



Sons of Norway Mini Presentations

# #313: OLSOK- ST. OLAV'S DAY

Image: Artist Peter Nicolai Arbo depicts Olav's fall at the battle of Stiklestad, 1859.

The feast day of St. Olav on July 29, also known as Olsok, commemorates the death of Olav Haraldsson—the second King Olav—at the Battle of Stiklestad in the year 1030. Olav is considered to be the first effective king of all of Norway who achieved a 12 year break from Danish domination and increased the country's acceptance of Christianity. He is the patron saint of Norway.

A descendent of the Norwegian ruler Harald I Fairhair, Olav was raised as a pagan and was a Viking warrior in the Baltic region in his youth. He fought against England from 1009 to 1011, but assisted the English in their battle against the Denmark in 1013. Believing that it was his calling to unite Norway into one kingdom, Olav started his journey home in 1013. On the way, he wintered with Duke Richard II of Normandy who was an ardent Christian. Converting to Christianity, Olav was baptized in Rouen.

Arriving in Norway in 1015, Olav conquered territory that had been held by Denmark, Sweden and the Norwegian earl Hakkon of Lade. In 1016 at the Battle of Nesjar, his defeat of Earl Sweyn united Norway under his rule. During the next 12 years he worked to garner support among the aristocracy to solidify his monarchy and to convert the country to Christianity. Known as a rather harsh ruler and prone to rough treatment of those who did not agree with him, resistance to his attempts to convert Norway was met with coercion and violence. Although other kings had tried to Christianize Norway before him, Olav is recorded as the one who actually achieved it by forcing Christian law upon the country.

But Olav's monarchy was short-lived. In 1026 he lost the Battle Helgeå and in 1029 he was driven into exile. He returned to attempt to regain control, but fell in 1030 at the Battle of Stiklestad, where some of his own subjects from central Norway took up arms against him. This battle is one of the most celebrated in ancient Norse history.

Following his death, strange occurrences were supposedly reported. His body showed no signs of decay and miracles were said to happen to those who touched his body. The legend surrounding his death, in combination with his popularity and his work to bring Christianity to Norway, led to his canonization in 1031.

St. Olav's popularity spread rapidly after his death, not only in Norway, but throughout Scandinavia. Numerous churches and shrines were constructed and dedicated to him in Norway, Sweden and Iceland. Today, pilgrims from around the world walk a network of routes called St. Olav's Ways. This network is named after King Olav who was said to have trekked these trails converting pagan Norway to Christianity. The nearly 400 mile journey starts in Oslo and ends at Nidaros Cathedral where St. Olav's remains were enshrined.

The Norwegian people commemorate him on July 29, the day he fell at the Battle of Stiklestad. The biggest party, The St. Olav Festival, takes place in Trondheim near the place where he was killed and buried. The day welcomes pilgrims from around the world who make the final hike of their pilgrimage on St. Olav's official day. Locals and visitors alike enjoy concerts, memorial services, theatrical performances, lectures, exhibitions and more.

