

St Olaf's Parish Church



Bishop William went East to Kirkwall with a worthy retinue, and carried thither the holy relics of Earl Magnus, and they set the shrine over the high altar in the church [that was there].

It is most likely that the church mentioned in this quote from *Orkneyinga Saga* and dating to c.1137 was on the site of the later St Olaf's Parish Church. We have little archaeological evidence of the twelfth century building excepting some medieval architectural fragments which were found in the graveyard. The church is no longer visible although its southern doorway is preserved in a wall on the north side of St Olaf's Wynd, several architectural fragments are built into St Olaf's Episcopal church and others are in the Orkney Museum.

This church site was located on the banks of the Papdale Burn and a short distance inland from the Bay of Kirkwall. It is likely that the saga-mentioned church stood on or near an earlier pre-Norse Christian site, as indicated by the two place names Papdale (meaning valley of the Papar or priests) and Kirkwall (meaning Church Bay and indicating the presence of a church here in the early years of Scandinavian settlement). The foundation of the saga church has been attributed to Earl Rognvald Brusison who, was Earl of Orkney in the mid-eleventh century, based on the saga evidence that he was foster son of St Olaf and had a residence in Kirkwall. However, there is no archaeological evidence to support this, and it would make this a very early Olaf dedicated church. It is perhaps more likely that the dedication was at the order of Olaf's son Magnus Barelegs, who took direct control of the Earldom between 1098 and 1103 and set his young son with advisory council in place to govern.

Regardless of the earlier history of the site, this was in the late 1130s the principle church in Kirkwall, which was one of the earldom centres of power, and as such was the most appropriate place for Magnus's shrine to be placed.

Once St Magnus Cathedral was consecrated (c.1150s), Saint Magnus's shrine was transferred there and St Olaf's church became the parish church of the newly formed St Olaf's Parish as part of earldom-wide twelfth century church reforms instigated by Bishop William and necessitated by the building of the Cathedral. It remained so until the seventeenth century after which it became a poorhouse, then a warehouse and carpenter's shop before finally being incorporated into a private residence.