Pilgrim Ways to Nidaros

To the shrine of St Olav – 5000 km of routes
A part of the European cultural heritage

St Olav Ways opening years
1997 Oslo Trondheim west. Norway
2003 Oslo Trondheim east. Norway
2006 Østfoldleden. Norway
2000 Østerdalsleden. Norway
2003 Klarälvdalsleden. Sweden
1997 Romboleden. Norway
1999 Romboleden. Sweden
1997 St. Olavsvegen. Norway
2003 Nordvegen. Norway
1992 Haervejen. Denmark

Ways to other shrines
2006 Valdresvegen. Norway
2006 Røldalsvegene. Norway

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Photos: Aslaug Sikveland Haugen
Saint Olav - Nidaros - Stiklestad

In his attempt to christianise Norway Olav Haraldsson fell at the battle of Stiklestad in 1030. His body was rescued from the battlefield and buried on the banks of Nidelva. A memorial church was raised close to his burial site on the river bank. Shortly afterwards, signs and miracles were reported close to Olav’s remains. He was revered as a saint, and pilgrims came from all over Europe to the feast of St Olav in Nidaros Cathedral, built on the site of the first memorial church. The St Olav Festival centred on the feast day of 29 July continues this tradition.

St Olav Ways in the medieval ages

In the 11th and 12th centuries Trondheim was a Scandinavian Jerusalem, a conscious effort to create a major Christian site in the north of Europe, on a level with Santiago in the west, Rome in the south and Jerusalem in the east. The northbound ways to the shrine of St Olav were an important and integrated part of the cult of St Olav.

The Pilgrim Ways to Nidaros were established through collaboration between the Church and the King, to create the same infrastructure for pilgrimage as that found around the larger pilgrim cities further south.

During the 11th and 12th centuries there was established an impressing infrastructure along the ways, with mountain huts and refuges, pastures and sea transport, all to make it easier for pilgrims to travel and to avoid conflicts with locals along the way. Churches and chapels were also built on mountain passes, like the St Thomas church at Fillefjell and the chapel at Hjerkinn.

There are traces of an impressing system of routes where you can find many references to St Olav all along the ways, both water wells and natural forms that were explained by St Olav’s great achievements in these places. All this contributed to the atmosphere when gradually approaching Nidaros.

The destination and focal point for all pilgrims was Nidaros Cathedral and its apse, rising above the high altar with St Olav’s shrine. The octagonal apse was an imitation of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

A fragment of the True Cross from Jerusalem and a golden ring containing drops of the blood of Christ were two important and very rare relics.

(Øystein Ekroll, Ph.D.  2007)

St Olav Ways in our time

The pilgrim’s reappearance on the overgrown paths was not a result of a conscious effort by the church. The modern pilgrim movement emerged from the grassroots. Suddenly pilgrims began arriving at the Nidaros Cathedral, starting with Swedes.

The significance of pilgrimage steadily increased, and in 1997 the first 1000 km with official pilgrim ways to Nidaros was opened by Crown Prince Haakon Magnus during Trondheim’s millenary celebrations in 1997. In 2007 the St Olav Ways celebrate their 10th anniversary with arranged walks and a fine programme.

The Pilgrim Ways to Nidaros, the St Olav ways, are developed and prepared by public authorities with local collaboration. The Collaboration Committee of the Pilgrim Ways, representing the Church, counties, municipalities and tourist authorities is responsible for the quality assurance in Norway.

In Sweden the Church of Sweden’s Pilgrim-centre in Vadstena is responsible for the pilgrim ways, and in Denmark the municipalities are responsible.

There are some 5000 km of prepared St Olav ways in Scandinavia and this cultural treasure is increasingly discovered at home and abroad.

Nidaros Diocese heads the Pilot Project for the Pilgrim ways 2007-2010, in order to improve access to the pilgrim ways – for through use only do the ways come alive!

The pilgrimsymbol, used along all St. Olav Ways. Combines the St. Olav cross and the tourist symbol.