THE ARCHITECTURAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE CULTS OF SAINTS: SOME SCOTTISH EXAMPLES

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Introduction

The saints were of supreme significance for the patrons of medieval ecclesiastical architecture.1 Those churches that were not consecrated to an aspect of the godhead were under the invocation of one or more saints, whose intercessory power, it was hoped, could be called upon when needed. Beyond that, there was the expectation that altars, which were the chief locations of worship within the churches, would have saints’ relics sealed within them. Indeed, since at least the time of the Fifth Council of Carthage in 401 it had been urged—albeit with varying degrees of consistency—that altars without relics should be destroyed.2

This chapter aims to look beyond such generalised associations, however, in order to offer a brief overview of some Scottish churches which had more specific relationships with saints. It will consider the ways in which the design of those buildings may have been conditioned by a wish to give architectural emphasis to the saints’ cults, as well as the means by which structured access to the main foci of the cults was organized.3

The buildings to be discussed range from votive chapels established in gratitude for the intervention of a saint in the affairs of an individual, as at Ladykirk and St. Monans, to churches erected to mark sites particularly associated with a saint, as at Culross, Egilsay, Restalrig and Tain. In at least some of those cases, the requirements of the cult might be expected to have been a factor in the overall design of the building. At

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1 The importance of saints’ images in late medieval devotional practice has been helpfully discussed in John Higgitt, “Images Maid with Mennis Hand”: Saints, Images, Belief and Identity in Later Medieval Scotland, Ninth Whithorn Lecture (Whithorn, 2003).


3 The most extensive discussion of pilgrimage in Scotland and its impact on church architecture is in Peter Yeoman, Pilgrimage in Medieval Scotland (London, 1999).
most of the buildings to be considered, however, the accommodation of a shrine was just one of a wider gamut of functions associated with a monastic, cathedral, collegiate or parochial establishment. In considering Dunfermline Abbey, Edinburgh St. Giles, Glasgow Cathedral, Iona Abbey, Kirkwall Cathedral, Melrose Abbey, Paisley Abbey and St. Andrews Cathedral, therefore, an attempt will be made to understand the arrangements made to accommodate the shrines against the background of a more complex range of requirements.

**The Churches**

Assessment of the architectural evidence will start with a brief examination of two votive churches established in thanksgiving for what was believed to have been supernatural aid afforded to their founders: St. Monans in Fife and Ladykirk in Berwickshire (figs. 1d, 1e, 2). St. Monans was built by David II in 1362–70, reportedly in gratitude to St. Monan for saving him from a near-fatal arrow wound, though it may be more likely that it was because he had survived a risk of drowning off the coast of the small settlement dedicated to St. Monan. Ladykirk was built by James IV in 1500–1507, supposedly in thanks to the Virgin Mary for his rescue from drowning in the Tweed. Both of these churches were designed as stone vaulted, aisleless cruciform structures in the most accomplished Scottish late Gothic architectural idiom of their times. St. Monans was set out with a spacious rectangular choir, a central spired tower flanked by transepts and a nave. Ladykirk was given architectural emphasis by means of a triplet of polygonal apses to the chancel and transeptal chapels, and a small western tower.

It is no longer clear, however, if anything in the design of these buildings was generated specifically by the needs of the saints’ cults. Although allowance must be made for the fact that neither was ever completely finished, this suggests there was no expectation that the

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6 At St. Monans, despite being reestablished and adapted for a small community of Dominican friars on the orders of James III in 1471 (*Register of the Great Seal*, vol. 2, no.