

#230: THE SAINT AND KING; OLAV OF NORWAY

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INTRODUCTION

Olav Haraldsson lived from 995-1030 and in just 35 years of life, he accomplished more than most. Olav's life can be summed up as a life-changing influence on the country of Norway and its future. He retained many titles in his short life: Viking, explorer, King, missionary, martyr; but none stuck better than Saint, a title that was given to him after his death in 1030. Olav's legacy lives on throughout Norway and around the world.

YOUNG OLAV

Born in 995, Olav was raised in an infamous Viking family and was surrounded by explorers, traders and seafarers. Olav's parents were Åsta (Astrid) Gudbrandsdotter and Harald Grenske, great-grandchild of Harald Fairhair, the first known Viking king of Norway. Grenske died soon after Olav's birth and his mother remarried Sigurd Syr, then leader of the Ringerike kingdom in Norway. It seemed as though Olav was destined for greatness at an early age. Following in his father's footsteps Olav became a Viking trader and traveled to the Baltic and beyond. As a young boy he learned plenty from his shipmates and even became aware of Christianity while in England.

Leaving his Norse gods behind and accepting Christianity was a bold shift for the times but Olav felt drawn to the religion. As a teenager, Olav was baptized in Rouen, France. His mission, he proclaimed was

to unite all of Norway under Christianity. At this time, Norway was still very much a nation that followed the Norse religion, a mix of beliefs in paganism supernatural forces. Stories were told and strict practices were followed. The Gods of Thor and Odin were thought to have control over life, death and nature. The Norse religion was a cultural phenomenon that was intensely worshipped by the Viking people. The mission of converting Norway was no small feat but as the Viking Age was coming to an end and Christianity was spreading across Europe Olav was convinced it could be done.

KING OLAV'S REIGN

In 1015, at the age of 20 Olav returned to Norway and started his reign of power by claiming rule over his step-father's kingdom of Ringerike. He became accepted and gained support by defeating the petty kings across Norway in small battles. His negotiations and alliance with the Swedish king led him to marry the king's daughter, Astrid.

Olav's travels to spread Christianity were consistent and effective. He had introduced the religion and spread it as best he could across Norway. He was 22 years old. However, like most kings, his power did not come without opposition. King Olav became the first national leader who had effective control over all of Norway but he was strict in enforcing Christianity on the people. He countered force with force when he met resistance in his attempts to make people change their religious beliefs. Spreading the word of God to those who had worshipped the Norse religion their entire lives was a great task. He made Christian law the law of the land and for the chieftains of the leading families in the districts, this was a threat to their power. Olav





St. Olav Ways

Olav's journeys across Europe and Norway can be found in routes named appropriately after him, St. Olav Ways. These networks of routes connect thousands of kilometers of history, landscape and cultural heritage all leading to Nidaros Cathedral, the northernmost Medieval cathedral in the world. The burial site of St. Olav remains a major tourist destination. After his death in 1030 and canonization soon after, people from all over Europe made pilgrimages to follow in his footsteps and visit his grave. The St. Olav Pilgrimage to Nidaros, now Trondheim was considered the greatest pilgrimage destination in the world during the Middle Ages. Today it is still possible to follow the routes of St. Olav. Pilgrim Centers located around Norway offer guidance and resources that allow pilgrims from around the world to plan their hike. The most popular time to make the pilgrimage is from June to September. To learn more about St. Olav Ways visit <http://pilegrimsleden.no/en/>

St. Olav's Day (Olsok) July 29

St. Olav's Day or *Olsok* literally translates to Olav's Wake. The day is celebrated each year on July 29 around Scandinavia. This is also the perfect season to finish St. Olav's Pilgrimage and end in the city of Olav's death, Trondheim. The pilgrim's journey comes to end with great celebrations honoring St. Olav. Nidaros Cathedral holds long prayer services and just outside the cathedral the St. Olav Festival is alive and eventful with parties and concerts going on around the clock. This festival attracts a large international audience for the entire week surrounding St. Olav's Day. The Catholic Church of Norway celebrates this as a major feast day across the country and Nidaros Cathedral, now a Lutheran church of Norway honors this special day. Olav was canonized after his death in 1030 during the Battle of Stiklestad. His martyrdom influenced the spread of Christian churches throughout Norway. Until the Lutheran Reformation in the 16th century, this day was celebrated in all churches around Scandinavia. Not until the 19th and 20th centuries did Norway and the surrounding countries begin to celebrate Olsok again. This day is a national flag day in Norway. To learn more about St. Olav's Festival in Trondheim visit <http://en.olavsfestdagene.no/>

was not the first ruler of Norway to introduce Christianity, yet he was the first to put Christian law into effect in Norway. Local chiefs and regional leaders were unhappy with this drastic change and King Knut the Great, of Denmark and England saw his chance to win their loyalty. Knut claimed that he had certain rights to Norway and in 1025 he sent Olav word that he must obey him.

Local chiefs in Norway were upset with King Olav and his strict laws, therefore their allegiances were easy to sway. King Knut of Denmark swept in to claim power and land by forming allies. He sent gifts to the local chieftains and their wealthy families in hopes they would turn against their King Olav. In 1028, Olav was forced to flee Norway. His life was being threatened and his country was overwhelmed by King Knut and his armies. Olav fled to Russia, to the home of his sister-in-law and her family in Novgorod. King Jaroslav of Novgorod was married to Olav's wife's half-sister. There, Olav stayed for two years before returning to Norway in hopes of reclaiming control.

THE BATTLE OF STIKLESTAD



Battle of Stiklestad, Wikimedia Commons

After two years in Russia Olav was ready to return to Norway. He raised an army and hurried back to Norway. He was warned by his respected allies, including his close adviser, Bishop Grimkel of England, that King Knut's army was waiting for him in Trondheim. Olav was bound and determined to reclaim his country. After leaving Russia

with his loyal guards Olav made his way to Trondheim. According to *The Saga of King Olav*, written in the early 1200's by Icelandic saga writer, Snorre Sturlason, Olav traveled with 3,600 men crossing 50 miles of mountains and valleys. He was up against over 10,000 peasants and farmers. Saga resources claim that the main reason for Olav's fall was that he failed to associate with Norway's most influential families—chieftains of those families were among the men who were fighting against Olav at Stiklestad. Olav was killed at the Battle of Stiklestad, just outside of Trondheim. He supposedly suffered injuries to his knee, neck and then finally a final penetration to the belly while leaning against a rock (seen in famous paintings of the event). This became the most famous battle to ever be fought in Norway's history. His body was seized by his men and supposedly buried below what later became Nidaros Cathedral.

ST. OLAV

Following Olav's death mysterious events began to occur surrounding his burial. His body showed no signs of decay and miracles were said to have happened to people who touched his body. Olav was said to have died a martyr fighting for the spread of Christianity. Although he was a strict proponent of forcing people to adopt Christianity he was ironically named Norway's patron saint. To the Norwegian people, the warrior king became a holy man—Saint Olav. He was canonized by his trusted advisor, Bishop Grimkell one year after his death. Olav held a unifying power that no other foreign monarch could claim. What he lost in life, he won in death—the Norwegians still commemorate him on the day of his death, July 29, St. Olav's Day or *Olsok* (Olav's Wake).