

St Magnus Church, Birsay



The present day church of St Magnus in the parish of Birsay was built in 1664, enlarged in 1760 and restored in 1867. However, this was not the first church on this site, according to several antiquarian accounts, a late 16th century chart and confirmed by excavations in 1982 when the existence of an earlier, possibly twelfth century, church of some architectural sophistication was discovered.

This is the second of three churches dedicated to St Magnus in Orkney marking three key sites in Magnus's sanctification (martyrdom, translation and shrine).

There is debate among scholars as to the location of the church in which Magnus was buried. Christ Church, according to Orkneyinga saga, was the first permanent Norse bishop's seat, founded by Thorfinn the Mighty in the mid-eleventh century next to his residence in Birsay and the place where Magnus was buried. On one hand, local tradition supported by the findings of the 1982 excavations and other architectural fragments have been used to suggest that a predecessor of St Magnus Church was Christ Church whereas the archaeological remains on the Brough of Birsay have led others to suggest it was there.

There is evidence for two important twelfth-century churches in Birsay: a monastic foundation on the Brough of Birsay and a bishop's church at St Magnus church but it is not possible to know for certain in which church Magnus was buried and the first miracles observed.

No matter which church Magnus was buried in, the important thing to realise is that his mother requested his burial in the most important church in Orkney at the time. In the early twelfth century Christ Church in Birsay was the ecclesiastical centre of the Orkney Earldom and the place where one of the most powerful Earls, Thorfinn the Mighty, grandfather of Magnus, was also buried.

Perhaps as part of the development of the St Magnus cult, the bishop's church was rededicated to St Magnus church and became the pilgrimage focus, in a similar way to the rededication and rebuilding of St Magnus Church in Egilsay.

References

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