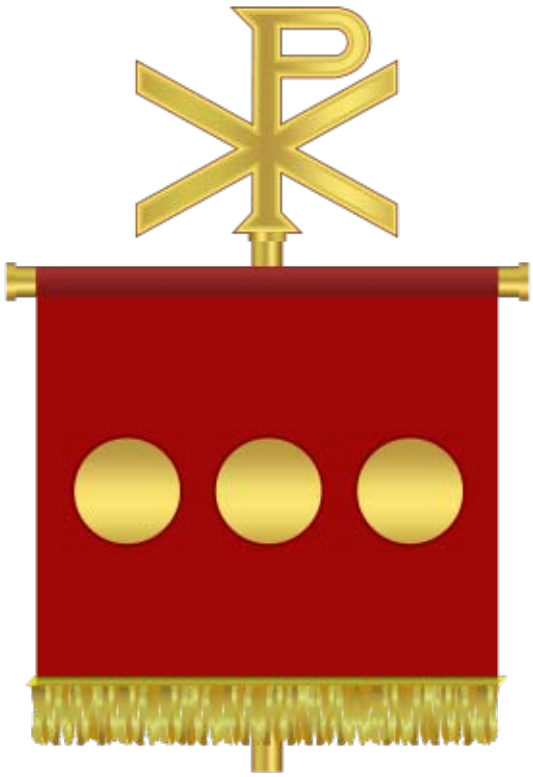
The Cross in the North

- A common implement of public torture among the Romans,
- a symbol of Christianity in the second century.
The cross as a single expression of faith on banners, shields and pendants.
For the medieval Christian, the Cross was a symbol of a heavenly ruler as well as his Christian representatives on earth.

Christians appear to have traced small crosses on foreheads, lips, or breasts, occasionally etching it on objects as a symbol of their faith. It was only with the advent of tolerance toward Christianity during the fourth century, however, that the symbol could become public. And when it did, it took three prime forms:



1) - the Cross of the Vision,
Constantine (c. 280-337) is credited with a vision of the Cross on the eve of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge (Ponte Molle), October 28, 312, bearing the inscription "In This Conquer." the symbol in his vision soon developed into a standardized chi-rho digraph crowned by a wreath-represented Christ emblazoned on the shields and helmets of his forces, Constantine won the battle, marching triumphantly into Rome behind his new emblem of adherence. Charlemagne (742-814, r. 768-814) revived the chi-rho Constantine's visionary cross was echoed by the visions of King St. Oswald of the seventh century and King Valdemar II Sejr of the thirteenth.

2) - the Cross of the Relic,
The Cross as holy relic was discovered where it lay abandoned in Jerusalem and treasured ever after as a source of miraculous healing powers. Divided into myriad pieces and distributed across the Christian world, it retained the power and wonder of the materialized Christ it had borne. It was an animate friend, a conscious servant of God and intercessor for all of humanity until the Final Day.

3) - the gestural cross formed in the air, the Crux usual is.
Alcuin (c. 735-804) posits that Christ chose crucifixion instead of some other form of death (e.g., stoning or the Sword) for the express purpose of giving Christians a wondrous gesture of power and protection. Its presence over the breast or traced in the air could effect wondrous cures and banish evil.
With its feast days, litanies, and myriad representations in Christian art, the Cross. towered above the other symbols of the faith, a crucial material reminder of human redemption.

- how Nordic pre-Christian communities interpreted the Cross
- how they found counterparts to it in the pagan concept of divine implements.

By the thirteenth century much of the region had embraced the new faith, and orientations toward the Cross reflected the growth of doctrinal orthodoxy among Christian populations. In this last stage of Christianization, we find accounts of Nordic kings who cannily use the Cross and its attendant symbolism in a manner reminiscent of the Christian monarchs of central and southern Europe. These narratives mark the final triumph of a truly Christian outlook, yet they comment as well on the continued prominence of paganism in the region and, perhaps, in the hearts of Nordic leaders.

The British Isles and Atlantic Settlements
The Cross came with the faith to northern Europe, first in Roman Britain and then in Ireland, from the era of Constantine onward. After the Anglo-Saxon invasion, England required reconversion, a task accomplished by missionary monks from both Rome and Ireland. Irish and Anglo-Saxon missionaries in turn converted the Scandinavians, both in the Atlantic settlements of the British Isles and, in part, on mainland Scandinavia.

The earliest cross figures in Ireland are inscribed Latin crosses, executed on stone slabs and erected on monastic grounds by the time of St. Patrick (c. 389-461) onward. By the eighth century, the first true high crosses had appeared, carved from sandstone and ornamented on shaft and arms with tight interlace patterning reminiscent of metalwork and manuscript art of the day." The characteristic ***Celtic ringed form*** had emerged, possibly in stone imitation of metal processional crosses, which would have had a ring to stabilize shaft and arms. These first Irish stone crosses limit figural depictions to the base, where pictures of horsemen, deer, and hunts are placed in rectangular panels. During the ninth century, this figural decoration gradually extended up the shaft and across the arms of the cross itself, retaining, however the same aristocratic themes and even an occasional mysterious figure.

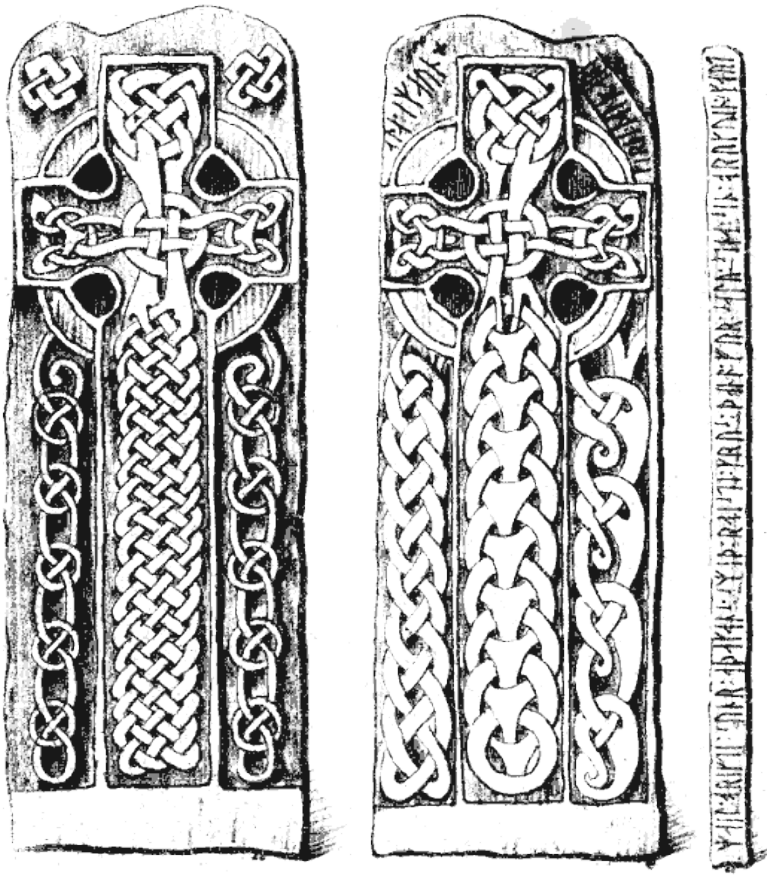
With the tenth -century scriptural crosses of sandstone, along with their granite counterparts in southeastern Ireland, events from the Bible and saints' lives replace earlier aristocratic horsemen and deer. The high cross has now become more emphatically Christian, depicting in neat, rectangular panels scenes useful in the teaching of catechumens or reassuring to the ascetic monk. Portrayals of the Flight into Egypt or Daniel in the lions' den obviate in their clarity the nebulousness of the earlier cross depictions and prepare the way for the final late crosses of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, which depict a crucified Christ or a bishop with miter and crozier. The process of "Christianizing" cross ornamentation has thus come to its.

The decisive figure for the development of the ***AngloSaxon cross*** is Edwin's successor, King St. Oswald (605-642), who returned from his exile at Iona a Christianized and Celticized monarch. Oswald demonstrates the continuity of the Constantinian Cross of the Vision in the distinctive social and cultural milieu of northern Europe. In a dream on the eve of his victorious battle for the throne of Northumbria in 634, the king recapitulates Constantine's vision, seeing a great cross and St. Columba, who explains its significance. If he erects a wooden cross on the battlefield, Oswald is assured, he will gain victory over the pagan Welsh king, Cadwallan. He does so and wins the battle, called ever after the Battle of Heavenfield.

The Venerable St. Bede (c. 672-735) retells the tale in his Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum (731). The visionary Cross, when experienced by a king, comes to the whole of society through the rulership it announces and the monuments that promulgate it. For generations, Bede relates, the wooden cross of Oswald served not only as a reminder of God's endorsement of their ruler, but as a cure for common diseases.

In areas where **Scandinavian settlers** came in close contact with Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Christians, the Cross transferred with little modification. Such was the case on the Isle of Man, where Celtic and Scandinavian settlements appear to have merged with particular syncretic productivity

Inscribed Latin crosses first appeared on Manx slab monuments in the late seventh century, as Man acquired Christianity from Irish sources. Gradually, Celtic high crosses with runic inscriptions and dedications began to appear. The best known of these is the tenth-century Gautr's Cross of Kirk Michael, which includes the names of both its patron and its carver, Gautr.



"MAIL : BRIGDI : SUNR : ATHAKANS : SMITH : RAISTI : CRUS : THANO : FUR : SALU : SINI : SIN : BRUKUIN : GAUT : GIRTHI : THANO : AUK : ALA : I MAUN;"

i.e. *"Malbrigd, the son of Athakan the smith, erected this (cross) for his soul, but his kinsman (?) Gaut made this and all in Man."*

That Manx Scandinavians assimilated the Cross as a warrior standard and implement of power - akin to the implements of Nordic gods - is evident in the iconography of the tenth-century slate cross fragment at Kirk Andreas." Here, flanking a depiction of the cross ornamented with interlace, we find two parallel figures: on the right, Odinn with his spear and raven, treading on the jaw of a wolf; on the left, Jesus (or a saint), armed with cross and book, treading on a serpent, flanked by a fish. While the book and raven figure as parallel sources of wisdom, the cross and spear are clearly intended as parallel sources of divine power. The Kirk Andreas Cross seems to assume a conversance with both Scandinavian and Christian religious systems and the willingness to compare them outright in terms of symbolism and imagery. It is a work scarcely imaginable but in the richly syncretic Celtic-Scandinavian, pre-Christian - Christian milieu of the Isle of Man.

The mixture of Christian and pre-Christian symbolism evident on the Kirk Andreas Cross parallels the figural sculpture of the Gosforth Cross in Cumbria. Here, in addition to interlace patterns, we find a variety of scenes drawn from Christian and Scandinavian sacred histories. A crucified Christ on the bottom of the east shaft is attended by both a man with a spear (probably the Longinus of medieval Christian legend) and a woman with a sweeping gown, who may represent Mary or Mary Magdalen but resembles iconographically similar valkyrie or queen figures on the pre-Christian picture stones of Gotland. The rest of the scenes on the cross appear references to Ragnarok, the pagan version of the Last Judgment, in which the Aesir and their allies do final battle against the unleashed powers of Loki and his ilk. The Gosforth Cross may represent a Scandinavianized Christian eschatology, one merging pre-Christian and Christian figures and reflecting the popularity of the subject in missionary homilies. It was an event in which the shining Cross of the Vision played a central role, and thus its appearance on a carved high cross makes good thematic sense, even if its imagery may seem strikingly pagan today.

The Eastern Scandinavia

Nordic chieftains and traders along the Baltic coast met with the symbols of Christianity long before understanding or accepting their theological meanings. The arrival of the Cross in Sweden and Finland came as early as the sixth century. Only gradually, however, does the Cross begin to carry the supernatural weight associated with it in medieval Christianity.

The Cross as talisman and motif becomes prominent in Nordic art, graves, and hoards well before the full embrace of Christianity. A survey of cross pendants and icons in gravefinds from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries in the Lake Beloe and Kargapol area of Russia shows the adoption of the cross as a sacred object, despite the apparent continuation of a pagan belief system, and may illustrate pagan responses to the Cross throughout northern Europe. Crosses appear around the necks of those persons viewed as the society's most vulnerable: women, teenaged boys, and especially children. That these burials are pagan, or only marginally Christian, is indicated by burial type, and by irregularities in the burial site

Orthodox style and motifs came with cross pendants from Russia and eastern Europe into the entirety of the Baltic region during the ninth and tenth centuries. By the eleventh century, local Nordic and Baltic artisans had begun manufacturing their versions of such objects in Novgorod, Gotland, and the Gulf of Riga area. Where burial with cross pendants appears a function of status, travel, and wealth-as in the still strongly pagan Turku region of Finland in the eleventh century - such objects are associated with male graves and hoards.

The importation of Mediterranean and Eastern Christian influences into Nordic art and belief can be traced in the remarkable picture stones of Gotland, a leading center of Viking trade in the east. Trade connections brought Gotlanders in contact with the highly developed commemorative sculpture traditions of the Christian Mediterranean as well as of southeastern Europe, and these soon became translated into pagan monuments on the island. Early cryptic symbols, such as spirals and triangles, gave way in time to more recognizable iconography, as on the eighth-century Alskog, Tjangvide stone.

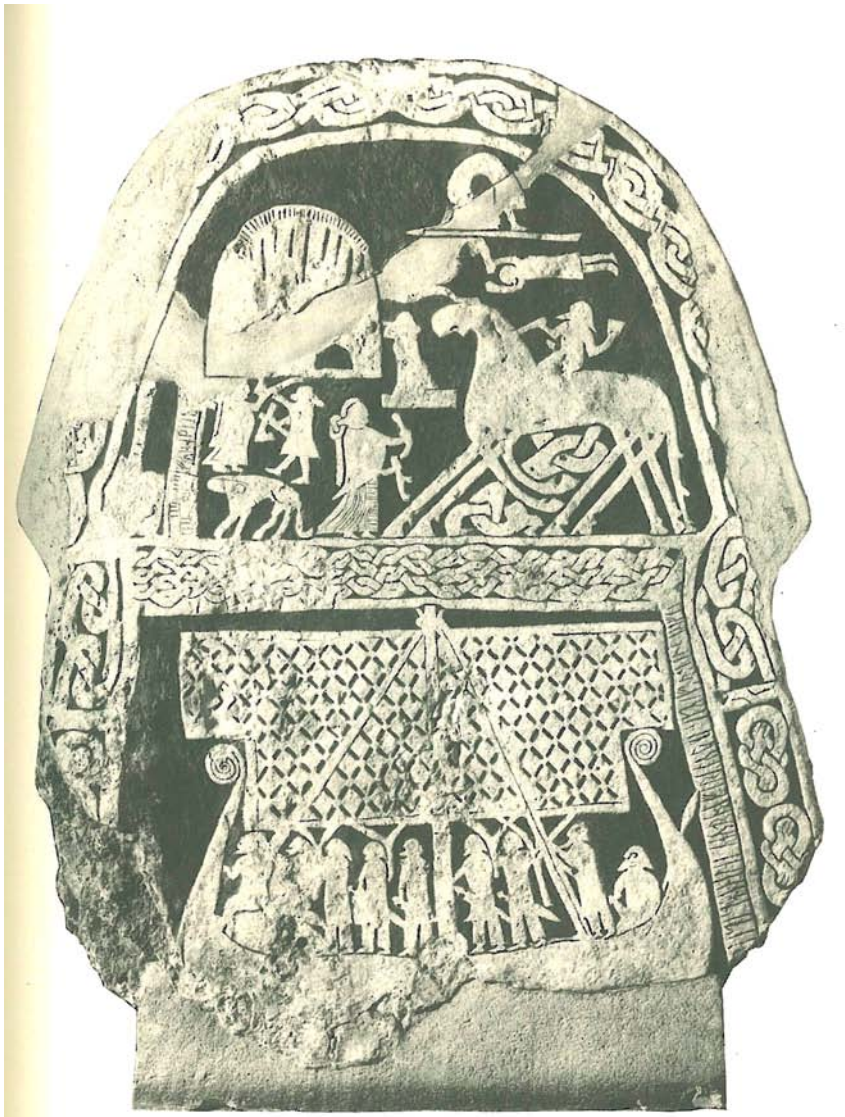


Figure 2. Pagan Picture Stone, Alskog, Tjängvide, Gotland, probably eighth century. Monument shows stylized depictions of elements of Scandinavian paganism, including Óðinn's eight-legged horse, Sleipnir, a valkyrie figure, and a ship. Photo courtesy Antikvarisk-topografiska arkivet, Stockholm.

stones of Gotland

The cross symbol functions as an insignia of Christianity, but in so doing it differs from the high crosses of the British Isles. No longer the animate object of fervent devotion, the Cross here appears but a simple emblem of religious membership, paralleled exactly by similar demarcations of pagan allegiance on stones of the same form.

The Frankish Mission and the Arrival of State Christianity

The **East** receives little credit in the textual accounts of Nordic Christianization, a fact which probably reflects both the Icelandic biases of our written sources and the deteriorating relations of eastern and western Christianity during the thirteenth century. In any case, both the limited distribution of British Isle high crosses in the Nordic region and the strong archaeological showings of eastern cross pendants should caution us to read the textual history with some reservation.

Another important source of Christian influence in mainland Scandinavia, however, came from the **south**. Although the continental Christianity arriving from Hamburg-Bremen evinced significantly less devotion to the Cross, it helped establish the notion of a Christian monarchy in the region and the idea of **mass conversions**. The concept of Christianity as a politically motivated public cult took shape particularly in Denmark and spread north and east. Its influence can be traced in yet another manifestation of Cross iconography, the Christian rune stones of Denmark and Sweden. Although derived in a distant form from the high crosses of the British Isles, these mainland Scandinavian monuments possess their own distinctive form and symbolism and their own apparent functions in the social life of Christianizing Scandinavians. They are functions reflective of public cult membership and a religiosity diffusing into the region from the south.

For Charlemagne (742-814) and his successors, Christianization represented a key means of controlling and potentially subjugating pagan populations to the north. It is clear that by the time of King Haraldr Bluetooth Gormson (baptized c. 965, d. 985), royal conversion was necessary to prevent hostile invasion from the south.

Crosses, however, did make their way into mainland Scandinavia, and often in striking monuments. Such is the case with the Jelling Stone, King Haraldr Bluetooth's (c. 958-87) monument to Danish conversion. Haraldr's acceptance of Christianity in 965 was prompted by two factors, neither of them the Cross. On the one hand, the powerful Emperor Otta to the south threatened to invade Denmark if he refused the faith. On the other hand, the priest Poppo/Poppa proved the power of the new religion by gripping a red-hot iron with his bare hand and showing it unharmed to the king. In the Jelling Stone, Haraldr identifies himself as the monarch who brought Christianity to the Danes. More than that, however, the stone brought to mainland Scandinavia the sculptural tradition characteristic of the British Isles. For the next two centuries, Christian as well as pagan Scandinavians imitated the monument, creating hundreds of similar sculptures in Denmark and Sweden. The Jelling Stone can truly be called a turning point in the history of Cross iconography in mainland Scandinavia.

The Jelling Stone removes the Cross itself from the Passion. Here, we find a central, nimbed Christ, arms outstretched in crucifixion, but without any supporting cross at all. Rather, the space surrounding Christ has been filled with coils of serpents, a decorative choice that links the stone imagistically to an eighthcentury Irish book cover from Athlone, County Westmeath. In this cast bronze representation of the Crucifixion, Christ's body dominates the scene, with the cross peaking out only a little at the extremities and elaborate spirals and interlace patterns adorning the Savior's clothes and those of his surrounding attendants. But the Jelling Stone takes this stylistic choice to the extreme, as if to say that the Cross holds no interest for the Scandinavian artist at all.

In the two centuries which followed, Haraldr's Jelling Stone served as the model for an unprecedented production of rune stones in central Scandinavia, some two thousand in all. Crosses figure frequently in these monuments, but here the cross is simplified and conventionalized in form, appearing most often as a simple Latin or palmette cross surrounded by some interlace patterning and a serpent-shaped runic inscription. Like Haraldr's monument, these later stones present the Cross more as an emblem of religious allegiance than as an object for religious meditation. As in Haraldr's Jelling Stone, they commemorate the deeds and lives of local individuals rather than more distant holy intercessors.

Jelling Stone, Denmark, late tenth century. Commissioned by King Haraldr Bluetooth Gormson, this moriument depicts a Christ in crucifixion and credits Haraldr with the conversion of Denmark. Photo courtesy National Museum, Copenhagen.

Source: Nordic religions in the Viking age, Thomas A. DuBois, 1999. Pp. 140-158.