

# Welcome

## The Coming of Christianity

During the Viking Era, many preachers from Christianised parts of Europe ventured north into Scandinavia to spread the word of Christianity, but with little success. It was not until the 960s that the king of Denmark, Harald Bluetooth, was baptised and, according to the text he had carved in the Jelling Stone, his action “made the Danes Christian”. Back then, the kingdom of Denmark also included modern-day Norway and vast regions of modern-day Sweden, so the transition from paganism to Christianity did not take place overnight, but was a slow, meandering process where Christianity and the indigenous Norse paganism co-existed with little conflict. A substantial number of wooden churches were built throughout Denmark in the 10th century, and the first stone churches were built in the early 11th century.

Although written sources give the impression of a religious awakening when Harald Bluetooth watches Poppo the monk prove his faith by carrying a red-hot iron with his bare hands, we have to assume that the religious transformation was largely the result of a tactical decision. South of the kingdom of Denmark, Otto I the Great – Christian emperor of the Germanic tribes – presumably did his share to prompt the religious transformation, as did trade relations with the rest of Christianised Europe.

According to German medieval chronicler Adam of Bremen, Bornholm did not become Christianised until the mid-11th century, or 100 years after the rest of Denmark. Egino the monk is believed to have converted the inhabitants of Bornholm to Christianity. The burial site at Grødbygaard Farm is one of Bornholm’s earliest Christian cemeteries. Here, the dead were buried by gender (women to the north and men to the south) and the graves are laid along an east-west axis, a distinctively Christian characteristic. At the centre of the site is an area devoid of finds where a wooden church probably once stood, but this has never been proven archaeologically. Finds of coins with a cross and a Jesus motif date the graves to the mid-11th century. The people of Bornholm could have encountered Christianity through trade, wartime service and marriage.

This meant that the Christianising process was gradual and at a more personal level.

The round churches have not been definitively dated but are dated relatively based on architectural assessments, etc. They are thought to be some of the oldest churches on Bornholm, which include the centrally located Aa Church. Future dendrochronological analyses of the growth rings in the churches’ woodwork could perhaps shed new light on the corresponding dates of the churches.



Coins such as this were found at the burial site at Grødbygaard Farm near Aakirkeby. They bear a cruciform motif on one side and an image of Jesus on the other. They were minted during the reign of Sweyn Estridsen (1047–1076).

## Societal balance of power

The “Saga of Canute’s Descendants” describes “Blood Egil” who was an earl on Bornholm during the reign of Canute the Holy. In the 1080s, Canute orders Blood Egil to be executed for his pagan conduct: after a battle against the Wends, Egil is so thirsty that he drinks water fed by the blood of the battle’s casualties. Hence his nickname and, as he refuses to repent of what he did, he is sentenced to death. Local traditions allege that Blood Egil resided in the area near Østerlars Church. Written sources indicate that Bornholm was part of the kingdom of Denmark since the time of Harald Bluetooth and was locally ruled by one or more earls.

In the Middle Ages, the societal distribution of power is perceived as a balance of power between church and king. In 1060, Sweyn Estridsen divides Denmark into episcopal sees and Bornholm belongs to Dalby see, which is merged with Lund see soon after.

In 1149, the king of Denmark, Sweyn Grathe, donates three of Bornholm’s four districts to archbishop Eskil of Lund, spawning a power struggle between church and king on Bornholm over the next century.

Bornholm’s location in the Baltic Sea makes it both a strategic asset and a vulnerable goldmine. Trading brought many riches to the island, but we also know that many hostile seafarers plied the waters around Bornholm; particularly the feared Wend pirates. The burial of many silver hoards from the Viking Era and Middle Ages attests to the fear of sudden attack. It is in this context – at the mercy of church, king, greedy pirates and inspiring trade relations – that the round churches were built.

