

## 2-2 Magnus and his cathedral

Much of what is known about St Magnus comes from the Orkneyinga Saga, written in the 13th century by an unknown Icelandic author. Combining historic with fictionalised accounts, it tells the story of the conquest of Orkney by Norway and the period of rule by the Norse Earls that followed.

Magnus Erlendsson was born in 1080. His father Erlend and uncle Paul shared the Earldom of Orkney until the King of Norway, Magnus Barelegs, invaded Orkney and installed Sigurd as Earl. The King then took Magnus and his cousin, Håkon (Paul's son) on a raiding trip down the west coast of the British Isles. The young Magnus was already known for his piety and gentleness. During a battle in Anglesey, he refused to fight and sang psalms instead, saying to the King that he didn't have anything against the people there.

Magnus subsequently escaped from the Norwegian ship and lived in Scotland until 1103 when he returned to Orkney to share the Earldom with his cousin, Håkon. He married Ingarth, a Scottish noblewoman. The couple had no children and, allegedly, Magnus had a cold bath whenever there was a risk that physical desire would get the better of him. It is possible that the story was created to add to Magnus' saintliness.

The power sharing arrangement in Orkney proved to be increasingly difficult. Magnus seems to have been a popular ruler and this aroused jealousy in Håkon. A battle between the two sides at the Ting (Norse parliament) at Tingwall was averted only by agreement to have a meeting to resolve the differences between the two cousins on the island of Egilsay on 16 April 1117 (or possibly 1116) – Egilsay was neutral territory because it belonged to the Bishop.

Magnus arrived in Egilsay with the agreed two ships and a small number of men. When he saw Håkon arriving with eight ships he realised that Håkon had betrayed him and he went to the church to pray. Magnus insisted that his men should not defend him as this would lead to the futile loss of their lives, given how greatly they were outnumbered. Magnus realised that his options were limited. He suggested to Håkon that he could be banished from Orkney or go on pilgrimage to Rome or Jerusalem. Håkon refused to consider these options but did agree to Magnus' suggestion that he be blinded and mutilated thereby removing any future threat. However, the chiefs who supported Håkon demanded that Magnus was killed to avoid any further risk of instability in the Earldom.



*St Magnus Window, North Transept*

The Orkneyinga Saga tells us that when Håkon's standard bearer Ofeig refused to perform the execution, instead Håkon ordered his cook Lifolf to kill Magnus. The distressed cook was comforted by the condemned man, who said 'Don't be afraid, you're doing this against your will and the man who gives you the order is a greater sinner than you are'. Magnus then took time to pray for those who were about to kill him and forgave them for their crime. As a chieftain, rather than a common thief, he asked Lifolf to strike his head rather than behead him. Before the fatal blow, Magnus reassured his executioner: 'take heart, poor fellow, I've prayed that God grant you his mercy'.

At first, Magnus' body was buried where he fell on Egilsay, and the Way visits this memorial: see page 32. Later, at his mother Thora's request he was interred in Christchurch at Birsay, built in 1064 by Earl Thorfinn. The Way visits Birsay, albeit the St Magnus Church that you will see there dates from the 17th to 19th centuries. However it stands at least partly on the site of the original Christchurch and has notable stained glass, including this vestibule window by Orcadian artist Shona McInnes (installed in 2013).

Very soon after his death, word began to spread of miracles and healing associated with Magnus and he was made a saint in 1136. As Kirkwall became the centre of power in Orkney, Magnus' relics were moved again from Birsay to St Olaf's Church in Kirkwall. Finally he was laid to rest in St Magnus Cathedral when it was consecrated in the 1150s.

The Way largely follows the route taken by those carrying the remains of Magnus, first from near Gurness, where his body was brought ashore after travelling by sea from Egilsay, then to Birsay and on to the cathedral in Kirkwall. A series of stones known as Mans Stones or Mansie Stanes are said to have been raised as resting places for the remains during this journey. They were blessed and considered sacred because of their association with St Magnus. The only Mans Stone that remains visible is at Strathyre: see page 43.

St Magnus Cathedral was founded in 1137 by Earl Rognvald, Magnus' nephew. Masons who had worked on the cathedrals at Durham and Dunfermline used local red and fawn sandstone in combination to create the fine romanesque building which dominates the Kirkwall skyline. Before land reclamation, the Cathedral originally stood on the shore of the Peedie Sea and would have



*Vestibule window, St Magnus Church, Birsay*

dominated Kirkwall as seen from the sea. The interior of the Cathedral is tranquil, its imposing grandeur balanced by the welcoming warmth of the sandstone.

From the time of its consecration, the shrine of St. Magnus was an important place of pilgrimage. A tangible link with the Orkneyinga Saga was discovered during renovation work in 1919. Magnus' remains were rediscovered in a pinewood box in a space in the square pillar to the right of the organ. The skull has a cleft in it, consistent with an axe blow. During an earlier Victorian renovation, various carved stone memorials were removed from the floor of the nave.

These have well-preserved lettering and striking symbols of death, and now stand against the inside walls of the nave.

St Magnus Cathedral is owned by the people of Orkney and serves as a parish church for the Church of Scotland. It also acts as a focus for the history and cultural life of Orkney, and it includes memorials to notable Orcadians including Edwin Muir, George Mackay Brown, Eric Linklater and John Rae. The Society of the Friends of St Magnus Cathedral was founded in 1958 and works closely with Orkney Islands Council and the Church of Scotland to fund restoration work. For details see the excellent guidebook listed on page 71.

In 1987 a stained glass west window by Lanarkshire artist Crear McCartney was installed to commemorate the building's 850th anniversary. This magnificent window is best seen in the afternoon or evening when daylight spills its vibrant colours onto the pillars and walls of the nave. Its main theme is the light of God and it features Christian, Norse and Orcadian imagery. At its apex is a dove, a symbol of peace. But behind the dove is an axe which recalls Magnus' violent death.

