



# IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF SAINT OLAV

A historical journey in the footsteps of Scandinavia's most popular saint





According to tradition, in 1030 the Norwegian King Olav Haraldsson landed in Selånger. He was on his way home to Norway. As King Olav he had introduced the first Christian laws in Norway but his claim to power had met with opposition from various powerful men and Olav had fled the country to today's Russia while he made fresh plans.

Now the time had come to reclaim the throne. During the journey Olav was supported by men loyal to him – among others the saga names the Viking Arnljot from Gällö. On 29 July 1030 the king's troops met a peasant army in battle at Stiklestad. Olav was fatally wounded and after his death he was declared a saint, in 1031.

Saint Olav became a popular saint and pilgrims flocked to his grave in Nidaros, today's Trondheim. The cult of Olav spread across large parts of northern Europe.

Saint Olav represents a time of upheaval. Scandinavia was being converted to Christianity and people were influenced by new ideas that changed their faith and their image of the world. Stories of the saints played an important part in the Middle Ages – and also later.

In conjunction with the Reformation in the 16th century the cult of saints was banned but interest in Saint Olav lived on among the ordinary people. St. Olav's church in Österlen tells the story of how the district's peasants continued to celebrate 'Olsmas' right up to the 19th century. They gently stroked the silver axe on the image of Olav and said their prayers. Then they sacrificed coins or even food at Olav's Well nearby in the hope of a good harvest.

SCULPTURE WITH SILVER AXE The cult of Olav continued even after the Reformation. (Sculpture in oak, circa 1500, St. Olav's Church, Österlen in Skåne, south Sweden). On the cover we see another famous sculpture of Olav from Medelpad. (Hardwood sculpture, Haaken Gullesson, early 16th century, Borgsjö Church. Photographer Lennart Karlsson, of the Swedish History Museum, took both photos.)





A CRUEL PUNISHMENT A martyrdom scene with an unknown saint. (Wall painting, 15th century, Trinity Church in Arboga. Photo: Lennart Karlsson).

# AMONG MARTYRS AND MIRACLES



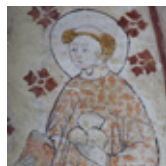
We all have a relationship with saints. Many of the names on the ordinary calendar are names of saints and the custom of celebrating name days has its origins in the Catholic Church's calendar of saints. The first Christians began to celebrate various saints on the dates of their deaths – a tradition that began in the Roman Empire almost two thousand years ago.

FROM THE THIRD CENTURY Rome's first Christian building was probably located at Santa Maria in Trastevere.

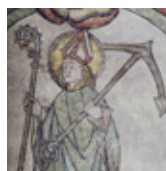
## THE EARLY CHRISTIANS IN ROME

At the beginning of the Common Era Rome was the centre of a powerful empire. Crowds of people flocked to the eternal city. The first Christians came there too and formed parishes. By the third century there were already almost 50,000 Christians in Rome but the authorities saw the growing movement as a threat and began to persecute the Christians. Christians who died in the battle for their faith are called martyrs, a term deriving from the Greek word for witness. A martyr bore witness to the glory of God's kingdom by shedding his blood.

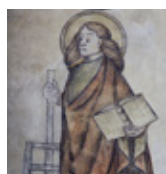
## THE MARTYRS DIED FOR THEIR FAITH



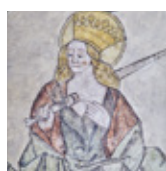
**Stefanus** [Stephen] is considered the first martyr in Christendom. He was a deacon in the early church in Jerusalem and was condemned to death by stoning at the age of about 35. It is the martyr Stefanus who is referred to in the Swedish Christmas carol 'Staffan var en stalledräng' ['Staffan was a stablehand'].



**Bishop Clemens** [Clement] of Rome was exiled to the Crimean peninsula, on the Black Sea. There the elderly man was forced to work in a stone quarry. The saint's legend tells that when Clemens still would not stop preaching, he was drowned in the sea with an anchor tied round his neck.



**Laurentius** [Lawrence], a deacon in Rome, was ordered to leave the Church's treasures to the Emperor but instead he shared everything out among the poor. Laurentius was sentenced to a cruel punishment: he was tortured and burnt alive on a red-hot grill. In Scandinavia he is known as Saint Lars.



**Agnes** of Rome was a 13-year-old Roman girl who refused to marry. When she cited her Christian faith she was executed. Agnes is often pictured with a lamb, whose Latin name, agnus, alludes to her name.

## THE CULT OF SAINTS AT THE GRAVES

It was in Rome's big, gloomy graveyards that the cult of saints began. It was there that the Christians gathered to celebrate the martyrs by their graves. They inscribed names and dates of death, that became the saints' heavenly birthdays. Even down in the subterranean catacombs in Rome plenty of places emerged for the cult of graves. Here the belief in miracles was reinforced by the light of flickering torches. There are descriptions of how the saints' bodies were preserved and their open graves smelled of lilies and roses.



AT THE GRAVES The early Christians celebrated the martyrs, as seen here in St. Calixtus' catacombs.







# THE CULT OF SAINTS GROWS



At the beginning of the 4th century things looked dark for Christians in the Roman Empire. Churches were plundered, holy books were burned and Christian leaders were executed. But suddenly the tide turned. The new emperor, Constantine, was converted and did everything he could to make Christianity the dominant state religion. This was manifested in magnificent churches and a growing cult of saints.

**PORTRAIT OF AN EMPEROR** Constantine the Great in Hagia Sofia in modern-day Istanbul (Byzantine mosaic, ca. year 1000).

## THE WORLD'S FIRST CHURCH MEETING

Constantine stopped the persecution of Christians. He was also the first Roman emperor to recognise Christianity and he organised the world's first church meeting at Nicaea in the year 325. Constantine's own religious faith is much debated. Perhaps his main aim was to create a homogeneous cult that would strengthen the emperor's position. However that may be, these events became significant in world history.

## HE BUILT ST. PETER'S BASILICA

Constantine had several magnificent churches built, among others Saint John's in Laterano, which is still the cathedral of the city of Rome today. The apostle Peter was buried on Vatican Hill. There Constantine established the first Church of Saint Peter, an enormous basilica, which was replaced in the 16th century with the new Saint Peter's Church – Christianity's biggest church. Outside the city walls churches were also built by the graves of the martyrs. Those who gave their lives for their faith were thus remembered for all time, with special festival days in their own churches.

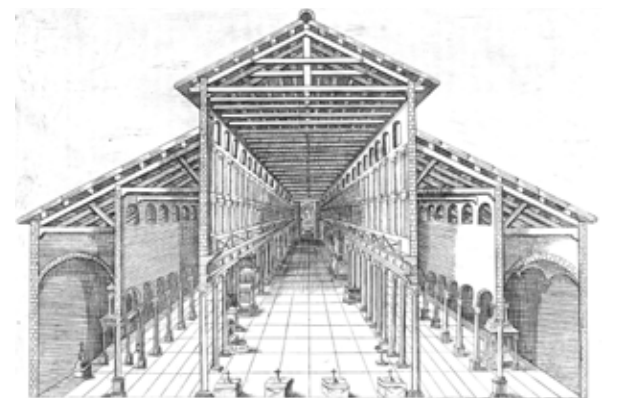
## MORE SAINTS

In the early days of Christianity people considered the apostles and the martyrs to be saints. But with time more and more who professed themselves Christian began to be considered saints. These could be people who gave proof of piety and did good deeds and those associated with miracles. Often these were priests, deacons, monks and nuns.

**A PILGRIM DESTINATION** Saint Peter's Church in Rome is the principal building of the Roman Catholic church. That is where the relics of the apostle Peter are kept. (Photo: Vladimir Lopatin).



A silver relic cross, 11th century. (The National Museum, Copenhagen. Photo: Søren Greve).



**THE PRECURSOR** The original Saint Peter's Church in Rome was built as a basilica in the 4th century. (Sketch, 15th century).



Even today we encounter the stories of saints in association with festivals throughout the year. The midsummer celebration was originally a church festival dedicated to John the Baptist, whose calendar day falls on 24 June. This was the original Midsummer's Day in Sweden. In Norway and Denmark the tradition lives on in the name of Saint Hans. The light summer nights were historically associated with magic powers and supernatural beings.

In September at harvest time Michaelmas is celebrated, which is called after the Archangel Michael and in November there is Martin's Goose, which is associated with Saint Martin.

The legend of Saint Nicholas forms the basis for Santa Claus who brings Christmas presents. The Swedish Father Christmas is a combination of Santa Claus and the house elf in old folklore.

FATHER CHRISTMAS Generous Saint Nicholas inspired the modern Father Christmas. (German Christmas card from about 1910).



SAINT NICHOLAS, archbishop of Myra, lived in the 4th century. Nicholas became famous for his generosity and gave away his inheritance to the poor. He was said to be able to help ships to navigate through storms. (Altar screen, 16th century, Hålsingtuna church. Photo: Lennart Karlsson.)



SAINT MARTIN, Bishop Martin of Tours, was a contemporary of Nicholas. According to legend, Martin gave half of his cloak to a frozen beggar. A cloak is called pallium in Latin and this has given rise to the term 'palliative care'. Saint Martin is France's patron saint and his feast day is celebrated in November, a festival that in Sweden is called Martin's Goose. (Altar screen, circa 1500, Himmata church. Photo: Lennart Karlsson.)

Detail from a reliquary. (The National Museum, Copenhagen. Photo: John Lee.)



# THE ROAD TO BECOMING A SAINT

A saint is associated with good deeds and miracles. From the beginning there was no formal process for the Church to recognise saints, but in time a requirement developed for thorough investigations to be carried out. Bishops had the opportunity to collect evidence and testimonies that could confirm the saint's status.

## A CAREFUL INVESTIGATION

In the 5th century a church meeting raised the importance of investigating potential saints to avoid the risk of heresy or sheer fraud. Bishops were allowed to recognise local saints but only after a thorough examination of the evidence. Augustine of Hippo, one of the most important Church Fathers, reminded people that the saints themselves were not to become objects of prayer. The cult of saints was a means of getting in touch with God and the saints were supposed to be mankind's advocates.

In the 13th century it was decided that the Pope alone could recognise a saint, in accordance with a detailed procedure. The final stage in the process is **beatification** and **canonization**. In conjunction with canonization the saint's name is entered on the Church's register of saints that is called the **canon**. It can take a long time for a saint to be canonized by the Pope. In the case of Saint Olav this did not happen until 1888.

## MIRACULOUS EVENTS

A saint must have performed miracles. The word comes from the Latin **mirari** and means "to wonder at". A miracle is associated with divine intervention and transcends the laws of nature. It might be a blind person who got their sight back or a lame person who could suddenly walk again. Infectious diseases disappeared. An empty larder was filled with food. A drowned person came back to life. Lost sailors found land. At death's door the dying received manifestations of celestial visions.

## A DAY FOR ALL SAINTS

When the number of saints increased, the need arose for a collective day for the saints who did not have a day of their own on the calendar. In 855 the Carolingian Emperor Louis the Pious

decided to appoint a common feast day for all the saints who did not have their own day. In our time All Saints Day lives on as a festival in the Swedish church. It is the time in the year when we particularly celebrate the memory of all the dead. All Saints Day is always celebrated on the Saturday between 31 October and 6 November. The day after, the Sunday, is All Souls Day. In Sweden the custom of lighting candles on graves on All Saints Day began towards the end of the 19th century. In older traditions candles were most commonly lit on graves on Christmas Eve.



ALL SAINTS DAY has its roots in the Catholic cult of saints but nowadays the most common practice is to visit the graves of one's relatives. (Photo: Stefan Holm.)





MIRACLE Mark the Evangelist, the patron saint of Venice, intervenes to save the life of a devout Christian slave who is being tortured. (Painting by Tintoretto, 1548, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice.)



"The Eye" – detail from a reliquary.  
(The National Museum, Copenhagen.  
Photo: John Lee.)



# HOLY RELICS

Relics are remains or objects that can be linked to saints. Among the most prized relics are remains from Christ's crucifixion, for example pieces of the true cross or fragments of his shroud. The relics are often kept in magnificent caskets sometimes known as shrines, which gives rise to the expression "to enshrine something".

## SOUGHT AFTER RELICS

The term relics comes from the Latin **reliquiae**, which originally meant leftovers from a meal or the ashes of a dead person. Saints' relics were much sought after and there were not enough for all the churches and monasteries. Therefore they could be divided up into small pieces and gifted by the Vatican. Some crusaders and pilgrims sold relics collected on their travels when they came home. This profitable trade sometimes culminated in fraud and forgery.

The Olav shrine in Nidaros Cathedral was probably made of wood, clad in silver and decorated with polished rock crystal and precious stones. The shrine was made by order of the royal saint's son, King Magnus Olavsson. Later in the Middle Ages the small shrine was placed inside a bigger silver casket. After the Reformation the reliquaries vanished, probably to Denmark, where they were melted down.



**SAINT OLAV'S SHIRT** In the 1950s a relic was found hidden in an altar in Jonstorp Church in Skåne. Among other things there was a scrap of linen. According to a piece of parchment with a text in Latin, the fragment came from St. Olav's shirt. The altar was installed at the time of the Reformation and it is interesting that the Catholic relics were walled in there during that period. (Photo: Eva-Marie Nilsson.)



**A HOLY ARM?** In Copenhagen there is an arm-shaped reliquary made of gilded copper. The beautiful enamel was produced in Cologne. Through the big rock crystal you could peep in and see the relics, which according to tradition comprised an arm from Saint Olav. Modern day investigations have shown that the reliquary contains thighbones that probably had nothing to do with Saint Olav. (The National Museum, Copenhagen. Photo: John Lee.)





**THE TRÖNÖ CASKET** In Trönö's new church in Hälsingland there is a famous reliquary made in Limoges, probably around the year 1220. The dragon heads are typical additions from Scandinavia. Among other things, the motifs display how Thomas à Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was murdered in 1170. It is not known what the casket originally contained. The reliquary survived the fire in Trönö new church in 1998 and was restored. (Photo: Hilding Mickelsson, Hälsingland Museum.)



**A STOLEN CASKET** A reliquary made of tin-plated copper, probably made in Ireland or Scotland towards the end of the 8th century. Underneath there is an inscription in late runic characters which says "Rannvaig owns this casket". The casket was probably stolen by a Norwegian Viking in the 10th century. Later – when the Scandinavians had become Christian – it was given to a Norwegian church and once again used as a reliquary. (The National Museum, Copenhagen. Photo: Lennart Larsen.)



**THE POPE'S SKULL?** In Denmark there is a skull that, according to tradition, originated from the martyred Pope Lucius [Luke]. Saint Lucius was the Pope in Rome from the year 253 until his death the following year. His relics were distributed across Europe and at the beginning of the 12th century his skull was taken to Roskilde Cathedral. After the Reformation the reliquary became a museum piece. This mysterious skull has intrigued researchers and a study using the so-called Carbon-14 dating method has attributed it to the 4th century – the mystery lives on. (The National Museum, Copenhagen. Photo: Roberto Fortuna.)



**SILVER COIN** The oldest coin struck with Saint Olav's name on was found in Denmark and made just over ten years after King Olav's death at Stiklestad. (Ca. 1042–1047, the National Museum, Copenhagen.)





**OLAV'S LIFE IN PICTURES** The Olav frontispiece is a Norwegian altar frontal made around 1330. The pictures show events from the time before the battle at Stiklestad: Olav's dream, Olav distributing silver coins, Olav falling in battle and his canonization. In the centre Saint Olav is standing under a canopy with a crown on his head, represented as an aristocrat. In his left hand he is holding the imperial orb and in the other his battle-axe. (Nidaros Cathedral, Trondheim.)

# THE OLAV LEGEND



Saint Olav became Scandinavia's most popular saint during the Middle Ages. According to legend, Saint Olav could cure diseases and drive away evil trolls. Miracles were associated with Saint Olav and after the battle at Stiklestad mysterious events happened around the king's body.

## A BLIND MAN COULD SEE AGAIN

The dead king's body was washed in a house close to the battlefield. A blind man was walking past the house and slipped on the bloody water from the washing that had been poured out on the ground. The blind man rubbed his eyes with his wet fingers. Suddenly the mist in front of his eyes disappeared and his sight was restored. The miracle is recorded in Erfdråpa, a commemorative poem from about 1040. Subsequently 25 miracles were described in the Church's official hagiography, Passio Olavi. Half of it deals with Olav's ability to heal the sick.

## CANONIZATION HAPPENED QUICKLY

Just a year after Olav's death his grave was opened. When the corpse was examined, it was found to be pink. His hair and nails had regrown. This incident is described in the poem Glælognskvida, "The Song of Silence";

There lies with intact body the pure king, admired by everyone and as when he was alive, hair and nails can grow upon him.

Bishop Grimkjell was the king's friend and confidant. He now declared Olav a saint. The coffin was placed on the high altar in Saint Clement's Church and covered with beautiful and costly cloths. Later the relics were moved to Christ Church, which was the oldest part of the cathedral in Nidaros.

**SUPERNATURAL POWERS** In popular legend Saint Olav is often depicted as a powerful representative of Christianity who can drive out devilry and trolls. Paintings in churches sometimes show him turning a troll to stone. He even manages to induce trolls to carry out church-building work. (Detail of wall painting, 16th century, Dannemora Church. Photo: Lennart Karlsson.)







**OLAV'S VOYAGE** A recurring theme in the churches shows the dispute over Norway's crown between Olav and his half-brother Harald. The dispute was settled with a sailing race from Denmark to Norway. Saint Olav won after performing several miracles, among other things sailing through the rock. The legend was taken as proof of the power of Christianity and seafarers liked to invoke Saint Olav as their patron saint before hazardous journeys. (Above, a wall painting by Albertus Pictor, from the 1470s, Dingtuna Church. Below, a wall painting, 16th century, Dannemora Church. Photo: Lennart Karlsson took both pictures.)



**IMAGES OF OLAV** The faithful placed sculptures of Olav in churches and chapels throughout northern Europe. These are two early sculptures of Olav from the 13th century found in churches where pilgrims passed by on Saint Olav's Way: Revsund in Jämtland and Torp in Medelpad. (Photo: Lennart Karlsson.) Top, Nidaros Cathedral, the pilgrims' destination, on a copperplate engraving from 1762.

# THE CULT OF OLAV GROWS

During the Middle Ages Saint Olav became Norway's patron saint and his grave was established as a pilgrim destination. Thousands of pilgrims travelled to Nidaros which became one of the great places of pilgrimage in Europe. The church's honouring of Saint Olav was manifested in architecture, hagiography and liturgy.



**Sculpture of Saint Olav.** (16th century, Borgsjö Church. Photo: Lennart Karlsson.)

## MANDATE FROM THE POPE

In the mid 12th century the church began to develop Nidaros as a sacred place and a destination for pilgrimage. In the background there were religious, political and economic motives. The campaign was directly authorised by the Pope in Rome and coincided with Nidaros being elevated to an archbishopric in 1152/53. The city was then visited by the Pope's own emissary, Cardinal Nicholas Breakspear. Breakspear travelled around the Nordic countries, established several cathedral schools in Norway and also laid the foundations of the archdiocese in Uppsala. In 1154 he was elected as Pope Hadrian IV.

## INSPIRATION FROM JESUS' GRAVE

Nidaros Cathedral was given new, coherent architecture. Saint Olav's octagonal tomb was reminiscent of Jesus' tomb in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. It was a striking setting that was intended to impress the pilgrims. The architecture supported the newly written stories of the saint in which Olav

was presented as a Christlike martyr. In the poem Geisli both Olav and Christ are described as "sunbeams" and bringers of light and warmth to Scandinavia. The resemblance to Christ is emphasised in Passio Olavi, a hagiography that Archbishop Øystein probably wrote himself.

## A SPECIAL OLAV LITURGY

Already in the 1030s the church began celebrating Saint Olav's feast day, Olsmas, on 29 July. In time the need for a full liturgy arose, in other words a description of how the worship should be conducted with, for instance, regulations on texts, prayers, music and robes. The oldest traces of the Olav liturgy have been found in England and dated to around 1050. Olsmas was celebrated in all Swedish dioceses in the Middle Ages. At the beginning of the 13th century Olav became the first name for 29 July on calendars of saints from Linköping diocese.



# THE CULT OF OLAV SPREADS

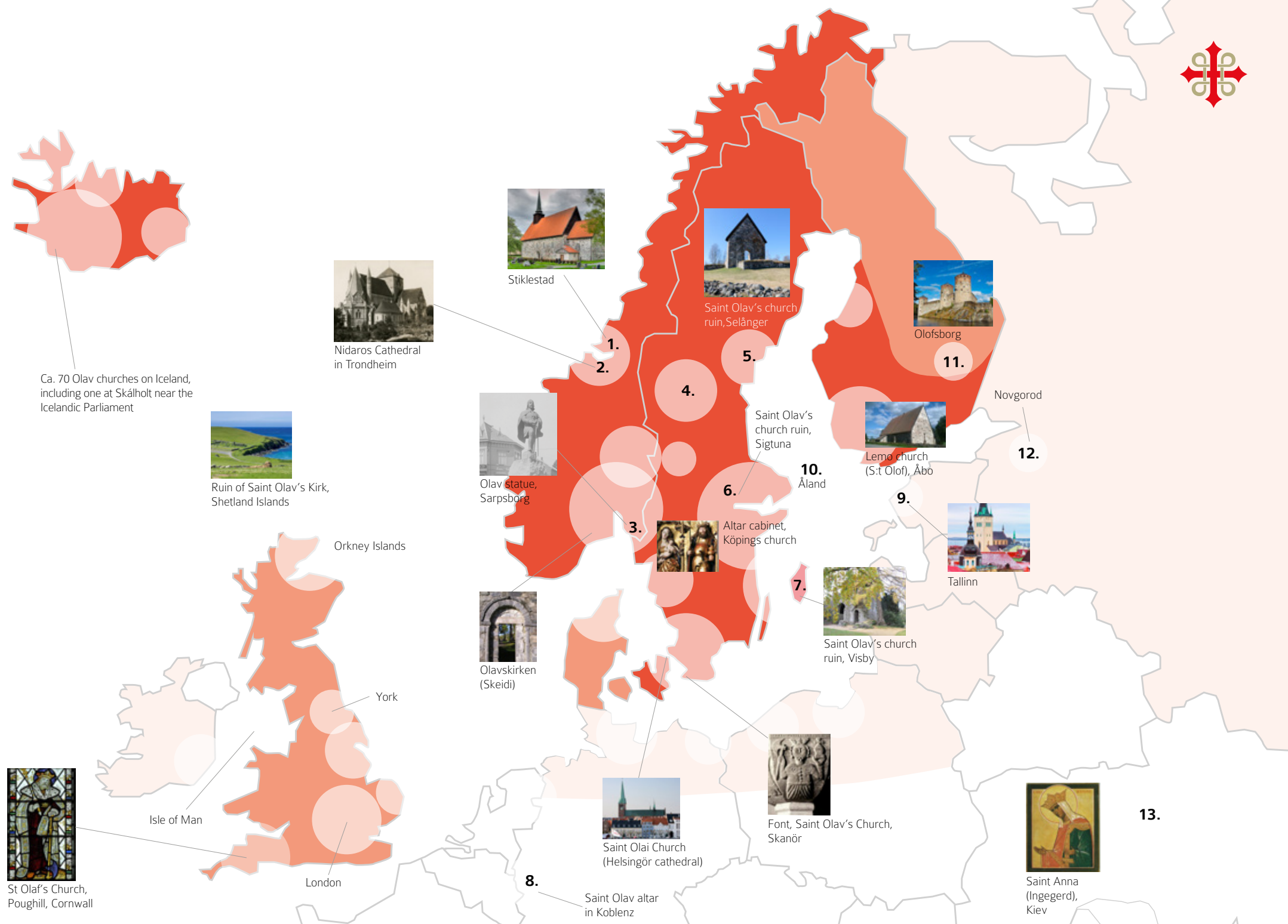
The cult of Saint Olav reached large parts of northern Europe. The several hundred churches and chapels dedicated to Saint Olav bear witness to that. In particular Saint Olav became associated with places that lay along the pilgrim routes to Nidaros. In Selånger the tradition of King Olav's landing was preserved.

## OVER 300 CHURCHES

Altogether researchers reckon that at least 340 churches and chapels were dedicated to Saint Olav, even though not all of those were named after the royal saint. The concentration is greatest in northern Europe: in the Scandinavian countries, in the British Isles and along the Baltic coast. Among the most remarkable memorials is the painting of Saint Olav on a column in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem – the oldest known image of Olav, dated by the art expert Anne Lidén to about 1160.



Saint Olav's column, Bethlehem. (Photo: Torunn Helene Bjørnevik.)



**1. STIKLESTAD CHURCH** is a Romanesque "long church" built of stone, from the year 1180. According to tradition the church was built on the spot where Saint Olav fell in battle.

**2. NIDAROS CATHEDRAL** is in Trondheim. The building of the original church holding Saint Olav's grave was begun around 1070. The oldest remaining parts of the cathedral date from the mid 12th century. In 1152 Nidaros was raised to the status of an archdiocese for the Norwegian church province. The archdiocese governed an area which covered Norway, Härjedalen, Jämtland, Iceland, Greenland, the Isle of Man, the Orkney Islands, the Shetland Islands, the Faroes and the Hebrides.

**3. THE TOWN OF SARPSBORG** was founded by King Olav Haraldsson in 1016 and is one of Norway's oldest towns. The Norwegian kings liked to spend the winters in the castle here in the Middle Ages.

**4.** There are a lot of Olav memorials in **MID SWEDEN**. A large number of churches in Medelpad, Ångermanland, Jämtland and Härjedalen were dedicated to Saint Olav. In this area there are also several Olav wells and sculptures of Olav. The legacy of Olav follows the medieval pilgrim routes.

**5.** In **SELÅNGER** the first stone church was dedicated to Saint Olav in the 13th century, today it is a ruin. In a medieval document the harbour is called Saint Olof's harbour. According to tradition it was here that King Olav landed in 1030 on his last journey to Stiklestad. The District Judge, Eric Teet, mentioned the story in a letter at the end of the 17th century. He describes how King Olav landed on the meadows below the village of Nävsta and ordered a big wooden cross, clad in copper, to be erected as he proclaimed the words "Land for the tribe in the name of Jesus".

**6. SIGTUNA** Here the ruin of Saint Olav's Church reminds us of the importance of the cult of Saint Olav and also its close connection to the power of the Swedish royal house during the conversion of Sweden to Christianity.

**7. GOTLAND** The Olav cult became widespread on Gotland, an island where King Olav is said to have stayed on his voyage to Kievan Rus in 1029. According to tradition it was Olav who converted the heathen inhabitants of the island to Christianity.

**8. KOBLENZ** In the Dominican monastery in Koblenz there was a Saint Olav altar with a reliquary. This was set up on the initiative of the German theologian Heinrich Kalteisen, who was Archbishop in Nidaros in the middle of the 15th century.

**9. TALLINN** Saint Olav's Church in Tallinn was built in the 12th century for Scandinavian settlers in Estonia.

**10. ÅLAND** Saint Olav is the patron saint of the Åland archipelago and several of the islands' churches are dedicated to Saint Olav.

**11. OLOFSBORG** [= Olof's castle] in the town of Nyslott was built in the 1470s and was intended to protect Savolax [now a Finnish province] against the Russian border, in the name of Saint Olav.

**12. NOVGOROD** bordered the kingdom of Sweden in the Middle Ages and was a flourishing city republic. There were many descendants of Scandinavians living in Novgorod and there were close commercial contacts. People from Gotland built a Saint Olav's church in the town.

**13. KIEV** Saint Anna is buried in the Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kiev. She is revered as a saint in the Orthodox Church and is the first Swedish saint. Anna was born Princess Ingegerd and was the daughter of Olof Skötkonung. Her half-sister Astrid was married to King Olav Haraldsson. Ingegerd/Anna was married to Jaroslav the Wise, Grand Duke of the Kingdom of Kiev. It was with them that Olav sought protection during his exile from Norway. Through her four daughters, Ingegerd/Anna became an ancestress of several European royal houses and a central female figure in 11th century Europe.





**THE SKOG TAPESTRY** On the remarkable Skog tapestry from Hälsingland you can see the three Scandinavian saint-kings together: Saint Olav, Saint Erik and Saint Knut. The tapestry is one of Sweden's oldest textile hangings, dating from the 13th century. It was discovered in 1912 in a church store in Skog church in Hälsingland. (The Swedish History Museum, Stockholm.)

# KNOWN AND UNKNOWN SCANDINAVIAN SAINTS

In addition to Saint Olav there were also other medieval saints in Scandinavia. Some are still associated today with particular places or traditional festivals. Saint Birgitta [Bridget] is a famous saint. The royal saints Erik and Knut (Canute) are also often celebrated.

## ROYAL SAINTS

The cult of Olav brought great wealth to Norway in the form of taxes, donations to churches and pilgrimages. In response to this a royal saint's cult also developed in Denmark and Sweden. A royal saint conferred increased legitimacy and power on the reigning royal progeny.

Denmark's national saint is Saint Knut. He ruled as King Knut IV and was murdered in an uprising in Odense in the year 1086. Knut was recognised by the Pope as a saint and his relics were buried in Odense Cathedral, also known as Saint Knut's Church.

Sweden's national saint – and Stockholm's patron saint – is Saint Erik. According to legend King Erik was killed on 18 May 1160 after mass in what is now Uppsala. He was buried in Old Uppsala. In 1273 his relics were moved to the new cathedral where they have been preserved in a gilded silver casket. Investigations have indicated that the remains belong to Saint Erik.

## SAINT BIRGITTA

Sweden's first saint to be canonized was Saint Birgitta. Even as a child she had visions and devoted her life to pious works, including many pilgrimages. The first of these followed in the steps of Saint Olav to Nidaros, probably in the year 1339. She also made pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostela, Rome and the Holy Land.



Birgitta was granted permission by the Pope to establish a convent in Vadstena but it was only consecrated after her death. Birgitta's day is celebrated on 7 October and fine weather around that date has given rise to the term "Britt summer".

**Saint Birgitta with her prayer book.** (Altarpiece, 16th century, Sättna Church, now the Västernorrland County Museum, Härnösand.)



**Saint Botvid.** (Wall painting, 15th century, Enånger Church.)

## LOCAL SAINTS

Few Scandinavian saints have been recognised by the Pope. Most saints were so-called local saints. That perhaps sounds derogatory but many people considered these saints as equals to the great saints. Even local saints' relics attracted pilgrims and the cult played an important part in the economy of several towns and churches. Examples of this are Saint Sigfrid in Växjö, Saint Elin/ Saint Helena in Skövde, Saint Ingrid of Skänninge, Saint Botvid in Botkyrka and Saint Eskil in Södermanland.



**DIVINE POWERS** Through the images of Olav the saint became a presence in the church space and prayers for help were addressed to a divine power who could come to the rescue. Sometimes popular saints were used to reinforce one another, as here, where Saint Birgitta and Saint Olav have been placed together. (Altarpiece, ca. 1425–1450, originally in Tjällmo Church, now in the Swedish History Museum. Photo: Lennart Karlsson.)





**GUSTAV VASA'S BIBLE** During the Reformation the medieval Catholic Church was transformed into an evangelical Lutheran church. The driving force in Sweden was King Gustav Vasa. In the year 1541 he received the first Swedish translation of the Bible, called Gustav Vasa's Bible. (Fresco by Johan Gustaf Sandberg, 1830s, the Vasa Chapel, Uppsala Cathedral.)



**NATIONAL ROMANTICISM** Saint Olav became a part of Norwegian nation-building in the 19th century. A legendary Viking king fitted in with the national romantic mania of the time. To commemorate the battle, in 1807 the "Olav Memorial" was erected, with a view of Stiklestad church. In 1882 Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, the poet and later Nobel prize winner, visited it and gave a speech.



# THE CULT OF OLAV AFTER THE REFORMATION

In conjunction with the Reformation in Scandinavia in the 16th century the cult of saints and pilgrimages were banned. Monasteries were abolished and ties to the Catholic Church in Rome were cut. But among the ordinary people certain saints survived and Saint Olav continued to be celebrated, sometimes in secret.

## THE CULT OF SAINTS WAS CALLED INTO QUESTION

During the Reformation the cult of saints was called into question and people questioned whether the divine could manifest itself in the material world at all. But the degree of strictness with which the traditions were tackled varied. In England all objects that might encourage idol worship were destroyed. In the Scandinavian countries they chose a different way and retained many objects. Instead the church tried to change people's behaviour. People were no longer allowed to kneel before the church's patron saint or leave offerings on the altar of the Virgin Mary. In spite of the new order, parts of the cult of saints survived anyway, among people who did not want to abandon their ingrained beliefs.

## SAINT OLAV WAS CELEBRATED IN SKÅNE AND HÄRJEDALEN

Saint Olav's Church in Skåne tells the story of how the Olav cult continued long after the Reformation. Olsmas was also celebrated in Härjedalen, at least up to the 19th century. This took place at the time of the haymaking revels among the summer bothies. The huts were festooned with foliage and festive food was served. Saint Olav was a popular saint in Härjedalen as is evident from the customary names: in the

17th century and even later there were cases of three brothers in the same family being called Olof, Ola and Olle.



**THE PEOPLE'S OLAV CULT** Saint Olav's Church on Österlen in Skåne continued to attract pilgrims even after the Reformation. In folklore Saint Olav's name was associated with plants, for example wild marjoram was called 'king's mint' or 'Saint Ola's mint' and ladies' slipper was called 'Olav's ball'.

# SAINT OLAV AS A NATIONAL SYMBOL

During the 19th century nationalism began to flourish in Europe, and in Norway and Sweden as well. People looked back at the Viking era and it became an important part of the story of the origins of these countries. In this context the legend of Saint Olav took on a new lease of life: now as a unifying symbol for the Norwegian nation and Norway's struggle for independence.



## A MONUMENT IN SANDSTONE AND MARBLE

In 1807 the "Olav Memorial" was erected in Stiklestad. The memorial was associated with the Olav legend, the conversion of Norway to Christianity and the founding of the Norwegian state, church and monarchy. The truncated column is a symbol of a life that was prematurely cut short. King Olav Haraldsson was only about 35 years old when he died. The site is said to be the place where Olav's body was laid the night after the battle.

There was a new kind of national feeling in the air. After several hundred years the Norwegians wanted to rid themselves of the Danes and on 17 May 1814 the Norwegian constitution was adopted in Eidsvoll. But after just a short period of independence Norway was compelled to enter into a political union with Sweden. Norway was allowed to retain its constitution and its own laws but the countries were to have a shared royal house and a common foreign policy. The Swedish-Norwegian union was a compromise and became a source of political crises up to the peaceful dissolution of the union in 1905.

## A ROYAL ORDER

King Oscar I considered that Norway needed an order of the same royal status as already existed in Sweden and Denmark. He therefore established the Order of Saint Olav in 1847, a national order named after Saint Olav. The insignia of the order comprises a gilded Maltese cross in white enamel with the lion from the national coat of arms in gold on red enamel. On the reverse it has King Oscar I's motto "Justice and Truth". The order of Saint Olav is still awarded to deserving Norwegians today.

## SAINT OLAV AS A BEACON

Saint Olav was drawn into the political debate of the time too. The poet Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson followed in the steps of the royal saint when in 1882 he travelled to Stiklestad to make a speech. Bjørnson believed that Norway should break away from the union with Sweden and he compared the situation with Saint Olav's battle with his enemies. But it might be deemed rather sensitive to promote a king from the Catholic era. Bjørnson therefore toned down the association with Christianity and promoted Saint Olav as a unifying symbol for the Norwegian people.



HISTORIC PAINTING The battle of Stiklestad was immortalised in romantic historical paintings. This is "King Olav falls at the battle of Stiklestad" by Peter Nicolai Arbo. (Water colour from "Pictures of Norway's history", painted by P.N. Arbo, 1860.)







**THE NATIONAL SHRINE** In the mid 19th century Nidaros Cathedral was in a sorry state. In 1869 a big restoration project was inaugurated, which would continue throughout the whole of the 20th century. Nidaros Cathedral got its west nave back, together with the towers and a West Front adorned with sculptures, including that of Saint Olav.

# IN THE SERVICE OF DEMOCRACY OR NAZISM?

In modern history Saint Olav's heritage has been used in many different ways. Some people have interpreted Saint Olav as a figure who transcends class differences. But the memory of Saint Olav has also been exploited by dark political powers.



## A SYMBOL OF DEMOCRACY

After Norway gained independence, there was no longer the same need for Saint Olav as a symbol of the longing for freedom and nationalism. But in political contexts Olav could be used as champion of democracy and social levelling. The historian Ernst Sars called Olav a "democratic Viking" and a "popular nation-builder who clamped down on the gentry and wealthy farmers." In 1930 there were big celebrations in Stiklestad to commemorate the 900th jubilee. This took place in an era marked by major political contrasts. So for the state and the church it was important that the jubilee should promote a feeling of unity. In his address Bishop Eivind Berggrav held Saint Olav up as a universal Christian model and a unifying figure regardless of class or social differences.

## BIG INVESTMENT IN NIDAROS CATHEDRAL

In preparation for the Olav Jubilee in 1930 there was a big drive to restore Nidaros Cathedral. The project had already been started in the 19th century. The result was a spectacular cathedral and a sacred Norwegian shrine. The reconstructed West Front was re-consecrated in the presence of King Håkon VII, Queen Maud and a large number of eminent guests. During that jubilee year the city of Trondhjem took back its medieval name, Nidaros. But after protests from the public the Norwegian Parliament annulled the name change in March 1931 and the city's official name then became Trondheim, with a slightly different spelling.

**BETWEEN THEN AND NOW** The restoration of Nidaros Cathedral began at the end of the 19th century. In the foreground the chapel of the tomb, which originally held Saint Olav's remains. The unusual octagon may have been inspired by Thomas à Becket's grave in Canterbury, or even the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (Photo ca. 1880, National Directorate of Historic Monuments.)



**FATEFUL** The new NS monument is unveiled on 29 July 1944. Vidkun Quisling, the leader of the NS party and head of government during the occupation, is giving a speech. (Levanger Photo Museum. Photo: Per Renbjør.)

## THE NAZIS EXPLOITED THE SAINT-KING

Like the German Nazis, the Norwegian Nazi Party or 'NS' (Nasjonal Samling) had an obsession with the Viking period. The NS wanted to take advantage of Saint Olav as a national symbol and arranged party meetings in Stiklestad. On 9 April 1940 the Germans invaded Norway and the country was occupied. The NS came to power and were then able to take over places of historic significance. In Stiklestad the party tore down the old memorial and built an enormous new monument. The installation comprised a sculpted relief showing the fallen Saint Olav and a nine-metre-tall stone monument decorated with the solar cross. After the liberation in May 1945 the Norwegians wanted to "reclaim Stiklestad" by restoring the old "Olav Memorial". However the Nazis' monument was so heavy that it could not be moved and instead had to be overturned and covered with earth.







THE SWEDISH SAINT Elisabeth Hesselblad was canonized by Pope Francis in Saint Peter's Square in Rome on 5 June 2016. (Photo: Alessandro Bianchi.)



SAINT LUCIA She was born around 283 in Syracuse in Sicily and was martyred during the persecutions of Emperor Diocletian. Sometimes she is depicted with two eyes on a platter. That relates to the legend that before her death Lucia tore out her eyes and sent them to her betrothed. A relic of Saint Lucia is preserved in Frösö Church in Jämtland.

# THE CULT OF SAINTS IN OUR TIME

The cult of saints is not just historical but is alive even today. New saints are still being created, as when Elisabeth Hesselblad was canonized in 2016. The legends of the saints also constitute a heritage in the Protestant churches in Scandinavia.



Saint Anthony's Basilica, Padua.

## A LIVING FAITH

The belief in saints is alive, particularly in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. But saints or holy people are also found in other world religions. People seek out saints in order to get closer to God for various reasons. Saint Anthony is the patron saint of lost people and objects, among other things. Pilgrims from all over the world come to his grave in Padua with prayers for help in finding people who have disappeared. On a notice board in the church there are long rows of photos representing relatives or friends who are missed.

## NEW SAINTS

Even in our time new saints are canonized in the Roman Catholic church. Elisabeth Hesselblad (1870–1957) is one example. In 2016 she became Sweden's second canonized saint after Saint Birgitta. In 1911 Elisabeth started the Birgitta Sisters, a modern branch of the monastic movement that Saint Birgitta laid the foundation for in the 14th century. During the Second World War she hid Jewish fugitives and devoted herself

to extensive charity work. She also contributed to fellowship and cooperation between different churches and associations.

## DOUBT AND TRADITION

Some people have found it difficult to reconcile the cult of saints with the Bible message. Some have claimed that worshipping the earthly remains of a saint was bordering on sorcery and idol worship. The cult of saints does not occur in the Swedish church or other Protestant churches. The Swedish church's message is to emphasise the humanity of the individual without allowing private individuals to be divinely exalted. If we humans try to determine whether another human is saved, God's steadfast mercy is set aside. Only God can grant salvation. That does not mean that the legends of the saints do not have a part to play in the Swedish church, both as part of our cultural heritage and in church festivals. Stories of the saints, for instance Saint Lucia, inspire people to do good even today and can help us to see how light conquers darkness.



THE FESTIVAL OF LIGHT Our modern Lucia celebration is a mixture of the story of a saint and popular traditions. The red silk sash symbolises Lucia's bloody martyrdom. For many people the festival is about invoking the power of light during the darkest season of the year.





**WHO IS YOUR SAINT?** People have always needed models and helpers. Historically many people turned to saints, but there are also cults of individuals in modern times in relation to artists, politicians and royalty. We like to see ourselves reflected in others when we are seeking answers to life's mysteries.

To describe this phenomenon we borrow imagery from church history. People talk about a “cult” and “worship” and even the graves of famous people can become the object of “pilgrimages”. Their clothes and belongings, “relics”, are sold for high prices in auctions. Such names as Elvis Presley, Princess Diana, Martin Luther King or the DJ and songwriter Avicii come to mind. Often they have died tragically and prematurely.



## FOLLOW THE TRAIL FOR OVER 580 KILOMETRES

History does not provide all the answers but serves as valuable inspiration. For many people, both believers and non-believers, a pilgrimage has become a way of reflecting on the big questions when faced with a crossroads in life. In the church the subject of pilgrimage has become increasingly topical. Today many parishes want to link up with historical paths of pilgrimage.

In this context Saint Olav has acquired a new role as a bridge-builder between regions and countries – not just in Sweden and Norway but in the whole of Scandinavia. Saint Olav's Way and the other pilgrim routes to Nidaros shine a light on our shared heritage. A pilgrimage opens up new encounters and lifelong memories.

Saint Olav's Way is the northernmost pilgrims' way in the world and runs from coast to coast – from the Gulf of Bothnia in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west. You can walk through a rich cultural landscape and experience beautiful countryside: river valleys, forests and fells. This is where Saint Olav walked on his last journey – and for many people it is a dizzying feeling to walk in those same footsteps today, a thousand years later.



The pilgrim church on the Hålland estate near Undersåker in Jämtland was built in 1999 on the model of a medieval stave church with the aim of preserving and developing the pilgrim tradition.



## S:T OLAVSLEDEN



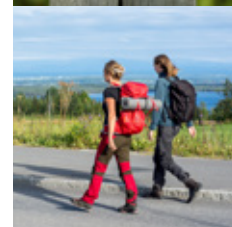
Stiklestad is a central place in Saint Olav's heritage. It was here that as King Olav Haraldsson, he fell in a battle in which he met the peasant army on 29 July 1030. The Romanesque long church was built around 1180, according to tradition on the site of the battle. Close by is Stiklestad's National Cultural Centre where you can study the Viking era through experiences, exhibitions and guided tours.

### Stiklestad

### Trondheim



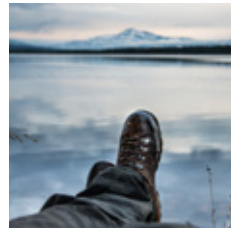
On the way to your final destination you walk through an increasingly green cultivated landscape, past monasteries, through forests and up to viewpoints. The path follows the fjord and leads into Trondheim. There you can experience the tranquillity of the majestic Nidaros Cathedral, the second largest cathedral in Scandinavia. The relics of Saint Olav were buried here when the church building was begun, around the year 1070. Close by is the National Pilgrim Centre. The thousand-year-old city lies at the mouth of the Nid river that gave its name to the former Nidaros, which was the Norwegian capital until 1217 and the archbishop's seat until the 16th century.



Along the Indal river there is a cultivated green landscape with its roots in the Iron Age. You trek westwards on the old road to Duved and a path runs past Tegeforsen falls, one of several imposing waterfalls in the district of Åre.

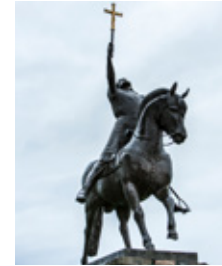


In Glösa there are rock carvings of elks that are over 5,000 years old. The rocky slabs and the babbling of the brook create a timeless feel. The Sami culture with its reindeer herding lives on in the mountains of Årefjällen.



From the Indal valley you trek high up on the Skaltstue trail with stone arched bridges, views of the mountains and reindeer pastures. Here you cross the border to Norway and pass on to Stiklestad.

### Åre

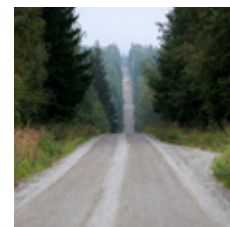


The full Saint Olav's Way is just over 580 kilometres long. Many pilgrims divide it into short stages, depending on their own inclination and taste. Along the way there is a wealth of sights to see and experiences to partake of. Do not miss the pilgrim centres with historic exhibitions and a large number of interesting churches. You get closest to the history and the landscape if you travel on foot or by bicycle but of course you can also choose to drive a car or take the bus or train to explore Saint Olav's Way.



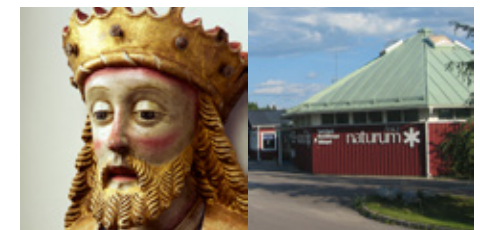
Drink the water from Saint Olav's Well in Pilgrimstad and experience the luxuriant cultural landscape around Brunflo with the mighty 12th century defence tower. On the island of Frösön stands the world's northernmost runestone that tells the story of the conversion of Jämtland to Christianity. From Frösö church you can take a short walk to Villa Sommarhagen, the romantic home of the composer Wilhelm Peterson-Berger.

### Frösön



Here you can walk through deep forests and on towards the open landscape of Storsjö. In the Jämt forest robbers lay in wait in former times. The grand 19th century wooden houses in Bräcke remind us of the forest's wealth. According to the story the Viking Arnljot came from Gällö. His life has been made into a film and an opera, among other things.

### Gällö



In Borgsjö there is a famous Saint Olav's Well and two medieval sculptures of Olav. The church is one of Sweden's most beautiful rococo churches, a shimmering rose pink jewel dating from the 1770's. Here there is also a pilgrim centre in the Ånge Naturum (natural history precinct).

### Borgsjö

### Selånger



According to tradition the Norwegian king, Olav Haraldsson, landed in Selånger in the year 1030. Selånger was a centre of power in the Middle Ages, with a church, a court square and a royal estate. Close by the beautiful ruined church you can visit Selånger Pilgrim Centre – a cultural centre with a café, historic exhibitions, a herb garden, play and learning areas for children and modern conference facilities.

This booklet has been produced as part of the "Pilgrim Västernorrland" project with the support of the Västernorrland Region. Some of the development work has been done in the "Pilgrims without frontiers" project, a cooperation between Selånger, Stiklestad and Trondheim financed by the European Regional Development Fund (Interreg Sweden-Norway).

**Project group:** Bror Holm, Helene Westerlind, Helene Ersson, Beatrice Ikonen, Jan Ovland, Nils Johan Tjärnlund  
**Design:** Jan Ovland. **Text and research:** Nils Johan Tjärnlund. **Translation:** Julie Martin. **Original:** Urban Åkesson. **Printing:** Nygrens

**Sources of pictures:** (page references in brackets): The Swedish History Museum in Stockholm (1–5, 8, 17–19, 22–23, 35–36), Wikimedia Commons (4, 6, 19–21, 24–25, 29, 31–32, 34), Alamy.com (6, 8, 10–11, 16, 20–21, 26–28, 30–32, 34), The National Museum in Copenhagen (7, 9, 12–15), Shutterstock.com (Stefan Holm, 9, unknown, 35), Farhult-Jonstorp parish (Eva-Marie Nilsson, 12), Hälsingland Museum (Hilding Mickelsson, 13), Torunn Helene Bjørnevik (20), Levanger Photo Museum (Per Renbjør, 29), Reuters/TT Press Office (Alessandro Bianchi, 30), Stolvassleden.com (Ruben Heijloo, 33, Marcus Elmestad, 33, Michael Johansson, 34, Håkan Wike, 34–35, Frits Meyst/MeystPhoto.com, 35, Svante Harström, 35), Svensk Filmdatabas [Swedish film database] (35), Ånge kommun (35), Selånger parish (Pelle Matsson, 35), Jan Ovland (36).

**Warm thanks to all who have contributed information and images!**





Selånger's church ruin from the 13th century.  
The medieval Saint Olav's Harbour was sited on the shore below.  
(Photo: Jan Ovland.)



The Norwegian King Olav Haraldsson was born around 995 and died in 1030 at the battle of Stiklestad. After his death he was canonized as Saint Olav and during the Middle Ages he was Scandinavia's most popular saint.

The widespread cult of Saint Olav lives on in the names of many people and places. Olav, Olof, Olaus, Olle and Ola are all variants of the same name, as is the Icelandic girl's name Ólöf.

Today pilgrims from far and wide have rediscovered the world's northernmost pilgrim trail, Saint Olav's Way. It begins in Selånger near Sundsvall and leads to Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim.

In the pilgrim centres along Saint Olav's Way there are exhibitions where visitors can learn how people lived in Viking times and in the Middle Ages. In this booklet the author and science journalist Nils Johan Tjärnlund provides an accessible overview of the cult of saints, legends and traditions.



Selånger  
pilgrimscenter



PILEGRIMSSENTER STIKLESTAD



NIDAROS PILEGRIMSGÅRD

Region  
Västernorrland

Interreg  
Sverige-Norge  
European Regional Development Fund

