

Retrospective Statement of Outstanding Universal Value

Property	Urnes Stave Church
State Party	Norway
Id. No	58
Date of inscription	1979

Brief synthesis

Urnes Stave Church is situated on a promontory in the remarkable Sognefjord on the west coast of Norway. It was built in the 12th century. The stave churches constitute one of the most elaborate and technologically advanced types of wooden construction that formerly existed in North-Western Europe. Today they are only found in Norway where 28 of them are preserved. Urnes is one of the oldest, and an outstanding example of these. The church expresses in wood the language and spatial structures of Romanesque stone architecture. Some reused outside panels from an earlier 11th century church have carved, sculpted decor of exquisite quality in the Celtic/Viking tradition known as the “Urnes style”, also found in other parts of Scandinavia and North-Western Europe. In the interior of the church there is an extraordinary series of 12th century carved figurative capitals. The carvings are important both as outstanding artistic artifacts, and as a link between the pre-Christian Nordic culture and the Christianity of the medieval ages.

Justification for criteria (i)(ii)(iii)

(i) represent a unique artistic or aesthetic achievement, a masterpiece of the creative genius; (1978)

The outstanding quality of the carved décor of Urnes is a unique artistic achievement. The wood carving on the outside includes strap-work panels and elements of Viking tradition from the previous building (11th century) which constitute the origin of the "Urnes style". These carvings are found on the northern wall with a carved decoration of interlaced, fighting animals. Similar carvings cover the western gable triangle of the nave and the eastern gable of the choir. In the interior of the church there is an extraordinary series of 12th century figurative capitals. Furthermore the church contains a wealth of liturgical objects of the medieval period.

(ii) have exerted considerable influence, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture, monumental sculpture, garden and landscape design, related arts, town-planning or human settlements;

The stave churches are considered the most interesting, highly developed wooden buildings in the Western European cultural sphere during the Middle Ages. They continue a tradition of wooden architecture, at one time common to large parts of Europe but lost today except for the buildings preserved in Norway. Urnes is one of the oldest of the Norwegian stave churches and the one that shows the best craftsmanship. Also it reveals the development from earlier techniques, and thus contributes to the understanding of the development of the specific tradition.

(iii) *be unique, extremely rare, or of great antiquity;*

The stave churches constitute one of the most elaborate types of wood construction which are typical of northern Europe from the Neolithic period to the Middle Ages. Among the roughly 1,300 medieval stave churches indexed, 28 remain in Norway.

This outstanding series of wood buildings includes different types and sizes. Urnes is medium-sized. It is rare for the extent of reuse of elements originating from a stave church built about one century earlier whose location was revealed by the 1956-1957 excavations. From its predecessor both decorative and some constructive elements are reused.

Urnes Stave Church is of great antiquity as a wooden building. The outside décor from the older church is preserved in an amazing state of conservation after exposure to all kinds of weather for nearly one thousand years.

Statement of integrity

The World Heritage Property is composed of the stave church itself, surrounded by a medieval cemetery enclosed by a stone wall.

Since all elements that constitute a stave building on the one hand and a church on the other are retained, the integrity of the site is fully present. The church and the cemetery are still in use. All items necessary for church services are in place, many of them also of great antiquity, even from medieval times. As a building representing the stave technique, all characteristics are to be found in the church. Moreover, together with the reused remnants and the excavated remains from an earlier building that was raised with the staves dug into the ground, Urnes with its frame of sills resting on stone foundations is a testimony to the completed development of the stave technique.

The vulnerability of the church is mostly related to danger of fire and pressure from tourism, if this is excessive. Also climate changes – like increased precipitation – will have negative impacts on the wooden building.

Statement of Authenticity

Over the centuries, interventions have been carried out to adapt the church building to religious and practical needs. These interventions are clearly visible, and as such provide authentic testimony to social life and religious practices. Two of the 16 staves (poles) in its interior have been cut during medieval times to make room for a side altar which has later

been removed. The medieval furnishings of Urnes Stave Church include a wooden Calvary group over the choir opening, two altar candlesticks of Limoges enameled bronze, and a chair constructed entirely of turned spindles. During the 17th century some interventions were made both to the construction and the furnishing. The altarpiece and pulpit of the church, the gallery, benches and closed pews, the choir screen and the wooden vault in the nave are all additions from around 1700. The choir was extended eastwards about 1600, also in the stave technique. The walls here are covered with paintings: scrolls, architectural motives, and apostles, all dated 1601. A clock tower has been built as a ridge turret. The name Støpulhaugen given to a hill just outside the stone wall indicates that the bell in earlier times was placed there in a separate construction.

The Urnes Stave Church has been subject to excellent conservation of the whole, homogeneous ensemble. The embellishments of the 17th century (1601 and around 1700) and the restorations of 1906-1910 fully observed its authenticity. This is also the case for the recently performed restoration of the foundations (2009-10).

Protection and management requirements

The World Heritage Property is protected by the Norwegian Cultural Heritage Act. The State Party has the overall responsibility and the county authority has the management responsibility at the regional level. The owner, the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Monuments, has drawn up an overall plan for its management of the property. A cooperation group for the World Heritage Property was established in 1998 with members from all administrative levels and stakeholders.

The church is no longer a parish church. However, it is of vital symbolic value for the community and is still in use for some christenings and weddings. The medieval cemetery is in use only for a few local families.

In 2010 an extensive restoration program led by the Directorate of Cultural Heritage ended, and the church is now in a good state of preservation. An advanced fire protection system with suppression systems and monitoring has been installed. Due to the remote location of the church tourism to the site is still modest. Although arrangements for tourism are kept to a minimum, they are carefully designed. Any new activity is handled under the supervision of the cooperation group, and will be subject to procedures executed by the authority in charge.