

Norway's experience of Islam

By: Dr. Kristin Kanzari

If you ask, local people might tell you that the hijab clad woman in the small town in Finmark and the occasional sound of the azan from the minaret in one of Oslo's local mosques is an exotic novelty, representing a new kind of relationship between Norwegians and the rest of the world. If you meet one of the younger of the almost 80,000 Muslims now inhabiting the country, you may hear that Islam has 'a long history in Norway' and that the national hero Henrik Wergeland (1808-1845 CE), who inaugurated the annual celebration of the signing of the Norwegian constitution on the 17th of May, died a Muslim.



سفينة الفايكنغ

The Viking Ship

Historical perspectives

Historically, Norway became one country at the turn of the first millennium. King Harald Harfagre (850-933 CE) is commonly credited with having ousted the small kings and gathered the different counties in one political unit, but there was still some way to go before Norway was a unified political and military territory. The old Norwegians were traders and craftsmen, farmers and fishermen. The very fine craftsmanship and prosperity enjoyed by large parts of the population is testified to in the house structures, metal works, huge ship building industry, and the immensely fine and detailed woodcarvings that decorated the stems of the famous Viking ships and other treasured property. Only a few Norwegians were actually Vikings, i.e. plunderers and mercenaries, but the term has become synonymous with any Norwegian living in the Viking era, from ca. 800-1000 CE. This was an expansive time: Leif Erikson (b. ca. 970 or 980 CE) traversed the Atlantic Ocean, from Iceland, landing on the northern coast of North America in Wineland almost five hundred years before Christopher Columbus.

The Norwegian Royal Chronicles, written in ca. 1264 by the Icelandic priest, poet, and statesman, Snorre Sturlason, tell vividly of

how the Vikings made pilgrimage all the way to the River Jordan to immerse themselves in the Holy Waters.

The turn of the millennium was not only time when the many counties of Norway were gathered under one ruler; it was also the time when the Norwegian people were introduced to Christianity. The vivid accounts of the Norwegian encounters with Christianity stands in remarkable contrast to the absolute silence of the text on the question of Norwegian contact with the Muslim people of North Africa, the Balkans and Turkey. Indeed, one has to suspect that such references have been omitted deliberately, either by Snorre himself or by later compilers of his manuscript.

It is inconceivable that these Norsemen did not know Islam and bring stories of this faith with them back to the motherland. Today Norway's Muslim population is nothing to write home about but there are small Muslim communities in the country. Bergen is most famous for its rain, its international music festival (May), and its incomparable beauty can even find a mosque to pray in, and if your search up hill from the colourful fish market – towards the Funicular that will take you to one of the mountains looking out over Bergen – you may even find a North African vendor selling halal kebab. ■

Aurora

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