

Life of Anskar (810–865). Translated by C.H. Robinson.

This source describes the missions sent by the Holy Roman Emperor to convert the Scandinavians.

CHAPTER 7.

After this it happened that a king named Harald, who ruled over some of the Danes, was assailed by hatred and malignity, and was driven from his kingdom by the other kings of the same province.

He came to his serene majesty the emperor Ludwig and asked that he might be thought worthy to receive his help so that he might be able to regain his kingdom. While the emperor kept him at his court he urged him, by personal persuasion and through the instrumentality of others, to accept the Christian faith, because there would then be a more intimate friendship between them, and a Christian people would more readily come to his aid and to the aid of his friends if both peoples were worshippers of the same God. At length, by the assistance of divine grace, he brought about his conversion, and when he had been sprinkled with the holy water of baptism he himself [i.e. the emperor] received him [Harald] from the sacred font and adopted him as his son. When, then, he desired to send him back to his own land in order that he might, by his assistance, seek to recover his dominions, he began to make diligent enquiry in order that he might find a holy and devoted man who could go and continue with him, and who might strengthen him and his people, and by teaching the doctrine of salvation might induce them to receive the faith of the Lord. At a public gathering of his chief men, at which their priests and other good men were present, the emperor referred to this matter and earnestly begged all of them to find someone who would volunteer for this difficult and honourable task.

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[Two monks accepted the mission.]

The two monks were subsequently brought before the king, who was gratified by their willingness and desire to undertake this task, and who gave them whatever was necessary for the performance of their ministerial functions, also writing cases, tents and other things that would be helpful and which seemed likely to be needed on their great journey. He bade them go with Harald and commanded them to devote the utmost care to his profession of faith and by their godly exhortations to confirm in the faith both Harald and his companions who had been baptized together with him, for fear lest at the instigation of the devil they should return to their former errors, and at the same time by their preaching to urge others to accept the Christian religion. Having been then dismissed by the emperor they had none to render them any menial service, as no one in the abbot's household would go with them of his own accord, and he would compel no one to go against his will. Harald, to whom they had been committed, was as yet ignorant and untaught in the faith, and was unaware how God's servants ought to behave. Moreover, his companions who had been but recently converted and had been trained in a very different faith, paid them little attention.

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[The monks eventually arrive in Denmark]

CHAPTER 9.

Accordingly the servants of God, who were with him [Harald], and who were stationed at one time amongst Christians and at other times amongst pagans, began to apply themselves to the word of God ; and those whom they could influence they directed into the way of truth, so that many were converted to the faith by their example and teaching, and the number of those who should be saved in the Lord increased daily. They themselves, being inspired by divine love, in order to spread their holy religion, made diligent search for boys whom they might endeavour to educate for the service of God. Harald also gave some of his own household to be educated by them; and so it came about that in a short time they established a school for twelve or more boys. Others they took as servants or helpers, and their reputation and the religion which they preached in God's name were spread abroad. After they, had spent two years or more in this good work brother Autbertus became grievously afflicted with illness, and on this account he was carried to New Corbey where, as his weakness increased day by day, at Easter time even as it had been before revealed to him by the Lord he ended his life, passing away happily, as we believe.

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CHAPTER 10.

Meanwhile [i.e. in 829] it happened that Swedish ambassadors had come to the Emperor Ludwig, and, amongst other matters which they had been ordered to bring to the attention of the emperor, they informed him that there were many belonging to their nation who desired to embrace the Christian religion, and that their king so far favoured this suggestion that he would permit God's priests to reside there, provided that they might be deemed worthy of such a favour and that the emperor would send them suitable preachers. When the god-fearing emperor heard this, he was greatly delighted, and a second time he endeavoured to find men whom he might send to those districts, who might discover whether this people was prepared to accept the faith, as the ambassadors had assured him, and might begin to inculcate the observance of the Christian religion.

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Anskar [a monk] then undertook the mission committed to him by the emperor, who desired that he should go to the Swedes and discover whether this people was prepared to accept the faith as their messengers had declared. How great and serious were the calamities which he suffered while engaged in this mission, father Witmar who himself shared them, can best tell. It may suffice for me to say that while they were in the midst of their journey they fell into the hands of pirates. The merchants with whom they were travelling, defended themselves vigorously and for a time successfully, but eventually they were conquered and overcome by the pirates, who took from them their ships and all that they possessed, whilst they themselves barely escaped on foot to land. They lost the royal gifts which they should have delivered there, together with all their other possessions, save only what they were able to take and carry with them as they left the ship. They were plundered, moreover, of nearly forty books which they had accumulated for the service of God. When this happened some were disposed to turn and go back, but no argument could divert God's servant from the journey which he had undertaken. On the contrary, he submitted everything that might happen to him to God's will, and was by no means disposed to return till, by God's help, he could ascertain whether he would be allowed to preach the gospel in those parts.

CHAPTER 11.

With great difficulty they accomplished their long journey on foot, traversing also the intervening seas, where it was possible, by ship, and eventually arrived at the Swedish port called Birka [Sigtuna].

They were kindly received here by the king, who was called Biörn, whose messengers had informed him of the reason for which they had come. When he understood the object of their mission, and had discussed the matter with his friends, with the approval and consent of all he granted them permission to remain there and to preach the gospel of Christ, and offered liberty to any who desired it to accept their teaching. Accordingly the servants of God, when they saw that matters had turned out propitiously as they had desired, began eagerly to preach the word of salvation to the people of that place. There were many who were well disposed towards their mission and who willingly listened to the teaching of the Lord. There were also many Christians who were held captive amongst them, and who rejoiced that now at last they were able to participate in the divine mysteries. It was thus made clear that everything was as their messengers had declared to the emperor, and some of them desired earnestly to receive the grace of baptism. These included the prefect of this town named Herigar, who was a counsellor of the king and much beloved by him. He received the gift of holy baptism and was strengthened in the Catholic faith. A little later he built a church on his own ancestral property and served God with the utmost devotion. Several remarkable deeds were accomplished by the man who afforded many proofs of his invincible faith...

For the full source, see <http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/basis/anskar.asp>