
KING OLAF TRYGGVASON,

Norway's Viking king, bold in might, to enforce the right

From Tragedies to Triumphs. Olaf Tryggvason, overcoming tragedies with triumphs, packed more adventure in 37 years¹ than most people would try for in a lifetime of double those years.



What's the proper balance of "might" and "right"? This Viking era controversy is pictured in a famous conversation, shown at left (wood-carving by **Tore Mørk**), and by many other chapters in Olaf's adventure-filled life. With whom did Olaf speak, in A.D. 988, and how did that discussion affect western Europe? (*That historic conversation will be described later, in its chronological context, after our main character is properly introduced; then its historical impact will be noted*).

Olaf's father was dead before baby Olaf was even born — what a rough start on life! And, life did not get much smoother for Olaf, for many years to come. Olaf's pre-birth months were focused on his mother fleeing for her life, and his, seeking safety from the killers of Olaf's royal father.

As a toddler, Olaf experienced the insecurity of a fugitive, only to suffer being kidnaped on the Baltic, by Estonian pirates, who promptly sold him into slavery (with his foster-father and foster brother), separating him from his mother at age 3. More tragedies came quickly — Olaf's first slave-master killed his foster-father. Olaf was re-sold and re-sold again. In 6 years, life took a turn for the better, when his uncle providentially met him in Estonia, and redeemed him, taking Olaf with him to Russia. Now life looked like it would get better, except danger followed Olaf's life like an unshakable shadow (including some dangers triggered by Olaf's own actions!).

¹ Olaf was conceived before spring A.D. 963 (his father was murdered that spring, while Olaf was *en ventre sa mère*); Olaf died on September 9, 1000, in a Baltic Sea battle, aged ~ 37.

But Olaf was destined to change his world, with cataclysmic changes that ripple on, beyond 1000 years, even into our world. (*For more on Viking history's impact, see Dr. Bill Cooper's 1995 classic, **After the Flood***). The major "chapters" of Olaf's life are now briefed, omitting many colorful details (so much that it pains this author!), to view Olaf's mortal journey in space and time.

Olaf Tryggvason's Rough Start: from Norway, to Sweden, to Estonia (A.D. 963 to 972)



As noted above, Olaf Tryggvason was conceived by his royal Norwegian father (Tryggvi, king of Viken, Norway), shortly before his father was murdered by supposed allies, in the spring of A.D. 963. Knowing that the killers also wanted to prevent any future political competition (or family-honor retaliation), from Tryggvi's widow and/or her after-born child (Olaf), Tryggvi's enemies hunted for Astrid, who was then still carrying Olaf *in utero*. Why worry about an unborn child? Olaf's royal bloodline marked him as a potential political force, since he was a great-grandson of Norway's King Harald Fairhair.² Astrid fled first to her father, Eirik Bjodaskalle, but soon needed to flee again, and further, because her father was an obvious source of refuge, and it was not long till the pursuers arrived at her father's house, seeking Astrid and Olaf (because word leaked out that she had given birth to a son while hiding on a Norwegian lake's island). Astrid successfully fled to Sweden, but then she learned that the Swedish king was cooperating with her enemies, who claimed they wanted to "foster" her infant son. Astrid's hope was to flee to Novgorod,³ Russia, where her brother (Sigurd) had a good position in the court of its young Rurikid ruler, Vladimir⁴ Svyatoslavsson.

² This kind of political intrigue is **not** limited to Norway, as is illustrated by the attempt of Queen Athaliah (Jezebel's daughter) to kill all royal children who might compete against her (*see 2nd Kings chapter 11 & 2nd Chronicles chapter 22*), and – in the ultimate example of such – the effort of Jerusalem's King Herod to slay Christ the newborn King (*see Matthew chapter 2*).

³ The region around Novgorod was then known as "Holmgarth". (Russia, as a kingdom, or, more accurately, an empire, was then known to the Norwegians as "Garthriki".)

⁴ "Vladimir" is the usual English spelling; in Old Norse he was called "*Valdamarr*", now commonly spelled "*Valdemar*" in Norwegian and other modern Scandinavian languages.

So, when Olaf was three, Astrid Eiriksdottir arranged to flee to the Baltic coastline of Sweden, with Olaf's foster-father (Thorolf Louse-beard), and Olaf's foster-brother (Thorgils Thorolfsson), to board a merchant-ship bound for Russia, with a goal of reaching Novgorod. But, another tragedy intervened — Estonian pirates. The pirates separated Astrid from the others, and she began a woeful life as a slave, somewhere in Estonia, ripped from her remaining family. (Many years later, after he became Norway's king, Astrid would be reunited with her son Olaf.)

For six years Olaf and Thorgils were slaves (“thralls”) in Estonia, being sold and re-sold. The first slave-master to own Olaf was Klerkon, an Estonian who immediately killed Thorolf, Olaf's foster-father. (Olaf would remember this murder; Olaf would avenge it, more than six years later.) Klerkon sold the boys to Klerk, for a goat. Klerk re-sold the boys to a farmer, Reas, for a high-quality garment. Reas and his wife, Rekon, and their son (Rekon) treated Olaf and Thorgils well, as Olaf grew to age nine. (*How world history would be different if Olaf's story ended here!)*



Life was about to change for slave-boy Olaf, in a big way. It began with an imperial government effort to collect taxes, a very ordinary affair in politics anywhere. The tribute money was owed to the ruler of the Baltic's eastern shore-lands, Vladimir Svyatoslavsson of Novgorod. One of the tax collection “enforcers” sent to Estonia was none other than Sigurd Eiriksson, brother of Astrid Eiriksdottir, and thus maternal uncle to Olaf Tryggvason. One day, in an Estonian marketplace, Sigurd noticed a boy of nine, who did not look like an ethnic Estonian. Sigurd asked the familiar-faced Norwegian boy about his identity. Learning the truth, Sigurd rescued both Olaf and Thorgils from slavery by redemption (i.e., buying them out of slavery). However, as later years would reveal, young Olaf took with him, from his years of life experiences as a *thrall* in Estonia, much more than just a righteous desire to take revenge against the murderous Klerkon.

Olaf Tryggvason's Youth in Vladimir's Court:

from Estonia to Russia, and to various lands neighboring Russia (A.D. 972 to 981)

Olaf's identity was originally kept confidential by Uncle Sigurd, because royal-blooded youths had a way of complicating court politics for an incumbent. When Olaf arrived in Novgorod,

at age 9, the incumbent ruler, Prince Vladimir Svyatoslavsson,⁵ was himself only about 14. The Novgorodians had insisted, on threat of rebellion to Kievan Russia's King Svyatoslav, that they be personally ruled by a prince (rather than a mere governor), so Svyatoslav installed his young son Vladimir there — to the satisfaction of the Novgorodians. Thus Vladimir avoided conflict with his older brother, Crown Prince Yaropolk, during Vladimir's teens, while his trusty Uncle Dobrynya guided his political affairs, serving variously as regent, prime minister, and chief advisor.

However, during Olaf's time in Novgorod (which lasted from age 9 to age 18), he noticed a familiar face in the marketplace: Klerkon, his first slavemaster, the man who cruelly killed his foster-father, deeming his upkeep as a slave worth less than his potential service or resale value. Olaf's hand had an ax, and soon that ax sunk into Klerkon's head so forcefully it stuck in his brain. Olaf fled to his uncle; Uncle Sigurd explained the whole story to Vladimir's young wife, Princess Allogia (also spelled "Olava"). Allogia asked her husband to defend the boy, who had only executed normal revenge as a matter of family honor. Prince Valdimir and Allogia officially defended Olaf, and negotiated a compensation to seeking justice for Klerkon's death. Thus Olaf's true identity became known to the royals, and the royals accepted young Olaf into the royal court of Novgorod. During the next few years Olaf learned Viking-style military and political arts, vital skills which he would repeatedly use later in life.

So Olaf (*pronounced "Óla" in Russia, and afterward Olaf often used this name to disguise his true Norwegian blue-blood identity*) lived in Novgorod, mostly in favor and friendship with Vladimir and Allogia, until Olaf was 18, in A.D. 981, shortly after Vladimir moved to Kiev (in A.D. 980). There was, however, one particular disagreement Olaf had with Vladimir (and this disagreement would be revisited again, years later, when Olaf ventured through Kiev). The main disagreement between Vladimir and Olaf, history records, arose during those early years in Novgorod, when Olaf would ridicule Vladimir's (and Olava's) wood-and-metal idols:

On one point, however, Olaf [Tryggvasson] annoyed the princely couple very much: they would have liked him even more than they did, if he had not [appeared] so foolish and obdurate on religious matters. At first, Vladimir had graciously invited him to participate in public sacrifices [*which sometimes included sacrificing humans, but usually only animals*], but he refused. At least, he should attend [*Vladimir thought*]. He refused again, and although at ordinary times Vladimir and he would



⁵ Vladimir was born about A.D. 958, so Vladimir was about 14 years old in A.D. 972.

be well-nigh inseparable, he would remain standing on the threshold of the sacred places where the sacrifices were offered, and patiently wait while his friend [*Vladimir*] was pouring milk and cutting throats [*of sacrifice victims*].

‘Olaf,’ Vladimir said with some irritation, ‘you are going to make the gods very angry. They will cut you down in your youth.’ But Olaf, during his time as a slave [*in Estonia*], had been corrupted by Christian fantasies [*in Vladimir’s pagan opinion*], and although he was not yet baptized [*a real theological problem situation for some*], he was ready to throw in his lot with those [*supposedly*] blasphemous scoundrels. He replied, smiling: ‘Prince, I have no fear of your gods. Can they speak? Can they understand? If not, why should I be afraid of your wooden poles?’ [*Compare Daniel 5:22-23 & Isaiah 44:15-20*]

This made Vladimir lose his temper, ‘Your attitude, my dear fellow, is extremely improper. Believe me, it is much wiser to be always on the right side of the gods. You must bow before them and try to propitiate them in every possible way. For your own safety, I beg you to do so.’ At that Olaf shook his head. Never would he bend the dignity of man before a carpenter’s artefact. Vladimir could not understand such foolhardiness, sensitive as he was to the power the gods had over him. ‘Olaf, if you do not minister to them, fondly and faithfully, I shudder at the punishments they might heap upon your head. Why put yourself in such danger?’ ‘I am in no danger. But even if I feared your stupid idols, I would not worship them. It is my destiny to deny them, and if I do not overturn them and hack them to pieces right now, it is only out of respect and affection for you, who are better than they. Look at yourself, Prince. You, whose face is always so kind and serene, how dark and sinister it becomes when you perform your vile sacrifices!’ exclaimed Olaf with some heat. ‘By this I rightly judge the nature of your gods: if they reign over anything, it must be over night and gloom.’ [*Surely this retort foreshadowed Olaf’s regnal destiny*]

Quoting Vladimir Volkoff, Vladimir the Russian Viking (Bath, England: Honeyglen Publishing, 1984), pages 72–73. Obviously, Olaf was confident in his friendship with Vladimir, to speak like that! Meanwhile, Olaf’s popularity grew, also, among the troops Vladimir assigned to his charge. Yet, at the end of Olaf’s six years in Novgorod, some of Vladimir’s *boyars* (advisors) became jealous of Olaf’s rising popularity (due to Olaf’s generosity with his war booty), and they hinted that foreign blue-bloods cannot be overly trusted, especially in unstable times. And, at the death of Vladimir’s father, King Svyatoslav (in A.D. 978), Russia became dangerously unstable.



After King Svyatoslav died, the capital (Kiev) was quickly taken over by Yaropolk, as his father's obvious successor. Soon Yaropolk wanted to dominate Vladimir's Novgorod also, but without Vladimir's help! Intrigue, armed conflict, and treachery tornadoed here and there in Russia, as the two brothers ventured and vied against each other for political power and position. (But in A.D. 980, Yaropolk was killed, and Vladimir was unrivaled King of all Russia.) Years later, a few years prior to this, Olaf had already left Russia, to seek his fortune — as a young man of 18.

Olaf Tryggvason's Early Manhood in Wendland: from Russia to Wendland, plus a few other Baltic Sea shore-lands (A.D. 981 to 984)

So Olaf went a-viking, — tall, handsome, and generously equipped with his Russian “severance package”, which included a ship. Olaf's first viking raid occurred at Bornholm (a Danish island off of Sweden's southern coast). Afterwards a Baltic Sea storm blew Olaf's ship eastward, causing him to land on a Pomeranian coast of “Wendland” (a Viking word used for Slavic lands located in and near present-day Poland). While visiting Wendland, in peace, Olaf made a very good impression. Soon (during A.D. 982) he was wed to one of the Wendish king's three



daughters, Geira, a young widow. (*Ironically, the assets and actions of the other two daughters would play into Olaf's death, years later.*) For the next two years he waged war on those who opposed Geira's royal possessions, thus establishing his reputation as a military commander and as a champion of the Wendish royal family. Sometimes Olaf's battles included lands on the north side of the Baltic, such as Danish Skania (now the south-most part of Sweden) and the Jamts of Gautland (the Geatish part of Sweden).

During these two years, as Geira's husband and military champion, Olaf also served his royal father-in-law (whom the sagas call “Burislav”) in a war Wendland joined as an ally of Saxland (Germany, during the reign of “Otto”), against the Danish kingdom of King Harald Bluetooth. At that time Bluetooth's territory included much of Norway as well. King Harald Bluetooth's Denmark was thus attacked by Emperor Otto's Germans (Saxons and Franconians), Burislav's Wends (including Olaf), and some allies from Frisia (*i.e., Holland — perhaps including some of Dr. Bill Cooper's Frisian forefathers!*).

Then tragedy hit Olaf, again: Princess Geira, Olaf's first-love and wife, died.

Olaf Tryggvason's Early Years in the West:

from Wendland, to Saxland, Frisia, Scotland, England, Wales, France, etc. (A.D. 984 to 988)

Married for only two years, Olaf was already a widower at age 21.

Olaf's satisfaction with life in Wendland died, too, and so he left Wendland, to make a new life for himself.

In other words, Olaf would resume the quest he began at age 18, he would once more go a-viking. The world was Olaf's target, and, for the next four years, Olaf (as "Óla") was on the attack. Soon coastlands, as well as lands accessible by navigable waters, were "harried" by "Óla" — in various parts of England, as well as in Scotland, the Hebrides islands, the Isle of Man, Ireland, Wales, Cumberland, and Valland (France).



Also, at some point during his four years of "harrying" all over Europe, Olaf traveled through Kievan Russia, perhaps during (or even before⁶) A.D. 986. While in Kiev, then, Olaf had a revealing conversation with his old friend Vladimir, who was then Russia's king [*konung* in Old Norse]. Specifically, Olaf was returning from exploits in and around Constantinople, the Greek-speaking capital of the eastern (Byzantine) half of the old Roman empire.

⁶ King Vladimir finalized his no-turning-back decision, during A.D. 988, to become a Christian (and to Christianize Russia), according to the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Yet prior to that decision, Olaf tried unsuccessfully to convert Vladimir to Christianity, yet Olaf had not then "accepted baptism". However, Olaf does accept baptism at Scilly, apparently during A.D. 988 (the same year Vladimir is formally baptized, and most of Russia after him). Therefore, Olaf's evangelistic conversation with the unbelieving Vladimir must precede Vladimir's conversion in A.D. 988, as well as Olaf's own "official" baptism by the wise man of Scilly, also in A.D. 988.

While passing through Kiev, Olaf urged his old friend Vladimir to reconsider Christianity:

‘I hope, my lord’, he [Olaf] would say, ‘that through your wisdom you will learn to believe in the one true God, the Creator, Who made heaven and earth and all things visible and invisible, rather than wander in such darkness as to believe in false idols who can be of no help to anyone, especially as they cannot move unless people carry or pull them, as I used to remark to you when I yet had no real notion [i.e., *no personal knowledge or correct understanding*] of God’. At first he [Olaf] was utterly unsuccessful with [Vladimir]

Quoting Vladimir Volkoff, Vladimir the Russian Viking (Bath, England: Honeyglen Publishing, 1984), page 163. Historical records suggest that Olaf’s theological conversation with Vladimir occurred when Olaf was a Christian believer, personally, yet before he publically showed himself as such by the rite of baptism. (Many of Olaf’s contemporaries would have been unimpressed with Olaf’s personal theology unless and until he was “officially” baptized as a Christian.)

After routinely harrying in France (A.D. 988), Olaf set his sights on another lucrative campaign in England. But Olaf was blown off-course, while sailing from France toward England. When he finally landed somewhere, it was at the Isles of Scilly, the small archipelago to the west of Land’s End (England’s most southwesterly coast). Another great triumph awaited Olaf there.

Olaf Tryggvason’s Meeting with a Wise Old Man: aiming for England, yet landing at the Isles of Scilly (A.D. 988)

Though “little” in size, Scilly imprinted Olaf Tryggvason in a “big” way.

Ironically, Olaf’s entrance into this world began on a “little” island in Randsfjorden (a freshwater lake in Oppland, Norway, shaped somewhat like a fjord, draining into the sea via the Randselva River). Olaf’s time at Scilly would push him into a “big” new role in his world, reforming “big” parts of Olaf’s world.

Political historian Snorri Sturluson recounts Olaf’s time at Scilly, in his classic Heimskringla, History of the Kings of Norway (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1991; translated by Lee M. Hollander), about how Olaf Tryggvason came to meet a wise old man:



When Olaf was anchored in the Scilly Islands he heard that on one of the islands there lived

a soothsayer [*originally this word meant “truth–teacher”, just as “forsooth” means “for truth”*] who prophesied future events which to many seemed to come true. Olaf grew curious and wished to test [this] man. He sent to him one of his handsomest and tallest men, attiring him most splendidly, and bade him say that he was the king [*i.e., to pretend that he was “Óla the sea–king”, Olaf’s publicly used name*], because Olaf had become famous in all lands for being handsomer and more stately and taller than any other man. After having left Garthriki [*i.e., Russia*] he had not used his own name but called himself Óla and given out that he was from Garthriki. But when this messenger came to the soothsayer and [*falsely*] said he was [Olaf], he received this answer: “You are not the king, and I give you the advice to be faithful to your king.” Nor did he say more to this man. The messenger returned and related this to Olaf, and Olaf was all the more eager to meet this man . . .

Quoting “Saga of Olaf Tryggvason”, within Sturluson’s Heimskringla, page 170.



Olaf traveled to meet the wise old hermit, who appears to have been a Cornish elder of the Celtic Church tradition. Then they met, face to face.

The wise old man encouraged Olaf to pursue his destiny, which the hermit said was to become a famous king and accomplisher of famous deeds, including deeds of bringing “many men to the true faith and baptism, and in so doing benefit both yourself and many others.” The hermit also advised Olaf Tryggvason that his words would be verified by a “token”:

“[W]hen you come to your ships you will encounter a traitor band, and that will lead to fighting, and you will put to death some of the band [of traitors], and you will yourself receive a [deadly] wound and be borne on your shield to the ship. But you will recover from this wound within seven days and [you will] be baptized soon thereafter.” Thereupon Olaf returned to his ships, and there he met a hostile band [of traitors] aiming to kill him and his crew, and it all turned out as the hermit had predicted — Olaf was borne wounded to his ship and, too, he recovered in seven days. The Olaf believed that this man had told him the truth . . . The Olaf again visited this man, spoke about many things with him . . . [The hermit] persuaded Olaf to be baptized; and so Olaf and all his men were baptized there. He remained there for a long there, learning about the true faith, and took with him priests [*the word Snorri used is a contraction of “presbyters”*] and other learned men from there.

Quoting “Saga of Olaf Tryggvason”, within Sturluson’s Heimskringla, page 171.

Olaf Tryggvason's Doings in the British Isles: from Scilly to England, to Ireland, to Hebrides, to Orkney (A.D. 988 to 995)

In the fall, Olaf sailed from Scilly to a harbor in England, Olaf was about to triumph again. Here Olaf would remarry, to Gytha (also spelled “Gyda”) a widow of Irish–Norse–Viking royalty, who ruled some territory in England, and spent some of her time in Dublin. Where Olaf landed, along the English coast, a lady named Gytha had summoned the public to an important event, her announcement that she intended to remarry. Gytha wanted to see her options face-to-face. Many men attended “dressed to impress”, but not Olaf. To cut an interesting story short, the widow Gytha proposed to Olaf, despite him appearing before her in his bad-weather clothing. Then a wannabe suitor challenged Olaf to fight to the death, to claim the widow’s hand. And so a duel was had, with Olaf defeating the challenger without killing him (and Olaf’s men disabling Alvini’s men, without anyone being killed). The challenger, Alvini, was tied up, to humiliate him and to prove Olaf’s power over him. Olaf warned Alvini to flee that part of England, or else Alvini would soon face a worse fate at Olaf’s hands. Alvini fled. Olaf confiscated Alvini’s English lands, and soon Olaf was remarried (to Gytha), during or soon after A.D. 988. (This marriage lasted 7 years.) Gytha was of the Irish–Norse–Viking royal family of Olaf Cuaran (or “Kvaran”), a dynasty that had ruled in Dublin till about A.D. 980 (when Olaf Cuaran died), after which various rivals pushed that family dynasty aside. During 989 to 995, however, while Olaf Tryggvason was part of this dynasty’s extended family, Dublin was ruled by Gytha’s kinsman, Sitric “Silkbeard” (Olaf Cuaran’s son).⁷

During those seven years (from A.D. 988 to 995), Olaf was also a busy Viking on the island of Britain, collecting *danegeld* tribute from the English in A.D. 991 (after winning the Battle of Maldon) and again in A.D. 994 (and confirming his ties with British Christianity in Andover, while meeting with the Bishop of Winchester in A.D. 994). In some of these exploits, Olaf allied with the Danish Viking king, **Sveyn “Forkbeard” Haraldsson**, son of Harald Bluetooth (whom Olaf had fought against years before, when Olaf was married to Geira of Wendland). Sveyn “Forkbeard” (*so-called for his custom of dividing his beard in halves, q.v.*) was a formidable force, having just rebelled against his Christianity-promoting father, Bluetooth, with Forkbeard ultimately causing his royal father’s death in A.D. 987 at Jomsberg (i.e., Wolin, Poland). Sveyn



⁷ Silkbeard would rule in Dublin till A.D. 1036, the last Norse Viking king to do so.

later led an ambush-attack at sea, *against* Olaf Tryggvason , in A.D. 1000, as a result of a complicated series of converging family-feud grudge dynamics. (*More on that later.*)

Olaf Tryggvason's Return to Norway, as King: **returning to Norway, with special attention to Trondheim (A.D. 995 to 1000)**

Meanwhile, Norway was getting restless, and conditions were ripening for Olaf to return to Norway, and to assert his birthright as Norway's king. Hakon "Evil-earl", a regent originally established by Denmark's Harald Bluetooth, was ruling without accountability ever since Bluetooth died (in A.D. 987). Specifically, Hakon was using his tyrannical power to force families to provide him with women — whom Hakon would abuse as involuntary concubines, for a week or so, then he would return them to their families. Norway seethed with a resolve, — to get rid of Hakon.



At this time Olaf Tryggvason returned to coastal Norway (vigorously "converting" the Orkney Islands to Christianity *en route* to Norway), and announced his intent to rule as king. Great timing! Skipping the dramatic details (*e.g.*, *Hakon being killed by his own servant while hiding in a pig-sty*), Olaf became Norway's new king, as Hakon's death was celebrated. Next, Olaf worked on confirming his kingship — and on his Christianizing the rest of Norway ("or else die" in the process of trying). But the Christianizing of some parts of Norway would be anything but easy. Meanwhile, Olaf's imperial ambitions included domination (and "evangelization") of lands outside continental Norway, such as the Shetland Islands, Orkney Islands, and Faroe Islands, plus using coercive influences (via hostage-holding and trade sanctions) with places like Iceland and Greenland.

Despite strong resistance from many in Norway, Harald vigorously imposed his brand of Viking Christianity upon Norway, by persuasion or by making offers "hard to refuse", such as dealing with "farmers" of the Trondheim (f/k/a Nidaros, i.e., Nith River-mouth) region:

In summer King Olaf gathered numerous troops from the eastern part of the country, and with that force proceeded north to Trondheim, anchoring first at Nidaros (or "Nitharos"). Then he sent out messengers about all the fjord to call an assembly, summoning the men of eight districts to Frosta; but the farmers changed their token into war-arrows and called together both free men and thralls [slaves]. Now when the king arrived at the assembly, he found there the host of farmers all armed. And when the meeting was opened, the king spoke

to the people and bade them to accept Christianity. But when he had spoken but a little while, the farmers called out and asked him to cease, saying that otherwise they would set upon him and drive him away. “Thus we did to Hákon, the foster child of Æthelstan, when he demanded that of us, and we do not value you higher than him.”

And when King Olaf perceived the angry disposition of the farmers and observed that they had so large a force that resistance was impossible, he yielded in his speech as if to agree with the farmers, and said, “I desire that we come to an agreement such as we had before. I wish to journey to where you celebrate your greatest [pagan] sacrifice and there see what is your accustomed faith. Then let us decide on what faith we shall adopt, and agree on that, all of us.” And as the king spoke gently to the farmers their mood softened and all their discussion thereafter proceeded peaceably and in a conciliatory spirit; and it was finally decided that there should be held a midsummer sacrifice inside the fjord at Mærin, and that all the chieftains and influential farmers should attend it as was their custom; and King Olaf was to come there too.⁸

Snorri Sturluson provides specific information about a local leader named Jarn-skeggi [“Iron-beard”] who opposed King Olaf, then he recounts the showdown at the midsummer sacrifice:

King Olaf moored his ships in the Nith River. He had thirty ships, with a picked and numerous crew. And when the time approached for the sacrifices at Mærin, King Olaf arranged for a big feast at Hlathir and sent messengers into the inner fjord district to Strind



and up into Gaular Dale and into Orka Dale, inviting chieftains and other farmers of importance. And when the banquet was all prepared and those invited had arrived, there was good entertainment for the first evening, and drink was served very liberally, and the men gre very drunk. But afterwards during the night everyone slept in peace. [On the next morning] . . . the horns [were] blown to summon men for a meeting. Then all [Olaf’s] crew left their ships and came to the assembly; and when it was opened, the king arose and spoke as follows: “We had an assembly at Frosta, and there I bade the farmers to let themselves be baptized,

but they bade me on the contrary to come and sacrifice with them, as had done Hákon, the foster son of Æthelstan. Then we agreed that we should meet in Mærin and there make a

⁸ *Quoting* Sturluson’s *Heimskringla* (cited above), at pages 205–206.

great sacrifice. But if I am to sacrifice with you, then I shall have a sacrifice made which is the greatest ever made, and sacrifice humans. And I shall choose for that, not thralls [slaves] or evildoers, but the noblest of men as sacrifice to the gods. I shall choose for that Orm Lygra of Methalhús, Styrkar of Gimsar, Kar of Gryting, Asbjorn and Thorberg of Orness, Orm of Lyxa, Halldor of Skerthingstethja” — and he named still another five most prominent men, saying that he would sacrifice them to obtain a good season and peace; and then he had his men immediately attack them. But when the farmers saw that they did not have a sufficient force to fight the king, they asked for quarter and offered to submit to his terms. Then they came to the agreement that all the farmers who had come were to let themselves be baptized and to promise the king upon oath to hold fast to the true faith and to abolish all [pagan] sacrifices. The king kept all these men by him at the feast until they had delivered their sons or their brothers or other close kinsmen as hostages to the king.⁹

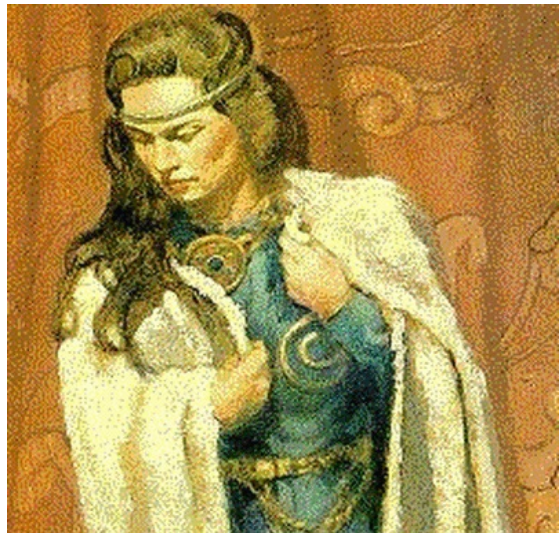
However, King Olaf Tryggvasson’s zeal was *not* so immediately successful in his personal dealings with one of his royal fiancée, Queen Sigrid “the Haughty” of Sweden, who had no intention of becoming a Christian when she married King Olaf. This problem ultimately led, with other converging family–feud factors, to Olaf’s death on the high seas.

Olaf’s Problems with Women and Former In-laws: involving Norway, Sweden–Geatland, Wendland, Denmark, etc. (A.D. 995 to 1000)

King Olaf was interested in gaining a third wife — his second wife (Gytha) had died in A.D. 994 or 995, shortly before Olaf decided to return to Norway. And guess who was eligible? Sigrid the Haughty, a widowed Swedish queen!

The problems with this match began with Sigrid’s concerns about Olaf’s trustworthiness (based upon a gift he gave her, without knowing it was not solid gold!), and climaxed with Olaf’s hot temper at Sigrid’s stony unwillingness to become a Christian!

Snorri Sturluson, the peerless Viking history scholar, recounts Queen Sigrid’s engagement to marry Norway’s king Olaf Tryggvasson. This would have merged Visigothic Sweden with Norway (*and thus virtually all of Scandinavia could have “officially” received Christianity, if Olaf got his way about things*), but the matrimonial deal failed, with sparks (!):



⁹ Quoting Sturluson’s Heimskringla (cited above), pages 206–207.

Queen Sigrith of Sweden, who was called “the Haughty” [*due to her killing unwanted suitors*], resided on her estates. That winter [A.D. 997] messengers went between King Olaf and Queen Sigrith, and through them King Olaf asked for the hand of Queen Sigrith. She received his suit [*i.e., proposal*] favorably, and the betrothal was definitely agreed on. hereupon King Olaf sent Queen Sigrith the large gold [arm] ring which he had taken from the [pagan] temple gate at Hlathir. It was considered a splendid possession.¹⁰

Sigrid entrusted the golden arm–ring to two brothers who were smiths, seeking their opinion of its worth. They observed its size and then weighed it. They whispered to each other and smiled secretly, not talking about the ring’s weight. Sigrid demanded to know why they snickered. The ring’s weight did not match the proper weight for gold of that size. The ring was broken in two — it was “counterfeit”! — not solid gold, only copper, covered with a layer of gold! Then Sigrid was furious and concluded that King Olaf “would defraud her in more things than that”.

In spring they met to discuss their upcoming marriage. At first, things went well between them. “Then King Olaf said that Sigrith should be baptized and accept the true faith [*i.e., to show her acceptance of Christ as her personal Savior, and her allegiance to the Christian faith, publicly rejecting her pagan Viking gods*]. She replied in this wise: ‘I do not mean to abandon the faith I have had, and my kinsmen before me. Nor shall I object to your belief in the God you prefer.’



Then King Olaf became very angry and said hastily, **‘Why should I want to marry you, dog of a heathen?’ And he slapped her in the face with the glove he had in his hand.** Whereupon he arose, and she too. **Then Sigurth said, ‘This may well be your death!’** With that they parted. The king returned north to Vik [near Oslo], and the queen east to Sweden.

Quoting Sturlusson’s Heimskringla, at pages 200–201, cited in endnotes.) So much for marrying Queen Sigrid! Yet, Olaf got a third opportunity at marriage, soon after the break–up with Sigrid.

Olaf’s third marriage was so ill–fated that it was, as a matter of Viking practice, annulled before it was ever consummated. In short, King Olaf defeated his pagan adversary Jarnskeggi

¹⁰ *Quoting Sturluson’s Heimskringla* (cited above), page 200.

(“Ironbeard”). After Olaf’s men killed Jarnskeggi in Thor’s temple, Olaf arranged to marry Jarnskeggi’s daughter, Guthrun, as part of the negotiated truce with Jarnskeggi’s kin in the Trondheim region. On the first wedding night Guthrun tried to stab Olaf to death, after Olaf appeared to fall asleep. Olaf “awoke” in time (a life-saving reaction that occurred once to Olaf’s Russian friend Vladimir), so the “marriage” was functionally canceled: a *de facto* annulment!

Meanwhile, since A.D. 997 Sigrid never relaxed, waiting to avenge Olaf for his insult.

Then, Olaf married Thyri, a sister of Danish king Sveyn Forkbeard, after Thyri separated from an old Wendish king (whom she despised due to his paganism and old age). Thyri had fled to Norway, from Wendland, and sought refuge from that unconsummated “marriage” (*which was forced upon her by her brother, King Sveyn Forkbeard, as part of a negotiated deal Sveyn made with the Wends, which had resulted in Sveyn marrying the Wendish princess Gunnhild, who died and was replaced by the vindictive Sigrid*). Olaf gave Thyri refuge and proposed marriage to her, which she accepted. Soon Thyri’s gratitude cooled, and she whined about her “dowry” lands in Wendland, which she forfeited when she separated from her would-be Wendish king-husband! So Olaf sailed to Wendland, to try to negotiate a solution to the whole mess — not knowing that Thyri’s sister (who was Olaf’s sister-in-law when he was originally married to Geira), would work to betray Olaf into Sveyn’s hands, with the help of her treacherous husband, Sigvaldi, a false friend of Olaf’s.

Sigrid the Haughty needed an angle to push her royal husband, Sveyn, to attack his old comrade-in-arms, Olaf. The angle Sigrid used was Olaf’s recent remarriage to Thyri, who was Sveyn’s sister. By Olaf’s remarriage to Thyri, Sveyn’s sister, Olaf had aided the ruin of Sveyn’s prior deal with the Wends. A conspiracy of Olaf’s enemies soon formed.

Thus, about three years after the face-slap, Sigrid was fulfilling her threat — through goading her new husband, Sveyn Forkbeard, to ambush King Olaf on the high seas, justified by her naggings that Olaf had no right to marry Sveyn’s sister Thyri, without Sveyn’s permission



(and thereby thwarting Sveyn’s relations with the Wendish king). Accordingly, in September of A.D. 1000, it was Queen Sigrid’s husband, Sveyn Forkbeard, who finally formed an ambush coalition (of Swedes, Danes, Norse, and Wends), baited by the treacherous Sigvaldi, to overwhelm Olaf Tryggvasson’s “Long Serpent” (and its companion ships) in the Baltic Sea, in what is known as the **Battle of Svold** (fought September 9th, 1000 — *see painting above*).

Near the end of the battle, the wounded King Olaf jumped into the sea, to avoid a certain death (or capture), never to surface again. Yet one Wendish boat did sneak away about the time Olaf jumped into the water, so rumors circulated that Olaf swam to that boat, for a rescue and getaway. But King Olaf was never seen again. (Olaf's time and mortal work on Earth was done.)

So who celebrated at King Olaf's defeat at sea? Sveyn Forkbeard, whose deal with Wendland's king was spoiled by Olaf's fourth marriage. Also, Sigvaldi, the Jomsviking chief married to a Wendish princess who was herself sister to Olaf's first wife, Geira. Also, Eirik Hakonsson, son of Hakon "Evil-earl", who died in the pig-sty as he hid from Olaf's forces. (Incidentally, Eirik was also son-in-law to Sveyn, by virtue of marrying a daughter of Sveyn's.) And, of course, Sigrid the Haughty gleefully rejoiced at learning about the death of her former fiancé. Surely she also prided herself on how she had aptly defended the traditional paganism of Sweden. (However, little did Sigrid suspect that her own son from a prior marriage, Olof Eriksson, would soon become *King Olof Skötkonung*, the king who first unified Sweden and Geatland ["Gautland"], and who did so as he officially Christianized that blended country!)

Olaf Tryggvason's Legacy and Ongoing Impact:

the world imprinted by Olaf Tryggvason — then, later, and now (A.D. 1000 & after)

So, how did Olaf Tryggvason change his own world ? And, how much of Olaf's historical impact has lived on through time, having produced effects that still exist in our own world? A few highlights might provide some food for thought about these questions.

Olaf's mother, who was eventually redeemed from slavery in **Estonia**, returned to Norway and lived there long enough to enjoy being proud of her royal son. Olaf was a influence in his friend Vladimir's life, contributing to Vladimir's decisive and public rejection of the paganism of **Russia**, and establishment of Eastern Christianity there. Olaf's meeting at Scilly will long be remembered, for its effect on history, and thus those obscure islands continue to receive fame (to this day), even in wood-carving artwork by **Tore Mørk** ! Olaf was a chief support to Sitric Silkbeard's recovery, in **Dublin**, of the Viking dynasty lost at Olaf Cuaran's death. Olaf was the finalizing catalyst in the defeat and death of Norway's tyrant, Hakon Evil-earl, serial abuser of Norwegian women. (*Notice that Olaf himself was a monogamist, with 2 of his marriages being good ones.*) Olaf forcibly promoted Christianity in his domains in **Norway**, — as well as in the earldom of Orkney (which included **the Orkneys** and **the Shetlands**, during the time when **Sigurd "the Stout" Hlodvirsson** ruled there); in **the Faroe Islands** (through the evangelistic work of Olaf's agent Sigmund Brestisson); in **Iceland** (through several of Olaf's missionary agents, as well as via Olaf's converts, e.g., Kjartan); and in **Greenland** (through the evangelistic leadership of **Leif Eiriksson**, who was converted to Christianity by Olaf, and was later commissioned by Olaf to Christianize Greenland). Olaf exemplified Viking Christianity, never timid, disoriented, or afraid of death — because Olaf knew that his own death was not really "the end", but a new and providential triumph, a time to meet his Creator and Sustainer (and Forgive), face to face. ><> © AD2008 James J. S. Johnson

