*A green and blue logo

Description automatically generated"Then in the light of the new day, 16 April 1117,   
there was a blinding flash of metal in the sun."*  
George Mackay Brown

The story of Magnus Erlendsson - Orkney's Saint Magnus - begins in 1098 - a time when the Orkney earldom was divided between two brothers, the earls Paul and Erlend.

Magnus was the eldest son of Earl Erlend, while his cousin, Hakon, was the son of Paul.

In 1098, the Norwegian king, Magnus "Barelegs", arrived suddenly in Orkney, where he unseated both earls and made his illegitimate son, Sigurd, overlord of the islands.

Earls Paul and Erlend were instructed to go to Norway, where they both died before winter's end.

With Sigurd in place as "king" of Orkney, King Magnus left Orkney on a raiding expedition, making sure he took Hakon and the 18-year-old Magnus with him.

Heading down the west coast of Scotland, the raiders travelled as far south as Anglesey.

## The raid on Anglesey

According to the sagas, on the voyage south young Magnus would not fight during the raids.

When the Vikings attacked the Welsh rulers of Anglesey, for example, Magnus refused to participate. Instead, we are told he chose to remain on the ship singing psalms.

This overtly Christian behaviour did not please the Norwegian King, who already disliked Magnus intensely and regarded him a coward.

This episode, although perfectly setting up the saintly image of Magnus, could have several explanations.

Firstly, it is highly possible that the account is a later addition, specifically introduced to emphasise Magnus' piety. The lack of references to Magnus in other historical accounts of the raiding voyage has prompted suggestions that his inclusion in the *Orkneyinga saga* version of events was purely fictional.

However, if we assume that Magnus was part of the raiding party, his refusal to fight could have been for purely political reasons rather than spiritual.

The historian William Thomson points out in his New History of Orkney, that Magnus had a "surprisingly frequent involvement in Welsh affairs".

Whatever the truth, the *Orkneyinga saga* goes on to explain that Magnus escaped from the king's ship. Slipping overboard one night, he swam to the shore of Scotland, where he "disappeared" until the death of King Magnus in Ireland in 1102.

We know little about this time in hiding.

## Magnus becomes earl

*"St Magnus, Earl of Orkney, was a man of extraordinary distinction, tall, with a fine, intelligent look about him. He was a man of strict virtue, successful in war, wise, eloquent, generous and magnanimous, open-handed with money, sound with advice and altogether the most popular of men."*  
*Orkneyinga saga*, Chapter 45

By the time Magnus reappears in the *Orkneyinga saga*, Sigurd Magnusson has returned to Norway to become joint ruler, leaving Magnus’ cousin, Hakon, in the position of earl.

A few years later, and after making representations to the Norwegian throne, Magnus was granted his share of the earldom. At first there was a good relationship between the two earls and their reign, from 1105 until 1114, was said to be a just and pleasant one.

However, this "Golden Age" did not last.

## The earls' quarrel

The *Orkneyinga saga* is not clear why the cousins turned on each other, simply stating that men of “evil disposition” began stirring trouble.

Hakon, says the saga, was jealous of Magnus’ popularity and was, therefore, "more disposed to listen to these miserable men".

Whatever their motives, the agitators succeeded in creating enmity between Magnus and Hakon, so much so that they drew up for battle at a "thing" - an assembly - on the Orkney Mainland.

The site of this meeting has been suggested as being Tingwall (from the Old Norse thingvollr - Assembly Field) in the Mainland parish of Rendall.

But a battle was averted.

Neutral parties managed to persuade the two earls to make peace. A further meeting was arranged to finalise this treaty, with the earls to meet on Egilsay at Easter, each bringing only "two ships and an equal number of men".

At the allotted time, and with the agreed number of men, Magnus set out for Egilsay.

Approaching the island in calm water, says the saga, a great wave rose up and struck Magnus' ship. This, it recounts, was taken to be an omen of the earl’s death.

"No wonder that you are surprised by this," said Magnus to his men, "Indeed, I take this as a foreboding of my death."

### Betrayal in Egilsay

Magnus was the first to arrive in Egilsay, where he waited for the arrival of his cousin.

When, later that day, eight warships came into view it became clear that treachery was afoot. Hakon and his men landed on the island the following morning. After first ransacking the church, Hakon sought out Magnus, who had: "gone to another part of the island, to a certain hiding place".

After a search, Magnus was found, captured and brought before an assembly of local chieftains. There, the saga stresses, Magnus was concerned only for the welfare of his deceitful cousin's immortal soul.

Magnus made three suggestions that would save Hakon from breaking his oath by killing an unarmed man. The first, that Magnus would go on a pilgrimage and never return to Orkney, was rejected, as was the second, that Magnus be exiled to Scotland and imprisoned.

The final suggestion was that Hakon should: "have me mutilated in any way you choose, rather than take my life, or else blind me and lock me in a dungeon"

Hakon deemed this acceptable, but the assembly were not so keen. The chieftains leapt to their feet and announced that one of the earls had to die. They had had their fill of joint-rule in Orkney.

Hakon smugly informed the dissenters that, as he preferred ruling and was not ready to die, Magnus should be slain.

Magnus put forward no argument so "was doomed to death".

Informing his followers they were not to die defending him, Magnus stepped forward to accept his fate.

## The martyrdom of Earl Magnus

With Magnus’ fate sealed, Hakon ordered Ofeig, his standard-bearer, to execute the earl. But the warrior refused angrily.

Enraged, Hakon turned to his cook, Lifolf, and instructed him to kill Magnus.

According to the saga, Lifolf wept loudly but Magnus spoke comforting words and forgave him for the acts he must carry out: "Be not afraid, for you do this against your will and he who forces you sins more than you do."

So Magnus knelt before Lifolf and asked to be struck hard on the head, rather than beheaded like a common criminal: "Stand thou before me, and hew on my head a great wound, for it is not seemly to behead chiefs like thieves. Take heart, poor wretch, for I have prayed to God for thee, that He be merciful unto thee."

Lifolf struck the blow and cleaved the Earl's skull in two.

The *Orkneyinga Saga* declares this act took place "1,091 winters after the birth of Christ" but this date does not tie in with documented events and is incorrect. Magnus was killed many years later - on April 16, in 1115, 1116, 1117 or even 1118. (see endnote)

Initially, Magnus was denied a Christian burial by Earl Hakon and simply buried where he fell.

## Miraculous happenings

Shortly afterwards, the miracles began.

The *Orkneyinga Saga* recounts that the site of Magnus’ murder was originally rocky and overgrown, but after his death "God showed that he had suffered for righteousness' sake" and the area was miraculously transformed into a green field.

Magnus' mother, Thora, pled with Hakon to allow her son a Christian burial. Hakon relented and allowed Magnus’ corpse to be retrieved. It was transferred to Birsay, where it was interred at Christchurch, the church Magnus’ grandfather, Thorfinn Sigurdsson, had built.

The exact location of this church remains uncertain today. Although it is generally thought to have either been on the Brough of Birsay or the site of the current St Magnus Kirk on Mainland Birsay. Recent investigations seem to favour the latter.

Wherever he was laid to rest, from the day of his burial a bright, heavenly light was said to have been seen above Magnus' grave. This holy light was accompanied by a "heavenly fragrance".

Before long, as the cult of Magnus grew, other stories began to spread, each detailing the miraculous happenings around about the Earl's gravesite.

## Sainthood

Initially, the Bishop of Orkney, William the Old, tried to suppress the growing cult of Magnus, dismissing the alleged miracles and warning that it was "heresy to go about with such tales".

But then, in an episode described in the *Orkneyinga Saga*, Bishop William was suddenly convinced of Magnus’ holiness after being struck blind in his Birsay cathedral.

Falling upon Magnus’ grave, and praying, the bishop’s sight was miraculously restored.

But intriguingly the bishop's change of heart seems to have coincided with a visit to Norway.

Although the saga makes no mention of the purpose of this journey, the historian William Thomson suggested that, in Norway, the bishop had met with the future Earl Rognvald - the man who would go on to found St Magnus Cathedral after the Orkney earldom became his.

If this were so, Bishop William's sudden promotion of the cult of Magnus could have had political reasons - Rognvald's plans to acquire the earldom centred on the popularity of the Magnus cult.

Whatever the reason, 21 years after their burial, Bishop William had Magnus’ remains exhumed, washed and tested in consecrated fire. Their holiness confirmed, Magnus was proclaimed a saint and his remains enshrined above the Birsay kirk's altar.

The relics stayed in Birsay "for a long time" until Magnus supposedly appeared to a Westray man, Gunni, in a dream. Magnus told Gunni that Bishop William should be told that Magnus wished to leave Birsay and move east to the growing town, Kirkjuvagr – the Kirkwall we know today.

## The relics of St Magnus

In March 1919, a wooden box containing a skull and bones was found during extensive renovation work in St Magnus Cathedral.

The skull, which showed clear signs of injury, was heralded as that of Saint Magnus - the martyr of Orkney, who was murdered at Easter in 1116, 1117 or 1118.

The experts who examined the remains in 1925 - Professor R. W. Reid of Aberdeen University and Rev Dr George Walker of Aberdeen's East Parish Church - were left in no doubt as to the identity.

"Those acquainted with the circumstances of the murder of St Magnus could have little hesitation in believing that the skull bore the veritable mark of his death wound and that these were the relics of the saint." said Dr Walker, before adding that the examinations "entirely proved the identification".

The bones were later re-interred in St Magnus Cathedral, where they remain today.

But are the remains actually those of the Orkney saint?

Perhaps not, says the eminent forensic anthropologist Professor Don Brothwell, who covered the subject in a paper published on the website honouring retiring Orkney Archaeological Trust chairman, Daphne Home Lorimer MBE.

Professor Brothwell's paper challenges the widely held belief that the remains in the pillar in the cathedral belong to the historical Magnus Erlendsson. After studying 1925 reports on the bones, Professor Brothwell concluded that the damage to the skull does not match the Orkneyinga Saga's account of the murder of Magnus on Egilsay.

As such, it is either not Magnus' skull, or the saga's version of the earl's death is incorrect.

This statement caused some controversy in March 2004, after an article on the subject appeared in The Orcadian newspaper. The consensus of opinion? How dare the authenticity of the remains be questioned!

But all the objectors seemed to miss one vital point - Professor Brothwell was actually calling to account the veracity of the *Orkneyinga saga*'s account of the murder.

It states that Earl Hakon's cook, Lifolf, who was standing in front of the kneeling Magnus, struck the killing blow. The narrative recounts: "Then, when [Magnus] was led to execution, he said to Lifolf: "Stand before me, and hew me a mighty stroke on the head, for it is not fitting that high-born lords be put to death like thieves."

According to Professor Brothwell, the position of Lifolf in relation to Magnus would undoubtedly influence "the form and position of bone damage on the skull", adding that the two "wounds" do not "fit with axe blows from the front of the individual."

In his paper, Professor Brothwell wrote:

"Neither of these two possible injuries, if they are indeed trauma evidence, could have been received from axe blows directed down from the front, and this calls into question either the authenticity of the skull or the position of the executioner."

From the damage to the skull, Professor Brothwell suggests that a sideward blow to the head felled the man. As the victim was knocked sideways, fell and rolled over he was struck again.

## Saga questions

Anyone with a passing interest in Norse sagas knows the dangers of treating them as accurate historical documents. The saga writers had their own agendas - whether playing down unsavoury deeds or glorifying others, the compilers of the sagas were not above embellishing a good story.

Saint Magnus himself is a fine example of this.

Most of the details of St Magnus' life found in the *Orkneyinga saga* were based on an earlier written account of the saint's life, or Vita, and a separate document listing the miracles ascribed to St Magnus. The Vita, which is now lost, was like most other Saint's Lives and generally dwelled on the piety and godliness of the saint in question.

An ecclesiastic source for the *Orkneyinga saga*'s version of events is clear from the way it emphasises the earl's saintliness in the face of all adversity. It is the *Orkneyinga saga* that declares Earl Magnus knelt meekly before his executioner to receive a single blow.

But this version of the execution differs from later accounts. *The Greater Magnus Saga*, which is more graphic, has the earl standing to receive the blow, before falling to his knees after being struck twice in the head.

However, the two Magnus sagas, the *Lesser* and *Greater Magnus Saga*, date from around AD1250 and 1300 respectively, and although the account seems to match the wounds on the cathedral skull, it is also possible that it may have been written after the relics were unearthed and transported from Birsay to Kirkwall.

The Magnus sagas contain information from the lost Vita as well as details allegedly from a sermon delivered by one “Master Robert” around AD1137 - 20 years after the death of the saint. Who this Master Robert was is unclear. Although it has been suggested he was a literary invention, it is just as likely that he was a real person, writing shortly after Magnus' death.

So, while this Master Robert may well have had his own agenda, are the Magnus sagas a truer account of the exploits of Magnus?

They certainly paint a slightly different picture of the sainted earl.

While the *Orkneyinga saga* version is clearly meant to emphasise the Earl's “holiness”, the Magnus sagas do not shy away from his less-than-saintly deeds and escapades as a younger man - although it does make excuses for him.

For example, The *Greater Magnus Saga* recounts how Magnus, in true Viking fashion, spent several years raiding, raping and plundering. This, it declares, was due to the company the young Magnus kept, but beneath the hagiographical gloss it does seem to hint at a truer picture of life at the time.

So, is the Magnus saga a more reliable account of the saint’s life and death? Perhaps, and then again, perhaps not. As always, caution is needed.

The later accounts, regardless of how authentic or historically accurate they may appear to be, could simply be a means of highlighting to the opposite sides of Magnus' character – the “nasty” side before he “accepted God”, and the later saintly persona.

The reader must remember that the sagas are embellished history, with the odd story thrown in for good measure. As such it is impossible to differentiate what is true history and what is later embellishment.

But one fact remains.

In the relatively short time between Earl Magnus' burial in Birsay and the relocation of his remains to the new cathedral in Kirkwall, it seems very unlikely that a "fake" set of bones would have to be found to satisfy the needs of the devoted.

## The founding of the cathedral

In AD1135, Earl Magnus Erlendsson of Orkney was canonised.

About this time, the revered remains of Magnus were taken from Christchurch, in Birsay, where they had lain for 20 years, and moved east. Their destination was the unassuming little Church of St Olaf, in a small seaside settlement Kirkjuvagr - or Kirkwall as it is known now.

Some years later, the saint's relics were moved again - this time transferred into the massive, sandstone cathedral that had been raised in Magnus’ honour.

The story of the founding of St Magnus Cathedral is well documented within the pages of the *Orkneyinga saga*.

In a tale of political intrigue and dirty deeds, the saga tells us that the cathedral was built on the instructions of Earl Rognvald Kolsson, who had been advised, by his father Kol, to:

"build a stone minster at Kirkwall more magnificent than any in Orkney, that you'll have (it) dedicated to your uncle the holy Earl Magnus and provide it with all the funds it will need to flourish. In addition, his holy relics and the episcopal seat must be moved there."  
*Orkneyinga saga* - Chapter 68

However, Rognvald's intentions in building the cathedral were not entirely honourable.

Born in Agder, Norway, around AD1100, Rognvald was the son of Kol and Gunhild, the sister of Saint Magnus. He changed his name from Kali Kolsson in honour of Earl Rognvald Brusison - the earl of Orkney from around 1037 until his murder in 1045.

Before long, Rognvald turned his attention to his uncle Magnus’ half-share of the Orkney earldom. In 1129, his chance came when he was handed the earldom by the Norwegian king, Sigurd the Crusader.

At the time, Rognvald did nothing about claiming his share. In fact, he did nothing for some time, until King Harald, Sigurd’s successor, ratified the claim.

Then, Rognvald assembled a fleet and sailed for Orkney, with the intention of overthrowing Paul Hakonsson, the existing earl. After battling severe weather, Rognvald and his men finally landed in the islands but were met with fierce resistance.

Not surprisingly, Paul had no intention of giving up his earldom without a fight.

It was then that Rognvald's father, Kol, had an idea.

Rather than wage all-out war, he suggested that Rognvald should try and secure the earldom by other, less direct, means. Kol instructed Rognvald to tell the people of Orkney that when he became earl, he would raise the finest church the north had ever seen. This church was to be in memory of his saintly uncle, Magnus, a man whom the islanders venerated above all.

While Rognvald was capturing the hearts of the people of Orkney, behind the scenes he had Earl Paul kidnapped in Rousay and spirited from the islands.

The *Orkneyinga saga* is unclear as to the fate of the dispossessed Paul.

Sweyn Asleifsson is said to have reported back to Rognvald that Paul had been blinded and incarcerated – upon the instruction of Paul who had decided to remain in Scotland.

However, it adds: “But some men tell a story which is less seemly, that Margaret had led Sweyn Asleifsson, by her counsel, to blind earl Paul her brother, and put him into a dark dungeon; but after that she got another man to take his life there.”

The saga concluded: “…we do not know which of the two stories is more true; but all men know that he never afterwards came back to the Orkneys, nor held he any rule in Scotland.”

Paul's murder, or abdication, saw his three-year-old nephew Harald Maddadsson made joint-earl. And back in Orkney, despite the underhand tactics surrounding the fate of Earl Paul, Rognvald was good to his word.

## Construction begins

With the earldom in Rognvald's hands, work on the cathedral started. Under the direction of the wily Kol construction work began in 1137.

The ambitious project was to be built on a prime site by the shore - which at that time came up as far as the current Kirk Green. However, a project on this scale was not cheap and Rognvald's grandiose construction scheme soon ran short of money.

Kol stepped in again, this time advising his son to restore the rights of tenure to Orkney's "ødallers" in return for a cash payment.

Rognvald agreed. The scheme was a success and construction continued.

Unfortunately, Earl Rognvald never saw his cathedral reach a state anywhere near completion. In 1158, he was murdered by a rebellious Scottish chieftain.

## Holy relics

Rognvald's bones were returned to Kirkwall, where they were eventually placed within the cathedral he had founded.

He was canonised in 1192, but some doubts exist as to the validity of his sainthood, because no existing records seem to confirm it.

However, Saint Rognvald's relics were discovered in the 18th century, set into a stone pillar opposite the one that would, in 1919, be found to contain Saint Magnus' remains.

Built from alternating bands of local red and yellow sandstone, the cathedral of Saint Magnus gradually grew, and with it the village at its feet. Upon its completion, three centuries or so after the first foundation stone was laid, it towered over Kirkwall - by now a thriving town.

The cathedral has been justifiably described as "one of the finest and best-preserved medieval cathedrals in Scotland" and it is not difficult to see why.

Even now, over 860 years after the initial building work began, St Magnus Cathedral still dominates the Kirkwall skyline - a familiar, and comforting sight, to Kirkwallians around the world.

## When did Earl Magnus Die?

The year of Earl Magnus’ death has puzzled historians for years.

Although the *Orkneyinga saga* is clear that the day was April 16, the year is blatantly incorrect - each section contradicting the other:

“The death-day of earl Magnus is two nights after Tiburce mass. He had then been earl over the Orkneys seven winters, he and Hacon both together. There had then passed since the fall of King Olaf seventy-four winters. Sigurd and Eystein and Olaf were the kings over Norway. There had been passed since the birth of Christ one thousand and ninety and one winters.”

From this passage alone we have a number of possible years.

King Olaf died in 1030, but his “fall” could also relate to him losing the Norwegian throne in 1028. So, depending on the interpretation of “fall”, this gives either 1102 or 1104.

The “seven winters” gives another two dates - 1112 or 1115, depending on whether Magnus was made earl in 1105 or 1108.

The final date, based on Christ’s death, is 1091 and can be discounted immediately as being far too early.

1102 and 1104 are also too early because they predate Magnus’ acquisition of the earldom.

1112 is more promising but is also too early and doesn't fit with the historical facts we do know about Magnus. That leaves 1115. Could that be the date?

Firstly, we must calculate the date of Easter, because we know the Egilsay meeting took place after Easter Sunday. Also, according to the saga account, Magnus died two days after the Feast of Saint Tiburce, or Saint Tiburtius. Tiburce/Tiburtius day is April 14, so we get the date of April 16 as the date of the earl’s death.

In 1115, Easter Sunday was on April 18. That’s four days after Saint Tiburce’s day and two after the given date for the earl’s murder. So, we can rule that year out.

Several other years have been proposed, with 1116 and 1117 the most common.

1117 is an oft-quoted year and has generally been accepted as correct. In the Penguin edition of the *Orkneyinga saga*, for example, a footnote has no doubt that April 16, 1117, was the date of Magnus’ death.

I suspect this date was first suggested because it ties in with the *Longer Magnus Saga*. It recounts a sermon allegedly delivered in Kirkwall by one “Master Robert”, 20 years after Magnus’ death.

This sermon, if it is historically valid, is said to have been delivered at the founding of the cathedral in 1137. So, 1137-20 years gives us 1117.

But again, the Easter dates don’t fit.

Easter 1117, fell on March 25. If the Egilsay meeting, which, the saga says, took place “immediately after the Easter celebrations”, was in late March, that’s more than two weeks before the *Orkneyinga saga*’s April date for Magnus’ death.

In 1116, Easter Sunday was April 2. Again, that leaves us with a two-week gap before the accepted April 16 date.

And there we have it. None of the “favoured” dates are possible. So where now?

In 2004, Orcadian historian Gregor Lamb suggested 1118.

This conclusion, he said, hinged: “on the phrase ‘immediately after Easter’ and the word *þegar*, ‘immediate’ is indeed the word used in the original saga.”

In 1118, Easter Sunday fell on April 14, which also happened to be St Tiburtius’ Day. Then two days later was Tuesday, April 16. This date, said Mr Lamb, also ties in with the tradition that important meetings - or things -took place on Tuesday.

“Great Thing meetings were invariably held on Tuesday, the third day of the week and there is no reason why the day chosen for this [Egilsay] meeting should have been an exception to the rule.”

So, the year fits with the saga account at least.

Magnus and his retinue arrived in Egilsay on Easter Monday - April 15, 1118 - where the earl went to church to pray. The following morning, April 16, Haakon’s men ransacked the church before going in search of the earl.

The rest, as they say, is history.