Pilgrimages and crusades

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When the Viking raids ceased in the middle of the eleventh century it did not put an end to the Scandinavian adventures abroad. Christian kings and chieftains still equipped ships for long journeys, but for totally different purposes. Their aims were no longer simply trade, plunder or conquest in foreign lands; they now wished to visit the great holy places of Christendom—particularly Rome and the Holy Land. Pilgrimages had begun.

When kings and chieftains—the people about whom we have the earliest knowledge—set out on journeys, they had many motives—penance or fulfilment of an oath, for example—but they often combined such motives with political aspirations. This is true of Knut the Great's journey to Rome in 1027, where he participated in the coronation of the Emperor Conrad II. It is also true of Erik Ejegod's first pilgrimage to Rome and Bari in 1098, during which he negotiated with the Pope for the establishment of the first Scandinavian ecclesiastical province.

Until about 1200 our sources tell almost exclusively of pilgrimages from Denmark and the west of Scandinavia. It seems probable that St Olaf visited the grave of St James at Santiago de Compostela as early as 1012–13 when he was travelling in France and Spain. Sighvat Thórdarson travelled from Iceland to Rome in 1030, and the Icelandic chieftain Gelli Thorkelsson also visited Rome about 1070. Erik Ejegod set out on a second pilgrimage for Jerusalem along the Russian rivers. He stayed with the Varangian guard at the Byzantine court, but never reached Palestine, for he died in Cyprus in 1103. The Norwegian king, Sigurd Jorsalfar (Sigurd the Jerusalem-traveller), journeyed to the Holy Land by another route. He travelled by way of England around the Iberian peninsula (stopping at Santiago), into the Mediterranean and arrived in Jerusalem in 1110. Rǫgnvald Kali, Earl of Orkney, and his companions took the same route to Jerusalem in the middle of the twelfth century and, as recorded in *Orkneyinga saga* (cat. no. 525), had a particularly eventful journey.

Even in the early years of the Christian period, however, pilgrimages were not confined to kings and chieftains. As early as the second half of the eleventh century there are reports of pilgrimages within Scandinavia—to the tomb of St Olaf in Trondheim, for example. It was not until the later Middle Ages, however, that pilgrimages were undertaken by large numbers of people, as a normal part of their spiritual life. A unique source, the fraternity book of the Benedictine

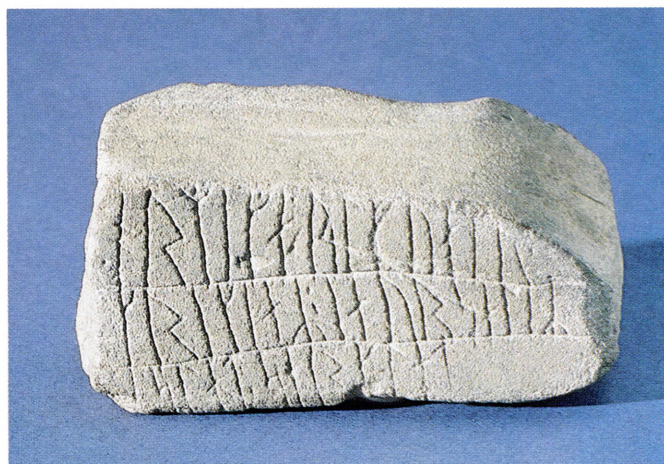

Fig. 1. Runic inscription on the small whetstone from Timans, Gotland, Sweden, mentioning both Jerusalem and Iceland. End of the 11th cent. Cat. no. 485.

monastery of Reichenau on Lake Constance, contains a list of the names of more than forty-thousand pilgrims who visited the monastery on their way to Rome in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Almost seven hundred of these have names of Scandinavian origin; most are Danish, but there are a few Norwegians and thirteen Icelanders.

Both Erik Ejegod's second pilgrimage and Sigurd Jorsalfar's journey in 1108–10 are described as 'armed pilgrimages', and thus had more the character of Crusades. By taking part in a Crusade, people obtained the same absolution and indulgence as they would by making a pilgrimage.

Fig. 2. The Gundslevmagle cross was made in the Byzantine area and found in Denmark in a hoard from the second half of the 11th cent. Cat. no. 488.

Fig. 3. Reliquary cross found at Tønsberg, Norway. It is probably 11th-cent. and contained a splinter of the True Cross. Cat. no. 489.

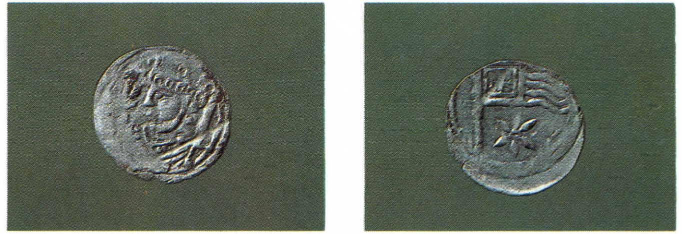

Fig. 4. Danish penny from the second half of the 12th cent. There is a ?palm frond on the obverse and a crusading flag on the reverse, the symbols of pilgrimage and crusade. The cross-emblazoned banner on the reverse is probably the earliest depiction of the Danish flag. Cat. no. 544b.

As early as the ninth century the Church offered pardons to those taking part in the struggles against the pagan Vikings and Muslims, but when Pope Urban II in 1095 called the Christian world to arms in order to recapture Jerusalem, the Vikings were among those who 'took up the cross'.

When Pope Eugenius III and Bernard of Clairvaux initiated the Second Crusade in 1147, the Danes, under the joint kings Sven and Knut, took up arms against their pagan Slav neighbours south of the Baltic. This war, which in ferocity and strength was basically a continuation of earlier Viking expeditions, carried formal papal approval as a Crusade, but was otherwise a total failure.

The full-scale attacks launched in the next few decades by the Scandinavians against their eastern neighbours were all carried out as Crusades. Valdemar the Great struck coins with a palm branch—the symbol of the Jerusalem pilgrims—on one face, and with a cross on the other (fig. 4). The capture of Arkona and the consequent conversion of Rügen in 1168/9 opened the way for the Danes to penetrate further east. But Knut VI's offensive against the Christian princes of Pomerania in the 1180s shows that the crusades were merely an excuse for ordinary piratical wars.

In 1171, Pope Alexander III encouraged the Scandinavian kings to stage a Crusade against heathen Estonia. The Estonian Crusade began in 1197 but met with little success until 1219, when the Danish king Valdemar Sejr was victorious at the battle of Lyndanise. Valdemar built a chain of forts to defend his newly conquered land, of which Tallinn ('The fortification of the Danes') was one. Through his conquest of Estonia, Valdemar brought almost all the Baltic lands, from Holstein in the west to the Gulf of Finland in the east, under his control. That this short-lived Baltic Empire was formed in the name of Crusade is demonstrated by the fact that the king chose as his flag the arms of the Teutonic Knights, the Dannebrog—which is still the Danish national flag.

Although the motives for these wars were really little more than power politics, and although the methods were no different from those of the earlier Viking raids, this does not reduce their impact: partly because of these expeditions the Slav and Baltic peoples became absorbed into the western Church and culture. No other Crusade—apart from that which drove the Moors out of Spain—had such lasting effect.

Fig. 5. Crusader on a gravestone from Vejerslev, Mors, Denmark. C. 1200.