3.7 Viking religion

The Europeans who suffered raids and conquests at the hands of the Vikings saw them as *heathens* — people who did not believe in God. Viking brutality was seen as a mark of paganism. The Vikings certainly followed a pagan religion in the earlier phases of their history, but they were gradually influenced by Christianity. Whether this lessened their perceived ‘brutality’ is a matter of debate. Therefore, there are two parts to Viking religion: paganism and Christianity.

**Pagan Viking religion**

Not much is known about pagan Viking religion because evidence is scarce. The sagas appear to give us some details. However, the sagas were written two hundred years after the Viking Age and so likely contain exaggeration and misinformation. We know for certain that pagan Viking religion was *polytheistic*; that is, the Vikings worshipped numerous gods. It is also known that two of their major gods were Odin and Thor.

Odin figures prominently in the sagas as a deity who rules from Valhöll, the Hall of the Slain, where those who died in battle are welcomed by his war-maidens known as the valkyries. Thor was the god of thunder, war and farming and was represented by the hammer he wielded. However, beyond this, the sagas contradict each other. Some accounts place Odin as the ruling god while others put Thor as the ruling god.

Scenes from Viking myths and legends, some of them later retold in the sagas, appear as stone carvings. However, many of these were in temples that have long since disappeared. Travellers from other lands sometimes made passing reference to Viking worship but gave few details.

Burial customs help to shed a little more light on pagan Viking religion. Evidence such as the Øseberg ship shows that burying the dead with their most prized possessions was customary. It was believed one’s soul would use these in the next world. The ship was a popular grave item and came in many forms and sizes; when boats were not available, stones were arranged in the shape of a boat. The boat possibly symbolised the means by which the dead would reach the afterlife.

**The coming of Christianity**

By the end of the Viking Age most of the Scandinavian countries had adopted Christianity as their main religion. Those in the west were influenced by Rome. Further east, where the descendants of Swedish Vikings had mixed with the Slav tribes on the rivers of Russia, the chief influence was Constantinople, which followed Eastern Orthodoxy. This was a result of Vikings serving as guards for the emperor of Constantinople.

Evidence suggests the conversion to Christianity was a gradual process. There was a long period of overlap where Christian and old pagan practices mingled. For the Christian missionaries who spread the faith throughout Scandinavia, this may have been seen as a practical tactic. By not completely overthrowing the old gods and the old pagan rituals, Christianity was able to get a foothold in Viking lands. There may also have been some
degree of sentimental attachment to the old pagan religion. The sagas, products of a later Christian age, dwell at length on the myths and legends of the pagan past.

Kings and chieftains taking up the new Christian faith also did much to hasten the path to conversion. King Olaf Tryggvason imposed Christianity on Norway in 995 CE. The sagas tell of him destroying pagan temples. Such aggression suggests there was resistance to the spread of Christianity. With some parts of the Scandinavian world remote from the rest of Europe, and therefore having little, if any, contact with the Christian faith, this seems a reasonable assumption, especially in far-flung regions like northern Norway, Iceland and Greenland. By the time Tryggvason’s successor, St Olaf, had finished his work of converting Norway and Iceland to Christianity, the Christian faith had taken firm root in the Viking world.

heathen one who is neither Christian, nor Jewish nor Muslim, and is often seen as therefore being uncivilised

polytheism the worship of numerous gods

EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION
3 What type of Christianity was followed by the descendants of Swedish Vikings who had settled in Russia?
4 Which kings imposed Christianity on Norway and Iceland?

ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES
5 Research the Sigurd legend. Examine and label those parts of the picture that illustrate incidents from the Sigurd myth. Treat the source as if it contained many frames (like a comic book) rather than a single picture.
6 What evidence is there in Source 3 suggesting that the Vikings mixed Christian and pagan beliefs as they moved towards Christianity?

HISTORICAL QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH
7 Use the internet and your library to research a Viking myth. Present it to the class in the form of a PowerPoint presentation. On each slide, summarise an incident in the story. Include suitable images for each slide.
8 Why do you think the Vikings converted from paganism to Christianity?