

Medieval Fact Sheet

Uppsala Domkyrka



Uppsala Domkyrka (Cathedral) from the Slott (Castle)

Introduction

Uppsala Domkyrka is the largest church in Scandinavia. It was built to contain the shrine of Saint Erik, a twelfth century King of Sweden.

Erik Jedvardsson became King of Sweden in 1156 aged about 36 after his predecessor Sverker I was murdered on Christmas Day. The twelfth century was a period when Christian Kings were being urged by the church to go on crusade against non-Christians – usually the Muslims who had occupied Jerusalem – but there were also pagans around the Baltic, including the Finns, who were engaged in plundering the Swedish coast. King Erik therefore had both a religious and a practical motivation to crusade against the Finns. He therefore went to Finland with an army where he exhorted the Finns to accept Christianity. When they refused, he conquered the southwest of Finland and forced the Finns there to be baptised.

However, the Finns were not the only enemies of the Swedes at that time. By 1160, Sweden was also at war with Denmark that was ruled at that time by King Magnus II. On 18th May 1160, King Erik was at prayer in the Trefoil Church at Uppsala (at that time known as Ostra Aros) when he was ambushed by King Magnus and his soldiers and was killed. When he died a spring burst forth where he fell, and a blind woman was cured when she touched his body.

Following his death, he was declared a saint by the Swedes – because he had converted the Finns, had met with a martyr's death and because of the miracles - and his remains were interred in the church at Gamla Uppsala, at that time the principal church in Sweden. However, he was not officially recognised as a saint by the Catholic Church. Nonetheless, other miracles followed and Gamla Uppsala became a focus for pilgrimage. Saint Erik became the patron saint of Sweden. Saint Erik's Day is on 18th May and it became a tradition to carry Saint Erik's reliquary between Uppsala and Gamla Uppsala on the day to ensure a good harvest.

In 1164, Uppsala became the seat of the first Archbishop of Sweden, Stefan of Alvastra, based at the church at Gamla Uppsala. Prior to this, Sweden had been part of the diocese of Hamburg-Bremen and then of Lund (not at that time part of Sweden). However, by the early thirteenth century, Gamla Uppsala was in decline mainly because of increasing difficulty in navigating the River Fryisan and then in 1204 the church was destroyed in a fire.

This prompted a decision to build a new Domkyrka at Ostra Aros, five kilometres down river from Gamla Uppsala. This decision was confirmed by Pope Alexander IV in 1258 on condition that Ostra Aros was renamed 'Uppsala'. Of course, Ostra Aros already had the Trefoil church where Saint Erik had been killed, but there was a wish to build the new Domkyrka around a shrine to Saint Erik that would be built where he fell. The new Domkyrka was therefore built around the existing Trefoil Church and when this was complete, the Trefoil Church was taken down and rebuilt just to the south of the new Domkyrka.

In 1270 the land on which the new Cathedral was built was given to the church by King Valdemar Birgersson (1250-75) in return for land at Gamla Uppsala. Work started on the current building in the 1270s guided by Archbishop Folke Johansson Angel (1274-77) and Dean Andreas And (1278-99). In 1273 the remains of Saint Erik were transferred from the church at Gamla Uppsala to the new Domkyrka at Uppsala.

The Domkyrka was consecrated on Whit Tuesday, 7th June 1435 and at the same time a new gilded reliquary is made for the relics of Saint Erik. In 1441 it was the scene of the coronation of Christopher of Bavaria as King of Sweden. It has been restored and altered during the centuries, most recently in the 1880s. During the medieval period it was used for the coronation of Swedish Kings and attracted many pilgrims to the shrine of Saint Erik. There were other chapels dedicated to other saints.

Karl Knutsson became King of Sweden in 1448 but he was opposed by many noblemen who favoured a union with Denmark. However, his biggest critic was Archbishop Jons Bengtsson Oxenstiern of Uppsala. In 1457 he entered the Uppsala Domkyrka, advanced to the high altar, laid down his mitre and vowed not to wear it again until he had driven Karl Knutsson from Sweden. He then left the Domkyrka and donned his armour. He succeeded in ambushing, wounding and deposing Karl Knutsson. However, the civil war continued. Karl Knutsson was restored in 1464-65 and in 1467 before his death in 1470.

The Domkyrka is located to the west of the River Fryisan on high ground known as the Domberget (Cathedral Hill) that is largely man-made from sand, gravel and cobbles piled between one and five metres deep and is retained by a substantial wall that archaeologists have discovered is almost two metres thick and other walled terraces. It was part of a complex of church buildings including the Trefoil Church, a chapel dedicated to Saint Erik, a Chapter House, a bell tower, a palace and a castle for the Archbishop of Uppsala. Of these other buildings only the Trefoil Church and the Tower above the Domkyrka steps survive from the medieval period, along with some foundations that survive within later buildings.

Construction of the Domkyrka

The Domkyrka was built largely using French architects and craftsmen. In 1287 a contract was signed with the French master mason and architect, Estienne de Bonnuell. He built the north and south portals, the large rose window in the north transept and several of the eastern chapels. The carved figure on a pier in the Vasa chapel who is holding compasses and a set square is thought to be a likeness of de Bonnuell.



The West Front

The Domkyrka is built of brick in a style common to Scandinavia and Germany. The Uppsala Plain is made of clay that is suitable for brick making, whereas there are no stone quarries nearby making stone a very expensive building material. Archaeologists have discovered the remains of a brick kiln near the Domkyrka. The building does not have extensive buttresses but does have unusually thick walls (for example the west walls of the towers are four metres thick) and several pointed vaults. Most of the original brickwork was replaced in the nineteenth century but some of the medieval brickwork remains near to the north door.

Construction continued during the fourteenth century, but was often halted due to lack of funds, plague, bad weather and collapsing vaults. However, in the 1360s a master builder Nikolaus from Vasteras was appointed, and the building moved towards completion. In 1435, the building was consecrated by Archbishop Olof Larsson. A small spire, or fleche, was added to the roof in the 1440s. The Domkyrka was damaged by a fire in 1473. The towers were completed between 1470 and 1489, but the spires were added in the sixteenth century and restored in the nineteenth. The towers are 119 metres tall and there are 467 steps from ground level to the top of the north tower. The fleche is 79metres high.

The Domkyrka measures 119metres in length, the external width of the transept is 52metres (internal width 40metres), the external width of the choir is 42metres, the internal width of the Nave is 31metres, the height of the ridge of the roof is 37 metres, the ceiling height of the central aisle is 27metres, the ceiling height of the chapels is 12metres and the thickness of the walls is two metres at the base. It has a building footprint of 4,077 square metres, an area of useable floor space of 3,439 square metres, a net volume of 55,037 cubic metres and it has been estimated that over four million bricks were used to build it.

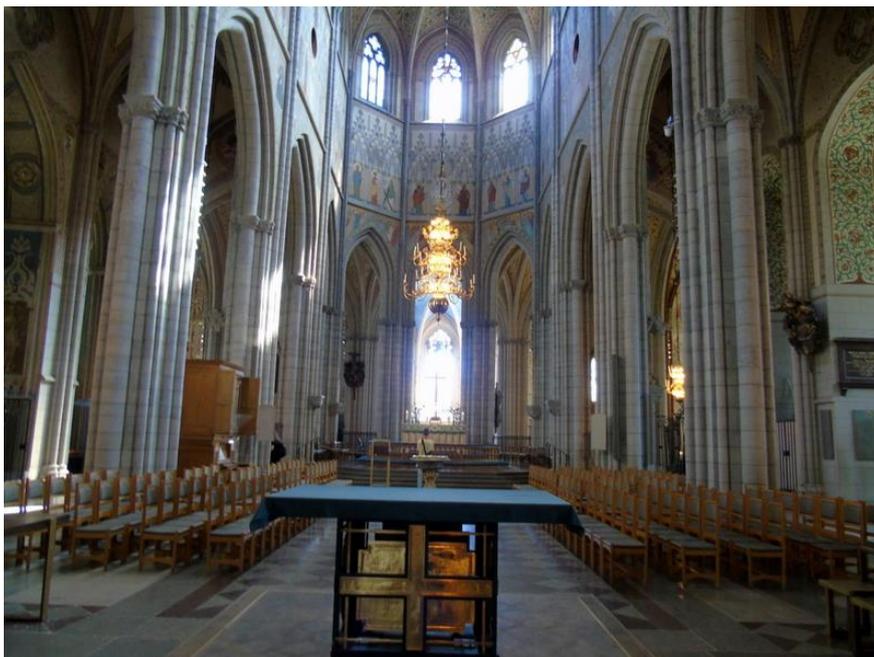
The Building

On entering the Domkyrka through the west door, visitors enter the Vapenhus (weapon house). In medieval times this was where people had to leave their weapons before entering the church. It now contains several medieval grave stones. To the south was the Chapel of St Thomas, now used as a meeting place. To the north there is a well – one of the springs in Uppsala that relate to Saint Erik. It is now used as a shop.

The Domkyrka has a clerestory in the Nave and Choir, but the windows are smaller and taller than those in contemporary churches elsewhere in Europe. They were designed to maximise the light given the climatic conditions in Uppsala. The Domkyrka is generally of a simpler design than most contemporary cathedrals, for example, the triforium has neither pierced walls nor galleries. It is thought that this reflects the ideas of the Dominican friars of Sigtuna who favoured simplicity and tranquillity. The Domkyrka contains many roof bosses, half of them medieval.

The large windows are said to represent the Trinity. The west window, God the Father; the south window – the largest in Sweden - God the Son; and the north rose window the window of the Spirit. The north window was constructed in the thirteenth century by the French masons in a classic gothic style, has a diameter of 7.4metres and is like the north window at Notre Dame in Paris. The south window contains fifty square metres of glass. The west window has a diameter of 7.5metres.

The Choir keeps its original medieval shape with pointed vaults, but the medieval screen is gone as are the choir stalls. The original altar was provided by King Magnus Ladulas (1275-90) and included an image of the Virgin Mary but in the fifteenth century it was replaced with a large winged altar piece representing the suffering and crucifixion of Christ and another showing the life of Saint Erik. The present altar is nineteenth century.



The Choir

The remains of the earliest Archbishops were moved from Gamla Uppsala in 1273 and interred in the west of the Choir. Later Archbishops are also buried there including Archbishop Jons Bengtsson Oxenstierna (1417-67) who favoured union between Sweden, Denmark and Norway and who was at one time Regent of Sweden.

During the medieval period there was a detached bell tower to the northeast of the Domkyrka. It had brick and granite foundations and a timber structure and was destroyed by fire in the eighteenth century. However, the Domkyrka has a medieval bell – Thornan, the Torun Bell. It was made in the fifteenth century and is Sweden's largest medieval bell although it was made in Germany. In the eighteenth century it was taken as a spoil of war from Thorn that was at that time in Germany (the town is now in Poland and is called Turun).

In the medieval period the Domkyrka library was housed in a room off the north Transept but all that remains today is a fifteenth century reading desk.

The earliest reference to a church organ at Uppsala is from 1376 although the current organ is modern.

Saint Erik's Shrine

The remains of Saint Erik were moved to Uppsala Domkyrka in 1273 and have remained there ever since. They were originally kept in a casket next to the altar but in the fifteenth century were placed in a silver gilt casket representing a gothic chapel. However, in the sixteenth century this was melted down and later, the current gold and silver casket with an alabaster canopy was made. The casket contains the remains of Saint Erik (examination of injuries to the bones and carbon dating have confirmed this) and his twelfth century burial crown made of gilded copper and containing semi-precious stones. It is the oldest preserved royal crown in Sweden.

Saint Erik's Chapel was dedicated in the early fourteenth century. The wall paintings were painted by Albertus Pictor after 1473 but were restored in the nineteenth century. There are twelve scenes, six on the west wall and six on the east wall.



Wall paintings showing the life and death of Saint Erik

The scenes on the west wall show the life and death of Saint Erik. The first scene shows the coronation of King Erik. In the second scene, Erik declines to accept gifts that are offered to him by the people. According to legend, he was a just King who did not exact more tax than was necessary, saying that 'I am content with what is mine'. The third and fourth scenes show King Erik and Bishop Henry crossing the Baltic to convert and baptise the Finns. In the fifth scene, King Erik is attending mass at Trefoil Church at Ostra Aros when he receives word that a hostile Danish army is approaching (some sources say this occurred at the Church at Gamla Uppsala). In the sixth scene a battle ensues outside the church that ends with the decapitation of the King.

The scenes on the east wall show the life of Saint Olaf Haraldsson – the patron saint of Norway. The first scene shows Olaf beating his brother Harald in a sailing race. The second scene shows Olaf attending mass. The third scene shows Olaf's coronation. The fourth scene shows the martyrdom of Saint Olaf at Stiklestad in 1030. The fifth scene is the coronation of the Virgin Mary as Queen of Heaven. The sixth scene shows the dormition of the Virgin Mary.

There are some other wall paintings in the chapel including an unknown female saint, Saint Fabian, Saint Sebastian, Saint Anthony and seven men with haloes.

The Corbels

The Choir contains twelve corbels that were carved in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century. These are ledges that were originally intended for statues and have remarkable stone reliefs on the lower surfaces. The corbels facing the altar show how people can be saved through the grace of God; while those facing the Ambulatory show the way to eternal bliss.



The First Corbel

The first Corbel shows two figures fighting with falchions (short swords) and bucklers (small shields). The older man – who is the best armed – fatally wounds the younger man. The younger man therefore dies without being able to confess his sins, take communion or receive anointing. He therefore has a sudden and unprepared death – something that was feared in the medieval period.

The second Corbel shows the death of the Virgin Mary as an example of a good death. Mary lies on a bed surrounded by the disciples while angels scatter incense. At her death, Christ lifts her soul from her body and takes it to heaven. The soul is depicted as a miniature Mary.

The third Corbel is the most controversial of all the corbels. It shows three Jews being suckled by a sow. This is an anti-Jewish symbol that is also found in other European churches including two others in Sweden.

The fourth Corbel represents paganism and unbelief. The central figure has the features of a bat, dragon and bird of prey and probably represents a pagan deity, devil or idol. To the right a woman holds a bucket and a bundle of twigs. The usual interpretation is that she is scattering blood from a sacrificial offering. The figure to the left is a nineteenth century replacement of the original.

The fifth Corbel shows the Christian communion. At the centre is the face of a man that personifies the vine surrounded by twelve leaves that symbolise the disciples. To the left is Christ with his hand raised and about to speak. To the right is the vine grower, holding a bunch of grapes. The carving also includes a camel and an elephant.

The sixth Corbel shows unchristian living. In the centre is a woman riding on a Ram who represents Luxuria who is guilty of the sin of lust. At her side are a musician and a jester who symbolise loose living, while the hare and the dog symbolise immorality and unchasteness.

The seventh Corbel is usually considered to refer to the birth of Christ. It shows Steffan (or Stephen) who was King Herod's stable boy, with four horses and the star of Bethlehem. Alternatively, it is taken to depict the conversion of St Paul.

The eighth Corbel shows the Martyrdom of Saint Stephen. Saint Stephen kneels in prayer while his tormentors stone him to death and the hand of God reaches down from the clouds. It emphasises the importance of believers standing firm in their faith.

The ninth Corbel shows a Pelican and a Phoenix and is symbolic of how Christ died to give man eternal life. The Pelican pecks at her breast so that her young can drink her blood. The Phoenix is burnt to death but then arises from the ashes on the third day.

The tenth Corbel originally showed the way to eternal destruction through foolery, drunkenness and murder. However, in the nineteenth century it was replaced with a carving showing the reliquary of Saint Erik being brought from Gamla Uppsala to the Domkyrka.

The eleventh Corbel represents stories from the Old Testament. On the left, God wrestles with Jacob who, according to the biblical story, refused to let go until he had received a blessing. On the right, Joshua leads the people of Israel into the promised land.

The twelfth Corbel represents the victory of Christ. On the right an eagle defeats a dragon, showing how Christ defeats the devil. On the left there is a King and a fox that is thought to represent a legend about how a cunning fox outwits a King.

Portals and Saints

The South Portal is dedicated to Saint Lars (Lawrence) and is ornamented with corbelled turrets on either side. It is thought to be the work of Estienne de Bonnueill, is largely made of soapstone (that is easily carved when first cut, but that hardens later) and was completed around 1310. It is in the style of contemporary French church doorways and is reminiscent of a winged altarpiece. The sculptures were carved later in the fourteenth century and there were probably originally sculptures in what are now empty niches. The sculptures were originally painted. Some were replaced in the nineteenth century. The Domkyrka was originally dedicated to St Lars whose statue stood above the north door until the 1430s when it was moved to the south door. The statue was carved in Uppsala around 1300 by Estienne de Bonnueill but was moved indoors in the twentieth century when a replica was placed in the portal.

The archivolt (the arched mouldings around the doorway) contain carvings from the old and new testaments. Six reliefs above the doors show the creation.

The frieze at the top of the Portal includes coats of arms and quatrefoils. The relief in the centre shows the Virgin Mary, the infant Jesus and the adoration of the Magi. It is believed to have been carved in the late fourteenth century and may have originally been placed at the base of one of the turrets. One of the smaller statues in the turrets is a fifteenth century depiction of Saint Erik that originally stood in the Chapter House. Above the right turret is a carving of the Virgin and Child that it is believed dates from the early fourteenth century.

The North Portal is also believed to have been built by Estienne de Bonnueill although it is built in a thirteenth century style. It is built of marble, soapstone and limestone from Gotland. It includes sculptured roses. Saint Olaf's statue originally stood above the north Portal. He is the patron Saint of Norway. Saint Olaf's statue was carved in Sweden in the fourteenth century and shows him crushing a troll beneath his feet symbolising his conversion of Norway to Christianity from the old religion.

Work on the West Portal started in 1431 according to a relief above the door. It is made of mottled pink and green Vattholma marble and several masons' marks can be seen. It retains the original medieval decoration on the arched tympanum. The Annunciation – the visit of the Angel Gabriel to Mary to tell her that she will give birth to the Son of God - is shown to the right. The scourging of Christ by Roman soldiers before his crucifixion is shown to the left. Saint Erik's statue originally stood above the west door but was moved in the sixteenth century at the Reformation.

The current statues above the doors are reproductions while the original statues of Saints Lars and Olaf are in Saint Henry's chapel in the church. Saint Henry is the patron saint of Finland. The current statue of Saint Erik is a nineteenth century reproduction.

The west door is 3.9 metres high and 1.8 metres wide. The south door is 3.3 metres high and 1.7 metres wide. The north door is 3.3 metres high and 1.6 metres wide.

Chapels and Wall Paintings

The Jagellonica Chapel was used as the Chapter House and Sacristy during the medieval period.

The Sture Chapel contains an early sixteenth century winged altarpiece that was brought to the Domkyrka from Skanela Church in Southern Uppland in 1912. It was carved in Brussels and shows the story of Ann and Joachim, parents of the Virgin Mary. The carvings show the betrothal of Ann and Joachim, their piety and charitable works, problems with childlessness, the birth of Mary, Mary being brought up by the priests in the Temple and the death of Joachim.

The Finsta Chapel contains the graves of Birger Persson of Finsta (d. 1327) and his wife Ingeborg Bengtsdotter (d. 1314). Their daughter Bridget became Saint Birgitta who founded the convent of Vadstena.

Saint Botvid's Chapel contains an unrestored fifteenth century wall painting of a flower tendril. Saint Botvid was a Swedish peasant who converted to Christianity and set out as a missionary to Sodermanland. He set free a bondsman so that he could also become a missionary, but instead the former bondsman murdered Botvid thus making him a martyr.

During the medieval period, the Swedenborg Chapel was dedicated to Saint Eskil and the 10,000 Knights.

In medieval times the Domkyrka contained many wall paintings. Many of the walls were also painted brick red with the joints painted white as can still be seen in the Horn Chapel. The vault ribs were also decorated.

Most of the wall paintings in the Domkyrka today were painted in the nineteenth century. However, the medieval wall paintings in the Chapel of Saint Erik have survived along with a flower tendril in St Botvid's Chapel and some patterns and vault paintings in the Ambulatory.

The Treasury

The Treasury in the northern tower includes many artefacts from the medieval period including textiles, vestments and hangings that form one of the largest medieval collections in the world. These include archbishops' copes and chasubles dating from the thirteenth century, fabrics from Lucca and a fifteenth century embroidered Virgin Mary chasuble.

The golden gown of Queen Margaret of Sweden, Denmark and Norway (1353-1412) is the only medieval evening dress to have survived anywhere in the world.

Rune Stones

Before the conversion to Christianity, Scandinavian writing took the form of carving runes either on stone or wood. Rune stones survive from the eighth to the twelfth centuries. There is a collection of rune stones outside the Domkyrka at the east end but there are also rune stones used to support the piers in the chapels of the Church. One of them is visible in Saint Erik's Chapel, but most are now concealed beneath the floor.

It is not clear why the rune stones were used to support the piers, but there are three theories:

- Noble families donated their family rune stones to the Domkyrka, considering it an honour for them to be used in this way, symbolically supporting the Church.
- Use of the rune stones in the foundations of a Christian church was symbolic of Christianity having triumphed over the older religion.
- The rune stones were dressed stones of a suitable size to be used as plinths and they were simply re-used. Their use is of no symbolic significance.



One of the Rune Stones outside the Domkyrka

Uppsala Domkyrka today

Modern Uppsala is one of Sweden's largest cities with a population of 160,000. It is in Uppland on the River Fyrisan about 71 kilometres north of Stockholm and 30 kilometres north of the airport at Arlanda. The City Centre lies to the east of the river between the river and the railway line. The Uppsala Domkyrka is located on high ground just to the west of the river. Also, on the high ground to the west of the river are the Slot (Castle), Trefoil Church and Gustavianum Museum that will be of interest to medievalists; as well as the campus of the University of Uppsala that was founded in 1477.

The Uppsala Domkyrka continues to be the seat of the Archbishop of Uppsala and the principal church of the Lutheran Church of Sweden. It is open to the public and visitors are welcome.

Adrian Waite

18th May 2019 – Saint Erik's Day

About the Fact Sheets

These fact sheets are written by me (Adrian Waite) unless otherwise stated. Their purpose is to provide basic information and some analysis and comment on medieval historical subjects. They therefore do not provide information about events prior to the fifth century unless this is needed to set events in the medieval period in context and do not cover events after the early sixteenth century. The subjects may be historical buildings, events, people; how medieval history is researched, managed or presented today or other subjects. They are published on the 'AW-History' website and are freely available. I hope that people enjoy reading them and that they encourage readers to explore medieval history further. Feedback about the fact sheets is always welcome and should be addressed to me at adrian.waite@awics.co.uk.

About AW-History

The address of AW-History is www.aw-history.co.uk

If you are interested in medieval history between the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century and the reformation in the sixteenth, this is the website for you! It contains information about the Anglo-Saxons, Vikings, Normans, Plantagenets, early Tudors and much more!

The website contains:

- Information about medieval history that can be freely downloaded
- Publications that can be bought by mail order
- Other historically related items that can be bought by mail order
- Information about events that you can attend - organised by "AW History" and by other organisations
- Links with other websites containing information about medieval history

We welcome visitors and hope that they enjoy the website. Feedback about the website is always welcome and should be addressed to me at adrian.waite@awics.co.uk.