

## Season 1, Episode 5: The Nordic Cross Flag: Crusade and Conquest

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Show Transcript

Welcome back to another episode of *Why the Flag?*, the show that explores the stories behind the flags, and how these symbols impact our world, our histories, and ourselves. I'm Simon Mullin.

On the last episode, we discussed the *Y Ddraig Goch* – the red dragon flag of Wales – and the deep historical and mythological origins of the red dragon on a green and white ground. We traveled back nearly 2,000 years to the Roman conquest of Britannia and the introduction of the dragon standard to the British Isles by the Iranian-Eastern European Sarmatian cavalry stationed at Hadrian's Wall. We explored how the dragon was adopted by the Roman army as a standard, and after their withdrawal from Britannia, its mythological rise as the symbol of Uther Pendragon and King Arthur, and then its resurrection by Henry VII – whose 15<sup>th</sup> Century battle standard closely resembles the flag of Wales we see today.

National mythology plays a significant role in shaping our identities and how we see ourselves as a community and as a people. And, as we found in episode 4, these mythologies are instrumental in shaping how we design and emotionally connect to our national flags. We're going to continue this theme about the cross-section of history, mythology, and national identity on the episode today as we discuss the rise of the Nordic Cross, a symbol that shapes the flags of all eight Nordic and Scandinavian countries today, and rules over nearly 28 million citizens speaking 15 distinct languages.

All Scandinavian flags feature the Nordic Cross, which is an asymmetrical horizontal cross – the universal symbol of Jesus Christ and Christianity turned on its side – with the crossbar closer to the hoist of the flag and bottom of the cross extending the end of the flag. The Nordic flags are a bit of an aberration in European flag culture, as Tim Marshal points out in his book, "A Flag Worth Dying For," as "nowhere else is there so obvious a grouping insofar as the moment you see one of them, you know the region it came from, if not the exact country." It's a bit ironic, he points out, that the symbol of the cross has survived for so many centuries in Scandinavia, given that this is now the least religious part of Western Europe, while the most religious, like Spain and Italy, feature no Christian motifs on their flags at all.

The flag of Finland, for example, features a wide blue Nordic Cross on a white ground; and the flag of Sweden, the land of my ancestors, displays a bright yellow cross overlaid on a light blue sky. And the flag of Denmark, which has been in continuous use since 1219, and is widely believed to be the oldest national flag in continuous use – even during Nazi occupation – boasts a white Nordic Cross on a red ground; the original motif that inspired every flag of Scandinavia.

So, where did the Nordic Cross come from? How did the land of the pagan Vikings not only adopt Christianity, but then raise the cross as the symbol of their nations? What does medieval Nordic mythology tell us about the flags, and what is the true, bloody, and violent history of the

Nordic Cross that flies over the most peaceful nations in the world today? As always, we'll ask, why the flag? And today, why the Nordic Cross flag? This is the story of the conversions of the northern Vikings, the legendary battles of Danish King Valdemar the Conqueror and the Swedish King Eric IX, and the centuries of crusades, wars, and conquests that shaped Northern Europe forever, giving rise to the Nordic Cross flag that flies over every nation in Scandinavia.

To tell the history of the Nordic Cross, we're going to focus on two Scandinavian flags in particular: the first and possibly oldest flag in the world, the red and white flag of Denmark, and then the flag of Sweden, the last Nordic nation to submit to Christianity.

But first, we're going to begin the story in the year 867 AD, when the Nordic nations were not nations at all, but Viking confederations, and talk about how the sons of legendary Viking king Ragnar Lothbroc flew the terrifying Raven banner of the Danes during their invasion and conquest of Christian England. We'll be right back after this.

BREAK

Welcome back.

As we explored in episode 4, the first few centuries following the Roman withdrawal from Britannia in 410 AD was a dark time in British history, with the island seeing endless foreign invasions, civil strife, and dozens of warring clans and tribes vying for political control in just about every corner of the country. And this period of political instability gave the Norse Viking warriors the perfect opportunity to take their piece of the poorly-defended and resource-rich British pie.

During the Viking Age, roughly from the late 8<sup>th</sup> through the mid-11<sup>th</sup> Centuries, the countries you know today as Norway, Denmark, and Sweden didn't yet exist as independent nations, but a collection of often competing pagan tribes and clans with somewhat common languages, customs, and religious practices. These Norsemen, which translates to "men from the north," were also collectively known as Vikings, a word which may come from the old Norse noun *vikingr*, a person traveling for adventure, and the verb, *viking*, which means to participate in one of these adventures with the goal of returning with fortune and fame. And with the advancement of the long boat in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century, these seafaring Viking raiders were able to take longer voyages that were previously out of reach, including to England, Iceland, Greenland, and Arabia, and it's even said that the famous Viking explorer, Leif Erikson, made it as far as North America, landing in modern-day Newfoundland, Canada, around the year 1000 AD – a place he called *Vinland*.

Leif Erikson may have been the first European to land on North American shores, but by and large the most famous and storied Viking warlord is a man whose legend far surpasses his true life's tale: a Norseman by the name of Ragnar Lothbroc.

Now, Ragnar Lothbroc, a name which means “Ragnar with the hairy breeches,” named after clothing he fashioned in preparation to fight a dragon and keep the serpent from biting his legs, is also known as Ragnar Sigurdsson, the son of the legendary and heroic Swedish King, Sigurd Ring. Ragnar is widely known as the scourge of England and France, when around 840 AD, he’s said to have led the first Viking invasion of England, raping and killing his way through the country with only a handful of warriors at his side, capturing monasteries and land and – as Norse legend tells us – seizing nearly two-and-a-half tons of silver, an enormous sum for a Viking raider. Most of what we know about Ragnar’s legend was written in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century – roughly 350 years after his death – and immortalized in the Icelandic “Tale of Ragnar Lodbrok.” But two references are made to a particularly eminent Viking raider named “Ragnall” in the generally reliable Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which was written and compiled in England between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

The reason I bring up Ragnar Lothbroc isn’t to discuss his legendary exploits, but the major historical ones led by four of his sons: Hvitserk, Ivar the Boneless, Bjorn Ironside, and Ubba – and their raven battle standard we’ll discuss shortly. Now, the Icelandic “Tale of Ragnar Lodbrok” tells the story of Ragnar’s demise at the hands of King Ælla of Northumbria, who executed the captured Ragnar by casting him into a pit of venomous snakes. With the fearsome Ragnar dead and feasting with the gods in the great halls of Valhalla, his children vow their revenge on the king of Northumbria, and all of Anglo-Saxon England would feel their wrath.

In 865 AD, Hvitserk, Ivar the Boneless, Bjorn Ironside, and Ubba united the Viking clans around a common purpose: the invasion and sacking of England, not only to avenge Ragnar Lothbrok, but for the same goal as every Viking raid on Britain since 793 AD: the promise of women, land, and unimaginable treasure. With the Great Danish Army, known to the Anglo-Saxons as the Great Heathen Army, Ragnar’s sons constructed the largest Viking invasion force ever seen, bringing together a fearsome coalition of Danes, Norwegians, Swedes, and Irish pirates under a single command – and a single flag – bringing the fight to the four petty English kingdoms of East Anglia, Mercia, Northumbria, and Wessex.

As I mentioned earlier, the Vikings would not have carried a unified national flag, because they were a collection of differing tribes, and each would have flown their own flags and symbols to identify their clans. However, we have significant evidence and written accounts – including in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle – that by the time of the invasion of England, the Great Heathen Army carried the “Terrible Raven,” a triangular red banner flag with a rounded outside edge that depicted a soaring raven on its ground. To the sons of Ragnar Lothbrok, who sailed the raven flag into East Anglia in 865 AD, the flag paid homage to the war god Oden and gave them strength – but to those on the receiving end of the invasion, the raven became a symbol of paralyzing fear.

So, quickly, what does the Viking raven flag mean?

The raven played a major role in the Viking Age as the symbol of the Norse war god, Oden. Known as the raven god, Oden was a shapeshifting deity who walked the earth in disguise. And

in Norse mythology, Oden was accompanied by two ravens, *Hugin* and *Munin*, names which translate to “thought” and “memory,” who give him the day’s news from all nine worlds every morning. According to the medieval Icelandic historian Snorri Sturluson,

“Two ravens sit on Oden’s shoulders and whisper all the news which they see and hear into his ear; they are called Hugin and Munin. He sends them out in the morning to fly around the whole world, and by breakfast they are back again. Thus, he finds out many new things and this is why he is called ‘raven-god’ (*hrafnaguð*).”

For the Vikings, the link between the raven, Oden, and war are very old and very deep. In fact, the raven is found in visual depictions of Oden as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Centuries in Sweden and Denmark, long before the rise of the Viking Age. In *skaldic* poetry, which is Scandinavian poetry of the Vikings, Oden is often referred to as the “raven god” and the “the priest of the raven sacrifice” – as the warriors who died in battle were the sacrifices to Oden’s birds of prey who would feast on their corpses. Blood would sometimes be called “Hugins vör” or Hugin’s drink; the warrior was the “reddener of Hugin’s claws”; and battle was “Hugins jól” – Hugin’s feast. Also, as the ruler of the underworld in Valhalla, a dead man’s soul would be a gift to Oden, and his lifeless body a feast for his ravens. To make war was to feed and please the raven; therefore, the raven motif on the Lothrbok battle flag held a profoundly symbolic and religious significance to the Viking invaders.

By 867 AD, the Great Heathen Army had taken York, under the command of Ivarr the Boneless. And according to “The Tale of Ragnar’s Sons,” it is during this siege that Ragnar’s sons captured their father’s executioner, King Ælla of Northumbria, and sentenced him to die by “blood eagle” to avenge their father’s death. This is very disturbing, so please mind the next minute with caution. Death by blood eagle was a horrific form of Viking execution. Quoting from the Smithsonian Magazine:

“First, the...victim would be restrained, face down; next, the shape of an eagle with outstretched wings would be cut into his back. After that, his ribs would be hacked from his spine with an ax, one by one, and the bones and skin on both sides pulled outward to create a pair of ‘wings’ from the man’s back. The victim, it is said, would still be alive at this point to experience the agony of...having salt rubbed, quite literally, into his vast wound. After that, his exposed lungs would be pulled out of his body and spread over his ‘wings,’ offering witnesses the sight of a final bird-like ‘fluttering’ as he died.”

With ritual human sacrifice and execution, there’s no doubt why the Viking’s raven flag left such a traumatic scar in the minds of the Anglo-Saxons.

By 878 AD, the raven flag had rampaged across England for 13 years, defeating and subduing the kingdoms of Kent, East Anglia, Northumbria, and Mercia, and conquering huge swaths of land on the British island, called the Danelaw. But the Christian Kingdom of Wessex led by Alfred the Great would not lay down their arms to this pagan invader. In 878 AD, the West Saxons defeated the Vikings in a miraculous victory at the Battle of Cynwit, killing Ubba, and, as

written in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, capturing Oden's magical raven banner as a trophy. The fall of the raven banner would mark the end of Norse expansion for a century. In May of 878 AD, Alfred the Great defeated the Danelaw king Guthrum the Old, and the West Saxons and the Vikings came to peace terms under the Treaty of Wedmore, which divided England between Wessex and the Danes. And as a sign of goodwill, King Guthrum converted to Christianity, taking the name Æthelstan until his death in the year 890 AD. With the conversion of Guthrum, the Danish kingdoms would slowly come around to Christianity, and ultimately swap the raven battle flag of Oden for the holy cross of Jesus Christ and Roman Catholicism.

When we come back from the break, we're going to discuss the first Christian king of Denmark the end of the Viking Age. We'll be right back after this.

BREAK

Welcome back to the show.

Where we left off, Alfred the Great converted Guthrum the Old to Christianity, christening him Æthelstan, and dispersing the Catholic faith into the Danelaw country in England, where it was practiced in tandem with the old pagan religions. You see, it was not unheard of for Vikings to adopt the gods of those they conquered or came into contact with, often blending their religious beliefs with others. Even an Indian Buddha statue has been found on the island of Helgö, an old Viking trading island in Stockholm. And for a time in some Viking circles, Jesus Christ entered the pantheon of Danish gods, alongside Oden and Thor.

Around the same time of Guthrum's conversion, Christianity was beginning to take root just across the North Sea from England in the land of Denmark – the old ancestral country of the Viking raiders. Both through Christian wives and slaves brought back to Scandinavia from their raids, as well as through their trade with Catholic merchants in Western Europe, Christianity would start to spread through the Norse lands, often able to coexist with the local religions. But this peaceful coexistence would not last long.

By the 950's, Denmark was a century apart and a world away from their ever anglicized and Christianized relatives back in the English Danelaw. And because Denmark was still a predominantly pagan society, they were under increased pressure – politically and militarily – from the rising Christian power to their south: The Holy Roman Empire in modern-day Germany. To keep the German's off his tail – and to dissuade them from an invasion that was growing increasingly likely – the Danish Harald Gormsson, known better as Harald Bluetooth, decided that it was in his best political interests to live another day and convert to Christianity. And why wouldn't he? Christianity had much to offer. It would secure his political survival in a Christianizing Europe, and offer practical help to his rule: the missionaries and bishops were both literate and bilingual at a time when most of the world could not read or write, and he could obtain valuable royal advisors from those who had served other Christian monarchs in Normandy, England, and Germany.

Harald Bluetooth bid farewell the old pantheon of Norse gods and was baptized in 965 AD, becoming the first major Scandinavian king to adopt the Catholic faith – preceded only by the weak Danish king Harald Klak, who failed to convert Denmark. With the full support of the Christian realm, Bluetooth was able to assimilate the Danes to Christianity, conquer Norway, and unify the entire country as a single nation under Christ – becoming not only the first true Christian king of the Nordics, but the very first monarch of the Kingdom of Denmark. In fact, Harald Bluetooth is the father of one of the oldest continuous monarchies that rules to this day.

While historians don't doubt it was political gamesmanship that led the Danish king to convert his nation, the Catholic Church instead tells a story of a miracle that opened his eyes to the power of Jesus.

I'm going to quickly paraphrase from Christian History Magazine:

"The legend goes, Harald Bluetooth and his warriors were discussing which god was most powerful. Some favored mighty Thor, who defeated giant trolls made lightning by throwing his hammer. Others picked Odin the Wise on his eight-legged horse, leading a horde of all dead warriors who ever perished in battle. One mentioned mischievous Loki, who tricked the other gods to serve his evil purposes. But what about this new god, Hvíta Krístr, White Christ, who was said to rule the hosts of heaven? A foreign priest named Poppo at this meeting was a servant of this Hvíta Krístr. The Viking warriors called upon him to prove the power of his god. At the forge of the smith, Poppo took a red-hot iron and held it in his hand. When he set it down, the king looked at his hands. There was not the slightest sign of injury. That was enough for King Harald Bluetooth. He was baptized without delay and ordered all his subjects to follow his example. Thus, because of God's miracle, Denmark was saved."

Upon Bluetooth's conversion, he erected massive carved runestones in the Danish town Jelling. In memory of his parents, and next to a depiction of a wide-eyed Jesus, he inscribed on these stones, "King Harald ordered this monument made in memory of Gorm, his father, and in memory of Thyrvé, his mother; that Harald who won for himself all of Denmark and Norway and made the Danes Christian." The Jelling Runestones represent much more than just a son's love for his departed parents, but stands as a certificate of baptism for the Viking old country – and for the whole world to see.

As you could probably tell from the stories of loot and conquest, the ideal Viking was a warrior who put victory in battle and its spoils above all else. So, it's not surprising that the symbol of the suffering Christ on a cross, who taught his believers to turn the other cheek and give all their riches to the poor, was not received sympathetically and did not fit too well into the ancient value system of the Norsemen. On the other hand, the Vikings were fascinated by the enormous wealth of the Catholic Church and of the monasteries they raided, that they believed there had to be something to this god on a cross. Therefore, the missionaries would change their tune and place an emphasis not of the suffering Jesus, but on the victorious Christ, a symbol as the prince of gold and power, preaching a gospel of wealth and success. That is why on old Nordic art and runic inscriptions – as well as on the Jelling Runestones of Harald

Bluetooth – you’ll find a living, steely-eyed, Jesus with his arms outstretched, wearing a crown – not of thorns, but gold – and dressed not in a cloth, but as royalty. Now this idea of a rich, victorious warrior Christ was someone the old Vikings could get behind.

After about a century of relative quiet on the island, the Vikings returned to their raiding ways in England in 980 AD. And in response to the next two decades of relentless attacks, the English King Æthelred proclaimed in 1002 AD that all Danes living in England would be executed as collective punishment – a day infamously known as the St. Brice’s Day Massacre. This royal death warrant infuriated the Norse world, and led once again to the invasion and conquest by the Danes out of vengeance, who took England and ruled until the death of King Harthacnut in 1042. The Viking Age would ultimately come to an end when, in 1066, another invading Norwegian King, Harald Hardrada, was defeated by the English at the Battle of Stamford Bridge as the Norwegians tried to retake the Danelaw land that the king saw as rightfully his. The high of the English victory over their Vikings was short-lived, however, when William the Conqueror began the Norman Conquest of Britain that October, which would end “native” Anglo-Saxon rule on the island for the next 400-plus years. Now, contrary to some popular belief, the Viking Age didn’t end because of Christianity or foreign conquest – it ended because being a Viking wasn’t paying the same dividends it once did. With monasteries moving inland away from the coasts, better defenses in England and Normandy, and new threats to contend with back home, the Norsemen just stopped raiding. King Harald Hardrada led the final Viking invasion into England, and historians will mark his failed conquest as the end of the Viking Age.

When we come back from the break, we’re going to explore the origins of the Nordic Cross in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, it’s divine descension from heaven in the heat of battle, and its adoption as the holy flag of the Danish Kingdom. We’ll be right back.

BREAK

Welcome back to the show.

In 1101, Christianity was cemented in Denmark with the canonization of their murdered monarch, King Canute IV – or, Canute the Holy – a king wholeheartedly devoted to the Roman Catholic Church and spreading the Christian faith to the Danes. As the patron saint of Denmark, the elevation to sainthood of Canute the Holy gave the Danish monarchy an air of legitimacy in to other Christian nations, and it corresponded with the slow, painful, and often bloody conquest of Christianity in the Nordics, burning like a steady wick throughout Scandinavia.

The Danes were at the forefront of converting the pagans to the north, as well as in the Baltics to the east. In fact, it was during one of these crusades of conversion and conquest in the Baltics where the mythical story of the Danish flag comes from. So, with the history of how Christianity conquered Denmark behind us, let’s dive into the story of the *Dannebrog* flag – “the cloth of the Danes” – with its white cross on a red ground.

The year was 1219, and a mercenary force of crusaders known as the Teutonic Knights were bogged down in a military campaign against the pagans in Estonia. Now, these knights were part of an elite crusading order founded in Jerusalem in 1192. They were unable to make much headway in their campaign, so they turned to the devoted Catholic king of Denmark, a man named Valdemar II – but better known as Valdemar the Conqueror – for his help in showing the pagans the true mercy of Christ, whether that mercy be shown by the sword or through persuasion. Valdemar saw a crucial opportunity to take more land. With the enthusiastic approval of the Church, Pope Honorius III elevated Valdemar's incursion into Estonia as a crusade, giving his conquest the divine blessing he needed to change the hearts and minds of the nonbelievers – and add a strategic territory to his expanding kingdom.

And this is the point when mythology and history collide. According to the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Danish chronicler, Christiern Pedersen, the story goes like this:

On June 15, 1219, the Danes were losing the Battle of Lyndanisse (in modern-day Tallinn) against the ferocious heathen army of Estonia. The Swedish Bishop Anders Sunesen, who had joined the king on his crusade, prayed for a sign from God that this would not be how their holy war ends. When the bishop would raise his hands into the air, the Danes would gain the upper-hand in battle – pun intended – but as he grew exhausted and his arms fell to his side, the Estonians would dominate the field.

I'm going to quickly pause here, because recalling my years of bible studies back in Hebrew school, this sounds remarkably similar to a story found in the book of Exodus. And it cannot be a coincidence. The passage I'm referring to is Exodus 17:10, the story of when the Israelites fought the Amalekites in the desert, "Joshua did as Moses had instructed him and fought against the Amalekites, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. As long as Moses held up his hands, Israel prevailed; but when he lowered them, Amalek prevailed." It's the same motif used in this chronicler's account. Again, it's obvious that the use of popular biblical imagery in national mythology is a common theme to legitimize a cause.

But back to the story. The bishop is tired and his arms are at his side. And just at the point when the Estonians were going to defeat the Danes, the clouds miraculously parted, and a thunderous roar came from the sky. As the weary soldiers looked above, they saw the red flag with the white cross – the very Dannebrog we see today – float down from the heavens. It was as if God answered the Bishop's prayers and sent a signal to the Christian soldiers below that hope was not lost. And it gave the warriors the bravery they needed to storm ahead, claim the battle, and take Estonia in the name of Christendom.

Once again, this motif of a heavenly sign isn't unique either. We hear the accounts of divine symbols from the sky in earlier tales. For example, there's Constantine's vision of a cross in the heavens during the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, with the words *hoc signo vinces* written beneath, "under this sign, you will conquer." It comes up again in 1139 when the Portuguese claimed to see a crucified Christ in the clouds before a battle with the Moors, and again in 1217 when they saw a Cross-shaped standard appear before another holy war. We'll even bring it up



again in the story of the Swedish flag. Anyway, this legend of the Danish cross is so important, because carries the weight of both biblical and other ancient mythologies, giving the flag – and the crusaders who carried it – divine legitimacy in the eyes of heaven and the Christian world. The red of the Dannebrog is said represent the blood of the martyrs who fell in the Battle of Lyndanisse, with the white cross standing for the holy cause for which they fought.

This is such a popular legend in Denmark, that there is a famous painting by the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Danish artist, Christian August Lorentzen, that everyone there knows, titled “Dannebrog falling from the sky during the Battle of Lyndanisse” depicting this very scene. And just last year, to celebrate the 800<sup>th</sup> year of this Dannebrog story, Valdemar’s day in Denmark, the Danish Queen Margrethe symbolically set sail to Tallinn, the capitol of Estonia, as Valdemar did with 1,500 ships in the summer of 1219. After the Battle of Lyndanisse, Tallinn was founded as a city in Danish-controlled Estonia, a city name that literally translates to “Danish Castle,” – thus the celebration of the Dannebrog is also celebrated in Estonia as the anniversary of their capital city’s founding.

The legend of the Dannebrog continues for another 340 years, and it’s said that this very flag was lost in the Battle of Hemmingstedt on February 17, 1500, against a peasant German army. It was then recaptured by Danish King Frederik II in 1559, only to crumble into dust and into history. In other words, the physical manifestation of God’s blessing as a heavenly flag was magically destroyed by his hand. But, as Christianity tells us about so much – you just have to have faith that the stories are true.

Now, I’m not much of a faith guy – and I reserve no judgement if you are – but I want to know what else history can tell us about a white cross on a red ground, and find out if there’s a more tangible side of this story that can tell us where the symbol may have come from.

Unfortunately for Denmark, this same symbol is not unique to them. It was used for years within the Holy Roman Empire which bordered Denmark to its south, as well as with crusaders who travelled to modern-day Israel during the 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, and 13<sup>th</sup> Centuries to fight for control of Jerusalem. The Knights Templar are the most famous order of crusaders who went to the Holy Land, but for our purposes, the lesser known Knights Hospitallers, or Knights of the Order of St. John, and later known as the Knights of Malta, may hold the secret of the Danish flag’s true origins.

There is a town in Denmark by the name of Slagelse. And during the middle ages, Slagelse was home to the famous Antvorskov monastery, which was the principle monastery in Scandinavia for the Catholic Order of Saint John of Jerusalem – an order also known as the Hospitallers. The founding mission of the Hospitallers was to give aid and medical care to crusaders and Christian pilgrims who ventured to the Holy Land, but it quickly grew into a powerful military order that made major contributions to the crusades throughout the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. While brothers in the order wore a black robe with an eight-pointed cross, the knights would wear a red tunic featuring a white cross into battle, with their shields also painted red with a large white cross at its center. Now get this: The Knights Hospitallers from the Antvorskov monastery were a critical

military component during King Valdemar II's crusade in Estonia, so it is widely believed today that the flag of Denmark was not just inspired by the Hospitallers' symbol, but that the Dannebrog flag may have actually been brought into battle by the Hospitallers, and then simply adopted by the Danes. While the story of the heavenly flag is certainly more exciting, the true history of the flag may be that it comes from a Scandinavian order of fanatical militant crusaders who helped King Valdemar the Conqueror take Estonia for his realm.

And to go out on a limb here, I want to ask, why was this flag so easily adopted as the symbol of Denmark? Well, here's my hypothesis: If we look back to the Vikings, who were around just a century before the famous battle in Estonia, the image of the blood-red raven battle flag of Oden may have been so deeply ingrained in the national warrior psyche and tradition, that swapping the raven for the cross was a minor, superficial adjustment to appease their new god and their new allies. Consciously or not, paganism has followed Scandinavia throughout the ages, always living in secret, hiding in the shadows of their customs and traditions, so this little theory may not be as far-fetched as it seems. We'll get back to a similar theory when we discuss the flag of Sweden.

Anyway, the Danish flag would live on only a royal flag for the centuries following the adoption of the Dannebrog – and, in fact, in 1834, the king even prohibited private citizens from displaying the flag in any way. This all changed during The First Schleswig War, a Danish-German military conflict, because when the soldiers returned victoriously, they were met with red-and-white flags flown across the country by the commoners. To appease their proud subjects – and the families of those who served – the ban was lifted, and the Cloth of the Danes was elevated to the national flag of all the Kingdom of Denmark.

When we come back, we're going to discuss the long and violent conversion of Sweden, and their mythological crusade against the pagan Finns, where – like we've seen before – the Swedish yellow cross is said to have appeared as a sign from god in the blue heavens above. We'll be right back after this.

BREAK

Welcome back to the show.

To the east of Denmark, across the small Kattegatt Sea, lies the nation of Sweden, home to half my family and the land of my Thor-worshipping ancestors. Though you wouldn't know it from our flag, which is a golden-yellow Nordic Cross on a crisp blue ground, this northern territory was once described as "the wildest and most remote of the Scandinavian lands," as it was the last of the Nordic countries to convert to Christianity. During the Viking Age, in which Swedish pirates played a starring role, Christianity came and failed many times. The first church in Sweden was built by Saint Ansgar, a Frankish archbishop and missionary in the early 9<sup>th</sup> Century, who was invited by the Swedish king to proselytize his faith. But the Swedes were not so easily swayed. They were deeply devoted to their pantheon of Norse gods – most notably Thor – and their massive countryside and well-protected shores kept them relatively safe from

crusading invaders. When Saint Ansgar died in 865 AD, the dream of converting the Swedes died with him. It would take another 130 years before King Olof the Swede, the first Christian king of Sweden – and, just like Denmark, the first king of a united Sweden – would bring the minority Christian religion into the mainstream.

Even with Christianity rising among the aristocracy and royalty – mainly for geo-political and trade reasons – the commoners held firm, even violently, to their pagan gods. The best example of this dichotomy is at the site of *Gamla Uppsala*, the center of pagan worship in Sweden that dates as far back as 3300 BC. Along with burial mounds that are said to be the resting places of the gods, there may have once stood a massive temple dedicated to human sacrifice – a feast for Oden’s ravens and a gift to the ruler of Valhalla. According to the 11<sup>th</sup> Century German chronicler, Adam of Bremen,

“The Swedes have a well-known temple at Uppsala. It is situated on level ground, surrounded by mountains. A large tree with spreading branches stands near the temple. There is also a spring nearby where the heathens make human sacrifices. A golden chain completely surrounds the temple, and its roof, too, is covered with gold...The temple houses the statues of three gods: Thor takes the central position, with Oden and Fray on either side...Every nine years a great ceremony is held at Uppsala. People bring sacrifices from all the Swedish provinces. The most distressing feature of this festival is that Christians too participate in the sacrifices, thus marking their return to heathenism. Animals and humans alike are sacrificed, and their bodies are hung in the trees of a sacred grove that is adjacent to the temple. The heathens believe that the grove has been made sacred through the death and the putrefaction of the many victims that have hung there. The heathens chant many different prayers and incantations during these rituals, but they are so vile that I will say nothing further about them.”

This description is important to our story, because he’s telling us that these ancient rituals were so ingrained in the spiritual consciousness of the Swedish commoners, that even the Christians would leave their churches to take part of the human sacrifices to Oden and Thor. But of course, the problem with many medieval sources is that the Christian writers were so appalled by pagan custom, that they tend to slander and smear their memories. So, we’re forced to take his account with a grain of salt.

Needless to say, Swedish Christianity waxed and waned throughout the early middle ages, guided by the political forces in Europe. Some strong rulers, like King Olof’s son, Anund Jacob, saw the conversions of thousands in the cities; while weaker kings, like his successor, Emund the Old, saw many revert to their pagan ways.

In 1080, Sweden’s devout Christian king, Inge the Elder, was forced to abdicate the throne by a violent mob because he tried to end the pagan cult of Uppsala and refused to take part in the *blót* ceremony – the human and animal sacrifices to Thor. He was replaced by another Christian king, his brother-in-law Sweyn, known as Sweyn the Sacrificer, who allowed these ancient rituals to continue with royal protection. However, Inge would return to Uppsala with an army of Swedish Christian warriors, razing the temples, smashing idols, killing Sweyn, and, in the

early 1100s, using the sword to force the end of official pagan practices in Sweden. However, we know they continued in secret for centuries that followed. Ultimately, Thor's temple in Gamla Uppsala was ground to dust, replaced with a 12<sup>th</sup>-Century stone church that still stands to this day.

By the mid-12<sup>th</sup> Century, Christianity had won over paganism, and the laws of the Church would finally reign supreme over the land of Sweden – nearly 200 years *after* the violent conversions of the Norwegians by their savage King Olof I, and the more peaceful conversions of Iceland and Greenland in the late 10<sup>th</sup> Century.

Now, the flag of Sweden – as with Denmark – also has its origins rooted in crusade mythology, as well as in the ever-changing history of royal politics.

13<sup>th</sup> Century Christian chroniclers tell us about the legend of the First Swedish Crusade, which was a mythical military expedition into southwest Finland by the Swedish King Eric IX. It is said that in response to Finnish raids on the Swedish mainland, Eric sailed off to Finland to put down the warring pagans once and for all by converting them to Christianity and claiming the pagan stronghold for Swedish Christendom. There is little veracity to this story, as southwest Finland was predominantly – if not completely – Christian at the time that this crusade was said to take place, but the mythology is key to establish divine legitimacy within the Swedish kingdom. And it also legitimizes Sweden's conquest of Finland, a land they occupied from about 1150 until 1809. The story goes, that as King Eric is battling the pagans on the Finnish coast, he sees a golden cross shining in the blue sky above. With his crusade now ordained by the heavens, he adopts this sign from god as his royal standard and for the Kingdom of Sweden. And according to this legend, the flag represents this blessing from god – the yellow cross adorned on the blue sky.

Eric the IX was the founder of the House of Eric, a house that ruled Sweden on-and-off for about a century from 1156 to 1250. And historical evidence tells us that the banner and battle standard of the House of Eric was a blue flag with three yellow crowned lions, which could be the foundation of the Swedish national colors of blue and yellow. But Sweden in the middle ages was not a single state, but a confederation of city-states and provinces, each with their own flags and standards, which were ruled by a single monarch – a monarch who bore the yellow and blue colors on his coat of arms.

With the House of Eric coming to an end without an heir in 1250, a man named Valdemar – not to be confused with the Danish King Valdemar, whom we discussed earlier – was elected King of Sweden from the House of Bjelbo. Now, the House of Bjelbo introduced their coat of arms, which consisted of a yellow-crowned lion on a blue and white shield, continuing the tradition – purposefully or not – of the blue and yellow colors. Under this house, another symbol rose to prominence, which everyone in Sweden knows today as it still represents the Swedish kingdom: three golden crowns on a blue background, which could very well be the first true flag used as the Kingdom of Sweden.

So, if we're to dismiss the tale of the flag from Eric IX's First Swedish Crusade, and consider this blue flag with three golden crowns as the first flag of Sweden, we have to ask, what does this flag mean? Because if we can answer that, we may get to the truth about the Swedish flag's real, and possibly pagan, origins. Now, bear with me for a minute, because this gets interesting.

The three golden crowns, adopted in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> Century, have several competing origin stories. One common theory suggests that the three crowns represent the Three Wise Men present at the birth of Christ; another interpretation would say that the crowns symbolize the three natural riches of Swedish topography – it's mountains, forests, and water. It could also come to represent the three realms controlled by the Swedish crown, Uppland, Gotland, and Svealand. My favorite origin story, however, is that the three crowns pay homage to the old Norse gods, who still watch over the land from Gamla Uppsala.

As we discussed earlier, although Christianity became the primary religion of the land in the early-to-mid-12<sup>th</sup> Century, pagan beliefs and practices never fully disappeared from Sweden, and this flag suggests that pagan beliefs could have even been continued by highest levels of the royal court. The three-crowned flag rose to prominence in Sweden only a century after the sacrificial altars and the temple to Thor was destroyed at Gamla Uppsala, a place venerated as a pagan holy site by generations of Swedes, possibly dating all the way back to 34<sup>th</sup> Century BC. There is historical evidence to suggest that the three crowns represent the three highest gods of the Swedish pantheon: Thor, Oden, and Fray, and could be connected to the three royal burial mounds of Gamla Uppsala, a place said to be the resting places of their ancestral gods – burial mounds which still stand to this day. In fact, during excavations of the three mounds in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, several pagan burial artifacts and bodies were discovered dating back to Vendel Age, which was hundreds of years before the start of Viking Age, adding legitimacy to this pagan claim. So, are the three crowns of the Swedish national emblem – the *tre kronor* – actually a symbol of respect to their pagan ancestry? And is the flag of Sweden today the Christianized adaptation of a pagan standard? Maybe. Maybe not. But it's not outside the realm of plausibility.

From the late 14<sup>th</sup> through the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the Kingdom of Sweden was ruled as part of the short-lived Kalmar Union, a political union of Denmark, Danish Norway, Pomerania, and Sweden, with its head monarch in Denmark, and its flag identical to the Dannebrog and current Swedish flag but with a red Nordic Cross on a yellow ground. The seal of Eric of Pomerania, the first king of the Kalmar Union in 1398, was a shield, quartered with a red cross, with all four of his kingdoms represented equally in each of the quarters. Sweden is represented simply with three golden crowns on a blue field, showing that this symbol came to be internationally recognized as the national emblem of Sweden – and possibly Sweden's first flag – by the 14<sup>th</sup> Century.

The early 16<sup>th</sup> Century saw the collapse of the Kalmar Union after years of political strife in Sweden. Just after the coronation of Christian II as the king of the Kalmar Union – and therefore the king of Sweden – he had several members of the Swedish aristocracy, nobility, and even commoners arrested and executed for alleged ties to the growing anti-unionist parties rising

across the country. Known today as the Stockholm Bloodbath, 82 Swedes were executed on November 10, 1520, kicking off a fervor of anti-Danish sentiment that would spell disaster for the king they nicknamed Christian the Tyrant. Tired and weary after more than a century of foreign control, and with anti-Danish bloodlust gripping the country following the Stockholm Bloodbath, a Swedish nobleman and nationalist named Gustav Eriksson raised a peasant army from the province of Dalarna – the rural province my family is from – and rebelled against the Kalmar Union’s king. After a short and terribly bloody conflict, Gustav was victorious in wrangling control of Sweden back from the Danes, and in 1523, he re-established the Kingdom of Sweden as a sovereign and independent state. The Kalmar Union had collapsed. Gustav quickly went to task establishing new Swedish flags that would disassociate Sweden from their old allegiances, and use the flag to forge a new path forward for his liberated countrymen. And to further cement Sweden’s status as a new nation, Gustav broke off all contacts with Rome, kicking off the Reformation of Sweden and Finland, which became a fully Protestant nation by the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

The first king of a modern and quickly reforming Sweden, Gustav’s navy would adopt a yellow flag with two blue horizontal waves and a cross at its center. And the Swedish army would fly a flag that looks remarkably similar to the national flag of Sweden today, but with a white – not yellow – Nordic Cross on a blue ground. But the first time we see the modern Swedish flag is on the coat of arms of the Duchy of Finland, which was at the time a part of the Swedish Kingdom, with two Swedish flags appearing on either side of a crowned knight’s helmet. And because this was a *royal* coat of arms, it could indicate that the Swedish flag we know today was used as one of several of the kingdom’s royal flags, used alongside the much older three-crowned flag.

So, why did the Swedes adopt the Nordic Cross?

As you know, Denmark’s flag is one of the first modern flags in the world, if not the first, so it would make sense that any new flag in the region, like Sweden, would be modeled on its design – especially because of the cultural proximity. And because of the violent anti-Danish sentiment in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Sweden, their adaptation of the Danish Dannebrog flag with the royal and independent Swedish colors could have been seen as highly provocative to the Danish royals who once ruled – a provocation the Swedes would have loved. Thus, it just could be that this symbol would have gained popularity in the anti-Danish royal courts of Sweden.

During the Age of Sail in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries, the flags were most commonly used as naval ensigns, with ships flying different variations of the blue and yellow, depending on their naval assignments, and merchant ships flying the blue and yellow national flag as you’d recognize it today. The flag would take on a more prominent role in Sweden after they lost Finland to the Russians in 1809, as the Swedes moved on to conquer Norway in order to maintain their sizable Nordic empire. With Norway under Swedish control, they would create several new flags to symbolize and legitimize their political union and occupation of the Norwegians. The union flag is hard to describe, so I’ll put an image of it in the show notes, but to put it simply, it’s just a mash-up of the two flags of Norway and Sweden, with a yellow, white, and blue Nordic Cross on a field of four triangular shapes of blue and red. In Sweden,

they would fly the Swedish flag with the union symbol in its canton, and in Norway, the union canton was added to the Norwegian flag.

In other words, both countries were granted civil and military flags on the same pattern, their respective national flags with the addition of a union mark in the canton, combining the flag colors of both countries.

In 1905, however, Norway would peacefully declare their independence from Sweden, so the Swedes would be forced to adjust their flag to remove the mark of the union, which they did on November 1, 1905. And on June 22, 1906, the official flag of Sweden was prescribed into law, with a lighter blue color only added to the flag in the 1980s. And that is how we got the Swedish flag we see today.

When we come back from the break, we're going to wrap up the episode with the quick history of one of the newest members of the Nordic Cross family, Finland, who adopted their flag as a symbol of independence from tyranny in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. We'll be right back.

BREAK

Welcome back to the show.

As the first Nordic nation to officially convert to Christianity, along with their heavy political and military influence in the region and around the world, it is clear that the Dannebrog influenced the other flags of Scandinavia. For hundreds of years, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland were often under the same king, so it's not surprising that those flags closely resemble – and adopted the colors from – the divinely-inspired flag of Denmark. In fact, Norway was under Danish control from 1388 to 1814, and the first Norwegian flag, which was adopted that same year after leaving the union with Denmark, was identical Dannebrog flag, but with a golden dragon from the Norwegian royal coat of arms in its canton.

The red, white, and blue colors of the Norwegian flag were added in 1821, inspired by the tricolor of the French Revolution – which you can learn more about in episode 2 – as well as to reflect their close relationship and shared ancestry with both Sweden and Denmark. And yes, they had a close relationship, but Sweden was in no rush to let the Norwegian's from under their thumb. For 77 years, the Swedes outlawed Norway from flying their flag at sea, only letting it be used on land, in order to keep it the flag from gaining popularity – and thus fostering Norwegian nationalism. In the end, however, Norwegian self-determination won out, and as you know, they separated from Sweden for good in 1905. Norway would only enjoy 35 years of independence, however, as Nazi Germany would occupy Norway from the summer of 1940 until their surrender on May 8, 1945. We'll do a full episode on the Nazi flag and its impact on the flags of Europe, but you should know that during the occupation, any use of the Norwegian flag – or any sign of patriotic feelings toward their nation whatsoever – was punishable by enslavement and death. So, there's no wonder why the Norwegians are so protective and proud of their flag of independence today.

As for the flag of Iceland, they were under Danish and Norwegian control since the Viking Age. And although they had a short-lived and rather unique national flag in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, a flag featuring three dried, headless codfish on a dark blue ground, they adopted a Nordic Cross flag to show their ancestral ties to Denmark and Norway, with three new colors to represent Iceland: blue for mountains and ocean; white for ice and snow; and red for the magma of Iceland's volcanos. On June 19, 1915, the Danish monarchy ratified the new flag, which Iceland again formally adopted upon their independence from Denmark in 1944.

Now, the flag of Finland has a much newer a much simpler origin story than Denmark or Sweden. As you know, Finland was a part of Sweden until 1809, when it was conquered by the Russian Tsar. The Russians controlled Finland as a semi-autonomous region of the Russian Empire called the Grand Duchy of Finland, flying the red, white, and blue flag of Russia. In 1861, the Finns began flying a variation of the blue and white Finnish flag on their naval ships, merchant boats, and private vessels. This simple design was actually first used by a Finnish yacht club founded in Helsinki in 1861, and quickly rose to prominence as the symbol for many of the anti-Russian, nationalist Finns. To their dismay, in 1899, the government of the Russian Empire adopted a policy called the Russification of Finland, a campaign that aimed to limit and eventually end the autonomy of the Grand Duchy of Finland and impose Russian culture, language, and law on its subjects. In 1910, one of their demands was that the Finns add the Russian flag to the Finnish flag's canton – a disgraceful decree that the independence-minded Finns could not abide. That flag became known as the *orjalippu* – the slave's flag – and most Finns would never fly it. The tensions between the Finnish people and the Russians came to a tipping point in 1917, and as the new Bolshevik government came to replace the Tsar, Finland declared her independence on December 6 of that year. The Finnish flag, this symbol of independence from Russia and all foreign control, was officially adopted on May 29, 1918. They would again fight against Russian invasion throughout WWII, but they would forever maintain their independence. And as a Finnish poet describes the flag in 1870, the colors represent the “blue of our lakes and the white snow of our winters.”

As we wrap up this episode of Why the Flag, let's look back and answer the question we posed at the beginning of this show: where does the Nordic Cross really come from? Medieval religious mythology tells us that the Nordic Cross came down from heaven in the Battle of Lyndanisse in 1219, during the crusades against the pagan Estonians, as the Dannebrog, the Cloth of the Danes, to show god's love and inspire the Christian soldiers to fight on. The Swedes would tell you that it appeared as a golden cross in the clear blue sky during King Eric IX's crusade against the heathens of Finland, a symbol of divine encouragement as he went on to conquer Finland for Christendom, and he adopted this symbol as the flag for his kingdom. And ultimately, the territories of these two kingdoms would adopt the Nordic Cross as their own. But facts are stubborn things, and if we put the mythology aside, history tells us that it most likely originated at the monastery of Antvorskov as the symbol of the crusading Knights Hospitallers, adopted by the Danish King Valdemar II, who, through slaughter and conquest and forced conversion, showed the pagans of Estonia – and the Norse world – the real meaning of the mercy of the one true god.



That's it for this episode of why the flag. You can read show notes at [flagpodcast.com](http://flagpodcast.com) and follow us on Instagram @flagpod. And make sure you subscribe to this show on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Stitcher, and don't forget to give us 5 stars in the app – it really helps. Thank you for listening, and I'll see you next time.