

ANALYSIS OF THE RELIGIOUS POLICY OF KING OLAF I TRYGGVASON OF  
NORWAY ACCORDING TO MEDIEVAL SOURCES

ნორვეგიის მეფის ოლაფ I ტრიუგვასონის რელიგიური პოლიტიკის ანალიზი შუა  
საუკუნეების წყაროების მიხედვით

**Mariam Gurgenidze**

Phd student in Medieval History

Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4831-4415>

[gurgenidze.m@gmail.com](mailto:gurgenidze.m@gmail.com)

+995577376228

**Abstract**

In the medieval era the Viking warriors were savage invaders, active colonizers, merchants, mercenaries, shipbuilders, who in the VIII-XI centuries established settlements on the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland. Conquered the territories of Scotland and Ireland, a significant part of the Frankish and English kingdoms. Reached North America, Spanish coast, Italy. Trade settlements were established in the east, in areas inhabited by Slavs. The process of forming the culture of this community is linked to successful foreign and domestic achievements. Due to this, there is a growing interest and relevance in the historiography about the Viking Age as a subject of study.

There has been a particular interest in the subject of research in recent years. There are numerous scientific papers, where this era has been studied in great detail. Therefore, the present review doesn't claim to present this issue in a comprehensive, exhaustive manner. We aim to give the reader a general idea of the importance of the data, stored in the sources in study of this epoch. The fact, that almost nothing has been written on this topic in Georgian historiography so far, makes us talk about this difficult issue. The practical purpose of the case study is to draw conclusions and comparisons, which will provide some assistance to scholars interested in both medieval European history and Scandinavian issues. The work of King Olaf I of Norway (995-100) Tryggvason, before and after his coronation, contains a great deal of interesting information, both in Scandinavian region and beyond. Obviously, it is impossible to discuss the material in one paper and this issue may be devoted to a separate scientific study. We tried to show the role of the king in the process of spreading new beliefs and analyze his work based on various sources.

**Key words:** Vikings, Scandinavia, Olaf I Tryggvason, Christianisation, Norway, Middle ages.

მარიამ გურგენიძე

თბილისის სახელმწიფო

უნივერსიტეტის

ისტორიის მიმართულების

დოქტორანტი

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4831-4415>

[gurgenidze.m@gmail.com](mailto:gurgenidze.m@gmail.com)

+99577376228

### აბსტრაქტი

შუა საუკუნეების ეპოქაში, ვიკინგი მეომრები წარმოადგენდნენ როგორც სასტიკ თავდამსხმელებს ასევე: აქტიურ კოლონიზატორებს, ვაჭრებს, დაქირავებულ მეომრებს, გემთმშენებლებს, რომლებმაც VIII-XI საუკუნეებში შექმნეს დასახლებები ფარერის კუნძულებზე, ისლანდისა და გრენლანდიაში. დაიპყრეს შოტლანდიისა და ირლანდიის ტერიტორიები, ფრანკთა და ინგლისის სამეფოების მნიშვნელოვანი ნაწილი. მიაღწიეს ჩრდილოეთ ამერიკას, ესპანეთის სანაპიროებს, იტალიას. სავაჭრო დასახლებები შექმნეს აღმოსავლეთით, სლავებით დასახლებულ ტერიტორიებზე. აღნიშნული საზოგადოების კულტურის ფორმირების პროცესი დაკავშირებულია წარმატებულ საგარეო და საშინაო მიღწევებთან. აღნიშნულიდან გამომდინარე, სულ უფრო იზრდება ინტერესი და აქტუალობა ვიკინგების ეპოქის, როგორც საკვლევი საგნის მიმართ ისტორიოგრაფიაში.

საკვლევო საკითხის გარშემო განსაკუთრებით გაიზარდა ინტერესი უკანასკნელი წლების განმავლობაში. არსებობს უამრავი სამეცნიერო ნაშრომი, სადაც აღნიშნული ეპოქა მრავალმხრივ საკმაოდ დეტალურადაა არის შესწავლილი. ამიტომ წინამდებარე მიმოხილვას, აღნიშნული საკითხის სრულყოფილად, ამომწურავად წარმოჩენის პრეტენზია არ გააჩნია. ჩვენ მიზანს წარმოადგენს, მკითხველს საერთო წარმოდგენა შევუქმნათ აღნიშნული ეპოქის შესწავლის პროცესში წყაროებში დაცული მონაცემების მნიშვნელობის შესახებ. ამ რთული საკითხის შესახებ სიტყვის თქმას უმთავრესად ის გარემოება გვაბედინებს, რომ ამ თემის შესახებ ქართულ ისტორიოგრაფიაში დღემდე თითქმის არაფერი დაწერილა. საკითხის კვლევის პრაქტიკულ დანიშნულებას მიღებული დასკვნები და შედარებები წარმოადგენს, რომელიც გარკვეულ დახმარებას გაუწევს, როგორც შუა საუკუნეების ევროპის ისტორიის, ასევე სკანდინავიისტიკის საკითხებით დაინტერესებულ მკვლევარებს.

ნორვეგიის მეფის ოლაფ I (995-100) ტრიუგვასონის მოღვაწეობა, გამეფებამდე და გამეფებს შემდეგ, საკმაოდ ბევრ საინტერესო ინფორმაციას შეიცავს როგორც სკანდინავიის რეგიონში, ასევე მის ფარგლებს გარეთ. ცხადია, მასალის ერთ ნაშრომში განხილვა შეუძლებელია და აღნიშნულ საკითხს, შეიძლება ცალკე სამეცნიერო კვლევა მიეძღვნას. ვეცადეთ გვეჩვენებინა, ახალი სარწმუნოების გავრცელების პროცესში მეფის როლი და მისი მოღვაწეობის ანალიზი სხვადასხვა წყაროებზე დაყრდნობით.

**საძიებო სიტყვები:** ვიკინგები, სკანდინავია, ოლაფ I ტრიუგვასონი, ქრისტიანიზაცია, ნორვეგია, შუა საუკუნეები.

## Introduction

Chronological framework of the Viking Age, VIII-XI centuries is an important period in the history of Scandinavian society, characterized by great political, socio-economic and cultural changes. In parallel with the socio-economic transformations, important processes took place in the political life of Scandinavian society: the spread of christianity, the establishment of independent kingdoms and their struggle for supremacy, the purposeful pursuit of integration into civilized Europe. The spread of christianity played an important role in life of society, which took place in parallel with international trade and economic ties and battles in the foreign arena. From IX century onwards, intense attacks on the kingdoms of Western Europe, political alliances with them entered an active phase and the internal conditions for the spread of the new faith were gradually created.

These processes are related to the activities of various political rulers. Among them, a prominent place in the history of Norway during the Viking Age is occupied by King Olaf I Tryggvason (995-1000), who appears as an interesting and important hero in medieval sources. Medieval authors offer interesting and contradictory versions of his personality and years of reign, so it is difficult to draw separate conclusions.

It can be said that the portrait of King Olaf I is completely unrecognizable in the sources and is somehow mysterious, which doesn't lose its relevance in modern scientific space. The Viking raids brought significant political and trade ties with Europe and the Baltic region, as well as Russia and Byzantium, and left an interesting mark on the political and cultural life of the various communities living in the area. It was during the reign of Olaf I Tryggvason, that a major event took place in the cultural life of the Kingdom of Norway, the proclamation of christianity as the official religion, which played a crucial role in the history of the country's further development.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the historical information about the reign of Olaf I Tryggvason (995-1000), one of the most prominent rulers in the history of Norway during the Viking Age, as well as his historical portrait. The spread of christianity in the kingdom of Norway had some precedents before Olaf became king. This process wasn't completed during his reign, but it was Olaf's reign and his foreign policy that led to the proclamation of christianity as the official state religion in the kingdom of Norway, based on a whole complex of cultural and political conditions. Consequently, we consider the king's political activity in the process of christianization of the kingdom of Norway, requiring a separate analysis based on medieval historical sources. Discussion of this issue is a novelty in the Georgian scientific space and we tried to offer Georgian readers not only a biography of the king, or an analysis of his work, but also highlight the peculiarities of his work with various authors of the middle ages and modern era. The aim of our research is to analyze the sources related to the spread of christianity in the region in a historical, religious and cultural context. The research topic is all the more relevant, because it hasn't been studied in Georgian historiography. The aim of the research topic is to present the historical processes of the Viking Age in the Scandinavian region, based on the combination of historical

sources of archaeological data and relevant scientific literature. Among such important issues as the spread of christianity in Scandinavian region, the reasons for the motivation of local rulers in the process, cultural and political changes caused by communion with the new faith, which significantly contributed to the integration of this community into christendom. Based on the existing research, we will be able to make some contribution to the process of studying the issue.

### **Methods**

In the study of the issue, for its correct understanding, the synthetic processing of information is used, the method of analysis of data from the scientific literature, the first source for a comprehensive study of the issue, based on the principle of historicism.

### **Results**

Based on the analysis of the sources about king Olaf I of Norway (995-1000), we can conclude that the support of the kingdom of England in this case, both military-political and religious, was crucial for the kingdom of Norway in the context of internal political controversies. Analysis of the sources shows that, the five-year reign of Olaf Tryggvason marks the beginning of significant political and religious changes in Norwegian history. King Olaf is depicted in medieval sources as a brave warrior and shrewd diplomat, who devised the means of securing sovereignty for a kingdom with a small and complex geopolitics. In the process of integration with the civilized world, one of the most important strategic tasks was the adoption of christianity, which began during the reign of Olaf Tryggvason and was successfully crowned during the reign of Olaf II Haraldsson (1015-1028).

### **Discussion**

The spread of the new faith in Norway was the result of the political influence of the kingdom of England, as opposed to the influence of the bishopric of Hamburg-Bremen and the kingdom of Germany. The first attempt to spread christianity was related to the attempt of Haakon Haraldsson ("Hakon the Good" around 920-961) in X century, who like Olaf, was baptized in christian way in England. Consequently Olaf's goals for the spread of the new faith must have had some basis, and the king's efforts with the missionaries couldn't have been founded on empty ground. In parallel with the spread of christianity in Norway, the process of conversion for a politically disintegrated kingdom was underway, hence Olaf's struggle for the spread of christianity, as a result of his alliance with the kingdom of England, as a reliable international partner and political supporter.

#### **Analysis of Viking-age sources about Olaf I Tryggvason**

Olaf I's (995-1000) struggle for power, his political activity, can be considered on the basis of various interpretations in the sources. In discussing the matter, we can't miss the important

biographical details of the king's life, which contain so much interesting information, that the five years of Olaf I's reign is a logical and interesting continuation of his early biography. The persecution of Olaf, as a Viking in the homeland began even before his birth. His father, konung Tryggve, grandson of the first king of Norway, Harald I the Magnificent (850-932), was assassinated by members of the royal dynasty, during an internal political controversy. Olaf's mother, Astrid took refuge in her native Upland where, according to one version, was born Olaf- the future king of Norway. Astrid apparently couldn't find a safe place with his parents, temporarily relocated to Sweden, and eventually left with his brother, Sigurd Eriksson, who served with Vladimir I the Great, chief of Kievan Rus (958-1015). In Russia, Olaf gained experience as a strong warrior, continuing his quest for fortune in Baltic region (Alison, 2011, pp. 141-147).

In 994 Olaf was baptized in Hampshire, England by the bishop of Canterbury. According to one version, Olaf was already baptized and this was confirmed in Hampshire. Prior to his enthronement Olaf, in addition to England, was an ally of the German Emperor Otto II (973-983), against the combined forces of king Harald Bluetooth of Denmark (958-986) and the de facto ruler of Norway, earl Haakon. In 995 Olaf defeated his main rival, earl Haakon, the de facto ruler of kingdom and regained power in Norway, elected at the center of the kingdom at Trondheim. The struggle for spreading power throughout Scandinavia, began. At his initiative, the traveler Leif Erikson was baptized, who in turn took the clergy to christianize the people of Iceland and Greenland. As already mentioned, Olaf had the ambition to rule the United Scandinavia, for this purpose he asked to marry Sigrid, queen of Sweden, which she refused. The pagan queen didn't want to marry a christian king. Eventually Olaf married Tire, sister of Sven I (986-1014) king of Denmark, who ran away from her husband, Burislav, king of the Wends. In 1000, earl Haakon's successors, with the combined armies of Denmark, Sweden and the Wends, defeated Olaf's fleet at the battle of Svolder. Defeated King Olaf of Norway, who was fighting with his famous ship "Long Serpent", disappeared from the battle forever (Alison, 2011, pp. 228-230).

The earliest source about Olaf's reign is "The History of the Archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen" by Adam of Bremen, XI century German chronicler. Adam of Bremen's main goal was to show, the importance of the episcopate of Hamburg, it's dignity in Scandinavian region. This issue must have been of particular importance to the German clergy, given the circumstances that the Danish monarchs had already sought to ally with the Pope and demanded the establishment of episcopacies in the region, independent from the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen, but author tries to emphasize the role of the bishopric of Hamburg-Bremen in the process of conversion of Scandinavia and criticizes the king of Norway Olaf Tryggvason. Calls him pagan, magician and king, kidnapped by magic. According to the modern scholar Anders Winroth, this criticism must be due to the dissatisfaction of the German clergy and bishops with the involvement of another church, such as the christian church of England, in process of christianization of Scandinavia (Winroth, 2012, pp. 125-128).

We find interesting information about Olaf in Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson's work "Heimskringla" (XII-XIII centuries). We should also mention XII century source Theodoricus Monachus's brief history of the kings of Norway. "Historia Norwegiæ", short history of Norway, written in Latin by an anonymous monk. "Islandingabok" the same "The Book Of Icelanders", whose story focuses mainly on king Olaf's contribution to the conversion of Iceland. Unlike Adam of Bremen, the narratives of this authors have one thing in common, portraying Olaf as a christian missionary king.

In his paper "The Conversion of Scandinavia", researcher Anders Winroth offers an analysis about interesting parallels. Medieval Scandinavian authors use the example of the life of Christ, try to show us the connection between Christ's and king Olaf's life and to show the role of the king in spreading of Christianity: Olaf was born without father, like Christ. Olaf's enemy, earl Haakon is a prototype of Herod, trying to find and kill little Olaf, (This comparison can be found in the "Historia Norwegiæ"), after the defeat at the Battle of Svolder, no one could find Olaf's body, as well as the body of Christ. There are several version, that angels took him to heaven, that he disappeared into the light, that he was later seen alive as the Christ after the resurrection (Winroth, 2012, pp. 122-124).

Clearly, the death and disappearance of king Olaf, has become a source of interpretation for many authors and most of them try to glorify the king of Norway as much as possible, to present him as an exemplary believer, who in his life, resembled the Lord. We think It is noteworthy, that the sources don't specify places, where the christian king preached and where people gathered to hear him. In his paper, "Historia Norwegiæ" (XII-XIII centuries), unknown author tells about the preaching of Christianity by king Olaf: "Olaf gathered his countrymen, living by the sea. If the bishop couldn't convert the pagans, king used "earthly weapons" to defeat all the unbelievers, the noble and the lowly, the young and the old" (Gronlie, 2006, pp. 12-15).

In his brief history of the kings of Norway, Theodoricus Monachus explains, that the above-mentioned "earthly weapon" implies, the king's anger against the pagans and tries to find a theological basis for king Olaf's violent methods by quoting the words of Christ from the Gospel of Luke: "Go in the ways and in the trenches. Persuade them, to come and fill my house." (Jakobsson, 2022, pp. 178-182).

The work of the Icelandic chronicler Snorri Sturluson "Heimskringla" (XII-XIII centuries), which contains "The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason", describes in detail the life of the king. In this source, Olaf is depicted as a propagandist, missionary king in his kingdom, as well as in Iceland and Greenland. The saga contains an interesting episode about king Olaf as the preacher of christianity: "One day king Olaf met a man on a walk, king asked him name, his name was Halfrudr. King asked: "Are you a skald?" The man replied: "I can compose poems". King replied: "Do you want to become a Christian and then a follower of mine?" Halfruder replied: "I will become a Christian if I am baptized by your hand". King baptized the man and became his protector" (Alison, 2011, pp. 208-209).

We should pay attention to an important detail, the king calls a pagan man to be baptized a christian and only then can he become a follower of the king. Well known is that, during the Viking Age in Scandinavia, skalds and the king's poets enjoyed considerable authority in society. Good skald, was a person in demand for the king, yet from the above episode it appears that the main priority for the king is, to adopt christianity and only then can skald cooperate with the king. About the king's missionary policy in Iceland and Greenland we read in saga: "After a two-year reign in Norway, king Olaf was accompanied by a saxon priest named Fengbendr, a fierce warrior and at the same time a good priest, a worthy man. The king sent him in Iceland to spread christianity."

We also learn from the work, that the priest remained in Iceland for two years. Preaching christianity, baptizing many people including influential dignitaries, but as Snorri Sturluson points out, the number of opponents of the new faith was greater. In two years a priest had to kill three people. The priest, who had returned to Norway, reported to the king the situation in Iceland, that he had been the victim of violence, persecuted by pagans, who wanted to kill him. Saga tells us, that king was so enraged by the priest's attack, that he summoned the Icelanders at the royal court and ordered them to be killed. Icelanders asked king to give them a chance to be baptized and to show their efforts to spread christianity in Iceland. Among them were influential Icelanders, who promised obedience and support to the king. Finally it was pointed out, that the clergyman sent by the king, couldn't achieve the result due to his cruel nature and violent methods. The author notes that king accepted the advice of the Icelanders (Alison, 2011, pp. 17-19).

It seems, Olaf I wasn't able to achieve results in Iceland by violent methods. It first became necessary to cooperate with the Icelandic ruling class through diplomatic negotiations. King Olaf's missionary policy was also directed to Greenland, where he sent Leif Erikson, along with the clergy. Compared to these sources, there is a sharp difference in the work of above-mentioned christian historian Adam of Bremen "The History of the archbishop of Hamburg-Breme", where he writes of king Olaf, that king was a magician, who devoted a great deal of time to prophesying to birds" (Tschan, 2002, pp. 82-83)

It is clear from this source, that Olaf's religious policies and his alliance with the Kingdom of England, were a hindrance to the German Kingdom's political ambitions in the Scandinavian region. Analysis of historical processes and sources suggests, that the criticism of the king of Norway by a German historian had a political basis and covertly expressed the dissatisfaction of the German Kingdom. Despite king Olaf's rigid and violent methods of spreading christianity in Iceland and Greenland, in Scandinavian sources the king is portrayed as a believer, a devout christian. Based on the analysis of historical processes, it is clear that behind the king's missionary efforts are his political goals: to rule the united kingdom of Norway, to spread power throughout the Scandinavian region. Based on the analysis of the information protected in the sources, it is clear that the interests of the parties are taken into account. Scandinavian sources emphasize the generosity of the king of Norway's intentions. To portray the king as a figure, pursuing national interests. These contradictory circumstances, once again, confirm the need to consider the rule of Olaf Tryggvason separately, from different angles.

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