LIMINALITY AND LOSS:
THE MATERIAL CULTURE OF ST SERF’S PRIORY,
LOCH LEVEN, KINROSS-SHIRE, SCOTLAND

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Introduction

St Serf’s Priory (NGR NO1615 0025), also known as the Priory of Lochleven, survives as a ruin on the largest island in Loch Leven, St Serf’s Island (see, Illus. 63). It is a low, flat-lying island in the south-east corner of the Loch, which has doubled in size since the lowering of the Loch’s water-level around 1830 (Munro 1994, 89–90). In terms of the Priory situation the ruins are now further away from the shoreline than formerly. The ruins were the subject of a recent survey by the RCAHMS (Cameron in prep.), which suggests that the date of the church should be reassigned from the thirteenth to the mid-to-late eleventh century. This survey is the most significant—and overdue—examination of St Serf’s since the two mid nineteenth-century investigations conducted under the aegis of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (Annan 1862 and Kerr 1882). The work carried out by the Society included excavations in 1877, which informed Kerr’s paper but were never fully published. The medieval finds as they survive, along with supplementary and related finds made since the 1870s, are published in detail here for the first time and linked to a brief assessment of the monastic community and some of the lost material culture from the Priory.

Origins and St Serf

St Serf is generally accepted as a genuine ecclesiastic (possibly a bishop), probably Pictish (possibly British), most recently discussed by Macquarrie in his analysis (1993, 1997) of the *Vita Sancti Servani (The Life of St Serf)*, who suggests a likely *floruit* of around 700, an affirmation of Watson’s view (1926, 332–3), which in turn was influenced by Skene 1867. This date is generally accepted by scholars, each with their subtleties of analysis and emphasis (notably Taylor 1996, 100–1; Veitch 1998;
St Serf’s, Loch Leven, has a pivotal position in the debate about St Serf himself. ‘The priory register of St Andrews contains copies of a number of early notes relating to the Céli Dé of Lochleven, which it claims are translations…from an old book written in Gaelic…The first of them states that the island in Loch Leven was given to St Serf by Brude f. Dergard…’ (Pictish king) ‘and that the Céli Dé of that place came to an agreement with Fothad f. Bran, bishop of St Andrews. A bishop of that name is recorded in the mid tenth century so we can reasonably conclude that Lochleven was in existence before c. 950…’ (Macquarrie 1997, 152). The king, Bruide son of Dargart, died in 706 (Clancy 2004, 130). Macquarrie makes a convincing argument (based on textual and scriptural evidence) for Culross as St Serf’s principal monastic establishment and pre-dating Lochleven (a question discussed further by Watson 2002, 476–82).

One of the later priors of St Serf’s, Andrew de Wyntoun, wrote his Orygynale Cronykil there in the fifteenth century and included in it details of St Serf, which Macquarrie argues (1997, 149–50) used sources at hand in the Priory. Wyntoun’s account and the VS agree that Culross was the primary church and place of burial and imply that St Serf’s was a daughter/subordinate church of Culross (ibid., 152). Macquarrie concluded (tentatively) that the development of the parochia of St Serf, centred on Culross, might have been in succession to the flight of the Anglo-Saxon bishop, Trumwine, from his seat at Abercorn, after 685 (ibid., 156). He suggests that Bishop Serf organised the new church in-line with Gaelic practice but Taylor (1996, 101) makes a more plausible case based on placenames and the Rome episode in the VS that Serf would have reorganised the church ‘under Roman and Pictish lines and under the close scrutiny of the Pictish kings.’ It seems probable that St Serf’s Lochleven was established before the 10th century. This early church is not though reflected in the surface remains of the Priory, further excavation is needed to clarify its existence.

By the eleventh century the ecclesiastical linkages of St Serf’s Priory had changed as by then the church was under the authority of the bishopric of St Andrews (see Cameron in prep. for architectural links). Bishop Robert transferred it to St Andrews Priory c. 1150, a grant confirmed by David I on condition that the Augustinian rule was introduced. Earlier royal patronage included a significant endowment from Macbeth and his Queen, Gruoch, in the mid eleventh century. Subsequent centuries saw further grants from the bishops of St Andrews (Dilworth 1995, 56 and see discussion below).