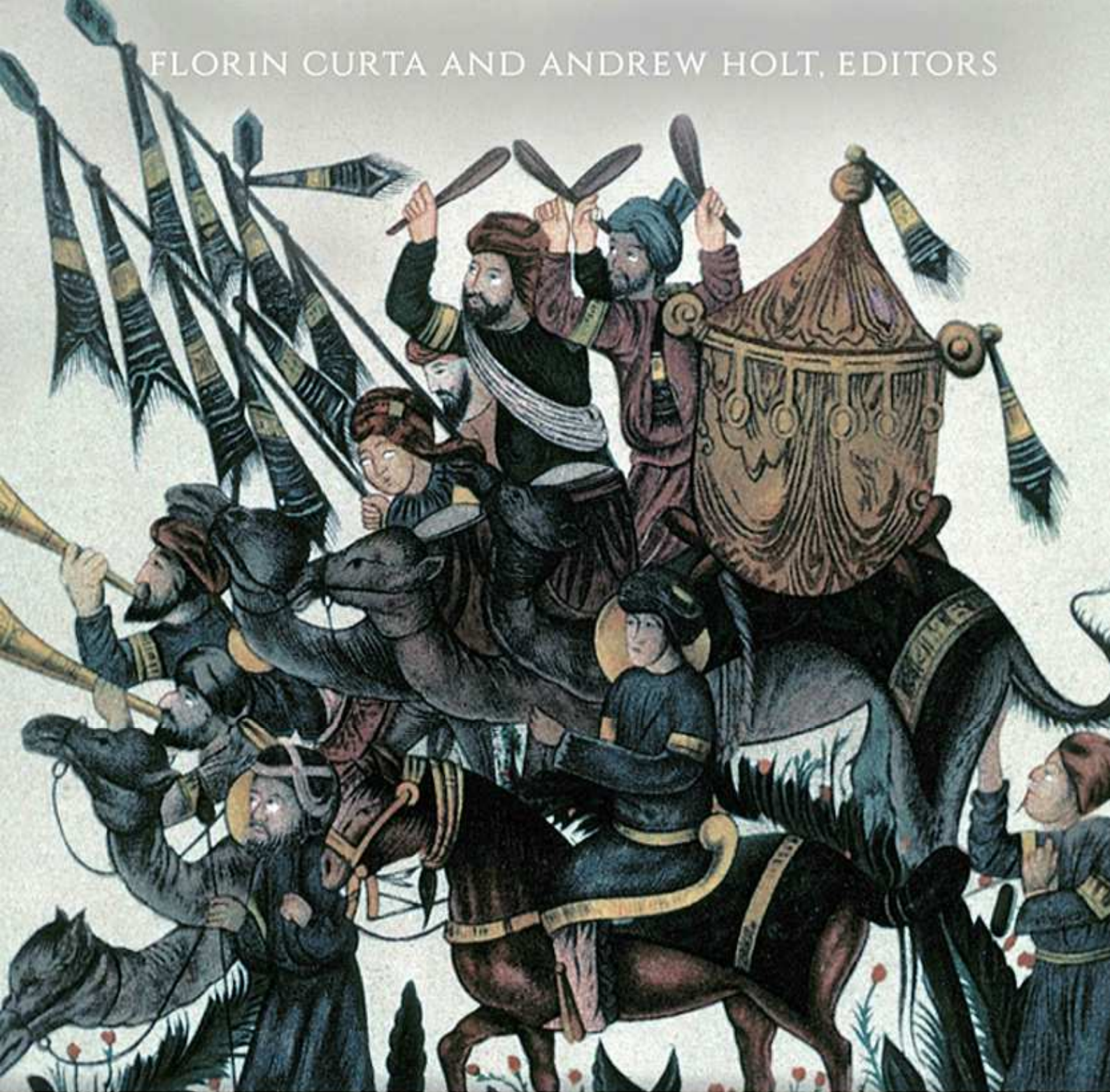


FLORIN CURTA AND ANDREW HOLT, EDITORS



GREAT EVENTS IN RELIGION

AN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PIVOTAL EVENTS IN RELIGIOUS HISTORY



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Curta, Florin, editor.

Title: Great events in religion : an encyclopedia of pivotal events in religious history / Florin Curta and Andrew Holt, editors.

Description: Santa Barbara : ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2017 | Includes bibliographical references and index. Contents: Volume 1. Prehistory to AD 600 — Volume 2. AD 600 to 1450—Volume 3. 1450 to the Present.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016040890 | ISBN 9781610695657 (set) | ISBN 9781440845987 (volume 1 : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781440845994 (volume 2 : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781440846007 (volume 3 : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: History—Religious aspects—Encyclopedias. | Religion—History—Encyclopedias.

Classification: LCC BL65.H5 G74 2017 | DDC 201/.69—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016040890>

ISBN: 978-1-61069-565-7 (set)

ISBN: 978-1-4408-4598-7 (Volume 1)

ISBN: 978-1-4408-4599-4 (Volume 2)

ISBN: 978-1-4408-4600-7 (Volume 3)

EISBN: 978-1-61069-566-4

21 20 19 18 17 1 2 3 4 5

This book is also available as an eBook.

ABC-CLIO


An Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC

ABC-CLIO, LLC

130 Cremona Drive, P.O. Box 1911

Santa Barbara, California 93116-1911

www.abc-clio.com

This book is printed on acid-free paper 

Manufactured in the United States of America

with the right to appoint his own churchmen. Indeed, a synod was organized in Gniezno, and was attended by Roman cardinals as well as Italian and German members of the high clergy. The synod decided to elevate Gniezno (which was already a bishopric since Mieszko's conversion to Christianity in 968) to the status of archbishopric, and to place Radzim (Gaudentius) at its head, with three suffragans—Cracow, Kołobrzeg, and Wrocław. A fourth bishopric, Poznań, remained subordinated directly to Rome. Pope Sylvester II enthusiastically approved the decisions of the synod, and the event brought Bolesław's Poland to the forefront of European politics. For the first time, shortly after 1000, chroniclers in the empire began to note the existence of a people called "Poleni" (later, Poloni), and of a country called "Polenia" (later, Polonia). Equally noted was the strong religious dimension of the events, particularly the fact that even before arriving in Gniezno, Otto dismounted, took off his shoes, and continued the trip on foot, praying, until he reached the tomb of Saint Adalbert. He had brought three altar plates for that tomb, and he received from Bolesław the saint's arm—and also other parts of the body, judging from the later dispersion of the relics among several ecclesiastical centers in the Empire: Aachen, Reichenau, Oberzell, Liège, Rome, Pereum (near Ravenna), and Affile (near Subiaco). Relics of Saint Adalbert also reached Esztergom, the metropolitan see of Hungary, a country in which Christianity had just taken root under King Stephen.

According to Thietmar of Merseburg, Bolesław presented Otto with 300 heavily armed warriors, and at the head of a strong retinue he escorted the emperor as far as Magdeburg. On his way back, Otto stopped in Aachen, where, as a follow-up to the pilgrimage to Saint Adalbert's tomb, he ordered the crypt of Charlemagne opened and he removed a number of items from the tomb to be used as relics. Otto's intention may have been to canonize Charlemagne, but he died less than two years after his meeting with Bolesław Chrobry in Gniezno.

FLORIN CURTA

See also

Donation of Constantine (ca. 750); Mieszko I and the Conversion of Poland to Christianity (966); King Stephen and the Conversion of Hungary (1000); Canonization of Charlemagne (1165)

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ALTHING OF 1000 AND THE CONVERSION OF ICELAND TO CHRISTIANITY (1000)

Unlike in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, where Christianity was imposed by kings and met some opposition from local populations, Iceland's conversion was a voluntary and peaceful decision taken by Icelanders at their annual assembly in the year 999 or 1000. The main sources for the Christianization of Iceland are the chronicler Ari Thorgilsson's *Islendingabok*, or "Book of the Icelanders," written between 1122 and 1133, and the *Kristni Saga*, or "The Story of the Conversion," from the mid-13th century. In the sagas, the event is recorded as the *kristnitaka*—literally, "the taking of Christianity."

Even if historians believe that the Norse discovery of Iceland took place around the year 860, the beginning of the actual settlement is dated either to 870, following the *Islendingabok*, or to 874, following the *Landnamabok* ("Book of the Settlement," from the early 12th century). The *Landnamsold* ("age of the settlement") lasted until about 930. The colonization of Iceland was the result of independent expeditions: most settlers were Norwegians

escaping from their country after its unification under King Harald *Harfagre* (“Fair-hair,” king from 872 to 930), but there were also some settlers from Sweden and the Viking kingdoms in the British Isles. In 930, the Althing was established as the general assembly, which was held annually in June at Thingvellir (the “assembly fields”) in southwestern Iceland. The Althing had legislative and judicial power, and its president, the *logsogumaðr* (“Law-speaker”), was elected every three years. He was a law expert, and among his duties was also the proclamation of adopted laws in the assembly. In such parliament meetings the leading role was played by the local magnates and *goðar* (chieftains), each with his own retinue of warriors. Besides being the major landowners, the *goðar* were political leaders with power in their own districts. Since the hall of each one of them was also a shrine, every *goði* also acted as a (local) priest.

Although the contacts of the Icelanders with Christianity predate the year 1000—not least because some of the first settlers were from the British Isles, where Christianity had already been adopted before the arrival of the Vikings—paganism remained predominant on the island throughout the 9th and 10th centuries. The earliest burials found on the island are cremations, as was the case in eastern Scandinavia at that time. From about 980, several missionaries arrived on the island. One of them was Thorvald Kodransson, an Icelander nicknamed “the Widely Traveled.” During a trip on the Continent, he had been baptized by Fridrek, an itinerant Saxon bishop. In 981, on his return home, Thorvald was joined by Fridrek and together they began to spread the Gospel across the island. The first to accept Christianity were Kodran, Thorvald’s father, and his family. Together with Fridrek, Thorvald moved from one district to another, finally reaching the Althing, where the bishop preached the new faith. However, at the general assembly, the two were met with scorn and were even insulted by means of skaldic verses; this provoked a violent reaction from Thorvald, and he killed two men. After more clashes between Thorvald’s faction and the pagans, in 986 Fridrek left Iceland and returned to Saxony, while Thorvald embarked for new Viking expeditions in Eastern Europe, where he died a few years later.

Subsequent attempts to convert the Icelanders were conducted at the behest of Olaf Tryggvason, king of Norway

(995–999/1000). In 995 or 996 he sent Stefnir Thorgilsson, a Christian Icelander, who stayed for a while in Norway. However, Stefnir’s preaching was not well received by his countrymen. He reacted by destroying pagan temples (probably private shrines in chieftains’ halls) and idols. In response, the Althing enacted a law against the Christians, who, because of their blasphemy, were declared *frændaskomm* (“a disgrace to one’s kinsmen”) and could now be denounced by their own relatives. Under such law, Stefnir was outlawed and he returned to Norway.

King Olaf Tryggvason then sent Iceland another missionary, in the person of the Saxon priest Thangbrand, who stayed on the island for two years (997–999). According to the sagas, Thangbrand was a controversial figure: he was a zealous preacher and a good scholar, but he was also violent and skilled in the use of weapons. He began preaching in southern Iceland, and he first succeeded in converting and baptizing some important Icelandic families, who were fascinated by the solemnity of the Christian rites. However, Thangbrand’s missionary activity also had many opponents, and when a conflict broke out, he killed several men, including a *skald* (“poet”) who had composed defamatory verses about Thangbrand. Because of those crimes, Thangbrand was prosecuted and outlawed at the Althing, and he too returned to Norway in 999. At this point, and to punish the Icelanders, Olaf Tryggvason forbade Icelandic merchants to access the Norwegian harbors as long as they remained pagan, and he took as hostages several Icelanders who were living in Norway at the time. Many were sons and relatives of prominent Icelandic *goðar*, and King Olaf threatened to kill them unless their countrymen accepted the Christian faith. Above all, the trade interruption was a concrete threat for Icelandic economy, because Norway was Iceland’s main trading partner.

When the news reached Iceland, a delegation of chieftains belonging to the Christian faction went to Norway and obtained the release of the hostages, promising the king that the whole island would accept Christianity. Meanwhile, however, the situation at home was getting worse, for the two factions had divided the country and there was the actual risk of a civil war breaking out. The intervention of mediators avoided an outright conflict and, at the delegation’s return, the case was submitted for arbitration at the Althing. The lawspeaker Thorgeir Thorkelsson was

entrusted with the responsibility to decide whether the Icelanders should convert to Christianity. Although a pagan, Thorgeir was a mediator trusted by both parties. According to Ari's account (*Islendingabok*, Chapter 7), Thorgeir spent a day and a night contemplating in isolation under his cloak; then he addressed the assembly, declaring that there had to be one law and one religion in the country, because to divide the law would mean to divide the peace; both sides agreed to respect his decision. Finally, the lawspeaker proclaimed that the Icelanders "should become Christian, and those who had not yet been baptized should receive baptism." Nonetheless, old customs, such as the exposure of unwanted children and the eating of horseflesh, were to continue. People would have the right to sacrifice in secret, but "it would be punishable by the lesser outlawry if witnesses were produced. And a few years later, these heathen provisions were abolished."

Through this compromise, Iceland peacefully adopted Christianity in the summer of 1000, the year of King Olaf Tryggvason's death. The conflict between pagans and Christians, which was a serious threat to the entire Icelandic society, was settled following the usual method of dispute resolution in medieval Iceland. As for the feuds involving rival families, the intervention of a mediator and the recourse to an arbitration avoided further bloodshed.

Notwithstanding the change of religion, which is otherwise referred to in the sagas as *siðaskipti* ("transformation of religion and culture"), Christianity did not cause a change in the Icelandic social structure. The *goðar* retained their religious role, now building churches on their estates and maintaining those churches privately. The first Icelandic bishop, Isleif Gizurarson, was a *goði*, and so were his successors. Isleif established the first episcopal see on the island in his own farm at Skalholt, while a second see was established in 1106 at Holar by Bishop Jon Ogmundarson. In the 11th century, the Icelandic bishops were under the jurisdiction of the archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen, which was the primatial see in the north. In 1104 they passed under the new Danish archbishopric of Lund and finally, in 1153, under that of Nidaros (Trondheim) in Norway. Nevertheless, the Icelandic clergy maintained a high degree of independence from external influences, and it was only in the second half of the 13th century, after the annexation of Iceland to the kingdom of Norway (1262),

that the Norwegian archbishops ultimately succeeded in extending their authority over the Icelandic Church.

FRANCESCO D'ANGELO

See also

Mass (and Forced) Baptism of the Saxons under Charlemagne (8th Century); Charlemagne Crowned Emperor by the Pope (800); Anskar's Mission to the Swedes (830–860); Boris of Bulgaria Converts to Christianity (863–864); Clement and Naum Begin Missionary Work in the Lake Ohrid Region (Late 9th–Early 10th Centuries); Otto I Proclaimed Roman Emperor (962); Mieszko I and the Conversion of Poland to Christianity (966); Vladimir the Great's Christianization of the Kievan Rus' (ca. 988–1015); Summit in Gniezno and Emperor Otto III's Pilgrimage to the Tomb of Saint Adalbert (1000); King Stephen and the Conversion of Hungary (1000); Olaf and the Christianization of Norway (1015–1030); Swedish Crusades against Pagan Finland (12th–13th Centuries)

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KING STEPHEN AND THE CONVERSION OF HUNGARY (1000)

There had been several attempts, shortly before the year 900, to convert the Magyars—a nomadic group that settled in the Carpathian Basin (present-day Hungary and the surrounding regions of Romania, Serbia, Croatia, Austria, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, and Slovakia). Byzantine Christianity was the first to reach the Magyar elites. In the mid-10th century, two chieftains named Bulcsu and Gyula were baptized in Constantinople, with Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (r. 913–959) as their sponsor at the baptismal font. Latin missions started only during the second half of the 10th century, under Duke Geza