KIRKJUBØUR

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A few miles south over the hills from the bustling port of Tórshavn lies the secluded ecclesiastical site of Kirkjubøur. A gaunt, gothic, roofless ruin of a cathedral broods over the enigmatic scene which includes the remains of an earlier church and a trim, modern-looking parish church which is not quite all that it seems. Occupying a central position is a handsome, substantial, timber farm-house where you can actually stand in the very building where King Sverre of Norway was educated – or so the guide book claims!

Conventional wisdom is that the Faroes were first colonised by Irish monks. Practically every book about these islands starts off by quoting Dicuil so I will not weary you by repeating him again. According to Matras there is one certain *pappa* name, Papashaldur, now no longer in use, near Saksun in Stremoy. The presence of *erg*-derived names on Suderoy may well indicate a Gaelic presence, though not necessarily a Celtic Church, pre-Norse one. The name Vestmanna is significant but St. Brendan's Vik could be a medieval affectation.

The early crosses found in the Faroes could be Celtic or they could be Norse. You select the expert whose opinion matches your prejudices. However, Dicuil appears as a reliable witness; his throw-away remark about it "being so light at midnight during midsummer that you could see to pick the lice off your shirt" has the ring of truth about it. If one adds to Dicuil the *pappa* name and tradition then it is reasonably certain that Irish monks landed in the Faroes, perhaps as early as 600 A.D.

If they were in the Faroes then Kirkjubøur would have been a coveted site. In a country where much of the land is as steep as the roof of a house the once-extensive flat meadows must have been attractive. According to the locals the site is favoured by being endowed by plentiful supplies of drift-wood and seaweed. In a land devoid of trees; drift-wood was an invaluable source of building material and fuel while the seaweed supplied nourishment to man, animal and field.

If the plain-living monks built their cells at Kirkjubøur no recognisable remains have been discovered and it is not until about 1060 that Gæsa Torhallsdaughter allegedly built a stone church dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The poor ruins of her church still stands but the sea has claimed most of it along with its associated graveyard. The history of this church is not known and when it was last used for worship is not recorded. The stones were bound together with burnt-shell mortar called *skilp*, material also used in Shetland, Orkney and the Western Isles.

When the white-painted parish church was consecrated we do not know. It is dedicated to Olav the Holy. Olav was King of Norway and reigned from 1016 to 1030. Like many other saints he was no paragon of virtue, but in London alone, six churches are dedicated to him and the present parish church at Kirkjubøur bears the name of a king who was defeated and killed in battle on the 29th of July 1030. The anniversary of his death is commemorated by a great festival in Faroe every year.

In 1320, Signarr, bishop of Faroe wrote to Bergen about the planking for the Mary Church at Kirkjubøur so this would indicate that the Mary church was still in use at this time. However, excavations carried out on the Olav church in the mid-sixties of this century uncovered a bishop's grave giving a carbon-14 date for the wood of the coffin of 1260 ± 100 years. In order to obtain planks big enough for a coffin the wood would have to cut from a tree that had been growing for approximately 60 years. Thus, depending upon where the wood sample was taken there is a possibility that the date of the making of the coffin could be advanced by as much as 50 years. This means that the actual date of the making of the coffin could be 1310 ± 100 years. This makes it even more probable that the grave is that of Bishop Erlend who died at Bergen in 1308 and who, according to legend, was brought back to Faroe and "buried in his cathedral at Kirkjubøur".

For years Erland's cathedral was assumed to be the gothic ruin, *Mururin*, and legend tells how Erlend fought off his enemies from the top of the wall. However, despite his exertions he was exiled to Bergen where he died. Yet if Mururin was Erlend's cathedral he was not buried in it. No graves of any sort have been found within it so it looks

as if Erlend was buried in the Olav church, then the cathedral of the Faroes. The archaeological examination of St. Olav's shows that it is a most unusual parish church and from a careful examination of its proportions and other evidence Knud Krogh has concluded that it was originally designed as a cathedral. It would not be unusual to have a cathedral adjacent to the smaller parish church of St. Mary. After the Reformation, the use of one church would commend itself to the congregation and the smaller church bearing the name of the Virgin would decay away.

In 1760 the St. Olav church was in need of repair and these were put in hand, but by 1788 the church was again in ruins and a sketch made by John Stanley on 15th June 1789 shows only part of the gable wall standing. In 1874 the church was thoroughly restored and the fine late 15th Century pew-ends were carried off to Copenhagen. There are however plaster casts in the museum of Tórshavn. A final restoration took place in 1966-67 and it was prior to, and during, this restoration that Sverre Dahl carried out the investigations which led to the discovery of the bishop's grave.

There is a delicately-carved statue of the Madonna in the museum at Tórshavn and this too came from Kirkjubøur. This figure is so very fine that its installation in a cathedral would be fitting to its character and cost. Stylistically it is English of the mid- to late-13th Century and its presence at Kirkjubøur adds another piece of evidence to the belief that St. Olav church was the original, and only, cathedral of Faroe.

Mururin, long thought to have been built by Erlend circa 1300 was probably founded by Bishop John Teuton (Johannes Theutonicus) in 1420 who probably intended to dedicate it to St. Brendan with a chapel dedicated to Bishop Erlend. When one examines *Mururin* without the preconceived belief that it was constructed in 1300 the 1420 date becomes much more tenable. The south door fits more comfortably into the early 15th Century than into the late 13th, while the numerous and wide windows indicate a later rather than an earlier date.

The building, including all the dressed stone-work, is made from local stone and must have been expensive on chisels. On the outer side of the eastern wall there is a carved stone with Christ on the Cross with

the two Marys and two angels. This intricate soapstone-carving needs petrological examination to determine its provenance. The treatment of the Crucifixion bears some similarity to the 15th century Kilchoman Cross on Islay. According to legend, holy relics were to be found behind this stone and this was proved in 1905 when seven labelled relics were discovered in the wall. Unfortunately, only four could be identified and these included:

A fragment of the true Cross
A piece of cloth from the dress of the Virgin Mary
A bit of the Icelandic saint Torlakki's skeleton
A bone of St. Magnus of Orkney.

There were once twelve wall crosses of which only seven remain. These are often described as consecration crosses. But *Mururin* was never completed, neither floor nor altar being installed, so it is unlikely that it was ever consecrated and the crosses probably represent the twelve stations of the Cross. Like the rest of the building they have been carved in the hard, local stone and the degree of craftmanship shown in the carving, of such intractable material, is of a very high order.

It is obvious from the key stones left projecting on the west wall that it was intended to build a tower but, like the roof and floor, this was never even started. We can only speculate as to why the work never went ahead. Bishop John Teuton, a German, died on 4th May 1431 and probably his plans died with him. Since 1387 the Faroes had been ruled ultimately by Denmark and we know that in 1468 King Christian of Denmark was so poor that he could not even afford his daughter Margaret a dowry when she married James III of Scotland. If the King was short of cash in Copenhagen in 1468 it is very possible that Faroe had been feeling the pinch much earlier and this could account for the lack of progress in the construction of the new cathedral.

Having, rather tentatively, established the status of the three churches: St. Mary, circa 1160 now ruined; St, Olav, circa 1260 Erlend's cathedral and now the parish church; St. Magnus, circa 1420 never completed, *Mururin*, let us now turn to the secular buildings.

The handsome log farm-building dates from the Middle Ages with numerous alterations and additions since then. Without adequate carbon-14 dating, and lacking a dendrochonology of the carboniferous woods of the western seaboard of Norway, it is difficult to interpret the evolution of this fine old building. According to legend, King Sverre of Norway was brought up and educated in the old farm-house and the more credulous can accept that in 1160 the young Sverre went to school in the present building.

The farm at Kirkjubøur was always the best and biggest farm on the Faroes and even the loss of much pasture-land, washed away by the sea during a great storm in the 15th Century did not unduly diminish its wealth. However, its wealth attracted unwanted visitors and it was attacked by pirates from the North coast of Africa several times in the late 16th Century. History is mercifully silent as to the number of times it was attacked in earlier centuries by Irish and Scottish pirates. In 1599 the then Lawman of Faroe farmed at Kirkjubøur and it was Peder Jakobson who had the Sheep Letter bound and added to his collection of other fine books.

In 1298, Duke Haakon (eventually Haakon V), son of Magnus VI king of Norway, issued a special decree or letter which dealt mainly with sheep and since about 1600 this has been known as "The Sheep Letter". There is evidence that the sheep laws applied equally to Faroe and Shetland although only the copies associated with Faroe have survived. The Sheep Letter was issued with the authority of the king of Norway but the Faroese Althing may not have been consulted about its contents. However, it was drawn up on the advice of Erlend, Bishop of Faroe, and Sigurd, the Lawman of Shetland, and in view of the fact that its main provision remained in force in the Faroes until 1866 indicates that it must have been most carefully drafted.

Two medieval copies of the Sheep Letter have survived. One is in the Swedish Royal Library in Stockholm while the other is also in Sweden, at the University of Lund. The Lund copy is one of the most beautiful and well-preserved of any early Scandinavian document and may well have been Bishop Erland's personal copy. The Stockholm Sheep Letter was originally the Faroese Lawman's copy and, from 1588 to 1601, this was Peder Jakobson who had the Sheep Letter

bound in a volume along with the Norwegian National Law and a copy of a letter from King Hans dated 14th July 1491. There are also other documents bound into the same volume, including a note on the scale of travelling expenses payable to members attending the Løgting at Tórshavn. The book was in Bergen at the time of Peder Jakobson's death and about 1680 it came into the hands of the Swedish Antikvitetskollegium and has remained in Stockholm since then.

Erlend's copy of the Sheep Letter may well have been originally kept in the library of the bishop's palace at Kirkjubøur. Nothing but a few low walls and a fine paved courtyard now remain of the palace. It consisted of two separate parallel buildings: an eastern wing, 24 metres long and 11 metres wide and a western wing, long and narrow, being 47 metres long and 7 metres wide. An avalanche in 1772 covered much of the palace site while an earlier landslide damaged the east wing. The thickness of the walls indicate that it was a two-storey building.

The site is certainly complex but not without its attractions and challenges. As Sverri Dahl so eloquently said at the Fifth Viking Congress held in Tórshavn in 1965 "To the people of the Faroes Kirkjubøur has always been a site of great significance. We know little of the thirty or so bishops who lived there, but that they were men of imagination and culture is adequately demonstrated by the remains which our modest investigations have revealed. To visit the site is still a remarkable experience and one wonders at the temerity of these northern bishops who, in this obscure island diocese, could build so grandly and so competently to the glory of God."

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