

A Saga of The Orkney Isles

FOUNDING OF THE CATHEDRAL OF SAINT MAGNUS, AT KIRKWALL, ORKNEY

Adapted From the Orkneyinga Saga

DURING the great world war, Kirkwall, in the Orkney Islands, became the great maritime clearing station of the allied nations, recalling the early period when the "Peerie Sea" gave shelter and anchorage to the ships of the Norse rovers, and was the Vagr of the Vikings, within which their fleets anchored in safety. One of the monuments left by the Scandinavians in witness of their embrace of Christianity is in this ancient town of the Orkney Isles.

The course of the early Northern searovers led straight across the North Sea to Orkney and thence along the west coasts of Scotland and Ireland to England. There are traces that the islands were inhabited before the coming of those who turned their attention to settlement and commerce, but the earliest records make no reference to any previous occupants, and in the absence of native population the colony developed along its own special lines leaving a history distinct from that of England, or even Normandy, in France, where the invaders adopted the language, religion and in a large measure, the customs of the country.

St. Magnus, according to the sagas, was a man of the noblest bearing, tall of figure, strong of arm, lively of look, virtuous in his ways, fortunate in combat, a sage in wisdom and wit, ready-tongued and lordly-minded, lavish of substance and high-spirited, quick in council and ready in assistance, he was greatly beloved by his friends. He was blithe and kind of speech to all wise and good men, but hard, relentless and unsparing against sea-robbers and those who plundered the land-folk and freemen. He held stern justice above distinctions of rank and was just to friend and foe alike. Magnus and Haakon held joint rule, but tale-bearers and mischief-makers caused trouble between them. The kinsmen gathered their forces and faced each other in battle array, but there were many Earls and men of high rank who were friends of both and they endeavored to make peace between the chieftains, in manliness and good will. This meeting was in Lent, a short time before Palm Sunday, and an agreement was arrived at which was to lead to steadfast peace and thorough atonement to be made in Easter week on Egil's Isle, or Egilsy. Each was to have two ships and each the same number of men. To this both made oath of agreement and declaration to keep the terms of peace.

With the passing of Eastertide, Magnus and Haakon made ready for the meeting. Earl Magnus summoned to him just and kind-hearted men whom he knew to be well disposed toward his kinsmen as well as himself. He took two long ships and the number of men agreed upon, and when all was in readiness set his course toward Egil's Isle. As they rowed in calm over a deep, smooth sea, it is recorded that a billow rose and fell on the ship where the Earl sat and steered. The chieftain's men marveled much at such a token. The Earl spoke up and said: "It is not strange that you wonder at this. I believe this to be

a foreboding of my life's end. We should so make up our minds regarding our undertaking, for I feel that our kinsman Haakon means not to deal fairly with us at this meeting." His men counseled for caution and urged him not to fare further trusting Haakon, but he answered: "We shall fare on still, and may God's will be done on our voyage."

Earl Magnus came first to Egil's Isle with his retainers and when they saw, when Haakon approached, that he had eight warships, and they felt that he meant treachery. Magnus proceeded inland and went to the church to pray, remaining in the sanctuary all night. His men offered to defend him, but he answered: "I will not put your life to risk for me. If peace is not to be made, then be it as God wills." He prayed earnestly and let mass be sung for him.

Early in the morning Haakon and his men arose and hurried to the church and ransacked it, but failed to find Magnus, for he had gone with two men into seclusion. On perceiving that he was being sought, however, he called to Haakon and his party, bidding them not to search further. On their approach Magnus upbraided Haakon, saying: "Thou didst not well, kinsman when thou repudiated thy vows and it is much to be hoped that thou doest this more from other's wickedness than thy own. Now will I offer thee three choices that thou do one of these rather than break thine oaths, and let me be slain guiltless."

"What offers makest thou?" asked Haakon's men.

"First," replied Magnus, "that I will go south to Rome, or out as far as Jerusalem, and visit holy places, and have two ships with me out of the land with what we may need to have, and so make atonement for both our souls. This I will swear, never to come back to the Orkneys. To this they at once said "Nay."

Then again Earl Magnus spoke: "Now, seeing that my life is in your power, send thou me up into Scotland to some who are friends to us both, and let me there be kept in ward and two men with me for pastime. Take thou care that I may never be able to escape from that wardship." To this they said "Nay" at once.

Once more Magnus spoke: "One choice is still left which I will offer thee, and God knows I look more to your soul than I do to my life. Let me be maimed in limb; pluck out mine eyes if you will, and let me be placed in a dark dungeon to the end of my days."

"This settlement I am ready to take and ask nothing further," spake Haakon.

Then the chiefs sprang up and said to Earl Haakon: "We will now slay one of you, for from this day forth ye two shall not jointly rule this land."

Haakon answered: "Slay ye him, then, for I much prefer to rule the realm to going forth to sudden death." So sayeth Holbodi, a truthful freeman of the Southern Isles, who, with one other man, was with Magnus at the parley.

Earl Magnus knelt in Prayer and wept most bitterly. When he had done Haakon bade his banner-bearer, Ofeig, to slay the Earl, but Ofeig answered "Nay" with great wrath. Then Haakon forced Lifolf, his cook, to kill Earl Magnus. The

martyr chief requested his executioner to stand before him and strike from the front, as beseemed his station, and not hew off his head as though he was a thief. He made the sign of the cross and bowed himself to the blow. It is told in legends that the spot where Magnus died was then mossy and stony, but in a time beautiful green sward sprang up, which signified that he was slain for righteousness sake and inhabited the fairness of Paradise. There had then passed since the birth of Christ one thousand and ninety-one winters, and thus was the seed sown from which should spring the spirit to build the Wonder and the Glory of all the North, the Minster of St. Magnus.

After the death of Haakon, the earldom was divided between Harald, the Smooth Talker, and Paul, the Speechless. They quarreled until death of the former left Paul sole ruler. He did not reign long in peace, however, for a new claimant appeared for a share of the earldom in Kali, son of Kol and Gunhild, sister of the murdered Earl Magnus. Kali had been Fairhaired, of Norway, was of noble appearance, skillful in war and a born leader brought up in court of King Harald, the of men. He was also a skald of much note and many of his songs have been handed down. As a token of honor and to gain favor his name was changed to Rognvald, which had been popular in the Orkneys since the days of Rognvald, Brusi's son. Be it known that Rognvald afterward joined in the crusades and made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and returned with great fame.

Rognvald sent a message to Earl Paul demanding the share of the Islands held by Earl Magnus. Earl Paul refused to give up any part of the inheritance, saying that he would guard it while God gave him life. Rognvald gathered a fleet of ships, taking counsel from his father Kol, and a wise old man named Uni. On the deck of his dragon he addressed his men, saying that he proposed to win his right or perish in the attempt. His speech was royally cheered by his men, and then his father, Kol, gave counsel:

"I advise thee, Rognvald," said the venerable Kol, "to make a vow that if St. Magnus secures to thee thy inheritance thou wilt build and dedicate to him in Kirkwall a minster of such size and splendor that it shall be the wonder and the glory of all the North."

Rognvald thought the advice good and registered a solemn vow to build a splendid cathedral in honor of St. Magnus and to remove thither with all reverence the remains of the sainted Earl. He then fared forth on his journey and the story of how he landed through strategy and how he gained peaceable possession of the islands through the kidnaping of Earl Paul by the redoubtable Sweyn Asleifson has already been told in these chronicles.

On becoming ruler Earl Rognvald set about fulfilling his vow to raise a great cathedral in Kirkwall. The work was begun in the year of grace 1137 under the superintendence of his father, Kol. As the work progressed it became more and more clear that the cost was far beyond the means at his command. In his difficulty the Earl went to his father for advice and Kol counseled that he should declare himself heir of all landholders who died and that their sons must redeem the lands. A Thing was called and this law

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