



WALKING ST MAGNUS WAY

ORKNEY PILGRIMAGE 2021



Day 1: Sunday 16 May *Kirkwall*

Today, before reading further, hit this link and listen to this beautiful piece of music written in the 12th century – the Hymn to St Magnus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6zciDnkMjE>

“Nobilis humilis, Magne, martyr stabilis”

“Oh noble, humble and steadfast martyr Magnus...”



Here in Kirkwall (Orkney), Magnus is the patron saint of the islands. He is the familiar saint, the one whose story is known by all. Songs and stories abound, old and contemporary. Children draw and paint his story. And although churches named for Magnus are found beyond Orkney, it might be safe to assume that elsewhere his story is not well known.

Now I was a little child in the 1960s, and I much enjoyed “Noggin the Nog”, so Norse tales always come for me served up by the voice of Oliver Postgate...

‘In the lands of the North, where the black rocks stand guard against the cold sea, in the dark night that is very long the men of the Northlands sit by their great log fires and they tell a tale...’

So for me the story of Magnus, which comes in the *Orkneyinga Saga*, a telling of the dynastic struggles for power and influence in the Orkney isles, The *Saga* explains the significance of the Christian faith in these, and the importance of the cult of Magnus, which reveals where God’s blessing was and could be found among these Norse people.

The *Saga* describes Magnus as ‘a man of extraordinary distinction, tall with a fine, intelligent look about him’. He is well loved by farmers, a significant thing to know about him in a time of land disputes.

The story of Magnus Erlendsson - Orkney's Saint Magnus - begins in 1098 - a time when the Orkney earldom was divided between two brothers, the earls Paul and Erlend. Magnus was the eldest son of Earl Erlend, while his cousin, Hakon, was the son of Earl Paul.

In 1098, the Norwegian king, Magnus "Barelegs", arrived suddenly in Orkney, where he unseated both earls and made his illegitimate son, Sigurd, overlord of the islands.

Earls Paul and Erlend were instructed to go to Norway, where they both died before winter's end. With Sigurd in place as "king" of Orkney, King Magnus left Orkney on a raiding expedition, making sure he took Hakon and the 18-year-old Magnus with him.

Heading down the west coast of Scotland, the raiders travelled as far south as Anglesey. According to the Saga, on the voyage south young Magnus would not fight during the raids. During the attack on Anglesey, Magnus remained in the ship singing psalms.

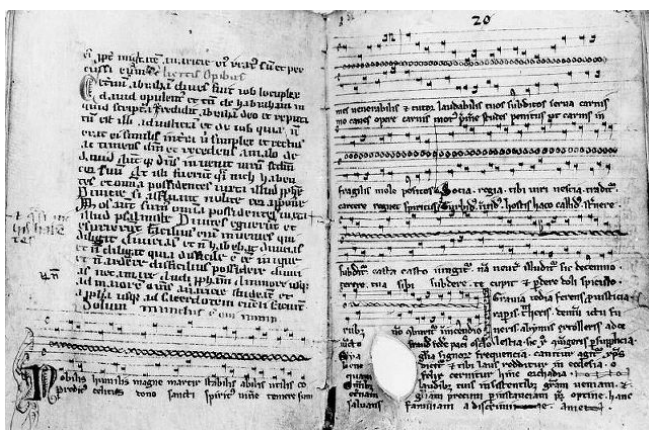
Much of Magnus' behaviour challenged the norms of masculinity and kingship in his times. This was seen in other aspects of his piety, such as his ten-year chaste marriage. The only reasonable excuse for not fighting and not bearing children was his Christian sanctity. The existence of this was without doubt the *Saga* says, though for some men in the Norse culture this was deemed a pitiful way to live.

Later Magnus and Hakon become jointly Earls of Orkney, where the local parliament required that there be only one earl. The matter could have been resolved by a battle, but instead there was an agreement to make peace through Magnus and Hakon meeting on Egilsay at Easter 1117. Hakon broke the terms of the meeting bringing more ships and men with him than agreed. The local chieftains gathering with Magnus and Hakon required that one Earl be killed. Death was not an option that Hakon would consider.

Rather than be killed, Magnus offered three options: he might go on pilgrimage and not return, he might go into exile for the rest of his life, or Hakon could maim him in some way. There was a rejection of these offers, with Hakon determined to live and rule alone.

Hakon did not kill Magnus himself, but asked his arms-bearer, who refused. It was Hakon's cook who did the deed, driving an axe into Magnus skull. In an imitation of Christ, Magnus forgave his assailant before his death.

Magnus was buried where he fell on Egilsay, where we go tomorrow. It was said that the stony crop where he was buried turned into a green field – the first miracle associated with the saint.



And if you didn't listen to the hymn at the start of this blog (or even if you did!), here it is again:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6zciDnkMjJf>