

The secret of Selje Island

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Once home of St. Sunniva, this desolate island is home to mysterious ruins and legends



Photo: Kremle / Wikimedia Commons

Tourists visit the ruins of Selje abbey in Nordfjord, Norway.

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Along the rugged coast of Western Norway lie thousands of desolate, rocky islands. Just north of Måløy, near the mouth of the Nordfjord in Sildegapet Bay, is a hilly green island that at first glance appears just alike. But this island, called Selje (or Selja), holds a secret that makes it a unique and significant island in the history of Norway.

Few would suspect that this island, measuring only a mile or so across at its widest, played a central role in the early history of the Christian church in Norway.

The secret of Selje Island is found on the flatlands of the western, seaward, side. Hidden from the mainland, ruins of an ancient stone building stand silently on a green plain. The broken marble walls define a large building with many rooms, now open to the sky. Rising up out of the ruins is a four-sided tower with a peaked roof and windows near the top. Within the tower, a set of crude stone stairs winds up into an attic room, where windows in each wall look out in all four directions.

A short distance from the tower building a series of steps and terraces cut into the hillside lead up to the high cliffs overlooking the plain. The steps end abruptly under the cliffs in a small cave in the hillside.

The mysterious ruins of Selje date back to around 1067 CE, when Olav Tryggvason was king of Norway. The cave in the hillside, which shows signs of human occupation, even older, is the site of the legend of Selje Island.

In 950 CE, an Irish princess named Sunniva was attacked by Viking raiders. The leader, a heathen, threatened to kill Sunniva's loyal Christian followers one by one unless she joined him in marriage. However, Sunniva and some 1,100 of her followers escaped from Ireland in boats, drifting eastward for several weeks in the stormy North Sea.

The princess eventually sighted land, having lost contact with many of the other boats carrying her people. Sunniva and some of her followers landed on Selje Island and took up residence there, living in and around the cave in the cliffs. Some of Sunniva's people are thought to have landed on the island of Kinn south of Selje, near the modern-day town of Fløro, but not much is known about this latter group.

At the time of Sunniva's landing, Norway was not yet Christianized. Haakon Jarl, the last of the Viking pagan kings, ruled Western Norway. Haakon had a reputation of dealing with Christians with his sword whenever possible. So when the mainland folk near Selje noticed their sheep were mysteriously disappearing and discovered that a group of Christians was living on the island, they complained to him. Haakon gathered his men and sailed south from Trondheim to investigate.

As the story goes, Sunniva saw Haakon's ships rounding the Statlandet Peninsula to the north. She gathered her followers in the hillside cave to pray for deliverance from the Viking heathens certain to slay them all. Their prayers, it is said, caused the roof of the cave to collapse in a catastrophic avalanche, killing Sunniva and all her followers. When Haakon arrived, there were no Christians to be found, only a fresh rockfall. He left, disappointed and mystified.

The evidence of Sunniva and her people had disappeared, but rumors and tales of the colony remained. The island was said to have a supernatural light radiating from its western side at night. Cargo ships sailing up and down the coast reported seeing weird lights and hearing strange noises whenever they passed Selje. A human skull was discovered on the island, strangely well preserved. Yet no one could account for whose head it was.

Olav Tryggvason succeeded Haakon Jarl and became the first Christian king of Norway. Just as Haakon was dedicated to keeping the country heathen, so was Olav committed to converting all Norwegians to Christianity. Olav ravaged the countryside with his army, "persuading" the populace to convert. He came, in 992, to the Statlandet Peninsula north of Selje to Christianize the locals. Knowing that Christians had been on the island several years earlier, he had his men explore the island and dig out the cave.

In the back of the cave, Olav's men uncovered what they believed to be the body of Sunniva, allegedly as fresh as the day she died. Such remarkable preservation of the body was considered a sign of sainthood. Largely due to Olav's efforts, Sunniva was subsequently sanctified as the first saint of Western Norway. The cave was named Sunniva's Cave in her honor, and a church erected outside the cave was named Sunniva's Church. Sunniva remains perhaps the most important saint in Norway.

After the sanctification of Sunniva, Selje grew in importance in the Norwegian Catholic Church. Native clergymen were now ordained as local priests instead of the English and German missionaries. Because of its importance as the site of Sunniva's internment, the first bishopric in

Norway was established on Selje in 1067. The first cathedral in Norway was built on a terrace just below the cave, and other buildings were constructed nearby to house the bishop and his people. The stone foundations of this cathedral still stand on the hillside today.

The first bishop of Selje was German, but apparently the remote location and solitude was too much for him, so he got permission to move to Bergen. The seat of the bishopric still remained, however, on Selje. In all, five bishops served on Selje until 1170, when the seat of the bishopric was formally moved to Bergen. Sunniva's remains and other relics were also moved to Bergen during this time.

Before the last bishop on Selje moved south, a group of Benedictine monks arrived on the island and built a cloister dedicated to St. Alban on the plain below the cave.

The monks were given the land where the old cathedral had stood to build their monastery. The cloister they constructed was one of three Benedictine houses in Norway in the 13th century. The large tower and stone walls visible today were built during that time and through the subsequent 200 years. Some of the marble used to build the tower and a second one at the other corner of the cloister (since fallen down) was quarried on the north side of the Statlandet.

According to historian Knut Djupedal (now at the Emigrant Museum in Hamar), who studied Selje Cloister for several years, Alban's Church or Cloister had a matsal (refectory), kjøken (kitchen), kyrkja (chapel), sakristi (sacristy), opphalasrom (living room), møterom (meeting room), and possibly some søverom (bedrooms) within its walls. The roof was undoubtedly made of wood, and supported in some places by stone pillars. In the center of the cloister was the monastery garden, where plants and herbs from all over Europe were brought for cultivation. Many of these plants still grow wild on Selje and on the Statlandet Peninsula.

In 1349, the Black Death struck Norway and nearly half of the country's population succumbed. In their selfless dedication to caring for the sick, most of the clergy in Norway died of the plague. The cloister on Selje never recovered its former prosperity after this catastrophe.

The Reformation came in 1530 and Catholic clergy were ordered to leave the country in 1536 to make way for the Lutheran State Church. The remaining monks cleaned out the cloister and moved south.

When the monks left, the monastery buildings soon began to fall into disrepair. Norway came under Danish rule in 1523, and the area around Selje later became the property of the renowned Danish astronomer, Tycho Brahe. Some of the stone from the cloister was removed and shipped to Copenhagen to become part of Brahe's new observatory there.

In the late 1900s, interest in Selje and the role it played in Norwegian history was rekindled. The one surviving tower was restored in the 1930s with new stones and a peaked copper roof. Many of the walls also received new stones. Excavations and studies of the island revealed some of its previously clouded history.

Local people in the mainland town of Selje continue to keep alive the secrets of the island by offering tours of the ruins, and dramatically retelling the legend of St. Sunniva and the mysterious ruins on the plain below the cliffs. Five kings of Norway have visited Selje, recognizing its importance in history, including King Olav in 1965. Sigrid Undset visited Selje in 1926 and mentions the legend of St. Sunniva in the first volume of *Kristin Lavransdatter* (The Bridal Wreath).

Still, the island is a relatively quiet monument to the early days of Christianity. A traveler can hire a boat in Selje to see the ruins, but there are no signs of modern structures on the seaward side to destroy the sanctity and mystery of the place. Only the silent, ancient ruins remain, standing witness to the legend of St. Sunniva and the secret of Selje Island.

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