

St Magnus Church, Egilsay



The church of St Magnus on the island of Egilsay is one of three important medieval churches in Orkney dedicated to St Magnus and marks the first of three key sites associated with his sanctification (martyrdom, translation and shrine).

The church is built from local stone and is one of the finest of the early churches in the Northern Isles. Although roofless the church is otherwise virtually complete, and its circular tower dominates the landscape and seascape, of the inner north isles. The tower survives to a height of 14.9m but was originally higher; comprising four or five storeys and perhaps standing to a height of 20m. The tower has a window in each floor, each one facing a different cardinal point.

Built in a Romanesque style, probably in the second quarter of the twelfth century, so only a short time after the death of Magnus, this church consists of a square-ended chancel with a barrel-vaulted roof on the east end of a rectangular nave, with a distinctive round tower on the west end. A chamber above the chancel and an upper gallery in the nave suggest this was a bishop's church. It is likely that this church was built and rededicated by a bishop of Orkney (Egilsay was church property) to replace the church that Magnus prayed in before his martyrdom. The traditional site of the martyrdom is a short distance from the church and is now marked by a monument. This church was the parish church for Egilsay until the early nineteenth century but may have served as an important pilgrimage church in the middle ages – marking the site of Magnus's martyrdom for pilgrims, with the tower acting as a navigational aid, guiding sea-faring pilgrims to this important location.

References

St Magnus church, Egilsay – canmore ID 2697: <http://canmore.org.uk/site/2697>

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Notes: Some lovely drawings of the church by Dryden can be found at the above link.

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