

**SUMMARY OF THE YFF PROJECT (2007-2011)**  
**THE “FORGING” OF CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN THE NORTHERN PERIPHERY (C.820-C.1200)**  
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The current “internationalization” of Europe sets new questions and priorities for professional historians. Above all, the common European present needs a new exploration of a common past. Such research has to extend across national interpretations and modern political borders. In this respect, northern Europe in the Middle Ages provides a good example of common social, political, and cultural processes developing across the region. In this “medieval” periphery, the contacts and links between Scandinavia and northern Russia were as numerous and influential, as the more well-known relations between Scandinavia and its western neighbors. The project’s aim is to engender more attention on the part of historians, and awareness on the part of general public, to long-lasting connections and links between Scandinavia and northern Russia—the commonalities that were not entirely obliterated by the religious split between Catholic and Orthodox Christianity. The latter point is especially important because we live at a time when the issue of religious identity has been brought back on the public agenda and has again become important for personal self-identification, to the extent that religious identity has turned into a sharp divisive line, both culturally and politically, even within European communities. In Scandinavia as in the rest of Europe, these recent developments actualize in public consciousness basic questions regarding the nature of Christian identity and its role in defining what Europeans, and Scandinavians in particular, are. In order to understand what Christian identity in Northern Europe really means, among other things we have to look at the ways in which it emerged there. This project thus aims to partly address this public demand in Scandinavia by looking at the origins of Christian identity across Northern Europe.

Recent studies frequently underline that the success of Christianization in Europe and elsewhere was, to a high degree, due to the ability of Christianity to adapt to local traditions and customs. This means that Christian identities emerging in various parts of Europe in the Middle Ages were often the result of a compromise between local societies and missionary Christianity, and hence these new identities considerably differed from each other. The project will explore this interplay between general trends and regional differences in the “forging” of Christian identity in Northern Europe. To fulfill this task, this project will rely on the international collaboration of experts in medieval, Scandinavian, and Slavic studies in a comparative study of the Christianization process in two neighboring regions of Northern Europe, which have traditionally been studied separately from each other: Scandinavia and northern Russia in the period from c.820 to c.1200. Furthermore, this project will address three new topics within the general subject of medieval Christianity in the north: **First**, it will undertake a comparative analysis of early Christian discourse in Scandinavia and Kievan Rus’. **Second**, it will look at the interactions between written words and material objects in the Christianization process in Northern Europe. **Third**, it will explore the place of practical literacy in the same process, with a comparative study of rune stones in Scandinavia and birch-bark letters in northern Russia.

### **1) Early Christian Discourse in Scandinavia and Kievan Rus’**

Recent studies demonstrate that the religious division and differences between Scandinavia and northern Russia were much less visible in the period from the ninth to twelfth century than they become later. Elena Melnikova (2006) argues that it was Scandinavians who “were most active in transferring Christian ideas from Byzantium to Rus’” in the late ninth and tenth centuries (see also Staecker 1997a). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that there were links between certain Christian cults in Scandinavia and Russia: for instance, the Scandinavian cult of St Olav has strong connections to early Rus’ (Jackson 1994, Melnikova 1996). This eastern connection of the cult not even touched upon in the only volume on St Olav published in Scandinavia (Svahnström 1981). At the same time, the similarities between the cult of St Olav and that of Boris and Gleb have not escaped the attention of scholars in the field of Rus’ studies. They, however, have argued that it

was the Scandinavian cult that inspired Grand-Duke Jaroslav I to promote the sanctity of his half-brothers, Boris and Gleb (Sciacca 1983 and Klaniczay 2002). Yet the opposite route of influence is just as plausible (Antonsson 2003). How these contacts affect the emerging Christian discourse in the two regions is an important question to address. Melnikova (2002) has recently attempted such an approach in her comparative study of the *Ynglinga Saga* and *The Russian Primary Chronicle*. She argues that both texts have common trends in their use of oral traditions. Furthermore, it seems that there were similar motifs shared between Scandinavian and East Slavic hagiographic works, or even borrowed from one tradition to another (Antonsson 2003). The project will explore further the topic of possible links and mutual influences between Christian discourses in the two neighboring regions of northern Europe. The study of emerging Christian discourse in Northern Europe will include the relevant Frankish and German sources, early Scandinavian hagiography, and early Christian Russian works.

## **2) Words and Objects in the Northern Periphery**

There is an increasing tendency in Scandinavian studies towards interdisciplinary study of texts, rune stones, and linguistic and material data (see for instance Jesch 2001 and Brink 2004). Yet there is still a gap between archeologists and text-based scholars in research on Christianization in medieval northern Europe, resulting from the general division between archeologists and historians. As one opponent of such division puts it: “Modern scholarship fragments the past on the basis of types of evidence – archeologists study objects, historians study words” (Moreland 2001, 9). The latter work with the earliest Christian narratives which demonstrate the gradual forging of a Christian identity in written discourse produced by the intellectual elite. The former concentrate on the material evidence which demonstrates the spread of Christian beliefs at a “grass-root” level. Such separation leads to the continuing existence of two separate, and in some parts incompatible, meta-narratives. The narrative based on written texts presents Christians as a conscious religious community shaped by religious texts and thus contrasted with the heathen. The narrative based on material data presents another picture of Christianization, in which the borderline between Christian and pagan is often difficult to draw, and where acculturation and accommodation are more suitable heuristic terms. Recent research on material objects in Scandinavia, guided by anthropological perspectives (Staecker 1999a, 1999b; Garipzanov 2005, 2006b), shows that the “forging” of Christian identity was a long drawn out process, influenced by many local social and cultural factors (cf. some essays in Sigurðsson, Myking, Rindal 2004). The discrepancy between the two narratives, outlined above, partly resulted from the social milieus in which the corresponding sources were produced. The written discourse was created and operated within the clerical literate elite, and material objects point to a wider social environment, which included illiterate lay majority. The discrepancy between the two narratives can only be overcome through interdisciplinary comparative research on narrative and material evidence. The study of material data will deal with the material markers of Christian identity—such as coins, cruciform pendants, Thor’s hammers, the signs of cross on various objects, etc.—as well as the chronological and geographical patterns of their dissemination. This focus on the material markers of Christian identity reflects the recent approaches of historical archeology and diplomatic semiotics, which point to the significance of material objects and graphic signs for production and reproduction of communities and identities (Hoskins 1998, Moreland 2001, Garipzanov 2006a). This means that Christian material objects and graphic signs were not mere evidence for the Christianization process: they were active agents externalizing Christian identity. In short, they were as important in the “forging” of Christian identity as Christian writings, and these types of sources have to be studied side by side.

## **3) Words and Objects Meeting in the North: Rune Stones and Birch-bark Letters**

At the same time, the project has to include the research on those types of evidence that lie on the border between written texts and material data, namely, on the monuments of practical literacy (as defined by Franklin 1985) or of primary literacy (as defined by Jesch 2001), such as rune stones in

Scandinavia and birch-bark letters in northern Russia. There are more than 6,000 runic inscriptions in Scandinavia; more than half of them were made in the Viking Age. As to birch-bark letters written in the period from the eleventh to fifteenth century, more than 1,000 of them have been found so far; most of them have been unearthed in Novgorod. While written discourse in manuscripts was predominantly connected to the church, literacy on such media as birch-bark letters was mainly related to economic activities. In addition, while parchment literacy was produced by the clergy, birch-bark letters were predominantly written by laymen (Franklin 2002). A similar function has been recently argued for rune stones (Sawyer 2000). The different function and audience for birch-bark letters and rune stones means that these types of sources let us penetrate beyond the level of written Christian discourse, that is, to the level of written communication within the literate laity. Consequently, rune stones and birch-bark letters are capable of filling up the gap between the written Christian discourse of manuscripts and material objects pointing to the dissemination of Christian identity on a wider scale.

Only by means of such an interdisciplinary study of Christian written discourse, material objects, and monuments of practical literacy, will the project be able to analyze the multifaceted nature of Christian identity, the interactions between the core Christian principles and local social conditions in early medieval northern Europe, and the gradual spread of Christian identity from clerical elite to literate laity and the rest of population.

#### **PROJECT PLAN**

In terms of organization and collaboration, the project will function via 1) individual research of the members of the research group and active partners; 2) the collaborative work of the research group and active partners in regular workshops and their research visits to CMS; 3) international conferences on the key topics of the project, which will provide a forum for cooperation within the research group, active partners, and network participants, and for presentation the preliminary results of the project to wider audience. These workshops and conferences will be organized by the project manager and the postdoctoral fellow. The materials of these meetings will be basis for collective volumes, which will be prepared for publication under the aegis of the research group and CMS.

In terms of research topics, the project will develop through four major phases: The **first phase** (2007-08) will center on the comparative study of early Christian discourse in Scandinavia and early Rus'. The **second phase** (2008-09) will shift focus to the evidence of practical literacy and the comparison between practical literacy and written discourse in the two regions. The **third phase** (2009-10) will concentrate on material markers of Christian identity in the two regions. The **fourth phase** (2010-11) will synthesize the results of the earlier stages through the comparison between Christian discourse, practical literacy, and material markers.