



WALKING ST MAGNUS WAY

ORKNEY PILGRIMAGE 2021



Day 3: Saturday 15 May *Kirkwall – St Olaf*



For my time in Orkney I am staying in a rented house. Just down the Street is *St Olaf's Wynd*, and there a very old doorway.

The site is that of the 11th century St Olaf's Kirk, built by Earl Rognvald Brusison, from which Kirkwall (Kirkjuvagr = 'kirk on the bay') may derive its name.

The kirk was restored in the 1500s by Bishop Robert Reid. The doorway of all that remains. Fixtures from the interior, including the piscina, are now within St Olaf's Scottish Episcopal Church, a ten minute walk away.

St Olaf (995-1030) himself is a very different sort of saint to St Magnus (who we will consider tomorrow). Although there was Christianity in the Norse lands before he became King, it is he who is considered the founder of Norway, and through his saga, and his afterlife as saint he became essential to the formation of national identity. In his lifetime he was known as Olaf 'the fat' or 'the big'. He was made a saint the year following his death (so 1031), from when he has been known as St Olaf 'the holy'. The church in Kirkwall was testimony to the spreading of Olaf's influence and cult.

His story, and others that are encountered in the northern parts of what is now Europe, illustrate how important it was to have a royal saint associated with the new nations as they were being formed in the 11th century. St Magnus was important in the same way for the Earls of Orkney.

There is a statue of St Olaf in our church in Kirkwall, as shown in the image here (right).

Olaf stands by the door, seemingly in welcome. What we cannot see is that he is holding a sword behind his back, for indeed 'conversions' at the time of Olaf could be as much about power as faith.

Olaf himself became a Christian in Normandy, being baptised at Rouen. Priests from Normandy, themselves of Norwegian descent, were his missionaries in Norway, as they shared both language and cultural background with those they were trying to convert.



Hymn for St Olav

Du folk i Hellig Olavs hjem
Som han blant frie førte frem
Som han gav liv og kristen tro
Ved dåpen i sitt martyrblood.
Nu reis dei, syng på Olavs dag
Til Olavs Gud om Norges sak.

Hvelv over frie norske hjem
Det lyse håp som samler dem!
Gi at hver mor med barn på kne
Må trygg og glad vår fremtid se
Da blir det gamle hjem så kjær
Og kommer oss så nært, så nært!

O people in Saint Olav's home
Whom he among the free led forth,
Whom he gave life and Christian faith
By baptism in his martyr's blood.
Now stand up, sing on Olav's day
To Olav's god for Norway's sake.

Enscence each free Norwegian home
In that light hope which gathers them!
Give that each mother with child on knee
May safe and glad our future see
Then will the old home be so dear
And come to us so near, so near.

There is much that is troubling about Olav's life, whose violence stands in contrast not just to Magnus, but to Jesus Christ, whose authority and rule we celebrate in this Ascensiontide. More on that tomorrow...