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## Steeled For the Storm

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# STEELED FOR THE STORM

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## How ancient Viking churches survived the centuries

**O**n a recent visit to Norway, where my maternal grandfather was born, I visited several Viking-built stave churches, some dating to the 12th and 13th centuries. Once 900 of these “dark messages in wood” greeted traders and pilgrims as they journeyed through the rugged countryside. Today only 29 remain. Our five-place Cessna bounced over the lush valleys and craggy mountains to photograph the best preserved of them, the Borgund stave church, which stands like a crown jewel in the narrow valley at the head of the Sonefjord.

The Danish poet Holger Drachmann described the church in 1886:

“A whim of childlike brilliance, a house for beetles, whittled from a naive giant’s playful knife, with modest crosses and large-nosed dragons, wrinkled and gnarled, twig upon twig. The interior is like a smokehouse dedicated to a mystic cult in which the darkness of the sages overwhelms the faintly smoldering tapers of Catholicism, and cast their light on farmers’ iron-clad axes and the flowing beards of Viking Kings.”

In the 17th century, the fresh air of the Reformation swept away the rites of the Catholic Church, leaving

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the simple message “the just shall live by faith.” The stave churches themselves took on new meaning. The essential corner posts were said to represent “the four gospels whose teachings are the supporting foundation of all Christianity.” The beams upon which the columns rest came to signify the apostles. It was said that the floor boards represent “the humble men who bow in honour; the more they are exposed to trampling feet of the congregation, the more support they provide.” Even the roof was said to “speak” the truth.

The churches resisted the attrition of the centuries because of the manner in which the columns, planks, and supports were joined. Rather than being nailed or glued, they were dovetailed, pegged, and wedged, lending flexibility to the structure, with each joint able to expand or contract in damp or dry weather.

A writer once described a stave church weathering a storm:

“In the afternoon the weather changed, and suddenly a . . . storm raged outside. It creaked in the old church walls, as if they were going to fall apart. It was as if each and every plank in the stave construction would slide out of its placement, break its very framework of masts and sills and bury everything beneath the vacillating columns . . . but little by little the raging wind blew more fitfully, became constant. . . although the storm increased rather than declined, soon no sound was heard in the church walls, wherein the entire structure had settled and was now steeled and strengthened in the midst of the storm.”



**Borgund stave church**

The sun was shining as we flew back into the 20th century, but my mind was on a storm. A storm that will soon test another church whose essential corner posts are rooted in the Reformation. And the winds will rage and the very foundations will tremble. But they will stand, I thought. Yes, they will stand. □