

**Øystein:** So I have to check if it's possible to go inside or,

**Nancy:** All right.

**Øystein:** Yep. But then I try this door here.

**Nancy:** All right. Wait, do you have keys? Yeah. What do they look like? Are they all old skeleton? Oh, no. I thought you had like a bunch of old skeleton keys.

**Øystein:** No, no, no. It's...

**Nancy:** (01:05:50)

Oh, it's a key card. Yeah. Darn. All right. We'll be quiet.

**Nancy:**

All right.(whispers) We're going to the church. We're going into the back of the church. Oh, gosh.

**Nancy (voiceover):** that's me, with Oystein Ekrøll, one of the foremost experts on Nidaros Cathedral, the northernmost gothic cathedral in the world. He's the head archaeologist and researcher at the Nidaros Cathedral Restoration Workshop. The first stones of this cathedral were laid in the 1100s, and it's right here in Trondheim.

**Nancy:** Is it here? There's a lot of stuff in the way.

**Nancy:** He's about to show me something few other people have seen.

**Øystein:**

All this stuff at the congregation. Yeah. You have to come around here.

**Nancy:** Okay. I'm coming. Alright, so we're going around these piles of chairs and the box of old batteries and missiles and, oh, dear. That didn't sound good.....

**Øystein:** Okay. You can see there are lines. It's in sizes with different angles. Here it is, yeah.

**Nancy:** Wow.

**Øystein:** We can follow it in different places. And this is the same as the vault, the above us. So this is the template.

**Øystein:** You see this? This, it looks like a human foot, but it is like what you call a ruler. It's what builders use. This is a 90 degree. But you see, it's not parallel.. And this is a very special medieval kind of

**Nancy:** Builder's ruler?

**Øystein:** Yeah. We have sources about it from the 13th century because with this one you can build almost anything.

**Nancy: (VOICEOVER)** Yes, etched on the wall of this cathedral, in a hidden corner, are the lines the master stonemason used to construct the cathedral's soaring vault, over our heads. Because of course they didn't have tons of paper available when these structures were built centuries ago.

**Øystein:** So this building is like a document. You see the walls are filled with all kinds of... you have names, you have years, you have bullet holes. You have figures like crosses or just letters and so on. So it is a document.

**Nancy:** I'm Nancy Bazilchuk, and you're listening to 63 degrees North, an original podcast from NTNU, the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

Today, I'm taking you on a journey back in time, to the early Middle Ages in Norway, to explore Nidaros Cathedral. It's a place whose soapstone walls, vaulting arches and countless sculptures hold many, many secrets, as you have just heard. It's a bit of a time machine combined with a

puzzle – in part because unlike other cathedrals, it has been restored over the ages, rather than rebuilt after catastrophic fires and disasters.

What I'm most interested in today is the story behind some truly astonishing sculptures. They're unlike anything you might expect in a grand cathedral, and without a guide, you might not notice them.

These are not the typical gargoyles and pious saints that adorn famous cathedrals like Chartres. Instead, there are noblemen and women wearing fine clothes and pearls, but with bat wings and dragon tails. There are grimacing apes. There's a satyr or a very squat man with a huge erection. And that's just the beginning. They all have a story to tell about the time when they were carved, in the early middle ages. Many were carved right before the Black Death.

And they surround the inside and the outside of the oldest and most sacred area in the cathedral, the Octagon, a structure that is truly unique as Gothic cathedrals go.

**Øystein:** Well, ever since I came here, I thought this is the most interesting, the most mysterious part, because all other parts of the cathedral, there are sort of run of the mill things. You can find parallels, especially in English cathedrals, and you can connect them, but the octagon has no parallel. Not in Northern Europe, at least not north of the Alps. So there is something special about this. Why build an octagon? Why not a square or a circle? We have round churches, we have square churches, we have cruciform churches and so on. Why an octagon?

**Nancy:** Part of the answer lies in the history behind why Nidaros Cathedral was built.

**Margrete:** This was a Trinity Cathedral in the Middle Ages, but they have the shrine of Saint Olav, which was the most important shrine in the north of Europe at that point in time.

**Nancy:** That's

**Margrete:** Margrete Systad Andås. And I'm with the Department of Arts and Media Studies at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, and I'm an art historian, and I basically mostly work with medieval things.

**Nancy:** Margrete is writing a book about the sculptures we'll be talking about. She and Øystein agree that the key to understanding this church art is understanding the importance of St. Olav, and his passionate followers and pilgrims. He was born in 935 and died in 1031, and was canonized in 1031.

**Margrete:** And Saint Olav, he was a Viking king. He was a proper Viking warrior, actually one of the people who really bothered the Anglo Saxons. But he christianized the Norwegians. And when he died, he was framed as a martyr, and that's what really christianized the country. So his shrine was a big thing, and the big pilgrimage place in the north of Europe. And at the place where he was buried, his shrine was then placed and an Octagon was built around it.

**Nancy:** Øystein told me the story of how Olav came to be canonized, and why it means there will always be a cathedral on this spot.

**Øystein:** The reason why it stands on this spot is that the high altar still today stands on the place, pointed out as where St. Olav was buried after he was killed in the battle of Stikklestad on the 29th of July 1030.

He lost the battle and his friends smuggled his body away from the battlefield and buried it in secret here in Trondheim. And there he lay for one year and five days until the 3rd of August, 1031, the coffin was exhumed, it was opened, and the king lay as he had died the day before, you could see his hair and nails had grown. And there was a sweet smell emanating from the body. So it was clear that he was a saint. And ever since there has been an altar where the high altar of the cathedral stands today. So that sort of decided where the cathedral should stand.

**Nancy:** The stream of pilgrims over the centuries, up to and including today, is one of the reasons why the statues around the Octagon are so intriguing. They're a message to medieval pilgrims who would have come

to the shrine and walked around the Octagon, which surrounded the shrine. Nidaros cathedral was also important to the Catholic church because it was so far north.

**Margrete:** It's referred to as Ultima Thule in the old sources, which is a concept that they borrowed from the Romans. Originally they talked about it in terms when they were talking about Britain and the outermost edge of the civilized world.

But in the Catholic church, in the medieval times, Ultima Thule is this place. (music: Midnight sun or Governor of the north?)

It's the frontier against the north, against everything that is unknown and terrifying, and also not Christian. They talk about that themselves in Norse sermons, that's where evil comes from, and it's against the Samis, it's against the unknown, those who are not Christianized. So they see themselves as a frontier as well, as part of the Catholic church.

**Nancy:** So this is what drew pilgrims from the time the cathedral was first built, at the end of the 1100s. But then...

**Margrete:** In 1328 disaster strikes.

It's a huge fire and it takes everything of wood inside, probably the shrine is damaged, bells are damaged.

Letters are preserved where the bishop writes to other bishops to encourage them to send money because they need to redo his cathedral. And that's when the restoration of the Octagon takes place. So it is originally 12th century, but then they start restoring in 1328.

**Nancy:** Here's where a disaster for the church became a gift for art historians like Margrete. Many of those weird sculptures that Margrete is studying were carved when the Octagon was being rebuilt after the fire.

Øystein Ekroll, who we heard from earlier in the episode, described the contents of the letter that Archbishop Eiliv wrote in his PhD dissertation on the Octagon. The reconstruction was so important that the Pope

himself got involved. In 1336 Pope Benedict XII granted 100 days of indulgence to all those who assisted the rebuilding during the next five years.

But then..... in 1349.....

**Margrete:** Disaster really, really strikes because then the Black Death comes and 70% die in Trondheim. And we have a very defined period of time from 1328 when we know exactly when the sculptures here are done.

**Nancy:** So imagine yourself a pilgrim coming here in the Middle Ages.

**Margrete:** It must have been overwhelming. We're so used to tall buildings now. But if you stand on the other side of the river, it's massive. And thinking about Trondheim, in those days, most buildings would've been wooden. There's the Archbishop Palace next door. But apart from that, there would've been wooden houses, smaller houses, and narrow streets. So yeah, I think it would've been overwhelming and also colorful.

**Margrete:** And they would never have seen anything quite like it before. Because in the north, this was the most extravagant building.

**Nancy:** So you're a pilgrim. You've walked, probably months, depending upon where you started, across the mountains, because Norway is a mountainous country. That crossing was not without its own dangers. But you have finally arrived in Nidaros, which was Trondheim's name at the time. You make your way to the cathedral, and you go inside, and come up to the Octagon in the far end of the church.

And that's when things get really interesting.

There are many grand sights in front of you. The altar itself, with the silver shrine. The elaborate stone arches surrounding the altar. But as you begin your walk around the shrine, you're greeted by a statue of the head and shoulders of a man, up on the left hand side of the walls around the Octagon.

He's grinning at us, and tearing a hood off a massive set of curly hair.

**Margrete:** This guy up here, he probably is there to send a message to the pilgrims who came here. He sort of smiles at us ... at the moment when you come up in the Octagon, and he is taking his hood off because that's what you do when you come close to the sacred. ...

So that's a reminder. But then he teases and he laughs and he's got these lavish curls and he's showing us his arm.

**Margrete:** This guy is extremely fashionable. You can see his arm with the buttons and buttons is the height of fashion. And exactly from this period of time, we find buttons in the records all over Europe because they're fashionable. It's a new thing that comes, you don't use pins and needles anymore, you have buttons. That shows that this is someone who's wealthy and he likes to show it off. So, this guy maybe is stepping a bit over the edge at this point of time, smiling though, because gothic sculptures often do, and he is more of a ludicrous character. He laughs.

And one of the things that we know that Archbishop Eiliv didn't like, that people were too fashionable, like peacocks. People were to keep within their level of society

**Nancy:** Archbishop Eiliv was the archbishop who oversaw the rebuilding of the cathedral after the 1328 fire. He apparently had some strong opinions about how people should behave.

**Margrete:** And the clergy he particularly says, do not wear yellow and red and green robes and do not wear stripes. So to keep it down, people, and the same with lay people. Everyone can't wear everything.

**Margrete:** He reminds us, it's about pride, it's about money. That's what he likes us to keep in mind with this sculpture here. We shouldn't be like that.

**Nancy:** So we walk clockwise, under the smiling man with the curls, into the recesses of the ambulatory. It's dark, kind of moody.

Cantaloupe-sized sculptures adorn the wall between the ambulatory and the interior of the octagon. And they're weird!

**Margrete:** And then we have all these figures around here of regular people, or wealthy merchant women with pearls, men dressed up, and they have their hair very fashionably curled up. And they have these tails, they signal sin.

**Margrete:** And that's not a good sign. They're hybrids. We find them in manuscripts at the time. Uh, and of course they're humorous. And they're playful. So you, uh, so they're funny in a sense, but they're also, uh, a sensors who are in a decay moral state. Uh, you sort of, you're not this and you're not that, which is, it ain't good. And having a tail can never be good in medieval Christianity. It refers to everything that is bad, essentially the devil's work.

**Nancy:** They also have webbed wings curled up next to their heads – it's not clear whether they're meant to be dragon wings or bat wings or the devil's wings, but, they're very creepy. So what are they telling these faithful pilgrims? Well, it turns out it's all about SEX.

**Margrete:** Archbishop Eiliv, the guy who started the restoration works, has regulations for the lay people on how to behave. And the sin of sexuality is of course, a recurring theme. Women who have children outside of wedlock are not allowed to have churching. They're not allowed to have the ceremony to return to the church. The same goes for prostitutes, or women who live in relationships and are not married with the church. So there are lots of regulations on the sin of sexuality. And a lot of them, or some of them at least, concern women very specifically, or today, we would say target women very specifically, but let's just sort of go with the flow in the middle ages. It's not just about the clergy staying within their moral framework. It's also a lot about lay people and how they should behave.

**Nancy:** The messages sent by the sculptures aren't just in the ambulatory, the area where pilgrims walked around the Octagon. Inside the central part of the Octagon are some really wild sculptures that would mainly be visible to the clergy. Margrete removed the red velvet



rope that keeps visitors out, and we step into this area. (BACKGROUND AX, me talking about the rope???)

**Nancy:** There are more figures higher up on the inside walls of the Octagon where it's more difficult to see.

**Margrete:** There's a monkey, an ape, and it's veiled, like a beautiful woman. And it sort of lifts the veil. And you can see the hollow eyes and the flat nose, uh, it's an ape. And that was a symbol for vanity in the Middle Ages.

**Margrete:** Saint Bridget, who writes in the 1340s the same time as this is decorated, she talks about the vanity of the ape and the vanity of the clergy. And the bishops are like she-apes, which is not a nice thing to say. So clearly it's the parable, or it's a symbol that is used in this point of time communicating to the clergy here not to be subject to the sin of vanity or pride, which is the worst.

**Nancy:** But it's not just inside the cathedral where there are strange sculptures. Øystein explains.

**Øystein:** In the Middle Ages, they say that a cathedral should reflect the whole, everything in life. But that's on the outside. Inside, that is the house of God. There are no evil forces there. But here on the outside, you have the gargoyles, you have the devils, you have the dragons showing us how dangerous life was in the middle ages. And this shows that only when you enter the house of God, you can feel safe.

**Nancy:** Some of these sculptures are far more unusual than just a gargoyle spout.....

**Margrete:** We're on the outside of the Octagon on the southeast side of it, facing what used to be the archbishop's palace. Part of it has been rebuilt and we don't know who this entrance was for, but given that it's not a double entrance like the other one, it's not a processional thing, it's not for two clergymen walking alongside each other. It's probably the door of the archbishop because it leads straight into the Octagon. ... So I guess this is for the bishop or the clergymen.

**Nancy:** The door is tall and made of seven broad oak planks, with three wrought iron hinges in curlicues, like stylized branches of a tree. To the left of the door are pillars carved of stone with.

**Margrete:** ... paradisian imagery, it's all these leaves, it's sort of sprouting with leaves and flowers like in paradise. But on the other side – and it's not so uncommon that you got a good and a bad side – you can see a face gaping at you, his mouth wide open and there are serpents hanging from his mouth. And those who are gnawed by serpents from the inside, they are in visionary literature from this period in time. Obviously sinners, they are being tortured, and they get gnawed from the inside with serpents. So that's the sign of the damned, the unbelievers.

**Margrete:** And then, his ears are being chewed by lions. And that's also probably not coincidental because the ears are the gates to the senses. St. Jerome, he talks about how the senses are the windows to the soul, and that's where evil can come in because the senses are what sort of leads you astray. And if you listen to the untruth, then you can be led astray, you know? So eating, sexuality, listening to the wrong things are things that might lead you astray. So, this guy, he's been obviously led astray. Lions are chewing his ear, and then, birds are sort of standing guard on the side.

**Margrete:** And it continues over here. And this one is almost gone today, but it's a monkey. And then next to the monkey is a guy who's naked, whether it's a satyr or whether it's a man. It's got very muscular thighs, so it could be a satyr, but his eyes are also sort of hollow and his mouth gaping and you can see his genitalia up front here.

**Margrete:** He's entangled in the vines because he can't break free, which is also a metaphor that you come across in liturgical writing or in religious writing, that you are a prisoner of the senses. So that's probably what he is. He's a prisoner of his senses, just like the one who has his ear being chewed. So this is about the danger of the senses. So it's probably a message to the clergy to take care.

**Nancy:** These crude messages via statues may seem strange to us, but you have to think about the time. Books were not that widely available, many people did not read, and religion was a central part of peoples' lives.

Plus life itself was a constant reminder that you were only on this planet for a very brief time.

**Margrete:** I don't think we can quite imagine what that kind of a life was like, and how much more today, you don't necessarily feel that you're standing on the edge of death at all points in time. But I think within a society like that, you will be much more aware that you never know how much time you have. And I think that's sort of a backdrop, when you look at the sculptures, reminding you about all the sins that you need to keep in mind right now, you can't wait until tomorrow. It's right now.

**Nancy:** So all those sculptures, reminding us, and reminding the clergy, this was a critical part of their job, protecting their flock.

**Margrete:** That's their job, that's their purpose in society, is to communicate these things, to take care of the salvation of everybody. You never know, and everyone is gonna come before the judge at some point in time, so you need to keep it in mind right now.

**Nancy:** It seems almost self-evident to say that we have only scratched the surface of this thousand-year old cathedral. If you should have the chance to visit Trondheim, you should definitely have a visit. And who knows, maybe you'll find yourself like Øystein and Margrete, captivated by this glorious structure.

**Øystein:** This cathedral sort of grows on you. I have been to countless cathedrals all over Europe. Many are older, many are bigger. Many are more splendid. But nothing compares to this one for me. Now I, of course I've been walking around inside, outside for more than 30 years in this part of the cathedral. I have literally caressed every stone, looked at every stone, touched it, tried to read its secrets, find out about its

history. When did you come here? How long have you been here? How have people treated you?

**Nancy:** I'm Nancy Bazilchuk, and you've been listening to 63 Degrees North, an original podcast from NTNU, the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. Thanks to my guests on today's show, Øystein Ekroll from the Nidaros Cathedral Restoration Workshop, and NTNU's own Margrete Syrstad Andås.

You can find links to some background information about the cathedral and some photos in the show notes. Writing, editing, production and sound design by me, Nancy Bazilchuk. Thanks for listening.