

Educational Material – Saint Erik

Who was Saint Erik?

Erik Jedvardsson was a king in Sweden 1156-1160. Already during his life he was a popular king. He was generous towards the church and he also participated in crusades to Finland with the bishop Henrik (Henry) (see the murals of this in the chapel of S:t Sebastian in the cathedral). He was also known not to take bribes.

How did Erik die?

According to the legend from the 13th century king Erik on Ascension day, May 18th 1160, attended mass the small church on the hill called Our Lord's Hill, where the cathedral is today. During the service, his men came up to him, warning for foe troops were outside. King Erik went out of the church, meeting the Danish troops in a battle. The king was killed, and the legend tells us that where his blood went down into the soil, there sprang up a fresh spring of water. This water was said to have healing powers.

Where is Erik today?

The dead king was buried in the cathedral of the time, Old Uppsala church, by the mounds just north of present Uppsala. The legend tells of different miracles around the death of the king and later by his grave. The late Erik was conceived as a saint, although not canonized by the holy chair.

St. Erik is conceived as Sweden's patron saint.

The remains of king Erik were placed in a shrine and in 1273, when the present Uppsala Cathedral was under construction, this shrine was brought here in a procession, and the new Cathedral dedicated to S:t Erik. The shrine was used annual processions for good harvests etc.

Is it really the same shrine?

No. The present shrine is the third one. The original shrine was probably worn out through being used in processions. The second shrine, in the shape of a gothic cathedral made of gold and precious stones in 1435, was melted down by the king John III (Johan III) in 1573 for financial reasons. However, John III had a new shrine made, the present. Stockholm gold smith Hans Rosenfäldt and Dutch artist Gillis Coyet made this fine piece made of 34 kg's. (75 lbs.) gilt silver.

Does the shrine really contain the remains of Erik?

The shrine does contain most parts of a male skeleton from around middle of the 12th century. Traces of cut by a sword on the neck can be seen. King Erik's crown, the oldest preserved in Sweden, is also in the shrine. It is made by gilt copper. Since 1976 the shrine is placed at its present place, the Finsta chapel.

Saints in the Church of Sweden

The reformer Martin Luther criticized the use of saints in the medieval Catholic church. The main argument was, that there is no need for any mediator between God and man. The faithful should direct their prayers not to the saints, but rather to God and Christ. However, the saints can be models to us. The saints are human beings that have reached a bit further, who can inspire us to a deeper commitment to our world and a deeper understanding of God's vocation to us. However, Lutheran churches do not appoint any people as saints.