Based on burial evidence, how prevalent was Christianity at the time of the royal conversion in Sweden?

The aim of this essay is to determine the prevalence of Christianity among the Swedish population in the tenth century. In their work to trace the Christianisation of northern Europe, historians have been limited to written sources that have largely been concerned only with the upper echelons of society, particularly of monarchs. All three of the Nordic kingdoms historically converted to Christianity towards the end of the tenth century: King Harald Bluetooth of Denmark converted in c. AD 960, Olaf Tryggvason of Norway in c. 995, and Olaf Skötkonung of Sweden in c. 1008 (Staecker 2003: 475). Nevertheless, the conversion of a monarch does not have to correlate strictly with the Christianisation of the populace. It is unlikely that all, or even most, of the Swedes converted to Christianity all at once at the behest of their monarch. The conversion of the Swedes may have largely occurred *before* the conversion of Olaf Skötkonung as a popular, bottom-up movement, or it may have occurred *after* the royal conversion with royal pressure encouraging conversions, top-down. Unlike the historical record, the archaeological record is not limited to the literate elite and is thus more favourable for detecting change among populaces. There are a number of established archaeological records for studying Christianisation in Scandinavia including landscapes, parish boundaries, rune stones, sculptures, place names, architecture, and even diet. This essay will exclusively focus on the mortuary record. I will first adapt and develop a method for detecting Christianity in Swedish burials, then apply it to two Swedish case studies from the period: one trading place, Birka, and one rural site, Barshalder.

Historical Background

The Swedes were in contact with the Roman Empire when Christianity was its official religion, so contact with Christians must go back as far as the fourth century, if not earlier (Hodges 2012: 6). The first known mission to Sweden was not until AD 830 when Archbishop Ansgar of Hamburg established a church in Birka with permission of local *things*. Although he secured converts, medieval historians do not reference Christian Swedes until tenth-century missionaries including Unni from Hamburg and those sent by King Æthelred (and presumably others) from England arrived in Sweden (Sanmark 2004: 552; Adam of Bremen 1. 60.). Olaf was baptised in c. 1008 and, unlike his father who lapsed in 'paganism', was evidently devoted to his new faith, as were his two sons who became Christian kings of Sweden.

Historical sources describe Sweden to have been in violent political turmoil in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, so it is not clear what potential power the monarchy had in promoting Christianity (Adam of Bremen 3. 5.).

Theory of Religion and Conversion

In this essay, I will refer to 'religion' to mean any common organised set of beliefs, practices, and worldviews. It is important to recognise that early medieval people probably would not have considered their 'religion' to be separate from their everyday lives. Archaeology can only show us the materials and to some degree the practices of past people, which means that we cannot directly identify individual belief. The aim of this essay is not to identify the religious *identity* of tenth-century individuals, but rather to determine the prevalence of Christian *practice*. Burial practice is particularly ideal for identifying early medieval religion for three reasons: 1) it is comparatively archaeologically abundant and has been studied in great detail by many scholars, 2) conceptions of death are an important aspect of Christianity (Bynum 1995), and 3) the mortuary record is indicative of *practice*.

It is important that we understand *how* conversion occurs and how historians and archaeologists might recognise conversion differently. Medieval accounts describe large populations that were converted instantly by charismatic missionaries, usually supported by the performance of miracles to convince them of the power of Christianity. Modern historians, such as Jones (1984) and Cusack (1998), suggest that conversions were slower and subtler, but still maintain the significant impact of missionaries. Winroth (2012) and Lund (2013) both recently differentiated institutional (Top-down) conversion from popular (bottom-up) conversion. Institutional conversion is dated by distinct events, whereas popular conversion is a gradual process that occurs over multiple generations from informal contact. This distinction is important because monarchs likely converted for political reasons, perhaps to make alliances or consolidate power (see Winroth 2012), whereas popular conversion is personal.

Sanmark (2004) made an observation that missionaries were not successful at converting kingdoms until after the monarch had been converted. She drew on various examples, including Anglo-Saxon England and Frankia, where monarchs implemented laws and legislation that rewarded converts to Christianity and outlawed 'pagan' practices (Sanmark 2004: 555). The argument follows that only with these royal incentives in place would large portions of the population convert. If this is indeed correct,

then Christianity would not be widespread in Sweden until after the conversion of King Olaf Skötkonung who we assume legislated similar incentives.

It is worth noting that during the process of popular conversions, new religions are not necessarily introduced as a basket of beliefs and practices. Elements can be introduced piecemeal, and it is possible for Christian practices to have existed alongside 'pagan' practices without being considered contradictory. Indeed, a number of scholars have observed this of Viking-Age Scandinavia (Lund 2013; Winroth 2012; Staecker 2003).

Indicators of Christianisation

Unfortunately, we know little about early Scandinavian Christianity. We can use modern Christianity for comparison, but we should not expect modern Christian funerary practices to exactly resemble tenth-century funerary practices. There have been criticisms of identifying religion through burial practices (Dierkens 1998: 43; Halsall 1995: 62; Pluskowski and Patrick 2003), especially since funerary practices are not necessarily uniform within a given religion, and other practices (e.g. baptism) may have been considered more important. We certainly must recognise that there were variations and fragments of Christianity which could reflect in burial practice, especially since the early Anglo-Saxon and Frankish Churches are noted to have been relatively lenient on funerary practices (Bullough 1983; Pluskowski and Patrick 2003). I have identified five distinct characteristics of Christian burials. Other characteristics from candles to the shapes of coffins have also been identified (Winroth 2012: 132), however I have sought to identify characteristics that could be applied universally in Northern Europe. It is hoped that this method could be equally applied to similar questions regarding the British Isles and beyond. It would be inaccurate to propose that these five characteristics provide a perfect checklist for Christian burial practice, however, if we remain self-critical these characteristics can be used as a reasonable starting point.

My method counts the total number of positively identified Viking-Age burials at a site, then identifies, counts, and organises those burials that display my five characteristics. Subsequently, I will calculate the proportion of burials that are characteristically Christian. The proportion will roughly correlate to the prevalence of Christian burial practice. In the interest of identifying distinct Christian practices, the essay will not speculate on indeterminate burials.

The first characteristic, inhumation, was a rule for Christian burial. Almost without exception, cremation was taboo in early medieval Christianity, because of the Christian belief of the Resurrection of the Dead on 'Judgement Day' (Bynum 1995: 119). Indeed, Charlemagne legislated the death penalty for the act of cremating corpses (Sanmark 2003). Winroth (2012: 132) further suggested that cremation was taboo because it was strongly associated with 'paganism', although it has been argued that regional variants of Christianity did indeed allow cremation (Andersson 1997: 363). Regardless, one can see a pattern that most Christian churchyards by the tenth century comprised exclusively inhumation burials, and this general transition from cremation to inhumation is widely accepted (Meaney 2003; Gräslund 2003; Winroth 2012).

Secondly, Christian burials tend to be oriented with their heads facing west. This orientation aligns with the positioning of churches and has to do with the direction of the second coming of Christ on 'Judgement Day' (Bynum 1995: 185), and this practice is observed today. I allow an error of +/- 45° to account for deviations in the seasonal positions of the sun.

Thirdly, Christians tend to be buried without any artefacts except their clothing or other wearable items. In practice, this denotes that Christian burials would only have artefacts such as pendants or combs, but not animal bones, weapons, or food. The Christian worldview maintained that individuals cannot take physical items from the world of the living to the world of the dead. Nonetheless, Christian burials with grave goods, such as the grave of St Cuthbert, with reading matter and reliquary were not unheard of (Abrams 1998: 116). Accordingly, legitimate Christian funerals could have plausibly allowed for small grave goods including chests or fine pottery. At the risk of oversimplification, we will consider the cessation of all non-wearable grave goods as an indication of Christian burial. Meaney (2003: 239), Geake (2003: 261), Toy (2003: 501) and Gräslund (2003: 485) have all argued that the cessation of grave goods was the most visible indicator of Christianisation. Even so, critics such as Abrams (1998: 116) have pointed out that cessation of grave goods alone cannot be used an indicator of Christianisation.

A related method for identifying religious burials involves identifying artefacts that symbolise that religion. The classic symbol of Christianity is the cross, which in this period appeared most frequently as pendants and brooches. Crosses also appear on the lower parts of a type of pottery known as 'Frisian jugs' which are occasionally found as grave goods. Symbol of 'paganism' include 'Thor's hammer' pendants, which were similar in size and material (metal, wood, or ivory) as cross pendants. The 'Thor's hammer' may have been consciously developed as the 'pagan' equivalent to the cross so

that ‘pagans’ could display their non-Christianity (Winroth 2012: 314). We must be cautious when assuming the religion of an individual from the appearance of one of these symbols in a grave, especially since the ‘Vikings’ are known to have plundered Christian places and traded with Christian merchants.

Fourth, Christians tend to be buried in coffins. This is a less commonly cited indicator, but this trend has been observed in Scandinavia by Gräslund (2003) and Winroth (2012), and for comparison in both England and Estonia most churchyards comprised coffined inhumations (Meaney 2003; Toy 2003).

Fifth, Christian burials tended to be clustered into concentrated areas. Christian burial practice prescribes that individuals should be buried immediately next to one another in ‘churchyards’ (Bynum 1995: 22). Although, as parallel examples from Anglo-Saxon England have shown, a burial can still be considered Christian even if it is not adjacent to a church (Sanmark 2004: 267), and churches are not necessarily contemporary to adjacent ‘churchyards’. With and without churches, we see this pattern of clustered parallel Christian graves throughout early medieval Europe (England Meaney: 2003; Sweden Sanmark 2003). Those Christian burials that are identified are typically sited in small defined burial grounds (Sanmark 2004: 266). Conversely, to be buried within a consecrated graveyard may have been more of a privilege than a compulsion. It is possible for Christians to have been buried among ‘pagans’, with the demarcation of cemeteries having more to do with social stratification than with religion (Meaney 2003: 237).

It is worth stating that ‘pagan’ burial practices were variant to the extreme (Lund 2013), and Christian burials, although varied, were far more homogenised (Price 2011). I argue this is because Christianity was a more organised religion, with institutional archdioceses and a central papacy, whereas ‘paganism’ remained a deeply localised, unorganised collection of beliefs, practices, and worldviews. A final indicator of Christianity may be the comparative homogenisation of burial practice. Despite these variations, the general trajectory from ‘pagan’ cremation burials with grave goods to Christian oriented inhumations without grave goods is widely accepted (Valk 2001; Toy: 2003).

Case Study 1: Barshalder

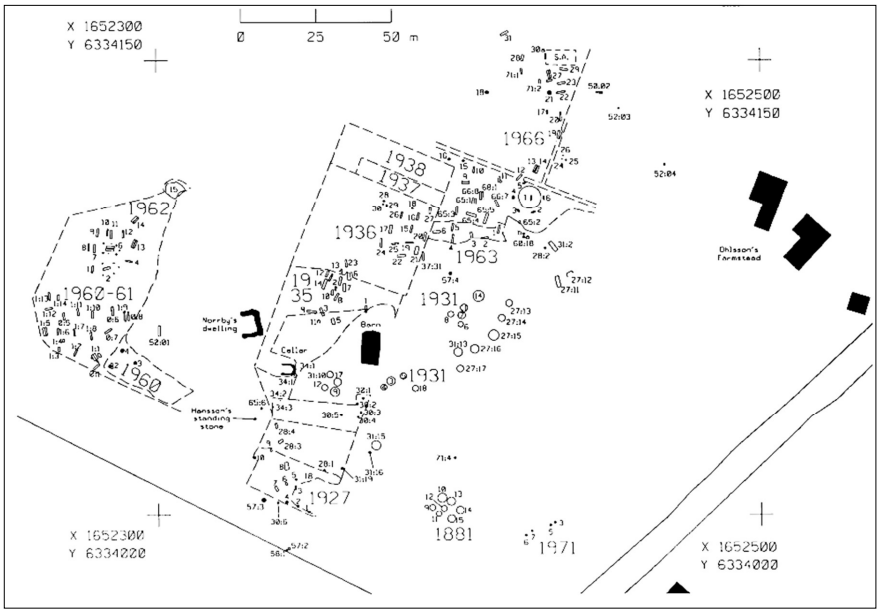

Figure 1 Site plan of Barshalder (Rundkvist 2003a: 94)

Barshalder is a rural cemetery located in southern Gotland in the Baltic Sea. As a resource, I have used the catalogues from the most recent published site reports (Rundkvist 2003a; Rundkvist 2003b). At Barshalder, three broad phases have been identified: the migration period, the Vendel Period, and the Middle to Late Viking Age, the latter of which has been absolute dated to the tenth to eleventh centuries through a combination of typologies, particularly silver jewellery and copper bowls. Problematically for us, this phase was additionally defined by what Carlsson (1983 referenced by Rundkvist 2003a: 6) called an "abandonment of pagan cemeteries", so we will have to rely on typologies alone.

There are 345 positively identified burials at Barshalder, 114 of which have been identified as 'late Viking Age' (Rundkvist 2003a: 103-135). Of the 114 Viking-Age burials, 108 (95%) were inhumations. Of those inhumations however, only 19 (18%) of those are oriented with the heads facing west +/- 45°. Instead, the majority (77/108 or 71%) are facing south, perhaps because it aligns with the coast of the island.

TOTAL POSITIVELY IDENTIFIED BURIALS	**345**
TOTAL POSITIVELY IDENTIFIED VIKING-AGE BURIALS	114
• **TOTAL VIKING-AGE CREMATIONS**	6
• **TOTAL VIKING-AGE INHUMATIONS**	108
• **ORIENTED HEAD FACING WEST +/- 45°**	19
• **EXCAVATED VIKING-AGE INHUMATIONS**	18
• **WITH COFFINS**	3
• **WITHOUT COFFINS**	15

Figure 2 Types of burials at Barshalder

Of the 108 confirmed Viking-Age inhumations, only 18 have been excavated. Five (27%) of those had no grave goods besides amulets, brooches, beads, combs, and other jewellery, although none were without grave goods entirely. Interestingly, if we include knives on this list as wearable artefacts, then there are three more inhumations (8/18 or 44%) that qualify. In fact, there were only three Viking-Age knives uncovered from the site, so it appears that knives were associated with these non-grave good assemblages. Except for knives, there were no weapons in the Viking-Age inhumations. Figure 3 shows the breakdown of types of grave goods. Even excluding knives, we find that non-grave good burials were proportionally more common (71/105 or 68%) than in the preceding period. An important difference is that the Viking-Age burials with non-wearable grave goods are restricted to what I have categorised as 'domestic' grave goods: needles, spindle whorls, and vessels.

TYPES OF VIKING-AGE GRAVE GOODS	**18 (%)**
NONE	0
• **NONE EXCLUDING WEARABLE ARTEFACTS**	5 (28%)
• **NONE EXCLUDING WEARABLE ARTEFACTS AND KNIVES**	8 (44%)
DOMESTIC (SPINDLE WHORLS, NEEDLES, + NEEDLE CASES)	8 (44%)
• **DOMESTIC INCLUDING ALL VESSELS**	10 (56%)
JEWELLERY	8 (44%)
• **AMULETS**	5 (28%)
• **BROOCHES**	8 (44%)
ANIMALS	0

Figure 3 Types of grave goods in Viking-Age inhumations at Barshalder

In total, there were ten artefacts uncovered with crosses, although only two have been positively identified as *Christian* crosses, both of which were pendants. The presence of Christian crosses in inhumation burials without any non-wearable grave goods creates a very strong case that these individuals were Christians. These two individuals are the confidently Christian individuals of the 114 known burials.

Based on evidence of in situ nails, three (17%) of the Viking-Age inhumations were buried in coffins. This is again less common than in the combined previous phases (53/150 or 35%). However, this may be underrepresented since wooden coffins do not preserve well. Importantly, what are absent are burials under mounds and in boats, neither of which would have been permitted in Christianity (Winroth 2012: 132).

There are several distinct cemeteries at Barshalder (Figure 1). Viking-Age burials are found throughout, and two cemeteries have exclusively Viking-Age burials: 1960-61, and 1935. In both of these cemeteries, the burials are more clustered than is average at the site, and in 1935 they are particularly clustered. Furthermore, in 1935 there are no cremations at all. Unfortunately, of the two only 1960-61 has been fully excavated. It is likely that one or both of these were consecrated Christian cemeteries, although they are all oriented with their heads facing south. A church, probably erected later, is located by cemetery 1935.

Overall, we find none of the burials at Barshalder meet *all* of our characteristics, although Christian characteristics seem more common if we negate the prevalent south-facing orientation. Three (17%) burials fit the other four criteria, and this could be as many as eight (44%) if we allow for decomposition of the coffins and the acceptance of knives as grave goods, although that is stretching the evidence to include an absolute maximum. If we consider Christianisation as a gradual process, then it is evident that Christian practices are more commonplace than in the preceding phase, with cremations mostly absent, and mound and boat burials entirely absent. The increased clustering of inhumations, and the one cemetery devoid of cremations, further evidences the process of Christianisation.

Case Study 2: Birka

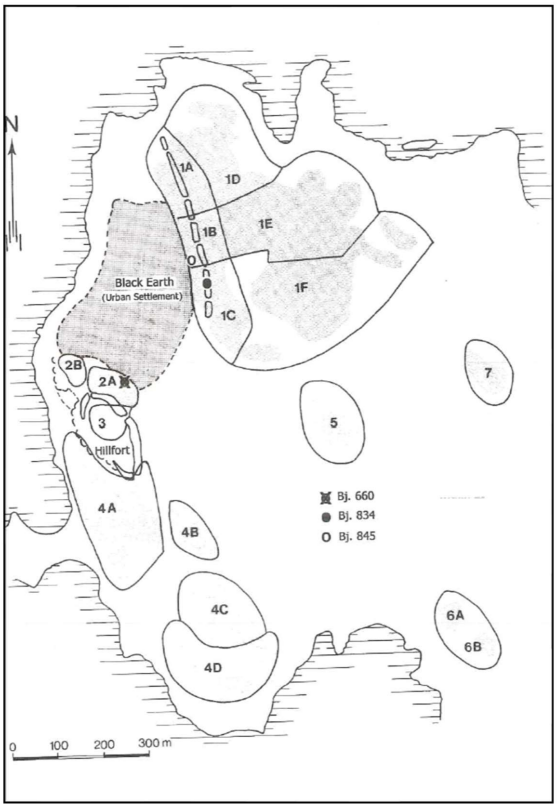

Figure 4 Site Plan of Birka (Price 2002: 129)

My second case study is Birka, a trading place with both settlement and cemetery archaeology, which presumably had greater contact to the Christian world than the rural site on Gotland. Indeed, the first recorded missions to Sweden were to Birka. We may thus hypothesise that Christianity would be more prevalent here than elsewhere in Sweden. For my method, I have relied on Gräslund's (1981) published site report and catalogue of excavated burials. The site at Birka has a more constricted absolute chronology from the eight to tenth centuries, with the latest coins finds dating from AD 960. The phasing at Birka is largely determined for each cemetery, and even then it is fairly weak unless individual burials are dated, therefore I will look only at the cemeteries at Hemlanden (represented as 1c-1f on the

map above), Borg (3), the cemetery north of Borg (2a-2b), and the Grindsbacka Cemetery (5), so that I will exclusively consider graves from the tenth and late ninth centuries (Gräslund 1981: 4). It is very important to note that, although they do overlap, the phases explored at Birka are earlier than the phases explored at Barshalder.

Within these combined cemeteries, there are a total of 776 confirmed burials, 429 (55%) of which are inhumations, although, as before, the number of inhumations with coffins may be underrepresented. Of those, 149 (35%) are burials with coffins (indicated by in situ nails), 178 (41%) are without coffins, and 102 (24%) are buried in cists or mounds.

TOTAL POSITIVELY IDENTIFIED VIKING-AGE BURIALS	**776**
• **TOTAL VIKING-AGE CREMATIONS**	347
• **TOTAL VIKING-AGE INHUMATIONS**	429
• **ORIENTED HEAD FACING WEST +/- 45°**	273
• **WITH COFFINS**	149
• **WITHOUT COFFINS**	178

Figure 5 Types of positively identified Viking-Age graves at Birka

Gräslund (1981: 28-29) counted and catalogued the orientations of all the phases of the burials at Birka. Of those inhumations where the orientation can be confirmed, a large majority (273 out of 327 or 83%) are oriented with their heads facing west +/- 45 °. More burials with coffins are oriented west than burials without, which supports the argument that coffins are an indicator of Christianity.

Of the 429 inhumations, 42 are without grave goods excluding wearable artefacts, 36 of which were in the Grindsbacka Cemetery. If we expand wearable artefacts to include knives, we have 43, and to include burnishing stones we have 44. Either number we choose gives us roughly 10%. Figure 6 shows the breakdown of grave goods. We find that at Birka the proportion of non-grave good burials is relatively small compared to those at Barshalder.

TYPES OF VIKING-AGE INHUMATION GRAVE GOODS	**429**
NONE	42 (10%)
• **NONE EXCLUDING CLOTHING ARTEFACTS**	43
• **NONE EXCLUDING CLOTHING ARTEFACTS AND KNIVES**	44
ANIMALS	11 (3%)

Figure 6 Types of Viking-Age inhumation grave goods

Figure 7 Reconstruction of Bj. 660 (Price 2002: 131)

Figure 8 Cross pendant found in Bj. 660 (Price 2002

There is a total of ten inhumations with cross pendants. Some of these crosses confound our Christian burial characteristics. Bj. 660 is an inhumation with a cruciform brooch (figure 8) and a box, pots, and bucket mounts (figure 7). There is additionally a 'Frisian jug' found in inhumation Bj. 854. Altogether the combined Christian symbols appear in eleven inhumations.

At Birka there are also four 'Thor's hammer' pendants, one of which appears in an inhumation with, among other things, weapons and a horse (Bj. 750). However, one of these 'pagan' pendants is found in the inhumation with the Frisian jug (Bj. 854) and another in a grave with a cross pendant (Bj. 750). Overt symbolism from both religions seems contradictory and has attracted different explanations. Gräslund (1981: 83-85) has argued that these might have been anything from individuals who had mixed-religious families, to individuals who could move fluidly from one religious identity to another. Winroth (2012: 139) has emphasised that these symbols are not necessarily contradictory. It is not unheard of for polytheistic religions to have flexible pantheons, and it is even possible that some tenth-century Swedes recognised both Thor and Jesus as gods.

Of those identified, Grindbacka has been the most frequently identified as a potential Christian cemetery (Gräslund 1981: 84; Sanmark 2003: 268). Here the burials are very clustered and even overlap, indicating an attention to keeping the graves within a consecrated area. It is likely that this was a Christian cemetery separated from the rest of the site, however even here there are cremation burials.

Overall, we find that 10% of the burials at Birka meet all of our characteristics of Christian burial so long as it was not problematic for a Christian to be buried among cremations. This proportion is smaller than at Barshalder despite Birka being a trading place, however this can also be explained by the earlier chronology of many of the burials at Birka. Here we see a continuation of 'pagan' burial practices including animal burials. Christian symbols are present but they are sparse and are sometimes found in the same graves as 'pagan' symbols.

Discussion

Depending on how liberally one wishes to identify Christianity based on these five characteristics, we struggle to find a prevalence of Christian burial practice in tenth-century Birka (10%) and Barshalder (17%). Any attempt to calculate a precise proportion from this data would be unreliable since the datasets are not wholly contemporary, but we can say it is roughly 10%. Only 36 burials at Birka met *all* of my characteristics (compared to zero at Barshalder) and these were not necessarily an exclusive Christian cemetery, so the number could be as little as zero between both sites. However, this small proportion could be misleading in at least four different ways.

Firstly, Christian burial practice may not have homogenised until legislation was put in place, so a substantial Christian population may have been invisible in the burial record until after the royal conversion. Essentially, there may have been many individuals who *had* converted to Christianity, but with no Christian model to follow, and no priests to instruct them, were *buried* in a pre-Christian practice, and so appear 'pagan' to us.

Secondly, the apparent burial practice probably better reflects the religion of their living family than the dead individual. If incoming Christianity was unpopular, then a 'pagan' family could still have given their converted son or daughter a 'pagan' funeral. Accordingly, first-generation Christians may be underrepresented.

Thirdly, practices that I have characterised as 'pagan' may instead be reflecting different non-religious social factors such as social stratification. For instance, being inhumed with knives may have been an indication of wealth, so wealthy Christian individuals might have been buried with knives even though weapons are not conventional Christian grave goods. If we include knife inhumations at Barshalder, the proportion of Christian burials increases to 44%.

Fourth, individual converts aside, we cannot expect all of society to have changed within a century, much less a single generation. Existing habits are hard to change, and Christian practices might have been introduced piecemeal. In this case, we would expect to see Christian and 'pagan' practices side by side, even in an early Christian society, so the south-facing burials at Barshalder and the ceramic grave goods at Birka need not indicate 'pagan' individuals. This I argue is the biggest problem with determining Christian presence because it is difficult to identify whether an individual is Christian or 'pagan' when they might practise both. Our distinction between the two religions may even be anachronistic.

With these points in mind, we can conclude that Christianity was not yet prevalent in Sweden. Nevertheless, Christian burial practices did become more common than in previous centuries. Although it is problematic to identify Christian *individuals*, or thus Christian *identity*, we can ascertain that Christian burial *practices* were relatively minor. I argue that this is because there were no priests or bishops to instruct Christian practices, so the worldviews and practices remained largely 'pagan'. It would only be until after the establishment of a Church that the social religion would gradually become Christianity. In regard to burial practice, Christianity was not prevalent in Sweden at the time of the royal conversion, although the introduction of Christian burial practices was well underway.

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