

A Tour of the Lomen Stavkyrkje



Deep in the country of our ancestors, the Lomen Stavkyrkje sits above the waters of Slidrefjorden in Vestre Slidre, Norway. It is a reminder of the basis and transformation of the Christian faith of our people. The origin of this building traces to the Viking age, even though it is still in use almost a millennium later. The current structure combines those Viking elements, those of the early catholic church of Norway and it binds them with the transformation of the protestant reformation.

During the month of July, many of the stave churches are staffed by guides, usually students that are hired to accompany tour groups or the walk up American pilgrims, such as my wife and me. For 20 kroner, about \$4 at the time, we were escorted through the church and its history by a delightful young woman who lived in “the farm across the hill”. This day had seen record rainfall, like so much of Norway had seen that year, but the day cleared up as we drove to the site in Lomen. We had followed our map and kept sight of the steeple in the distance, just off highway E-16, a main road between Oslo and Bergen in the heart of the Valdres Valley.



There is no dedicated road and parking lot to the church. It sits behind the adjacent farm, who apparently acts as the caretaker for the church. We parked at the farm yard and walked a few hundred feet on a hillside path. A warm fresh Valdres summer wind greeted us. We walked along streams of water flowing along a well-trodden hedgerow. We passed a small rainfall induced waterfall as it rushed down the

hill to Slidrefjorden. As we approached the church gate, we met our guide sitting on the stone fence as she agreed to lead us. She rushed off to the neighboring farmhouse to get the key, while we photographed the ancient building, bell tower and the weather worn gravestones.



She returned with an enormous metal church key, and led us to the entrance, which seemed located in the back of the church as compared to the church gate. As we cornered the building, we were awed by the huge dragon and vine sculpted wood entrance. It shielded the worshipper from the wind and the rain, and instantly reminded us of the origins of this church and our people. The door itself was strapped with an ancient iron metal design which is characterized in many art designs of Valdres. The massive door was opened, not by a twist of the key, but by turning and turning the screw type lock until the key itself became the handle to pull open the heavy medieval door.

The experts believe through dating the wood that the origin of the church dates back to 1192 although there was no mention of it in writings until 1325AD and 1334AD, at that time referred to as "Hvams kirke". Some of that dating evidence is substantiated from a coin found at the site which dates to the reign of King Sverre between 1177 and 1202 A.D.

At that time, the church was built as a tall tower based on four columns or “stave” which held the upper cross beam structure and the roof. At the top of the columns were face carvings, believed by some to be the remnant acknowledgements of the old Norse gods, condemned to hold the Christian church roof for eternity as their punishment for being false gods. Those columns remain in the darkness of the roof supports but were visible with the flashlight of our guide. The beams between the columns contain carvings with the X shaped cross of St. Andrew. This ancient choice of cross designs is interesting, and suggests the early Viking influence of the Christian religion in Scotland, whose early links to St. Andrew extend beyond golf. Certainly, visitors like us saw the church as a mix of the old Norse and the new Christian religion at the time it was built.

We were told that there was no floor in the early church. There were no pews, no windows for the parish. There were no hymnals. The early priests read in Latin to the worshippers, who were quite literally in the dark.



The church was modified as a result of the reformation. The worshippers now participated in the service; windows were created for light, floors and seating provided. By 1750, the church was converted and extended outward from the tall narrow posts to meet the needs of the growing community. Other changes over the centuries were made to provide modern conveniences, such as the door lock in the 19th century. A narrow stairway and a gallery had been built into the church as well. Eventually however, the community outgrew the church and the congregation moved to the “new” Lomen church in 1914. For a fee, the Lomen Stavkyrkje can still be opened for weddings or baptisms. The building and the external bell tower are maintained and painted continually, preserving this precious evidence of Norwegian heritage.



The sanctuary with the altar is quite separated from the nave. As you step into that room, it seems quite distinct from darker domain of the laity. The altar is medieval and was painted by a local Lomen artist hundreds of years ago. His artwork covers another original painting on that wood substrate, but to uncover it would only destroy the precious art on the surface. The plaster head on the altar is that of Mary, a replicate part of a larger statue that was presumably destroyed during the chaos of the reformation in the 1500s. The original sculpture is kept at the Valdres Folkmuseum, down the road in Fagernes. The altar

cloth is also a recreation, but based on historical research of the local tapestry weaver, Marit Anny Løken Tvenge (see Budstikken May 1978). The original was kept for preservation in Oslo. Later in the day, we actually met Marit at her wonderful Lomen tapestry shop and found copies of the Lomen tapestry as well as various designs in the styles of the local area farms. It is a stop well worth the time, as many of you know.

The wooden kneeler in Lomen Stavkyrkje is the only part of the altar that is known to be original from the Viking era. The original baptismal font was also in a museum; only its soapstone base was remaining as an original church fixture.

To the left side of the sanctuary is a plain wooden storage box, also known to be of Viking era, and found to have worn runic writing which can only be seen in certain light. The guide said that it was believed that the runes gave a magic incantation, since any other interpretation yielded nonsense.

The priest's chair also has a medieval look to it, a plain painted Norse chair. However, it bore the same faces as were carved in the ceiling beams, but carved in the back of the chair. We were amused and speculated that these Norse gods were forced to look at the wall and not the altar, punishment similar to that which the column icons were forced to endure. Remember, that rumor started here if you hear it again on your own tour.



One would think that a church bell would have been in the tall steeple on the church, but that was relegated to an auxiliary building behind the church. This was common to other stave churches.

We walked slowly on the path back to our entry point, tempted to dip our hands into the clear, fresh water rushing by us. As we left our ancient home church, we looked over the beauty of the Valdres valley and understood why our predecessors had settled there. It was good.

- Ken Larson

Addendum: We noticed that <http://www.maritannysvevstogo.no/index.html> is the web site of Marit Anny Løken Tvenge's tapestry shop and coffee house.
