

Part 2:

**Re-interpreting the lost choir of Dunfermline Abbey: history, liturgy and ground-penetrating radar**

Michael Penman

**The central area around the High Altar (including the ‘Bruce grave’)**

During our GPR fieldwork and research (2016-19), two themes were repeatedly underlined. First, the dangers of seeking a neat, consistent pattern of architectural and liturgical development in such a complex lost building; and second, most important of all, the need to take account of the high level of disruption and reuse inflicted upon the choir site during the ‘Psalter’ period 1560-1818. These were generations which saw the ruinous choir site occupied periodically by everything from Cromwellian troops to stone auctions following wall and tower collapses, as well as by town burials.

In that context, for reasons discussed below, we should set aside the 1818 ‘Bruce grave’ from our discussion of the medieval altar area from the outset. The paved sanctuary/chancel spaces of high-status churches of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries besides sought to exclude elite lay burial within its bounds unless for figures who might be considered saintly (as were Malcolm III and David I by Dunfermline’s monks), As leading theologian William Durandus of Mende (1230-c.1296) advised, long, low sanctuary steps should symbolise the Apostles, Martyrs and Virtues and:

‘No body should ever be buried in a church, near the altar, where the Body and Blood of the Lord are conected, unless they are the bodies of Holy fathers whom we call patrons, that is, the defenders of the church, who by their merits, defend the entire religion’

Above all this would have left the high altar, the mass and communion visible from choir crossing space and the monks’ stalls further west. One or more railed box tombs (like Bruce’s) would surely have blocked such a view at Dunfermline. Moreover, the effigies, heraldry and inscribed epitaphs of these tombs would not have been visible at all to most visitors.

That Dunfermline’s lost choir high altar sanctuary conformed to these principles may be partly confirmed by our GPR. Rather than being evidence of medieval or ‘Psalter’ burials, the distinct features identified in our central scans may represent footings of the screening and altar setting of the post-1250 church, fittings which had reused the David I-era apsidal east end of his original choir.

Significantly, there is previously overlooked antiquarian evidence which further confirms these possibilities. Local historian Ebenezer Henderson (1809-79) deposited the full manuscript for his celebrated *Annals of Dunfermline* (1879) in the town’s Carnegie library. It contains unpublished measurements for the four base stones of the high Trinity altar (based in turn on pacing by Edinburgh surveyor, John Baine, in 1790). These accounts prove that there were further choir remains extant in 1818 than otherwise made known to the public.

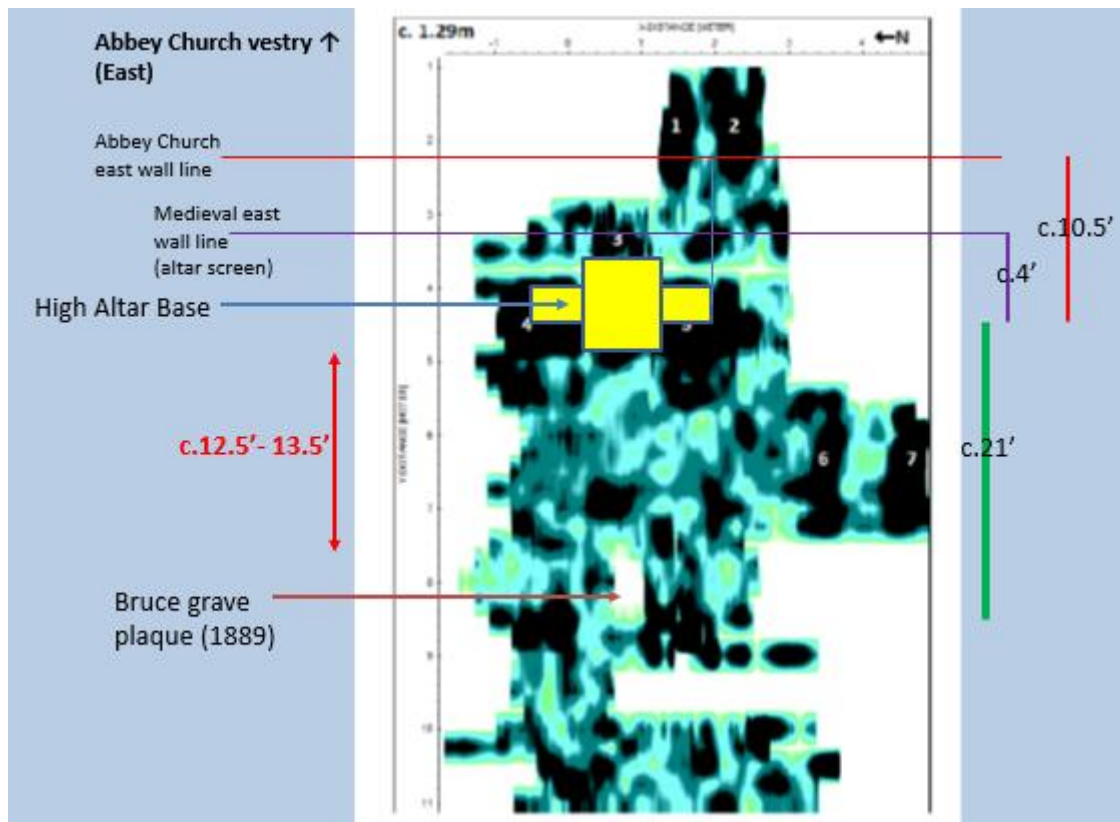


Fig 16: The Baine/Henderson measurements of 1790/1854-79 for the high altar stones imposed *approximately* on our 2017 scan of the central dais area [© EMC Radar/Michael Penman]

Once Henderson's relative distances are applied [Fig 16] this leaves as little as 12.5' from the outer altar edge to the eastern end of the 'Bruce grave' space. This is surely too confined a space for the sanctuary of such a choir (165' long), certainly when compared to other great Benedictine cult churches and mausoleums like Westminster or St Denis, or to similarly proportioned houses, such as Benedictine Tewkesbury (Gloucestershire.). None of these houses have burials within their stepped choir sanctuaries. The reliability of Henderson's record, mapped on to our GPR, is strengthened by his report of the removal in 1817 of one of the altar base stones to the Abbey Church south exterior: it still survives there today [Fig 17].



Fig 17: Fossiliferous marble stone c.7' 6" long x 15" broad x 10" deep, on south-side of Abbey Church exterior, removed from the choir high altar remains in 1817 [© David Williams].

### **The North Transept (interior and exteriors) and northern aisle (the medieval Lady Chapel and Lady Aisle)**

If there were likely no elite burials within the central sanctuary the majority of royal interments at Dunfermline from 1150 must have lain west within the central paved presbytery and its flanking aisles. That the choir's sanctuary steps perhaps began as far west as the line of the current Abbey Church dais is hinted at by the large rectangular feature (running north-south) identified by our GPR scan across this central space in 2016 [Part 1, Fig 6]. Moreover, that burial in the northern Lady aisle and Lady Chapel was increasingly popular throughout the 14<sup>th</sup> century, as chroniclers report, can be confirmed by our surveys.

That the several possible graves [Part 1, Fig 5] identified as lying east-west down the northern aisle are indeed medieval can be confirmed by further antiquarian evidence: four possible pairs, perhaps, if we include the 1766 double grave now covered by the modern organ [marked as 'P' on Burn's ground-plan: Part 1, Fig 3]. In July 1807 Edinburgh antiquarian John Graham Dalyell (1775-1851) excavated under the six traditional slabs ['K' on Burn's plan] believed to cover six kings, targeting the largest in search of Bruce. Only one medieval stone coffin was found with back-filled earth and fragmented, water-logged bones: our GPR may pinpoint the disturbance from this dig.

However, Dalyell also reported five further shaped stone coffins unearthed in this area by 1809 and made further observations often overlooked by subsequent scholarship. He suggested that some Dunfermline royal burials saw bodies placed *inside* the boxes of tombs rather than below the pavement (and this would fit with the French St Denis model of Bruce's tomb). But Dalyell also asserted that he was shown an area a 'few yards south-west' of the six slabs where locals also believed the tomb of Bruce had stood, a spot where sculpted marble fragments had been recovered along with a metal plaque bearing the legend *Robertus Dei Gratia Rex Scotorum*, bought for his collection by the Earl of Elgin (a hoax second plaque would be found near the 1818 'Bruce grave').

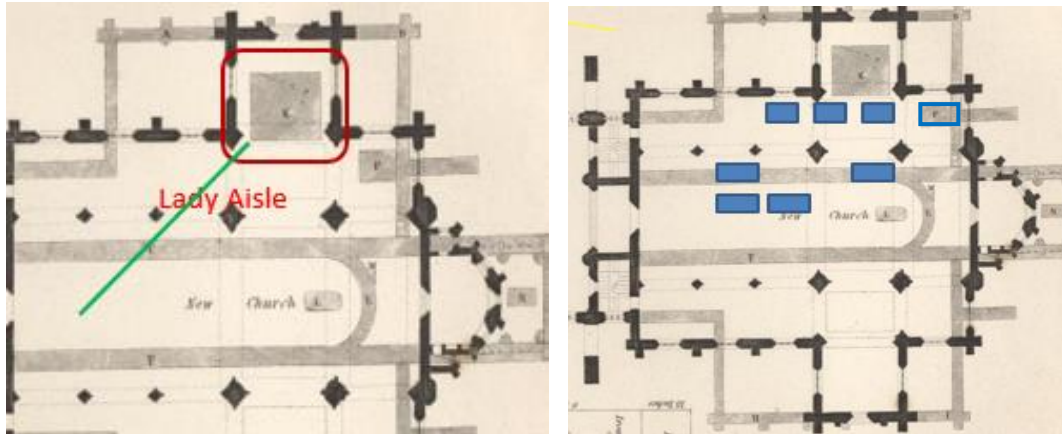


Fig 18: i. Line indicating possible position ‘a few yards’ south-west of six kings’ slabs where antiquarian Dalyell was shown a site said to be Bruce’s tomb in 1807; ii. speculative recreation of north Lady aisle and presbytery-edge burials based on GPR and written evidence [adapted from Author’s copy].

This gives us a second, much more visible possible site for Bruce’s tomb along the northern edge of the choir’s paved presbytery or the southern edge of the Lady aisle, perhaps between pillars. Its location in this ambulatory spot could explain the need for £22 of iron rail-work to be added in 1330. Given the north-south axis of the Lady Chapel this area could also still be said to lie ‘in the middle of the choir’ (as, again, at other great Benedictine churches), perhaps just north-west of a central burial spot for Abbey founder, (St) David I. The chroniclers after all describe the latter as ‘buried before the high altar under the paved part of the middle of the choir in that noble monastery which he had himself built and endowed.’ This alternative location for Bruce’s tomb also gives us and an extended marble debris field to add to the pieces later found around the central 1818 ‘Bruce grave’.

That Bruce and his queen may have been buried together in this space close to the Lady Chapel, which was completed during his reign, is suggested by their patronage of Dunfermline. The couple stayed there for the births of children who were named for Dunfermline’s saintly dead and altars – Margaret, John and David. Queen Elizabeth also surely wore the ‘birthing shirt’ relic of St Margaret in labour. Amongst many grants, Robert favoured the choir in 1321 with a gift of churches to pay for a perpetual light to the Virgin and St Margaret in the presence of her feretory ‘in the choir’. And Bruce’s extended family and supporters sought interment in and around the Lady Chapel, often as couples: Thomas Randolph and his wife; Bruce’s sister, Christian, and her husband Andrew Murray; Bruce’s daughters and their husbands and perhaps even Robert II’s queen Euphemia Ross (d.1387) and her first husband, John Randolph (d.1346). Even Bruce-admirer, Regent Robert Stewart Duke of Albany (d.1420) and his second wife may thus have sought association with these kin, as, according to eye-witness Abbot Bower, Albany was interred ‘between the choir and the Lady Chapel.’

Dr Ian Fraser of Historic Environment Scotland, collaborating with Glasgow School of Art, has recreated Bruce’s gilded black-and-white marble tomb to stunning effect, based upon contemporary French royal examples from St Denis [Fig 19]. However, given the outlay in 1329 of more than £110 on purchasing this monument in Paris and then installing it in Dunfermline, is it possible that this was in fact a double tomb for king and queen, again drawing

on St Denis models? This would explain why Bruce's financial accounts, extant from 1326, contain detailed costings for his funeral but nothing for Elizabeth (d.1327).



Fig 19: Recreation of Bruce's lost Italian marble tomb purchased in Paris in 1329, by Historic Environment Scotland and Glasgow School of Art [© HES].

Bower had also asserted that by his lifetime David I's tomb (or shrine) lay within the eastern choir. The recent University of Glasgow facial reconstruction project has offered a persuasive case that David (and some subsequent royals) had in fact been buried in the western nave and that the eastern extension of the choir down to c.1250 had left enough room for a later 'tight cluster' of box tombs for Alexander III, Bruce, Elizabeth de Burgh (running south-to-north) across the presbytery-sanctuary space, directly in front of the high altar (including the 1818 grave space for Bruce). However, in addition to several architectural/archaeological contradictions and chronicle ambiguities, we can now see that the combined antiquarian, GPR and liturgical evidence offers a strong challenge to this view.

### **The South Transept (a previously unnoticed St John Chapel?)**

As we saw in Part 1, the remains of some of the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Lady Chapel burials may have been detected by our 2016 GPR scan of the north-west exterior [Part 1, Fig 11]. However, caution must be exercised as some 'Psalter' burials of c.1560-c.1818 may have intercut this space and others. Not least, this may explain several of the interments identified in the Abbey Church vestry space, atop the retro-choir sanctuary pavement of St Margaret's 1250 shrine [Part 1, Fig 7]. Just as newly Presbyterian Scots often sought to save and translate the burials of their medieval forbears after Catholic churches were smashed, so later generations of good Scottish Protestants could still seek association with pre-1560 royalty and even saints when seeking burial.

Nevertheless, although our 2019 scans were in part hampered by a high water-table, it is striking that thus far none of our South Transept-side GPR results have detected any further potential burials [Part 1, Fig 15]. This may point to a southern medieval space relatively free from interments. But there may again be a strong liturgical reason why this was the case.

What does seem increasingly credible is the accuracy of Abbey Church architect William Burn's 1818 ground-plan of the extant medieval walls of the choir. This asserted the presence of an extended southern chapel, matching the Lady Chapel to the north. Our 2019 GPR does cautiously confirm the likely ghost of such a structure, perhaps demolished to help stabilise the foundation of the Abbey Church South Transept. Burgh records of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century confirm the presence of a southern 'St John aisle', so the likelihood of this adjoining a matching St John Chapel makes liturgical sense. This would have been a popular Holy Family partner to the Virgin Chapel to the north and the high Trinity altar. For Bruce and his generation this chapel would have had a potent association with his greatest battle victory, at Bannockburn on 24 June 1314, on St John's midsummer feast day.

Such a chapel must have housed a major altar, image and perhaps a baptismal font. Yet its presence may also help explain a single English chronicle reference to Alexander III (d.1286) having been buried 'alone...near the presbytery' on the south side of the church. Rather than being the first royal buried in the eastern choir for over 130 years (as the Glasgow University project has argued), was Alexander, who was killed in a drunken riding accident at 44, denied interment in the central choir alongside David I, Malcolm IV (d.1165) and even his own queen, Margaret of England (d.1275), because it was deemed that his unshriven soul must first seek intercession from St John the Baptist, the future Apostle created uniquely 'without sin' even before his own birth and in anticipation of Christ?

### **The Pilgrimage Church and its Liturgy**

With these possibilities in view, we can now cautiously combine the medieval, antiquarian and GPR evidence to offer a snapshot of Dunfermline's layout and spiritual life c.1250-c.1560 [Fig 20].

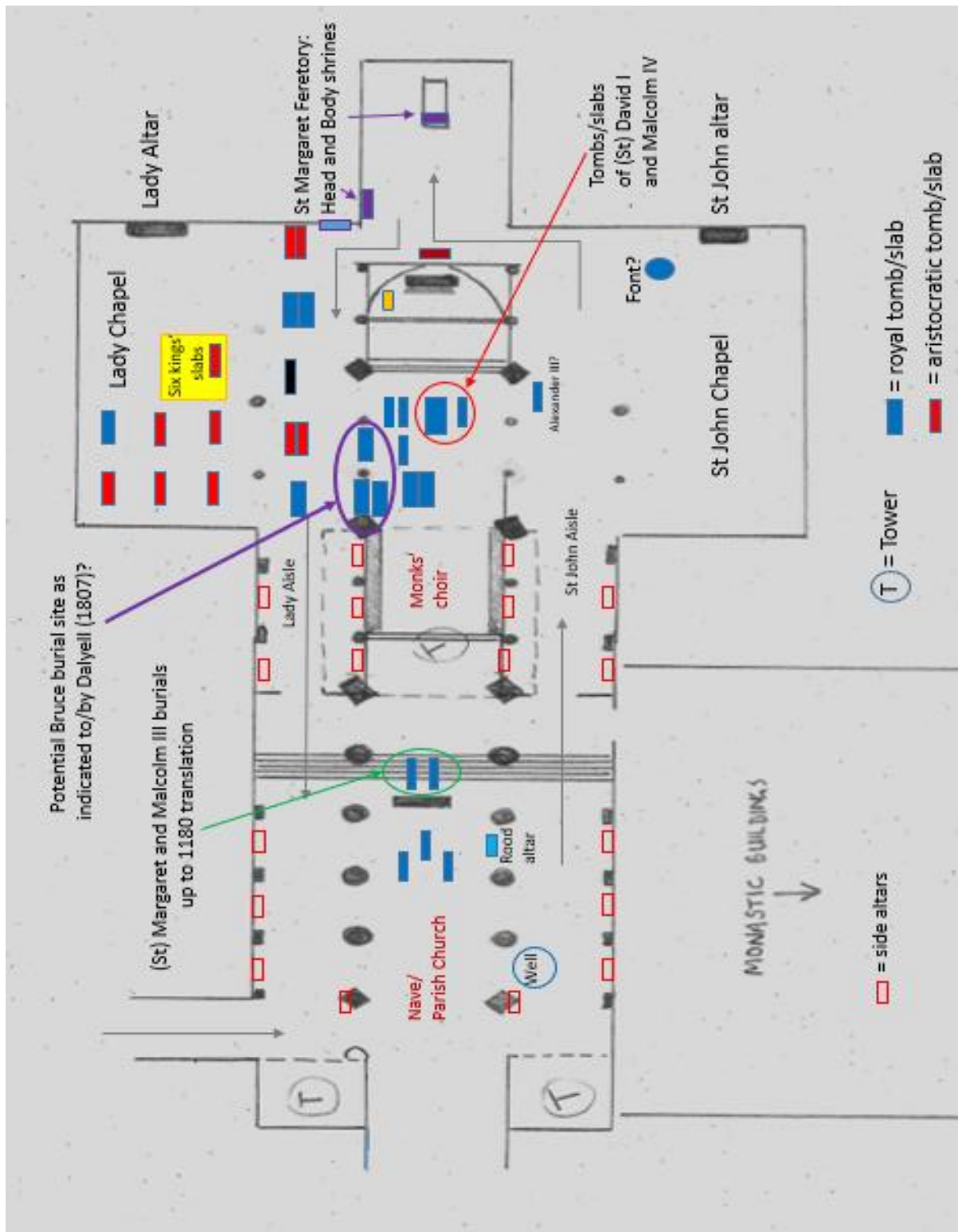


Fig 20: Speculative(!) recreation of Dunfermline Abbey choir c.1250-c.1560 [© Michael Penman]

Visitors to the abbey would enter the nave/parish church by its northern door. Within this original 'choir' several pre-1124 royal burials were visible around the Trinity high altar, not least the empty original tombs of Margaret and Malcolm III. The manuscript collection of her miracles, compiled to aid her canonisation c.1249, confirms their translation through to the

eastern choir in 1180, but also that these vacant sepulchres served as stations for veneration and vigil by the sick and pilgrims, alongside altars to the Holy Rood and Margaret, and 'St Margaret's well'. Baronial and burgh guild side chapels and altars filled out this parochial space.

Echoing Durham Cathedral Priory's processional route, visitors to Dunfermline perhaps passed through to the monastic choir on holy days via steps and a pulpitem door on the south side, entering the St John aisle running alongside the central monks' choir (with its organ by the 15<sup>th</sup> century). A crossing space permitted viewing across the central paved presbytery with its multiple (pre-1275) royal burials, including a central 'shrine' to quasi-founder (St) David I, and east towards the stepped sanctuary, the latter at least c.30' long by a tapering c.25-20' wide, with its Trinity high altar, dressed in fossiliferous marble with a triptych image, Easter Sepulchre (site of Margaret's 1180 shrine) and tabernacle. The east end of the St John aisle held Alexander III's tomb, opening out into the St John baptismal chapel with font, altar and image, a mustering point from which the Sacristan could limit pilgrim access through a narrow (c.6-8') gap through to the chapel of St Margaret with its feretory shrine, displayed personal relics (birthing shirt, gospel book etc) and a separate head shrine. The latter may have been inspired by the head shrine of St Thomas Becket, whose great translation feast of 7 July 1220 the then abbot of Dunfermline surely attended as head of a daughter house of Becket's Benedictine cult church of Canterbury.

Passing out north-west through a matching arch, visitors to Dunfermline now entered a light, lofty matching aisle and chapel, dedicated to the most popular cult of the late middle ages, the Blessed Virgin. Her six major annual feasts would have made this a focus of worship and patronage. Here royal and aristocratic couples and Bruce-Stewart kin, using a variety of pavement and monumental burial forms, sought close association with the Virgin and child, Margaret and Malcolm, and Robert I and Elizabeth de Burgh.

This ambulatory space allowed visitors to take in the detail of these great tombs, even if protected behind ornate iron rails, before passing out of the choir to the west, re-entering the nave through the pulpitem north door into the side chapel of St Peter/Paul (where vault paintings of these saints are still visible). These visitors may well have been struck by the echoing power of the trinity between their monarchs and God/Christ and the Church, having passed through three great chapels [John, Margaret, Mary], by the shrines of three royal saints [Margaret, Malcolm III and David] all within a Trinity church with three walls of narrative glass in its east end feretory shrine, the whole crowned by three towers.

This impression may have been further intensified by the monks' integration of dynastic *momento mori* with their regular liturgy. We can recreate something of the liturgical calendar of Dunfermline, combining fixed and moveable universal church feasts with the red-letter days of Fife's important local and royal cults and the obits and other key life-dates of its patrons [Fig 21].



<b>FEASTS</b>		<b>OBITS etc</b>
St Andrew	30 Nov	
[Imm. Conception BVM]	8 Dec]	Malcolm IV 9 Dec 1165
<b>Christmas/Nicholas</b>	<b>25 Dec</b>	
St Stephen	26 Dec	
St Thomas?	29 Dec?	
[Solemnity BVM]	1 Jan]	Edgar I 8 Jan 1104
<b>Candlemas [Christ/BVM]</b>	<b>2 Feb</b>	<b>FAIR 1 March</b>
St Cuthbert	20 March	Alexander III 19 March 1286
<b>Annunciation BVM</b>	<b>25 March</b>	[Robert I inauguration 1306]
<b>Easter ↓</b>		<b>Alexander I 23 April 1124</b>
<b>Trinity Sunday ↓</b>		
<b>Corpus Christi/Holy Blood ↓</b>		
St Katherine of Siena	29 April	David I 24 May 1153
<b>Visitation BVM</b>	<b>31 May</b>	Robert I 7 June 1329 [burial 12 July?]
<b>Translation St Margaret</b>	<b>19 June</b>	<b>FAIR 19 June</b>
<b>St John the Baptist</b>	<b>24 June (death 29 Aug)</b>	
St Peter/Paul	29 June	
St Serf	1 July	
St Benedict	11 July	
St Margaret of Antioch	20 July	Thomas Randolph 20 July 1332
St Mary Magdalene	22 July	
St Lawrence	10 Aug	
<b>Assumption BVM</b>	<b>15 Aug]</b>	
<b>Nativity BVM</b>	<b>8 Sept</b>	
<b>True Cross</b>	<b>14 September</b>	<b>FAIR 14 September</b>
St Ninian	16 September	
<b>(St) Michael(mas)</b>	<b>28 Sept</b>	
St Ursula	21 Oct	Elizabeth de Burgh 27 Oct 1327
<b>St Margaret</b>	<b>16 Nov</b>	Malcolm III 13 Nov 1093
St Katherine of Alexandria	25 Nov	

Fig 21: Speculative recreation of Dunfermline Abbey's liturgical calendar [© Michael Penman].

This underlines the intense activity likely at Dunfermline every Spring-to-early Summer, through the first major feasts of the Virgin and then Holy Week down to Trinity Sunday (six weeks later, and the consecration date of the abbey in 1150) and Corpus Christi/Holy Blood (the following Thursday). Patronal or pilgrimage indulgences, community relic processions (via the nave's great west door) and increasingly ornate masses with votive prayers would have been especially in evidence in years when these feasts coincided with such dynastic anniversaries as the obits of (St) David I, Robert Bruce or the translation feast of Margaret (which also saw the start of the burgh fair). Altogether, reimagining such a rich liturgy in its late medieval setting more fully matches what we might expect of one of Scotland's wealthiest monastic institutions and a royal cult and mausoleum church, akin to Westminster or St Denis.

### The Bruce Grave: an alternative narrative?

What then of the 1818 'Bruce grave', a site of pilgrimage for thousands of visitors a year? At the time of its discovery and since, officials and scholars have been convinced of its occupant's identity by several apparent proofs: its central prestigious position given the chronicle reports, the skeleton's cut sternum (indicating heart removal), pieces of cloth of gold (and a possible

lead coronet) and even signs of bone damage/disease suggesting leprosy. Several of these points remain ambivalent or debateable without further scientific testing, not least any medical diagnosis. However, two further key pieces of evidence from 1818-19 have yet to be considered.

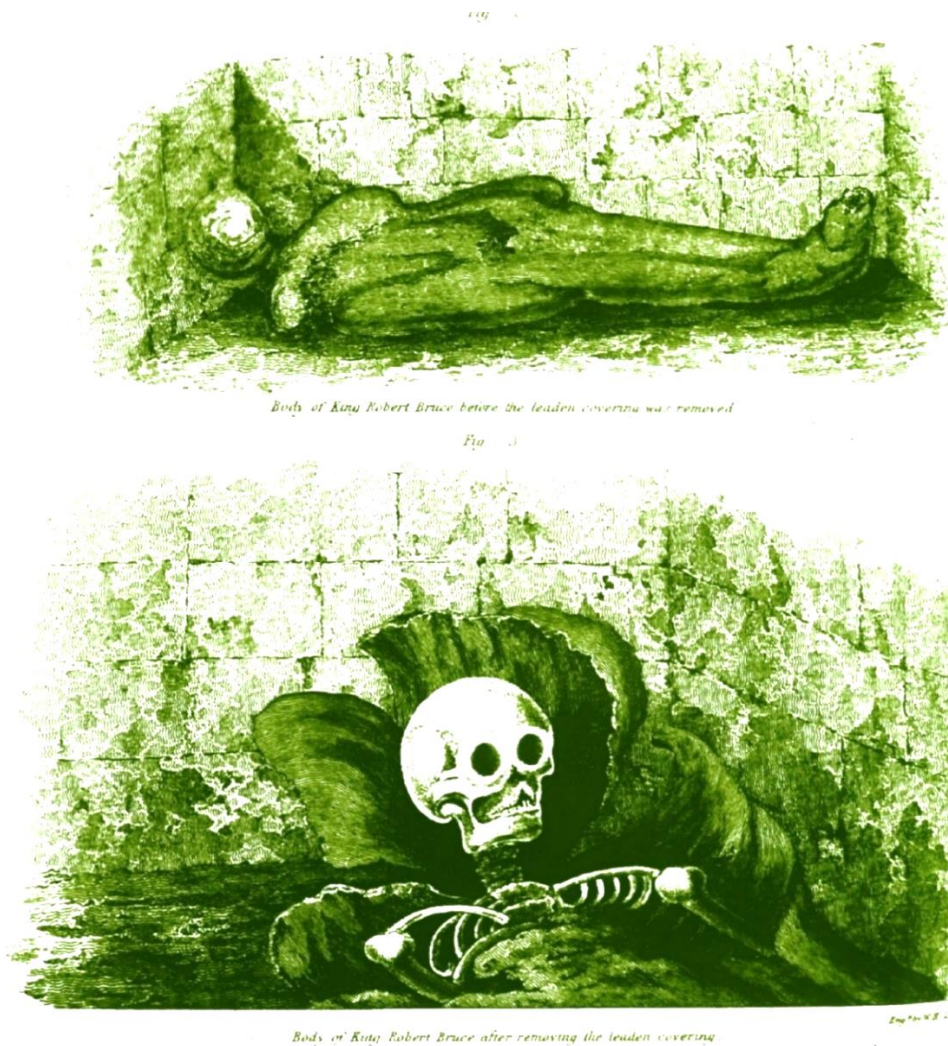


Fig 22: Lead shroud, crypt space and skeleton as depicted in Deputy Remembrancer Henry Jardine’s report of the grave’s inspection and re-interment on 5 November 1819 (published 1821/24) [Author’s copy].

The first of these is the lead shroud coffin around the skeleton [Fig 22]. As viewed in Deputy Remembrancer Henry Jardine’s report (1821) this seems to be clearly anthropomorphic with visible shaped head, shoulders, arms, body, legs and even feet (very close in fact to the recorded form of James VI/I’s lead shroud at Westminster from 1625). This is then a late 16<sup>th</sup>-early 17<sup>th</sup> century form of a coffin type which, like heart removal (which did not require cutting the sternum if the viscera had first been removed, as Bruce’s were), remained in favour with elites well into the modern era. Earlier lead shrouds, including 14<sup>th</sup>-century examples, were simple pellets, one sheet formed up under the body with a flat top.

This surely points to the ‘Bruce grave’, if originally a medieval burial, having been disturbed at least once well before 1818, a quite common practice (especially if the incumbent was

believed to be saintly). However, then there is the reported evidence of the stone crypt, a remarkably crude, tight and awkward burial space, especially when compared to known English examples of the 14<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries at Westminster and Windsor. The Dunfermline grave space was even recorded as badly cracked beneath the human remains.

When taken together with the GPR and antiquarian evidence which has been assembled above to question the liturgical logic of a burial within the high altar sanctuary pavement this surely raises the possibility of the 'Bruce grave' being a later, post-1560 intrusion. Is it, perhaps, a rescue burial, not a rare occurrence as monastic churches were dissolved and sacked in the 16<sup>th</sup> century across the British Isles?

Crucially, this does not exclude the possibility that the occupant was a medieval king. Imagine the scenario where Dunfermline's choir, as we know, was smashed in 1560, the roof collapsed and some of the royal remains exposed, their inner oak and lead coffins perhaps visible through the broken boxes of their monumental tombs. We know from contemporary evidence that Dunfermline's monks rescued relics of St Margaret and Malcolm III to the Catholic continent. Did they attempt to do the same for other burials?

Ebenezer Henderson certainly recorded complaints of 1580 to the Kirk Session that 'a few Benedictines of Dunfermline, with doors bolted and barred, kept watch in their choir by the shrines of St Margaret and St David, and the sepulchres of Bruce and Randolph...' Yet by 1586 these monks had vacated the ruins. The last died in a nearby 'cell' in 1600, still a Catholic. Could these monks, local men themselves, have recruited sympathetic townsmen to recycle some of the collapsed stone of the cloister buildings to improvise a basic, shallow (just 3' deep) grave space for some of the royal remains? Did they site this before their former high altar knowing its time had passed?

If so, the question becomes who did they deem most worthy of rescue – the saintly David I or hero-king, Bruce? Or should we be open to the possibility that this grave and bones are in fact the relics of a 'Psalter'-era burial of some unrecorded local worthy seeking association with dead kings, perhaps even improvising some of their traditional practices? DNA and carbon-dating of bone fragments removed from the grave in 1819 may clarify these issues, on the balance of probabilities confirming it as Bruce. But this should not necessarily be taken as proof of the site, form and liturgical meaning of his original burial, especially in relation to the greater complexity and evolution of this major church now revealed in part by GPR surveying and reassessment of the written record.

### **Future Research and Questions**

Several of the interpretive arguments above remain contentious and indeed we welcome, and seek here to further, debate about Dunfermline Abbey's rich history. The future collaborative plans of the Abbey Church, HES and Fife Council have already identified further research into Dunfermline Abbey's past as central to wider understanding of its historic importance. It is to be hoped that further GPR surveying of the choir site – and the adjoining nave, cloisters and palace – will form a key component of that ongoing re-interpretation.

This might help answer some of the new questions which our initial scans have raised. For example, can we find further geo-physical evidence for the chronology and liturgical settings

of St Margaret's great feretory shrine and earlier burial spots, the abbey's many altars, the central monks' choir and the vital link of the pulpitum and crossing? And do traces of the tombs and bodies of the abbey's key royal patrons like David I and perhaps even Robert Bruce remain to be discovered beneath the central presbytery space?

### **Further Reading**

M. Penman and E.C. Utsi, *In Search of the Scottish Royal Mausoleum at the Benedictine Abbey of Dunfermline, Fife: Medieval Liturgy, Antiquarianism, and a Ground-Penetrating Radar Pilot Survey, 2016-19* (2020) – to be available as a free 150pp. pdf download (along with EC. Utsi's three GPR field reports) from Historic Environment Scotland at <https://canmore.org.uk/>.

R. Fawcett, J. Luxford, R.D. Oram and T. Turpie, *A Corpus of Scottish Medieval Parish Churches* – entry for Dunfermline Abbey at <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/corpusofscottishchurches/site.php?id=158524> .

I. Fraser, 'The tomb of the hero king: the death and burial of Robert I, and the discoveries of 1818-19', in R. Fawcett ed., *Royal Dunfermline* (Edinburgh, 2005).

M. Macgregor and Wilkinson, C., 'In search of Robert Bruce, Part III: medieval royal burial at Dunfermline and the tomb investigations of 1818-19', *Innes Review*, 70 (2019), 171-201.