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The Mystery of Stave Churches

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Seeing inside makes all the difference



Photo: Eric Stavney

As Eric Stavney and his daughter assembled a cardboard model stave church, they realized that what's most interesting is found inside.

Eric Stavney

Mukilteo, Wash.

As my daughter and I put the spire on the top roof of our second cardboard stave church, a 1/87 scale model (for model train layouts) you can buy on eBay, we had the same let-down as when we finished the first one: all the cool stuff gets buried inside. The V-shaped trusses, the carved Saint Andrew's crosses, the stave columns rising up from the flagstones to define the midtrom or nave—you get to see all that as you build it, only to cover it up in darkness by piling on a succession of roofs.

We got so frustrated after one model, we even cut away one side so we could peek at the construction inside—like a doll's house.

Indeed, the real charm and mystery of a real stave church is the dark interior.



At left: Photo: Eric Stavney

Gol Stave Church seen from the outside as it appears today.

I recently visited the Gol Stave Church in the [Norsk Folkemuseum](#) of Oslo. Gol Stave Church is a curiosity, because it was moved there from Hallingdal, and so lacks that sense of place where it was originally built. But I am thankful to King Oscar II for moving it to what became the Norsk Folkemuseum in Oslo, because now it is easily accessible to visitors like me.

However, I've had the Borgund Stave Church stuck in my head since I last was in Norway, because it's one of the most

spectacular and best preserved. Once you've experienced that one, it almost spoils your visits to other churches.

Nonetheless, the Gol church does offer the senses some of the most important elements of a stave church: a dark, unheated interior, a unique smell, ornate carvings, and at least one painting. It's impossibly old, built sometime in the 1200s (Borgund dates back to about the same time).

When I stepped over the front portal of the Gol church, I was plunged into darkness: a single lit candle on the altar was the only real source of light. The floorboards are slightly springy underfoot. The museum has put a shallow bench on either side of the nave aisle for weary

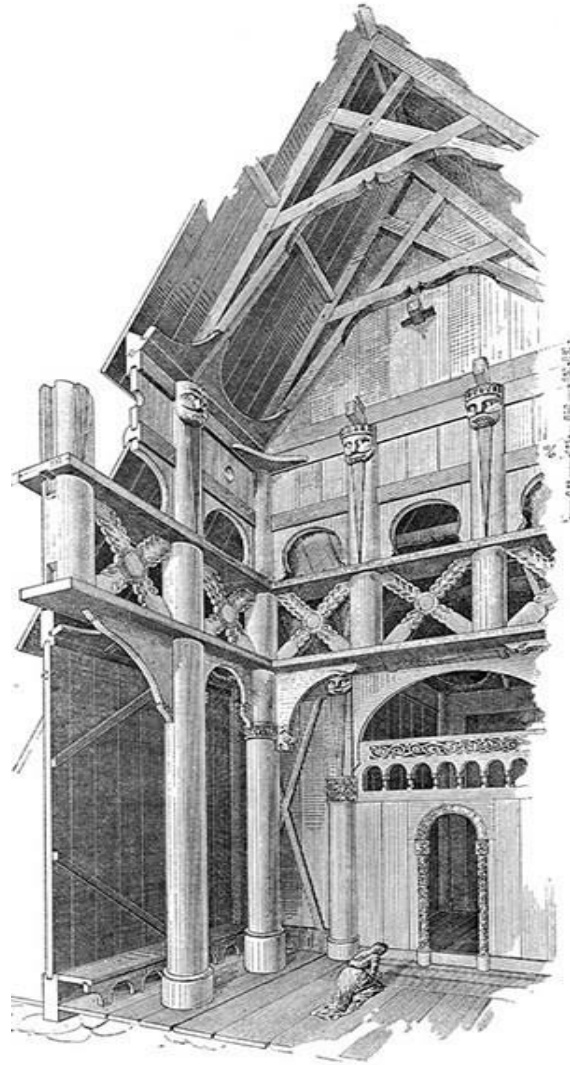
tourists, but I prefer to stand, as congregations did in stave churches for at least 400 years, before pews became fashionable.

And then I looked up, or tried to. As my eyes get used to the dark, it seems the ceiling is far, far above, framed in ever-smaller rectangles of cross beams and arches of dark wood. Is there something up there? It's hard to tell.

The smell of the pine tar used to preserve the wood conjures up a smoky fire surrounded by mysterious hooded figures. On the outer posts, the tar has formed bubbles or blisters like charred wood. I've read that they extracted pine tar from wood smoldering in pit-kilns covered with turf to limit the availability of oxygen. The tar is a key element in preserving the church exterior from the weather.

At the door, my eyes get lost trying to follow the interwoven rings and serpents and figures—some I can't really see too well. It's bizarre to imagine this as a Christian "house of God" with the many Viking animal and serpent motifs, including the dragons on the roofs outside.

I've wondered why the carvings seem somehow Celtic, so reminiscent of the illuminated Book of Kells. The Book of Kells originated in Ireland or Scotland sometime in the early 800s. It isn't hard to imagine that the Vikings who raided in the 900s



*Image: Public domain / Wikipedia Commons
Line drawing of Gol Stave Church that appeared in the 14th edition in 1908 of the publication Grundriß der Kunstgeschichte (Floor Plan of Art History) by Wilhelm Lübke and Max Semrau.*



took home pieces of art like that found in the Book of Kells and that the artistic style influenced these amazing carvings.

*At left Photo: Eric Stavney
The nave carving inside the Gol church.*

In the Gol church, there's a faded painting of the Last Supper over the altar, as if to remind parishioners why they were there. They stood in this church, on these planks, in all seasons

for Sunday services, and for innumerable weddings, baptisms, funerals, and confirmations through 700 – 800 years of history. They witnessed the conversion of their services from Catholicism to Lutheranism. Yet many of the rituals, like the changing of the seasons, remained the same: the reading from scriptures, the priest's or pastor's homily or sermon, the gathering of family, the cadence of weekly worship.

As I counted the staves surrounding the nave, I remembered that they're usually made of carefully selected Scotch pine, which is still very common in Norway today. Looking at the cross beams and timbers, it's hard to believe wooden pins with notched beams hold it all together, and that it's still standing after 820 years.

When someone finally led me out of the building, in a daze, I realized why I love stave churches so much. Despite having read books and articles on stave church construction, built models, painted pictures, and taken zillions of photos, I just can't leave one without feeling humbled and in awe.



*Photo: Eric Stavney
The ambulatory at the Gol Stave Church.*

I hope sometime you get a chance to visit one: there are several excellent replicas in the United States, in Norway, of course, and in Denmark, Sweden, Iceland, and Poland.

I don't think you'll be the same coming out as when you went in.

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