

How important were  
political and  
economic factors in  
the christianization of  
the ...



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The Vikings were often described as being the 'people who came from Scandinavia'<sup>1</sup>, the 'fierce race of the Danes, of the Norwegians, or of the Swedes,'<sup>2</sup> who plundered and pillaged their Christian neighbours. The Viking raiders not only put an economical strain on the Christendom, but as the Latin Christian, Byzantine and Islamic political powers grew in authority, their successful conversions became a trophy of the success for the warring political powers. Although the Viking society functioned differently under the Old Norse religion to Christian societies of the time, the political and economic factors that surged through Europe resulted in Viking dominance gradually fading away as Christianization 'moved the centre of the world.'<sup>3</sup>Christianity was more advantageous to the king as it asserts that he had been anointed by God to his position of power. If we take the example of Sweden during the pre-Christian Viking era, royal decisions had to be ratified by assemblies, which the king could manipulate, but could not control. These assemblies, known as 'thingar' in Old Norse, existed throughout Medieval Scandinavia. The Danish king, on the other hand, could make decisions without them. <sup>4</sup> This aristocratic way of rule can be compared to the king's aristocratic superiority within Christianity. Swedish kings were also bound to the laws of the land, as early Swedish law, recorded in 1020, states, 'he must swear to be faithful to all the Gotar, and he shall not break the true laws of our land'. Thus, the argument is raised on whether the old ways were more beneficial to the lower class peasantry than the method of society incorporated after Christianization. The peasantry of pre-Christianized Denmark paid their local chieftains (goði<sup>1/2</sup>i) tribute, but on a restricted scale. If the goði<sup>1/2</sup>i attempted to impose themselves too much then the peasants could simply transfer to another goði<sup>1/2</sup>i, <sup>6</sup> making the power of a goði<sup>1/2</sup>i

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dependent upon his personal and political skills. 7 This implies that the peasants may have been at an advantage under the Old Norse society, which therefore highlights the importance of the political factors in the Christianization of the Vikings as it was for reasons such as this that posed a significant reason for the peasant majority to resist converting to Christianity.