Harald Bluetooth (c. 935-986), but was also known as a cruel, sensual ruler who ill-used women, both noble and peasant. Informed of the arrival of an exiled Irish princess and her followers who had formed a Christian exile community on a barren offshore island called Selja, the jarl gathered his troops and set out to enslave and destroy the settlement. Tradition says that when the small band saw the armed Viking ships approaching, they retreated to the island's caves and begged God to not allow them to be taken, but to grant them eternal life and to cover their bodies with a grave of falling stones. Their prayers were answered with a great landslide of boulders killing the company; Jarl Haakon and his troops searched the island, but found no one. Jarl Haakon would be succeeded by Olaf Tryggvason, Norway's first Christian king, who recovered and enshrined the relics of St. Sunniva and her company.

factors whom he would present to the gods. He had in mind a more worthy offering, namely, the chieftains of the highest rank now assembled around him. The King was in a strong position and the chiefs therefore submitted and were baptized. They were obliged to leave their sons and nearest relations in the King's power as hostages for their fidelity to their new religion...

So the King came to the sacrifices at Maeren. He went into the temple with the bönder and with one blow of his axe he shattered the image of Tor. The King's followers destroyed the other images and ... [in] this way he induced the people to be baptized. He settled down right in the middle of Tröndelagen and built a manor house where the river Nid flows into the fjord, and thus made the little seaside village into an important seaport and market town. This was the beginning of the city of Trondhjem. The first church built was dedicated to St. Clement, the martyr pope, who with an anchor as his symbol, was popular along the coast of Norway, and folks took him as the patron of sailors.²

Olaf also arranged the baptism of the young trader and colonist Leif Erikson, the first known European to set foot in North America, and after Leif's baptism Olaf sent him back to Greenland with a priest to convert the growing community of settlers led by his father, Erik the Red. Leif's own conversion was deeply rooted, and although his father appears not to have converted, Leif's mother, Thjodhild, built the first Christian church in Greenland, and thus in the New World. Archeologists have recently found remains of this church.

(And, by the way, sometime between 995 and 1000, Leif Eriksson's converted brother Thorstein and his sister-in-law, Gudrid the Far Traveler, spent two years as pioneer settlers in what is today Newfoundland, Canada. Although they were eventually driven out by hostile natives, during their stay Gudrid gave birth to the first Christian and European baby born on North American soil. She named him Snorri, and after he was grown she embarked on foot on pilgrimage to Rome, returning some years later to live a devout life on her own land, which she called, "The Farm of Merry Noise". Gudrid and Snorri's descendents became three of the earliest bishops of Iceland.

Along with Norway and Iceland, Olaf also converted the earl and people of the Orkney Islands (at that time a part of Norway), as well as the Faroes, Shetland, and Iceland. Olaf was called *Beatus* or Blessed by the early anony-

mous chronicle *Historia Norwegie* and the 12th-century Norwegian chronicler Monk Theodoric, though he is not a canonized saint in the Roman Catholic or Orthodox Church.

PART III: Weddings

This brings us to the last period I want to speak about, which shows this golden thread of heavenly grace slowly weaving in strand upon strand to conquer these strange northern peoples. This final piece centers on two Swedish princesses, stepsisters Ingegärd and Astrid, the daughters of Olof I Skötkonung, the first Christian king of Sweden.

Forced by his war-weary chieftains to espouse his daughter Ingegärd to his rival, King Olaf II Haraldsson of Norway (later canonized as Norway's St. Olaf), the Swedish Olof soon broke off the engagement and betrothed Ingegärd to his exiled guest Yaroslav (the Wise), Grand Prince of Kiev, son of St. Vladimir the Enlightener of Russia, and great-grandson of Equal-to-the-Apostles St. Olga of the Rurikid Swedish-Rus' dynasty. Yaroslav would regain his throne and bring his bride back to Kiev.

Yaroslav's Court

Ruling from what is now the Crimea in the Black Sea to Lake Ladoga in Russia's far north, Yaroslav and Ingegärd's marriage ushered in the golden age of the Rus' dynasty, and the couple presided over one of the most prosperous, cultured, learned, and pious courts of the era. As first-generation Christians (both would have been baptized with their convert fathers), they hospitably welcomed priests and missionaries, built magnificent churches, and patronized education, particularly the copying of patristic and liturgical books.

In his 1018 *Chronicles* after visiting Yaroslav's court, the Saxon bishop Titmar of Merzeburg characterized Kiev as "a great city... and ornament of the Greek world...with more than 400 churches, eight marketplaces, and an uncountable number of citizens." At this time, the population of Kiev was 50,000 while the population of London was 20,000, and Paris, after repeated invasions, was little more than a large village. The medieval German historian, Adam of Bremen, writing sixty years later, called Kiev, "...the competitor of the scepter of Constantinople, the most charming gem of Greece."

² Sigrid Undset, *Saga of Saints*, Sheed and Ward, 1934, London.

Within a short time of their Kievan wedding, however, we find Ingegärd's half-sister Astrid Olofsdotter married to her sister's former fiancé, the Norwegian king. Some accounts say this was done secretly with Ingegärd's help, though it may well have been at the instigation of their father. In any case, peace between Norway and Sweden accompanied the marital alliance, and, as we shall see, these Kievan-Swedish-Norwegian marriage ties provided decades of mutual support.

Ingegärd and Yaroslav's Progeny

We know that Ingegärd and Yaroslav had at least six sons, including St. Vladimir II of Novgorod and Vsevelod I of Kiev who married Anastasia, the daughter of the Byzantine Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos. They also had daughters: Elisif (Elizabeth), Anastasia, Anna, and according to some sources, Agatha. The eldest, Elisif, married one of the greatest of all Norwegian Viking rulers, Harald Hardrada, formerly a comrade-in-arms to Yaroslav and before his return to rule Norway, commander of the famed Varangian Guard which protected the Byzantine emperor.

Anastasia would wed the future King Andrew of Hungary, then an exile at the Kievan court, while Anna espoused the Capetian King Henry I of France. After Henry's death, Anna ruled France for six years as regent for her young son, the first French queen to do so. She was also one of the first educated women in France – even her husband was illiterate – and Anna spoke, read and wrote not one, but five languages including Greek and Latin – a resounding tribute to Yaroslav and Ingegärd's patronage of education. In this same period Yaroslav gave the hand of his younger sister Maria to Casimir I of Poland, who reunited the Polish kingdom.

Just as the youthful Yaroslav and his father St. Vladimir had taken refuge in Sweden and Norway during periods of dynastic unrest, the Kievan court provided generous hospitality to royal exiles fleeing eastward: Ingegärd's brother-in-law, the Norwegian Olaf II, was welcomed there, and after his death, Ingegärd and Yaroslav brought up his illegitimate son Magnus—later to inherit the Norwegian throne and after his death canonized as St. Magnus. The royal Kievan couple also took in the exiled Prince Andrew of Hungary, as well as raising the infant outcast sons of British King Edmund Ironside of England: Edward Ætheling (the Exile) and Edmund Ætheling, whose mother Ealdgyth, it has been suggested, was another half-sister of Ingegärd.

Another fascinating possibility is that after being raised in Kiev, the English Edward Ætheling wed Yaroslav and Ingegärd's youngest daughter Agatha and took her to Hungary, where they lived in exile with his friend Prince Andrew and Agatha's sister Anastasia before Edward's ill-fated summons to return to rule England. This would make Agatha (who is known to have come from Hungary, and whom early commentators assert to have been of Russian royal blood) the mother of St. Margaret of Scotland and grandmother of St. David I of Scotland. Margaret, in turn, married Malcolm Canmore, King of the Scots, and together they reestablished monasticism on Iona in the 11th century, thus coming full circle to repair the devastation of their Viking ancestors. There is a long tradition that it was St. Margaret who ordered the building of St. Oran's Chapel, the oldest structure on Iona today, and her image is enshrined in one of the few stained glass windows in the Iona Abbey Church.

And Ingegärd herself? She and her husband Yaroslav the Wise both became saints, and we know her today as St. Anna of Novgorod.

Thus, two royal stepsisters, Ingegärd and Astrid, were the inheritors of this legacy of bloodshed and plunder, yet they were also lynch-pins in an ever-widening pool of conversion and matrimony in which the grace of the Holy Spirit slowly submerged the entire Viking era.

Back to my subtitle: "Iona's Revenge". The word revenge comes from the Latin "vindicare," meaning "to lay claim to, or avenge," and this laying claim to His creatures, whether it takes a moment or hundreds of years, seems in the end to be one of the divine prerogatives that our Lord has kept for himself. ✚