

# ST MAGNUS: AN EXPLORATION OF HIS SAINTHOOD

**William P. L. Thomson**

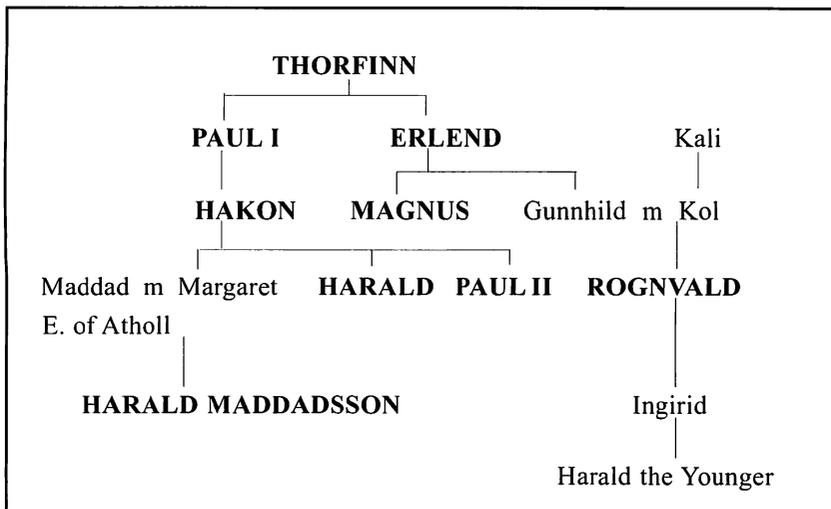
When the editors of *New Dictionary of National Biography* were recently discussing ways in which the new edition is different from the old, they remarked that one of the changes is in the treatment of saints:

The lives [of saints] are no longer viewed as straightforward stories with an unfortunate, but easily discounted, tendency to exaggeration, but may now be valued more for what they reveal about their authors, or about the milieu in which they were written, than for any information they contain about their ostensible subjects (*DNB* 1998).

This is a good note on which to begin the exploration of Magnus's sainthood. We need to concern ourselves with the historical Magnus — and Magnus has a better historical basis than many saints — but equally we need to explore the ways people have perceived his sainthood and often manipulated it for their own purposes.

## **The Divided Earldom**

The great Earl Thorfinn was dead by 1066 and his earldom was shared by his two sons ( fig.1). It was a weakness of the earldom that it was divisible among heirs, and the joint rule of Paul and Erlend gave rise to a split which resulted not just in



**Fig. 1. The Earls of Orkney.**

the martyrdom of Magnus, but in feuds which still continued three and four generations later when *Orkneyinga Saga* was written (c.1200). Yet the initial division was amicable, and for many years Paul and Erlend together ruled over an undivided realm. It was, however, easier for brothers to agree than cousins. We are told that their sons, respectively Hakon and Magnus, ‘could not be in each other’s company without the risk of a quarrel’ (*SMS* 1987: 22), so Paul and Erlend eventually divided the earldom into two distinct territories as had sometimes been done in the past.

The saga describes how, in an attempt to defuse the cousins’ rivalry, Hakon was persuaded to leave the islands and journey to Scandinavia. Throughout the events which followed, Hakon’s contacts were entirely Scandinavian, whereas Magnus seems to have had close links with Scotland, and indeed with England and Wales. Hakon’s travels took him to Sweden where the saga has a long and circumstantial account of his dealings with a heathen wizard. Hakon prevailed on him to reveal the future and, with some reluctance, the soothsayer foretold that Hakon would commit a crime for which it would be difficult to atone, he would become sole earl of Orkney, he would journey to the extremities of the world but return to die in northern parts.

The way this story is told reminds us that we see the historical Magnus not only through the filter of a naive ‘Saint’s Life’, but also filtered by the saga-author’s sophisticated literary talents. The fortune-telling episode deals with a real person (Hakon) and purports to be a real event, but it is shaped, or more probably entirely invented, for literary reasons. It is obvious that it is intended as a ‘table of contents’ to alert the reader to the events which follow: the killing of Magnus, and Hakon’s search for absolution in Rome and Jerusalem. However, it serves another literary purpose since we are introduced to Hakon in the dubious company of a heathen wizard, and so the idea is implanted that there is a dark side to the man who is destined to kill the saint. The author also gives his work unity by forging a number of links between the martyrdom and the earlier legendary parts of the saga, and he uses incidents which repeat or have a resonance with mythical events to create a sense of inevitability as the Magnus-story unfolds. The telling of Hakon’s fortune is an example of this literary device. It repeats the story of Einar Klining who is goaded by the evil Ragnhild into killing her husband, Earl Havard. Einar consults a soothsayer who warns him: ‘Do not do thy deed today, but tomorrow, else for long years there will be manslaughter within thine own kin’. Einar, however, ignores the advice to postpone the murder of the earl until a lucky day, and thus he casually sets in train not only the immediate round of killings, including his own, but the doom of kindred-slaying which continues to plague the earldom family and culminates in the death of Magnus (*OS*: ch. 9; Foote 1988: 196). Hakon’s encounter with the Swedish soothsayer is a repetition of the mythical warning: Hakon is also told about the killing of an earl, but it is now a destiny he is powerless to avoid — he

is offered no choices — and by the killing of Magnus he initiates the further round of feuds between the members of the Paul and Erlend branches of the family.<sup>1</sup> This story is an example of the frequent need to disentangle the historical Magnus from the saga's story-telling techniques.

### Magnus at the Menai Straits

While in Norway, Hakon committed his future to the fortunes of King Magnus Barelegs, the warrior-king who was about to launch his expedition against the north and west of the British Isles (1098). Yet the king made it clear that the voyage was not likely to benefit Hakon, and indeed the king's intentions were hostile to Orkney. Magnus Barelegs captured and deposed Paul and Erlend whom he sent to Norway where both died during the course of the following winter. Having abolished the earldom, he set up his own system of government with his young son in nominal control, and continued into the Hebrides and the Irish Sea taking Hakon and Magnus with him.<sup>2</sup>

- 
1. The saga's very first story about the earls creates another such link. Sigurd the Mighty's killing of Maelbrigte Tusk presages Hakon's conduct at Egilsay (*OS*: ch. 5). In both cases there is a betrayal of trust at a set-piece meeting when it had been agreed that both sides were to be equal. Sigurd defeats Maelbrigte by taking extra men mounted two on every horse, while Hakon is victorious because he breaks the agreement and takes extra ships. We are led to expect that Orkney earls will succeed by means of a ruthlessness which is admirable in its directness, but which pays little regard to the moral constraints by which lesser mortals are bound.

A more complicated link involves a contrast between Torf Einar and Magnus. In the early chapters of *Orkneyinga Saga* Torf Einar is depicted in Odin-like terms as a means of providing the earls with a powerful, archaic and mysterious ancestor (*OS*: chs 7-8). In contrast, the Magnus-story — the moral high-point of the saga — is surrounded by circumstances which recall Balder-imagery: Magnus is 'bright of countenance' and is 'the fairest of men'; his story involves immunity from injury by spears and arrows, he is a good man killed by treachery, suffers a bleeding wound, there is a feast after death, fertility symbolism, and recurring themes of tears and blindness.

2. Although *Orkneyinga Saga* and the related *Magnus Sagas* describe Magnus's part in this expedition, he does not appear in non-Norse sources, but perhaps it is unlikely that his presence would have been recorded. However, the *Saga of Magnus Barelegs*, which might be expected to show interest, makes no mention of Magnus at Menai, but states that he escaped from the king's company during a later expedition (1102/3). For the number and dates of Magnus Barelegs' expeditions, see Power 1986. It seems likely that Hakon and Magnus would have accompanied Magnus Barelegs, not only because they were obliged to serve the king in time of war, but also because it would not have been very prudent to leave them behind, given the way Orkney had been treated.

It was in Anglesey at the entrance to the Menai Straits that the battle took place which first marked Magnus for sanctity. It was a somewhat unusual battle since the landing from the Norwegian ships was opposed by Norman horsemen. Archers on both sides played an important role, and the mounted knights splashing out into the shallow water ‘fell from their horses like the fruit of figs from the trees’ (Moore 1996: 20).

The king ordered Magnus to prepare for battle, but Magnus declared that he had no quarrel with anyone there. He refused to take shelter, and remained ostentatiously singing from his psalter, unprotected from the spears and arrows which rained down on the ships with deadly effect.

This memorable story must surely be based on an actual incident, although we may suspect that it has been somewhat dramatised by the saga-author.<sup>3</sup> The event is often taken as the very key to Magnus’s sainthood although the saga tells us that the king did not believe that Magnus’s motives were religious. John Mooney, who wrote a much-admired book about the saint, had no such doubts (Mooney 1935: 87-97), and more recently George Mackay Brown has similarly interpreted Magnus’s refusal to fight as a rejection of violence. He wrote:

We should think of Magnus as a man of pure vision, who saw inevitably what would happen in history if the impulse to violence and real-politick — so lauded by the vikings — was not to be confronted and denied (Brown 1994).

Both John Mooney and George Mackay Brown saw Magnus as making a moral stand against unprovoked aggression — but they might be wrong. Magnus had some very obvious and entirely worldly reasons for refusing to fight for Magnus Barelegs: his father and uncle had been taken prisoner in circumstances which led to their death, the earldom had been abolished, and Magnus’s expectation of becoming earl had been blighted. But the earls, although they held Orkney from Norway, also held Caithness from Scotland. Since Hakon thought that something might yet be salvaged through the influence of his high-born Norwegian relatives and his friendship with Magnus Barelegs, Magnus’s obvious course was to cultivate the Scottish connection. He therefore took an early chance to escape, and made his way to the court of King Edgar where he must have witnessed the religious reforms associated with St Margaret and her sons. If he was influenced by what he saw, the saga fails to tell us.

Magnus’s refusal to fight might also be somehow related to his surprisingly numerous Welsh contacts. Soon after Menai he was back in Wales, residing

---

3. Peter Foote, on the basis of an examination of the texts, concluded that the Menai incident might not have been in the original ‘Saint’s Life’ (now lost) and therefore was probably unhistorical (Foote 1988: 204-5). Barbara Crawford preferred to see the incident as ‘a well-remembered tradition’ based on a real act of insubordination, perhaps involving a deliberate repudiation of royal authority (Crawford 1998: 26-7).

with 'a certain bishop'.<sup>4</sup> For his part King Gruffudd of Gwynedd (which included Anglesey) had strong Norse links and was rumoured to have visited Orkney where he raised a fleet of twenty-four ships to attack Glamorgan (Dickins 1928/9: 47; Jesch 1996). Another possible contact was towards the end of Magnus's life when late sources tell us that he spent a year in the company of Henry I of England (*LMS* 1894: 257-8; *Legenda*: 303). The occasion might have been in 1114 when Alexander I joined Henry I in a campaign against King Gruffudd, bringing a Scottish army drawn from 'the farthest corner of Pictland', a description consistent with the presence of a Caithness contingent led by Earl Magnus (*ESSH*: ii, 141). Thus Magnus's refusal to fight at Menai probably had a political context, although we do not properly understand his involvement. His Welsh connections may explain why his protest was made in Anglesey, whereas reasons of conscience might have led him to object to the plundering and burning of the Western Isles, the violence of which was celebrated with evident relish by Magnus Barelegs' skalds.

### The Martyrdom

A year or two after the death of Magnus Barelegs on a second expedition to the British Isles (1103), Hakon was restored to the half of the earldom which he had inherited from his father. Magnus meantime received Caithness from Scotland (*LMS* 1894: 251), but his return to Orkney was resisted by Hakon, and it was only after Magnus had visited Norway and appealed directly to King Eystein that he was able to secure his inheritance. There may have been further ramifications: Magnus was earl in Caithness, but it is not obvious that he shared Caithness with Hakon (*LMS* 1894: 251, 258). These territorial disputes must have exacerbated the cousins' already difficult relationship, yet for the moment their affairs seem to have been settled satisfactorily. There followed a period of several years when, as far as we know, joint rule was reasonably effective.

There are no details in *Orkneyinga Saga* of the renewed dispute which eventually led to Magnus's death, although the *Longer Magnus Saga* (written long after the event) seems to suggest that the conflict involved Caithness (*LMS* 1894: 258). We can imagine that joint rule resulted in personal irritations as

---

4. The Welsh bishop with whom Magnus resided might have been Hervé of Bangor. Hervé was a controversial figure whose election was described by Pope Paschal II as 'barbarous'. He was a Norman, closely associated with the Norman earls with whom, the saga tells us, Magnus 'had no quarrel'. Unusually for a Welsh bishop, Hervé was consecrated from York. Magnus also had a York connection; it was probably Magnus who was instrumental in obtaining the consecration from York of Ralph Novell who was William the Old's unsuccessful rival as Bishop of Orkney (Maud 1996: 19, 74-5, 152; Crawford 1983: 107-11).

well as all sorts of practical difficulties. If Magnus was with Henry I for a year, his absence from Orkney may have precipitated the crisis. The fact that the immediate cause of the dispute is withheld from us suggests that there might have been a number of fairly mundane points to be resolved rather than a single clear-cut issue. It is also, no doubt, an indication that the quarrel was secular; if it had hinged on religious matters or moral principles the saga would tell us.

The earls, each with armed followers, met at a ting at which battle was narrowly averted. When joint-earls threatened to fight there was usually a neutral party in favour of seeking a solution through arbitration, and this group was strong enough to persuade Hakon and Magnus to bind themselves to a settlement. Then there was a call for a further meeting on Egilsay so that the details of the agreement could be finalised. The choice of Egilsay is interesting since Bishop William the Old is on several occasions recorded as living on the island (*OS*: chs 66, 76, 77). The location of the meeting suggests that Bishop William was the mediator. There are, however, doubts about his neutrality: Orkney not only had rival earls, but it also had rival bishops, and Bishop William appears to have been Hakon's bishop (Crawford 1983). The saga makes no mention of him when describing the events leading to the martyrdom. Bishop William was, however, well placed to influence how the story of the martyrdom was recorded, and we may imagine that he was anxious to gloss over the fact that he was in any way associated with these events.

Both earls were to come to Egilsay with equal forces, and Magnus arrived first with the agreed two ships' companies. When towards evening Hakon came with 'seven or eight war-ships, all large, filled with men', Magnus knew he had been betrayed. The following morning Hakon came ashore and Magnus was captured. He was not immediately killed but, if we can believe *Orkneyinga Saga's* account, which is hagiographical and probably over-formalises the occasion, he was brought before an impromptu assembly which proffered advice to Hakon. It is not clear whether charges were considered, but the saga would have us believe that the assembly had the final say in determining the sentence. When faced with execution, Magnus bargained for his life: first, he offered to leave Orkney and go on pilgrimage to Rome or the Holy Land, but that was rejected; he then offered to agree to imprisonment in Scotland, but that too was unacceptable; his third offer was to suffer maiming, blinding and imprisonment. Although the three offers are a hagiographical device, they remind us of the real fate of Earl Paul who twenty years later was abducted, imprisoned in Atholl, and reputedly maimed and blinded, whereupon even his closest friends abandoned all thought of restoring him to the earldom (*OS*: ch. 74-6).

The saga-writer had some difficulty in portraying Hakon and felt the need to treat his part in the martyrdom with delicacy, no doubt because at the time of writing Hakon's grandson, Harald Maddadsson, was Earl of Orkney. The assembly is invented, or its role is given prominence, in order to divert some of the

blame from Hakon. He is represented as willing to accept Magnus's final offer, and the ultimate responsibility is put on the assembled chiefs. The neutral party had vanished; 'We will kill one of the two of you now', the chiefs declared, and thus we are led to believe that Hakon agreed to Magnus's execution only when the alternative was his own death.

Hakon ordered Ofeig, his standard-bearer, to kill the earl, but he indignantly refused, so Lifolf, his cook, was reluctantly compelled to be executioner. Magnus instructed the tearful and trembling servant how it should be done. 'Stand in front of me', he said, 'and hit me hard on the head, for it is not fitting for a chief to be beheaded like a thief'. The skull of St Magnus, discovered within a pillar in the cathedral, bears the evidence of this fatal blow (Reid 1926).

### **Magnus, the 'Ideal Earl'**

The saga refers in passing to a poem which described how Hakon and Magnus had co-operated to wage war and had killed their second cousin, Dufnjall, and it also describes a joint expedition which put to death a Shetland viking, Thorbjorn of Burrafirth. The saga-writer remarks of these events: 'here they are not told at length'. Presumably the poem was heroic, and did not blend easily with the somewhat unctuous 'Saint's Life' which was his main source.

The poem, although lost, provides enough evidence to dispose of Magnus-the-pacifist. Pacifism was the last thing you wanted in a medieval earl. The saga-author clearly saw Magnus not as a pacifist, but as a stereotype ideal ruler: he tells us that Magnus was tall of stature and valiant, lucky in battle, administering even-handed justice to rich and poor alike, generous to his followers but unsparing towards robbers and vikings. Unfortunately the one fact which we can check is wrong; the examination of his skeletal remains revealed that Magnus was about 5 ft. 7½ ins. in height — hardly tall, although neither was he unusually short — but he was 'rather poorly developed physically' (Reid 1926: 140). Height and strength are frequently exaggerated when heroes are mythologised, and we may suspect that Magnus's noble qualities were liable to be affected by the same process of exaggeration.

### **Rognvald's Promotion of the Cult**

During Magnus Barelegs' expedition one of the king's councillors, Kali Sæbjornsson, received wounds from which he died. In compensation Kali's son, Kol, was given Gunnhild in marriage; Gunnhild was a daughter of Earl Erlend and a sister of Earl Magnus. Rognvald, as child of this marriage, was thus Magnus's nephew and he was also heir to the half of the earldom which had been ruled by his martyred uncle ( fig. 1).

By no means all heirs with a theoretical claim succeeded in winning a share of the earldom, and Rognvald, inheriting through the female line, born far away in Norway and unknown to Orcadians, must have seemed unlikely to make good

his claim. Royal recognition was a necessary first step and this, we are told, Rognvald obtained (*OS*: chs 61, 62). But royal recognition was not in itself sufficient; it was necessary physically to take possession, and Orkney was meantime in the capable hands of Hakon's son, Earl Paul. With its usual partiality for this side of the family, the saga portrays Paul as a popular, high-principled and stubborn earl whom it would not be easy to dislodge.

The skill with which Rognvald prepared the ground by creating a network of alliances demonstrates his formidable political talents, but we need concern ourselves only with one aspect of these preparations. The saga tells us how Rognvald's father, Kol, counselled him to seek the heavenly assistance of his martyred uncle and he advised Rognvald to promise to build a 'stone minster' in Kirkwall and to dedicate it to Magnus (*OS*: ch. 68). The saga places Rognvald's vow after his first attack had been repelled by Earl Paul and immediately before his successful invasion. We are led to understand that earthly means fail but heavenly assistance brings victory. It is possible, however, that the chronology has been altered to avoid the incongruity of the vow being followed by an unsuccessful expedition. The story belongs some twelve chapters earlier where the saga tells us that Bishop William initially had done his best to damp down enthusiasm for the cult of Magnus but, following a voyage to Norway, his attitude abruptly changed (*OS*: ch. 56, 57). We are not told the purpose of this journey but, given the urgent political circumstances and the bishop's sudden change of heart, it looks as if he was in contact with Rognvald. This, we may suspect, was the occasion when promises were made to build the cathedral, endow the bishopric and promote Magnus's sainthood.

Bishop William was certainly a willing participant, and it is even possible that he, rather than Kol, was the brains behind the scheme. The events which immediately followed depended entirely on the bishop taking the initiative. On his return from Norway he was detained in Shetland by contrary winds, and he was persuaded not to resist the exhumation of Magnus's relics provided he was home in Birsay to say mass on Sunday. When the wind changed and he returned safely, he was still not entirely convinced (it is not sufficiently miraculous for a south wind on the leading edge of a depression to be followed by northerly winds as the weather system moves away). A second miracle was required: one day when Bishop William was alone within Christchurch he was struck blind; falling on Magnus's grave he prayed in tears to the dead earl, and his sight was miraculously restored. Nowadays the creation of a new saint is a lengthy process, but at that time it was controlled by the local bishop and so there was no need for delay. Magnus's canonisation involved, first, local enthusiasm for his cult, part spontaneous and part, we may suppose, carefully fostered by those who hoped to benefit; second, there were miracles at his grave, and finally came the taking up of his bones which the bishop tested in fire. His sainthood was proclaimed and a triumphal procession conveyed the relics from Birsay to Kirkwall.

It is not difficult to see that the winning of Bishop William's backing was a vital element in Rognvald's strategy prior to invasion. On a practical level it was advisable to secure the bishop's support. He was a diplomat of considerable skill, and potentially a dangerous enemy who was never entirely committed to Rognvald; he had an agenda of his own and already he had links with Scotland and with the Atholl family which also had a claim to the divided earldom. But the bishop was needed if canonisation was to be achieved: Bishop William was the key to unlocking the full potential of the Magnus cult as a means of recruiting popular support for Rognvald as heir to his saintly uncle. It was a strategy which was brilliantly effective; modern manipulation of public opinion is often crude by comparison.

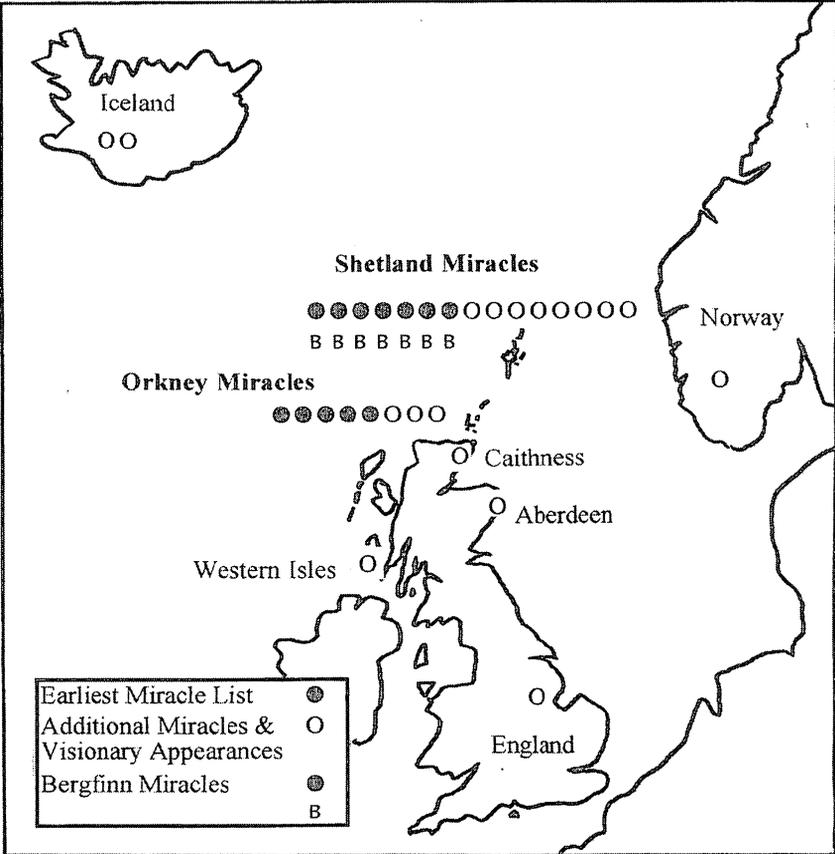
There is sometimes a reluctance to accept the reality of these political machinations. John Mooney was always prepared to think the best of people, and his book about Magnus never attributes underhand or devious motives to those involved in raising him to sainthood and building the cathedral; Magnus, Rognvald and Bishop William were his heroes and they could do no wrong (Mooney 1935: 231-38). Mooney had an uncomplicated view of sainthood with the result that he sometimes gives the impression that Rognvald conducted his invasion much in the spirit of one of the more altruistic presbyterian missions. These political manoeuvres were an aspect of Magnus's sainthood which George Mackay Brown for different reasons also refused to contemplate: '... it is a grey and uninteresting case', he wrote, 'it is the prose as opposed to the poetry' (Brown 1994). George Mackay Brown's imagination had refined Magnus to the point that to acknowledge the possibility of political dealing was not only to complicate the poetic essence of his sainthood, but to dilute it.

Modern opinion might think that Bishop William was 'bought' by the promise of a new cathedral and other inducements, but he probably did not think he was doing anything reprehensible. His actions were in fact strictly correct, given that Rognvald had royal recognition of his claim to Magnus's half of the earldom. It must have seemed right that church and state should co-operate in an enterprise which was so obviously of mutual benefit. The bishop might also calculate that there were some very worldly advantages; a cathedral which housed the relics of a popular saint could grow in wealth and status. Clearly St Magnus's shrine did succeed in attracting pilgrims; the many miracles involving Shetlanders show that visitors were drawn from outside Orkney, and we also know that a pilgrim-route developed through Caithness. The mercenary aspects of the cult are demonstrated by scarcely-disguised instructions about how best to give thanks for a cure. The *Magnus Sagas* tell us that lots were sometimes cast to decide whether to make a pilgrimage to Rome, or free a thrall, or make a money payment. Given these choices, fate usually decreed that money was best, and some of the miracle-stories set out the going rates. The obvious expectation was that others would be encouraged to give generously — and no doubt they did. There is evidence that the shrine itself was richly adorned since we are told that the saint miraculously punished thieves who broke pieces of gold from it.

**The Miracles**

A great part of the *Magnus Sagas* consists of a catalogue of medieval afflictions: blindness before the days of spectacles and cataract operations, broken limbs at a time when there were no hospitals, and the violent behaviour of those who might now be constrained within mental institutions.

The geographical distribution of St Magnus's miracles is shown in fig.2. It shows that Shetland miracles predominate, particularly in the earliest miracle list. A suspiciously large proportion benefit the Shetlander, Bergfinn Skatisson,



**Fig. 2. Miracles and Visionary Appearances.** The map shows the distribution of St Magnus's miracles and visionary appearances. The preponderance of Shetland miracles, often associated with Bergfinn Skatisson, is particularly marked in *Orkneyinga Saga* which is the earliest surviving miracle list.

and those associated with him — his son, his nephew, a tenant and two companions. When these miracles are taken in conjunction with the many Magnus place names in Shetland and the frequency of Magnus dedications, and we remember the ready support which Rognvald received, we see that Shetland must have been in the part of the divided earldom whose loyalties lay with the Erlend side of the family.<sup>5</sup> Miracle-stories are a well-attested means of preserving support for a defeated cause, so it would be interesting to know more about Bergfinn and to be able to investigate the extent to which he deliberately orchestrated the Magnus cult. All we can say is that enthusiasm for the cult and political support for Rognvald went hand-in-hand, and both drew much of their strength from Shetland (Crawford 1984). There were, as was usually the case, additional advantages for Bishop William. The Shetlanders' enthusiasm for Magnus whose shrine was in Orkney must have been a unifying influence throughout the unusually large and scattered diocese. The cult was probably a means of extending the bishop's authority to Shetland in a way which his less powerful predecessors would have found difficult.

There were also some rather far-fetched miracles (which tend to be conveniently remote from Orkney). It was in England that two gamblers bet on a throw of two dice; one was a rich merchant who had lost everything except his last ship. When his opponent threw two sixes it was obvious that more than normal luck was required; making a vow to St Magnus, the gambler made his throw; one dice came up a six and the other split in two with one half showing a six and the other a one, thirteen in all, so the gambler won back all his property (*OS*: ch. 57). Confidence in the miracle is somewhat shaken when you discover that the same story of the split dice is told of St Olaf (*St Olaf Saga*: ch. 97). We probably regard this miracle as unscrupulous borrowing in the worst traditions of hagiography, but there is another way of looking at it: if Magnus and Olaf share the same miracles, it just goes to prove that they are the same kind of saints — and indeed they are.

### Patron Saint

It is easy to see that Magnus fits precisely into a pattern of Scandinavian patron saints, St Olaf of Norway, St Cnut of Denmark and St Erik of Sweden, all of whom came to represent a growing sense of national identity (Jexlev 1988). These patron saints have four characteristics in common: (1) they were royal (2) they met violent death (3) their deaths were at the hands of rival factions of their own people and (4) they date from the eleventh/twelfth centuries.<sup>6</sup> The creation

---

5. The *Legenda* (a late source which contains additional details which may not always be reliable) places Erlend and his sons in Shetland at the time of Magnus Barelegs' invasion (*Legenda*: 303; Foote: 205).

6. As well as the Danish king, another template was his nephew, Cnut Laward, preparations for whose canonisation were initiated in 1135 at much the same

of an Orkney saint in the fashionable mould of the Scandinavian patron saints can be seen as an assertion of the quasi-royal status of the earls of Orkney. Perhaps it tells us more about the nature of the earldom and Rognvald's aspirations than about the actual life and character of Magnus.

Saint-kings who met violent death were also frequently found in Anglo-Saxon England. Another possible prototype is St Oswald, king of Northumbria. Oswald was killed in battle in 642 AD so he is much earlier than Magnus, but his cult had an extraordinary revival in the twelfth century. In 1104, when St Cuthbert's relics were translated to the new cathedral at Durham, the skull of St Oswald was discovered within the same shrine still bearing evidence of a dreadful wound to the head as does the skull of St Magnus. Oswald was well known in twelfth-century Scandinavia but the link may be more direct. It is believed that the Durham masons were subsequently employed in Kirkwall, so perhaps they brought with them stories which account for some of the parallels between Oswald and Magnus: both were married saints who preserved their chastity by bathing in cold water (as did King Edward the Confessor), and they have at least two miracles in common: both punished people who had the temerity to work on their saint's day, and both brought divine punishment on thieves who stole from their altar. Without over-emphasising the similarity of their cults (there are differences) it can be seen that Oswald and Magnus belong to a common tradition of kingly sainthood (Stancliffe and Cambridge 1995; Toy 1983: 99).

Magnus's role as Orkney's patron saint was envisaged from the very beginning. In the same way that St Olaf was 'perpetual king of Norway', the martyred Magnus was described by Rognvald's father as 'the true owner of the realm' who would bestow it on his successor, namely Rognvald (*OS*: ch. 68; Crawford 1998: 32 n.6). The earls no doubt found it useful to base their rule on a feudal grant which emanated directly from heaven; it provided a legitimacy which it was difficult to dispute.<sup>7</sup> Stories about the supernatural punishment of those who worked on Magnus's saint's day probably indicate that there was

---

time as the elevation of Magnus's relics. Like Magnus and Rognvald, 'Cnut Rex' and 'Cnut Dux' were uncle-nephew saints. The inclusion of Magnus among the Scandinavian royal saints in a Russian martyrology illustrates that Magnus was widely regarded as belonging to that group (Lind 1990).

7. George Brunnsden suggests that another example of the political exploitation of the Magnus cult is found in Iceland where visionary appearances and interest in his cult reflect Magnus's usefulness as a saint from the Atlantic colonies who could be used to imply a degree of independence from the Norwegian king (Brunnsden 1997). While it might have been possible for the earls to claim that they held Orkney by God-given right through Magnus rather than as a fief of the Norwegian crown, there is no hint that they used Magnus's sainthood in this way. Magnus enhanced the prestige of the earls within the earldom, but did not undermine the Norwegian connection. He was a companion of St Olaf rather than a rival.

official pressure to observe his festivals and thereby to acknowledge the authority of the earls. The cathedral, including the saint's shrine, remained the personal property of the earls, while hymns to Magnus, ranging in date from the late thirteenth to the first half of the fifteenth century, suggest continuing patronage. Thus Magnus's sainthood, even after Rognvald had achieved his immediate purpose of winning Orkney, continued to be an official cult designed to buttress the rule of the earls.

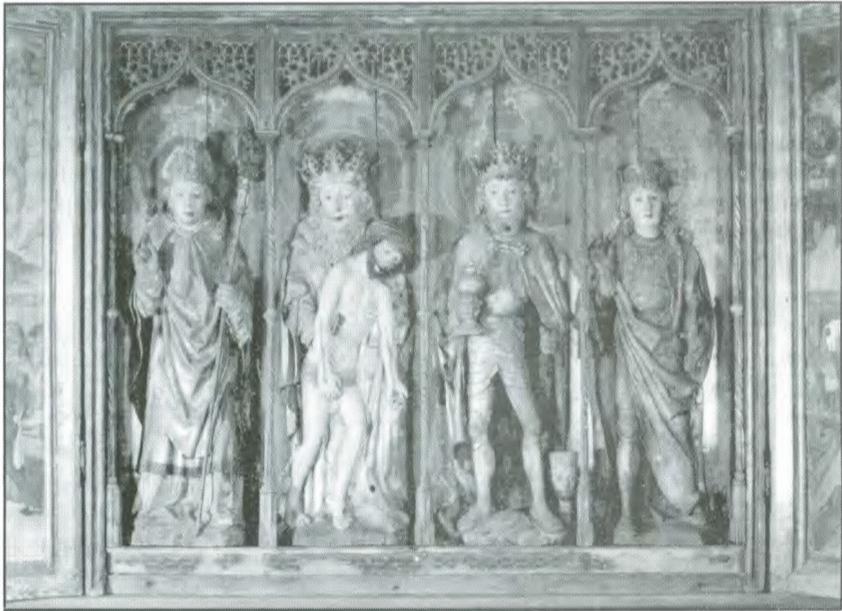
Early visionary appearances were related to the transfer of Magnus's relics to Kirkwall and to miraculous cures, but later appearances were at times of national crisis, and it was as a martial patron saint that he had an enduring appeal. When Orkney faced invasion from Caithness, Magnus made a visionary appearance at Summerdale (1529) and 'faucht for the libertie of this cuntrie, quha was its patroune' (Leslie 1888/95). The spread of the Magnus cult to Scotland is indicated by an appearance after Bannockburn when, as 'ane knycht with schynand armour', he brought news of the victory first to Aberdeen and then across the Pentland Firth to Orkney (Batho and Husbands 1941: 277).<sup>8</sup> When he appeared in 1249 to warn Alexander II not to invade the Norwegian territory of the Western Isles, he was accompanied by Columba and Olaf. Whereas the figure of Columba was large and menacing and Olaf was rather stout and ill-tempered, Magnus was tall, slender, youthful and the fairest of men (*Hakonar Saga*: ii, 271). It is a description which is rather difficult to reconcile with the gaudy and unathletic figure which we find in Norwegian statues ( fig.3) although they too were intended to depict Magnus as a garlanded earl, sword in hand, in his role as patron-saint (Blindheim 1988; Crawford 1988: plates 3,7,8 & 9).

### **Sacral Kingship**

One reason why there was such a ready response to royal saints in Scandinavia may be because they embodied older, pre-Christian concepts of sacral kingship where the king, as descendant and successor to the gods, exercised a priestly function. The king was the priest but, if things went wrong, he might suddenly become the sacrifice. For example, when the Swedish subjects of the legendary king Olaf Tree-feller took it amiss that he was sparing in his sacrifices, they

---

8. The legend seems to be an attempt to explain an annual payment from the customs of Aberdeen to furnish the mass elements for St Magnus Cathedral. This gift was known to be associated with Robert I, hence the belief that it was in gratitude for a visionary appearance after Bannockburn. In reality the grant was earlier, probably made at the time of the Treaty of Perth (1266) and later confirmed by Robert I (probably in 1312). The likely reason for the gift was that St Magnus Cathedral was the appointed place for handing over the 'Annual of Norway', the annual payment by Scotland for the Hebrides (Thomson 2000).



**Fig. 3. St Magnus.** The ‘gaudy and unathletic’ figure of Magnus (right) is difficult to reconcile with the saga’s description of him as ‘tall of stature and valiant’. Nevertheless the intention was to depict Magnus in his capacity as a martial patron saint; he wears armour, he holds the hilt of a sword, the blade of which is now missing. He appears in the company (right to left) of St Olaf, Christ and God-the-father and St Thomas (From the altarpiece from Andsnes, Nordland, Norway, reproduced by permission of Tromsø Museum).

surrounded his house and burned him as ‘a sacrifice for good crops’ (*Ynglinga Saga*: ch. 47; McTurk 1974/7). It is easy to imagine that a similar aura once surrounded the earls of Orkney. Some earls were ‘lucky’, such as the mythical Havard Harvest-happy who was killed at ‘Havardsteigar’ in Stenness. Despite, or in some sense because of the violence of his death, Havard was remembered as ‘lucky in his harvests’ (*OS*: ch. 9).

In discussing the numerous murdered royal saints of Anglo-Saxon England, David Rollason was inclined to discount connections with sacral kingship, preferring to see these king-saints as deliberately created by royal houses and the church co-operating for their mutual advantage and thereby reinforcing the institutional structure of society (Rollason 1983: 16). We can see that the same is true of Orkney — at least up to a point. It is hardly likely that a real memory of sacral kingship was preserved in twelfth-century Orkney, and the earl and the bishop obviously did promote Magnus’s

sainthood for their mutual benefit: Magnus's sainthood was a means of winning Orkney for Rognvald and enhancing the prestige of the earls, while the church gained at least as much from the strengthening and enriching of the bishopric. Yet the mind-set which responded to the violent death of kings was perhaps not far below the surface. The rational self-interest of the earl and bishop may have been one part of the cult, but another component was the altogether more primitive response of ordinary people to the circumstances of Magnus's death.

It is a mind-set which even today is not far below the surface. Two recent examples remind us that royalty and violent death are potent ingredients which still evoke this popular response. The re-burial of the remains of Czar Nicolas in 1998 prompted talk of his sainthood. The former czar may yet attain sainthood and, if he does, it will have more to do with his royal status and his dramatic murder by Bolsheviks than with his moral qualities. The death of Diana, Princess of Wales, contains the same elements of royalty and violent death. Popular outpouring need no longer be directed to the promotion of sainthood as such, but it is interesting to see how the response to her death was described using the vocabulary of sainthood — public reaction was 'a cult' and her island-grave 'a shrine'. The cautionary note struck by Cardinal Basil Hume's reminder that 'Diana should not be treated as a saint' echoes Bishop William's warning that it was 'sheer heresy' to go about with stories of miracles at the tomb of Earl Magnus.

In extreme cases the violent death of royalty is sufficient, not just to hide the real person, but to render irrelevant the most glaring defects of character. It has been said of Edward II that 'seldom, if ever, have contemporaries written of an English king with such unmitigated contempt' yet, in response to his horrific murder, his elaborate tomb at Gloucester became for a time the centre of a somewhat improbable cult (McKisack 1959: 95).

### **Why is Magnus a Saint?**

I would like to end by drawing together the strands which compose Magnus's sainthood. We expect saints to be good, so the first strand is just the common-sense view that Magnus is a saint because he was a good man who was unjustly condemned and met death bravely, accepting God's will and forgiving his enemies. This may be true, although sainthood so thoroughly obscures real people that we cannot be entirely sure. It seems that his quarrel with Hakon was secular and motivated by self-interest rather than by moral issues or any real conflict of principle. His death may have been unjust, but we must dig deeper if we are to discover that it was a martyrdom.

A second view is that Magnus's stand against Viking violence caused a turning-point in the development of Orkney society. This is an attractive theory and, although Magnus may not have been the direct cause, we can readily see

that he at least became the symbol of a new society for which the term ‘Viking’ had ceased to be appropriate. But we over-simplify Magnus’s sainthood if we interpret the turning point as simply a rejection of violence on his part. Contemporaries, and those who later looked to him as Orkney’s patron-saint, saw nothing incongruous in his military activities; he was ‘ane knycht with schynand armour’, an idealised ‘just ruler’ in whom severity was commendable and entirely compatible with sainthood. Not all miracles brought cures; some inflicted punishments. Part of our difficulty with Magnus is that nowadays we find it less easy to respond to these warrior-saints.

We expect saints to be religious, so a third possibility is that Magnus’s sainthood could in some way be the result of his beliefs or his support for new forms of strengthened church organisation as represented in Scotland by Queen Margaret and her sons. The saga, however, provides little evidence to support such a view apart from recording his visit to the Welsh bishop and his time at the Scottish court where admittedly these influences were strong. These new institutions did have a profound effect on Orkney and did mark a turning point, but not in Magnus’s lifetime. The changes are associated with events a generation later – the success of his cult, his canonisation, the strengthening of the bishopric, the building of the cathedral, and the flowering of Orkney’s twelfth-century renaissance. Later it was possible to describe how Magnus had ‘driven away the throne of the Devil out of the northern parts of the world, and established the tabernacle of Almighty God’ (*LMS* 1894: 269), but these achievements were posthumous; they were the work of other people acting in his name.

It is obvious that one of the main ingredients in Magnus’s sainthood was the promotion of the cult for political ends. Without Rognvald there was little chance that Magnus would have become a saint — and yet saints, no matter how useful, are not easily made out of ordinary men even by such brilliant propagandists as Rognvald and Bishop William. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries no fewer than eight Orkney earls met violent deaths, so the killing of an earl was not in itself very remarkable; it happened on average once in every generation. It was the manner of Magnus’s death which made it different, the formality of the occasion, the set-piece meeting and the betrayal of trust, while the way in which the drama unfolds in parallel to Lent, Palm Sunday, Holy Week and Easter conveys a subliminal message that the martyrdom re-enacts the passion of Christ. George Mackay Brown described Magnus’s execution as a ‘cold deliberate ritual’ (Brown 1987), and it is still easy to feel that it has a depth of meaning which is lacking in the deaths of earls who were killed in battle or fell victim to murderous attacks.<sup>9</sup>

---

9. The violent deaths of some other twelfth-century earls produced a similar but lesser reaction. Rognvald, assassinated in 1158, was also canonised (*OS*: chs 103-04) although his cult seems never to have had wide appeal. His grandson, Harald the Younger, a claimant to the earldom, was killed in battle in 1198

George Mackay Brown's novel *Magnus* diverges from the historical Magnus when it insists on motives of pacifism, and it no doubt simplifies the saint by refusing to countenance political motivation, but it builds on the themes of suffering, sacrifice and renewal, and on the kind of fertility symbolism which finds earlier expression in the Gaelic hymn to St Magnus (Carmichael 1900: 1, 179-81; Mooney 1935: 292-93; *SMS* 1987: 50-51). As Magnus's destiny is gradually revealed, the chorus-like figures of Mans and Hild periodically appear; they plough, they tend the growing crop and in the end they reap. Their labour is a progression towards the eventual harvest of Magnus's sainthood, and the martyrdom — the death of the sacral king — brings them a harvest with an abundance of bannocks and ale. 'Mans' is the shortened form of the name 'Magnus', so Mans is Magnus himself, shorn of sainthood and representing human aspirations. 'Hild' is more obscure: it is a name which George Mackay Brown has drawn from the legend of the Everlasting Battle (fought in Hoy) where each night Hild restores the dead warriors so that next day their battle is renewed (Saxo Grammaticus: 149; Almqvist 1978/81) — the agricultural cycle is a ritual which is endless. And yet, although he uses her name, George Mackay Brown never refers directly to the legend; it is a private insight — a literary puzzle of a kind which the saga-author would have enjoyed.

Although the unknown saga-writer and George Mackay Brown are separated by almost eight hundred years, both re-worked Magnus's sainthood in literary terms. Ordinary folk might not so readily put the meaning of sainthood into words, but the seekers after miracle cures and the pilgrims who made the long journey to his shrine knew that the violent death of Earl Magnus somehow re-enacted an ancient mystery of powerful significance. Their social superiors, clerical and secular, were more cynical in their manipulation of the cult, and they were quick to appreciate how Magnus's sainthood might be promoted for political advantage. We have seen that, as a result of these processes, different constructions have been put on Magnus's sainthood, some of them diametrically opposed: Magnus is, for example, the confident medieval warrior-saint, but he is also the modern pacifist, incapable of action by reason of conscience. The historian no doubt has an uneasy feeling that contact with the real Magnus has been lost somewhere along the way. Sainthood, we may conclude, is a very elusive quality.

---

following which Caithness people called him 'a very saint' and attributed 'countless miracles' to his merit (*OS*: ch. 109). He failed to win the earldom, and similarly he failed to attain sainthood.

## Bibliography

- Almqvist, Bo, 1978/81: 'Scandinavian and Celtic Folklore Contacts in the Earldom of Orkney'. *Saga-Book XX*, 80-105.
- Batho, E. C. and Husbands, H. W. (eds), 1941: *The Chronicles of Scotland*. (Hector Boece, *Scottorum Historia*, Paris, 1527, trans. John Bellenden, 1531), 2 vols.
- Blindheim, Martin, 1988: 'St Magnus in Scandinavian Art'. In: Crawford 1988: 165-82.
- Brown, George Mackay, 1977: *Magnus*. London.
- Brown, George Mackay, 1987: *Four Poems for St Magnus*. Breckness Press, Orkney.
- Brown, George Mackay, 1994: 'The Magnus Miracles were Manifest'. *The Orcadian*, 3 November.
- Brunsdon, George M., 1997: 'Politics and Local Tradition within the Cult of St Magnus of Orkney'. *Northern Studies* 32, 129-39.
- Carmichael, Alexander, 1900: *Carmen Gadelica*. 6 vols. Edinburgh.
- Crawford, Barbara E., 1983: 'Birsay and the Early Earls and Bishops of Orkney'. *Orkney Heritage* 2, 97-118.
- Crawford, Barbara E., 1984: 'The Cult of St Magnus in Shetland'. In: B. E. Crawford (ed.), *Essays in Shetland History*. Lerwick, 65-81.
- Crawford, Barbara E. (ed.), 1988: *St Magnus Cathedral and Orkney's Twelfth-Century Renaissance*. Aberdeen.
- Crawford, Barbara E., 1996: 'Bishops of Orkney in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries'. *Innes Review* 47, 1, 1-13.
- Crawford, Barbara E., 1998: 'St Magnus and St Rognvald — the Two Orkney Saints'. *Scottish Church History Society Records* 28, 23-37.
- Dasent, G.W., 1894: *Orkneyingers' Saga*. Rolls Series 3. London.
- De Geer, Ingrid, 1985: 'Earl, Saint, Bishop, Skald — and Music'. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Uppsala.
- Dickins, Bruce, 1929/30: 'Orkney Raid on Wales'. *Proceedings of the Orkney Antiquarian Society* 8, 47-48.
- DNB*, 1998 = *New Dictionary of National Biography*, Newsletter No.4.
- ESSH* = A. O. Anderson, 1922: *Early Sources of Scottish History*, 2 vols.
- Footo, Peter, 1988: 'Observations on *Orkneyinga Saga*'. In: Crawford 1988: 192-207.
- Górski, Karol, 1968: 'La Naissance des États et le Roi-saint; Problème de l'Idéologie Féodale'. In: Tadeusz Manteuffel and Aleksander Gieysztor (eds.), *L'Europe aux IX-XI<sup>mes</sup> siècles*, Warsaw.
- Hakonar Saga* = G.W. Dasent (trans.), 1894: *The Saga of Hacon*, Rolls Series 4, 2 vols. London. Reprint 1997.
- Jesch, Judith, 1996: 'Norse Historical Traditions and the Historia Gruffud ab Kenan'. In: Maund 1996: 117-47.
- Jexlev, Thelma, 1988: 'The Cult of Saints in Early Medieval Scandinavia'. In: Crawford 1988: 183-91.
- Legenda* = *Legenda de Sancto Magno*. (1) *Íslenzk fornrit XXXIV*, 1965: 303-08. (2) Dasent (trans.), 1894: 302-04.
- Leslie, John, 1888/95: *The History of Scotland*. Edinburgh.
- Lind, John L., 1990: 'The Martyria of Odense and a Twelfth-Century Russian Prayer'. *The Slavonic and East European Review* 68, no.1, 1-21.

- LMS* = *Longer Magnus Saga*. (1) *Íslenzk fornrit* XXXIV, 1965: 335-63. (2) Dasent (trans.), 1894: 239-80.
- McKisack, M., 1959: *The Fourteenth Century*. Oxford History of England. Oxford.
- McTurk, R. W., 1974/7: 'Sacral Kingship in Ancient Scandinavia'. *Saga-Book* XIX, 139-69.
- Maund, K. L. (ed.), 1996: *Gruffudd ap Cynan*. *Studies in Celtic History* 16. Woodbridge, Suffolk.
- Mooney, John, 1935: *St Magnus, Earl of Orkney*. Kirkwall.
- Moore, David, 1996: 'Gruffudd ap Cynan and the Mediaeval Welsh Polity'. In: Maund 1996: 1-59.
- OS* = *Orkneyinga Saga*. (1) *Íslenzk fornrit* XXXIV, 1965. (2) A.B.Taylor (trans.), 1938: *Orkneyinga Saga*. (3) H. Pálsson and P. Edwards (trans), 1981: *Orkneyinga Saga*.
- Power, Rosemary, 1986: 'Magnus Barelegs' Expeditions to the West'. *Scottish Historical Review* 65, 2, 107-32.
- Reid, R. W., 1926: 'Remains of Saint Magnus and St Rognvald entombed in Saint Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall, Orkney'. *Biometrika* 18, 1 & 2, 118-50.
- Rollason, D. W., 1983: 'The Cult of Murdered Royal Saints'. *Anglo-Saxon England* 11, 1-22.
- St Olaf Saga* = Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*.
- Saxo Grammaticus = Hilda Ellis Davidson (ed.), 1996: *Saxo Grammaticus, The History of the Danes*. Cambridge.
- SMS* = *Shorter Magnus Saga*. (1) *Íslenzk fornrit* XXXIV, 1965: 311-32. (2) Dasent, 1894: 283-301. (3) H. Pálsson and P. Edwards, 1987: *Magnus Saga*. Oxford.
- Stancliffe, Claire and Cambridge, Eric, 1995: *Oswald; Northumbrian King to European Saint*. Stamford.
- Thomson, William P. L., 2001: 'The Ladykirk Stone'. *New Orkney Antiquarian Journal* 2, 31-46.
- Toy, John, 1983: 'The Commemoration of British Saints in the Medieval Liturgical Manuscripts of Scandinavia'. *Kyrkhistorisk årsskrifti*, 91-103.
- Ynglinga Saga* = Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*.