

A BRIEF HISTORY OF STUGUN PARISH IN MID-SCANDINAVIA

The first Swedish king to be christened and baptized was Olof Skötkonung, who was also the first one to reign in both eastern and western parts of Sweden. The southern part belonged to Denmark-Norway, as well as the provinces of Jämtland and Härjedalen further north. His daughter married Olaf Haraldsson of Norway, who was in his days a famous Viking who sailed the seas and fought against Denmark and England. In Normandie, northwestern France today, he met Christianity and was baptized in Rouen in 1014. He later became king of Norway 1015-1028, until the Danish king Canute overthrew him. (The same Canute also occupied parts of northern England.) Olof was killed in a battle north of today's Trondheim. During his life and after his death, many miracles happened, and he was canonized Saint Olaf in Trondheim, one year after his death. His relics were buried in the Nidaros church (Trondheim). He is the national saint for Norway, but was also worshipped in other parts of Scandinavia and Finland. Many pilgrims travelled to Nidaros and a big cathedral was built between 1070 and 1300, today the second biggest cathedral in Scandinavia.

He was married to Astrid Olofsdotter, daughter of the above-mentioned Swedish king.



The cult surrounding Saint Olaf was popular all-around Scandinavia, and in Mid-Scandinavia there are still many trails leading to Trondheim, and people still hike those trails even if they are not always pilgrims. The trails usually follow the waterways, to make travelling easier. There was a network of early Christian churches built across mid-Scandinavia, wooden ones often built on the same locations as heathen worship places. These churches did not last very long and some were abandoned when the Great Plague came around 1350, when at least a third of the population died. Later more sturdy churches were built of stone, clay and bricks.

The Archbishop of Uppsala was the one who had the power over the mid-Scandinavian churches in those Catholic times. To make it easier for pilgrims to travel safely there was a system of hostels, where the owners had the obligation to provide the wayfarers with food, lodging and sometimes transport. The owners in return got compensation in the form of land to farm, the right to use the forest for hunting and getting wood, fishing

in the rivers or lakes, as well as tax exemption. One of these early pilgrim hostels, “Själastuga”, is the one in Stugun, located in the vast forests of Ragunda.

The Archbishop in Uppsala organized for travelers to stay in Stugun, between the steep hill Stuguberget and the river Indalsälven. On January 29, 1290 the first farmer and hostel-keeper Giurd Bodakarl received a charter from Archbishop Johannes stating both his obligations and his privileges. This was later passed on to his descendants, the documents at the National Archives show. Homesteads in Hölje, Lit, and Ansjö, Hällesjö, were also given to the grandson of Giurd Bodakarl, as a way to help finance the hostel and the early chapel in Stugun.

Stugun formed its own congregation in 1567 with only five farmers and their families. Jämtland belonged to the Norwegian king and was the site of several battles back and forth between Norway and Sweden. Sweden eventually won and took over Jämtland and Härjedalen in 1645, but it took time before the Jämtland people could be trusted as proper Swedes.

One descendant of Giurd Bodakarl became especially well-known in this part of Sweden, Pål (Paul) Persson, a farmer but also an excellent carpenter and blacksmith. He built the old church in Stugun which was finished in 1795, but also several other churches and bell-towers in eastern Jämtland. The bell-tower in Håsjö parish is represented with a copy at Skansen, the famous out-door museum in Stockholm.



Stugun did not grow much until the mid-1700's, when there was a surge of settlers in the more forested areas of the parish. The settlers were promised land and tax exemptions for 15-30 years (somewhat like the Homestead Act in the US) and if they succeeded in building a farm and making a living, they became regular farmers who owned their land. Quite a few of those early settlers were soldiers who chose to settle on new land, also to escape going abroad as warriors.

In the 1800's Stugun grew and attracted many loggers and laborers who worked in the forest and sawmills. In 1846 there were 719 people and many more at the end of the century, around 2500 in 1926. Some made good money from the forest products and

built bigger and fancier farmhouses, but the majority had to work hard to make a living. More than 500 emigrated to the US and later Canada between 1860 and 1930.

Today there are about 600 people in Stugun, many of them work in forest-related jobs, or welfare-service jobs. Some commute daily to Östersund. There are pre-schools and a Public school for ages 6-16, but no high school.

CARTA MARINA, 1539, THE HISTORY OF THE NORDIC PEOPLES 1555



Two Catholic priests and scholars, Olaus and Johannes Magnus, published this early map of Mid-Scandinavia along with a series of books about the history of the Nordic peoples. It was based on their travels through the area on a mission from the Pope to sell Letters of Indulgence to help finance the Peter's cathedral in Rome. Here you can distinguish some of the names of parishes, like STVVA, which is Stugun today. It was very important to describe the waterways from the Baltic Sea to the Atlantic. The two Catholic priests later had to go into exile, when the Swedish king Gustaf Vasa introduced the Reformation in 1527. Sweden has since then until 2000 had a Lutheran State church. Gustaf Vasa also distributed the Bible in Swedish to all parishes (it used to be written in Latin, which only scholars understood).

Olaus Magnus spent a long time in exile in Rome and worked for many years on the books about the Nordic Peoples, which was published in 1555. It was not translated into Swedish until the early 1900's. Though not always historically correct, it provides an interesting insight into Scandinavia and its people. An excerpt:



Early skis and snow shoes



Olaus Magnus traveling

“FOURTEENTH CHAPTER (SECOND BOOK)

About the adventurous passages over the mountains Skars [near Skalstugan] and Sula [Sylarna] between Sweden and Norway

In the Nordic countries there is a province called Jämtland, which from time immemorial belongs to the Archbishop in Uppsala, together with a fortified church called Västerhus [on Frösön]. From this Jämtland province, the residents and traveling strangers who travel in summer, experience a no less than terrible and dangerous road over the high mountains mentioned above, while during winter they can find their way easily by short cuts and trails over the frozen lakes, marshes and rivers. Because these vast mountain areas, the likes of which are rarely seen in Europe, have on their east side, practically under the traveler's foot, gateways and openings in the hard granite, some made by nature, some financed by early kings for the good of the people. After entering through these openings, you experience between the mountain slopes, also in summer, a coldness, that if the travelers were not equipped with several layers of clothing like in winter, they would be exposed to inevitable danger due to the quick change of air, until they finally manage to get through these mountain areas and chilly valleys. When they later are going downwards, a walk that takes several days, there is a greater danger, where the hanging bridges fastened to the mountain sides with props of timber, could have been crushed or damaged by heavy snow or storm-fallen trees or fallen rocks. And herewith, there is no other hope for the travelers than waiting until the bridges are repaired by the residents. There is no other way available over the enormous heights and the deep valleys. Since the wayfarers have to foresee that such horrors threaten them, they must bring a sufficient supply of food, much like if they at any time would be in a state of siege and wanted to save their lives.

As for the draft animals, they are taken good care of because of the abundance of grass and drinking-water. There are many rich springs, where fresh water flows down the mountains and everyone appreciates this tasty water. But it is no wonder, that the travelers have to put up with many hardships due to the horrible precipices between the cliffs, that you cannot avoid or master. You have to tread your way carefully and wisely,

especially if the terrain is full of obstacles, gravel and stones. Furthermore, the trails are so narrow, that people and draft animals, especially those who are not familiar with the area, sometimes get dizzy, cannot see properly and helplessly fall down to the ground below.”



Magic stone statues in the mountains

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