

WAS CONSTANTINE'S SARCOPHAGUS LID SECRETLY SHIPPED TO SCOTLAND?

By Norman Hammond
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PILGRIMS to Dunfermline Abbey, where many of Scotland's kings are buried have for more than a century admired the Victorian memorial to King Robert the Bruce. A life-size, brass effigy, crowned and in chainmail, is set into a slab of deep reddish-purple porphyry, a volcanic rock quarried in Egypt and used by Roman emperors for their finest monuments.

Recent research by Dr Dyfri Williams of the British Museum has shown how oddly appropriate this particular piece of stone is for commemorating a national hero, and how Dunfermline's memorial is linked to the Elgin Marbles. Writing in the magazine *Minerva*, he tells how "what was once thought to be part of the tomb of the founder of Constantinople became part of the memorial to the restorer of an independent Scotland".

Robert the Bruce, the victor of Bannockburn, which in 1314 secured his ascendancy and began Scotland's rise to independence from England, was buried in Dunfermline Abbey in 1329; but when the building fell into ruin, the location of his grave was lost. Rediscovered in 1818, the skeleton was found wrapped in cloth of gold and confirmed as Robert's by the cloven breastbone, split to remove his heart for burial in the Holy Land.

By the 1870s there was a move to mark the site of the tomb in an appropriate manner, and the ninth Earl of Elgin, as both Lord Lieutenant of Fife and the head of the Bruce family, took the matter in hand. He proposed a memorial flush with the floor of the abbey crossing, so as not to obstruct worship, and offered a huge piece of porphyry which he happened to have at home.



The slab had been at Broomhall, the family seat, since 1802 when it had been shipped from Constantinople by the seventh earl, the noted Lord Elgin who also acquired the Parthenon sculptures now in the British Museum. Elgin had determined to collect some decorative stones to refurnish Broomhall, and as Ambassador to the Sublime Porte, was in a position to ask Sultan Selim III for permission to remove some of the many fragments that had been lying around Constantinople since Byzantine times.



Sultan Selim III

A record of the negotiations has come to light in the Basvekalet Arsivi in Istanbul, Dr Williams reports. The Sultan decided that it was politic to humour his “beloved friend Elchy-Bey”, and several pieces of porphyry were given, including a Ptolemaic giant scarab beetle (now in the British Museum) that had probably been shipped from Egypt to Constantinople in Roman times.

One large piece proved more of a problem, however, since it was in the courtyard of the Osmanlye Mosque. It was the lid of a massive porphyry sarcophagus some 2.6m (8ft 6in) long, reputed to be that of Constantine the Great, allegedly from the imperial mausoleum near the Church of the Holy Apostles. The church was demolished during the Ottoman conquest, and so, Dr Williams says, the reputed association between particular sarcophagi and individual emperors can be neither confirmed nor discounted.

Property within the cartilage of the mosque was beyond the reach of anyone but the Sultan, and it is indicative of how much Lord Elgin was esteemed that Selim III was prepared to engage in a lapidary sleight-of-hand to give him what he desired. One of his courtiers suggested that the Sultan give permission for the sarcophagus lid to be removed from there to the Palace and then, from some appropriate place, be given to the ambassador”. Selim decreed let it come to Inculi (the Kiosk of the Pearl, close to the Marmara shore) and let them take it from there”.

Thus “Constantine’s” sarcophagus lid was duly and discreetly shipped (while the chest remains in use as a cistern in the mosque court-yard) aboard HMS Niger, and lay unused at Broomhall when Elgin’s grandson thought of using it for Robert the Bruce’s monument. The porphyry, one of the hardest stones known, was cut and polished by an Edinburgh firm and the brass effigy made by E. S. Black in the same city: on December 21, 1889, the Bruce Memorial was unveiled by the earl’s sister, Lady Louisa Bruce.

Provost Donald, thanking the family, noted that the bras was very beautiful, but the least rare and costly material ... the porphyry was richer and rarer ... taken out of one of the trophies brought from Athens by Thomas, seventh Earl of Elgin, about the beginning of this century, it was said to have been the tomb of Constantine the Great.” In such ways, Dr Williams notes, “is history kept alive and its rich and never ending tapestry further embroidered”. [Minerva Vol. 15 No. I: 40-42]

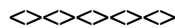


A DUNFERMLINE HISTORICAL RELIC

The inventory of the personal estate of the late Mr. Thomas Bruce of Arnot, near Leslie, was recently recorded within the Sheriff Court books of Kinross-shire, along with the trust disposition and settlement of the deceased. The personal estate has been sworn as of the net value of £2719. 7s.11d. By his settlement the deceased directs his trustees to deliver to his son, Charles Bruce, of Her Majesty's Civil Service (who received the honour of knighthood some time ago), the small piece of the robe of King Robert the Bruce which was given to the testator's father; and he particularly requests that it be retained in the family as an heirloom, and not sold, gifted, or otherwise disposed of out of the family.

For the information of his family he explains that the piece is part of the robe in which the Bruce was buried, and in which his body was found to have been wrapped when his stone coffin was discovered in the Abbey of Dunfermline in the year of 1818. Small portions of it were then cut off and given to the clan, meaning chiefly those of the name and having the blood of "the Bruce family in their veins." The other provisions and bequests under the deceased's settlement are of a private nature.

The small estate of Arnot, in Kinross-shire, which belonged to Mr. Bruce as heir-of-entail, now passes to his only surviving son, Sir Charles Bruce.
[Dunfermline Press Sat 23.7.09]



DUNFERMLINE ABBEY CHURCH



By Adam Westwood

ROBERT BRUCE'S MARCH TO BANNOCKBURN

Sots, wha hae wi' WALLACE bled,
Scots, wham BRUCE has aften led,
Welcome to your gory bed,
Or to Victorie!

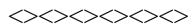
Now's the day, and now's the hour;
See the front o' battle lour;
See approach proud EDWARD'S power –
Chains and Slaverie!

Wha will be a traitor knave?
Wha can fill a coward's grave?
Wha sae base as be a slave?
Let him turn and flee!

Wha for Scotland's King and Law,
Freedom's sword will strongly draw,
FREE-MAN stand, or FREE-MAN fa',
Let him follow me!

By oppression's woes and pains!
By your Sons in servile chains!
We will drain our dearest veins,
But they shall be free!

Lay the proud Usurpers low!
Tyrants fall in every foe!
LIBERTY'S in every blow! –
Let us Do – or Die !!!



THE SANCTUARY

BY EDWARD HENDERSON



A Norman door beside the belfry tower,
The name of Bruce on gravened balcony,
A solemn tune, chimes, out the evening hour,
Recalling ancient rites and chivalry.

With softened tread I crossed the grassy sward,
‘Among epitaphs engraved in simple lay,
The ancient sires resolved on faith’s reward,
Held high the torch that lit life’s pageantry.

On moulded plinth and deep-splayed window sill,
On corbelled course and sculptured traceries,
The lichen seeks the weathered stone to fill,
Stones stained with the tears of centuries.

Each buttress base rose from its gravel bed,
With rainbow surge cut short before its fall.
Its ponderous weight increasing overhead,
As stone to stone is wedded to the wall.

My shadow fell upon the oaken door,
It slowly moved in measure with my pace,
I thought of those who trod this way before,
And felt the awful reverence of the place.

A sudden shaft of light shot to the floor,
Reflecting back on many a sculptured stone,
Extinguished soon upon the closing door,
I entered in, and I was all alone.

Uncovered head: I stood there where I was,
The vulgar noise of traffic died away,
With quick’ning breath within a moment’s pause,
I felt a surge of great solemnity.

Through mellowed light from many a glazed pane,
Enriched with figures of some Godly man,
I saw an arch and higher still again,
A vaulted roof from arch to arch did span.

Each massive base supported fluted shaft,
Each capital a sculptured ornament,
And every arch a gem of mason’s craft,
Appeared to reach to God’s own firmament.

In yonder wall, hid from the light of day,
All canopied in ornate deep recess,
A Noble knight in marble effigy,
Lies stretched upon his bier in battle-dress.

Was this the sword he put to goodly use,
To fight the infidel upon his last crusade?
Did he go forth to battle for the Bruce
Before the steel beside him here was laid?

With inward sight and mind in reverie,
The holy place was peopled once again,
With Abbot, Monks, in solemn harmony,
I heard the vesper hymn from girdled men.

And these are they who built this lordly pile,
With mallet, chisel, line and measured square;
Took up the sculptured stone, and with a trowel
Laid mortar bed, and sealed it with a prayer.

Time has no weight in such an hour as this,
The heart is light, the spirit vigilant;
Hope that is, dimmed revives its genial bliss
Within the place of holy sacrament.

The vergers bent upon his duties choice,
With ready smile was standing by my side,
The aged man with animated voice
Told how he came each day at eventide.

We crossed the nave, I slowed my step to his;
His eyes grew ever brighter as he spoke
Of saintly King who sleeps within the place,
Of Abbots Lords and Knights and gentlefolk.

The old man stood aside to show the way;
A paler light now fell upon the floor;
I felt the fragrant breath of closing day,
The vergers bowed and locked the oaken door.

Grey casket! wrought in good King David's time
In stone weaned from the hills beside the firth,
Holds dear the dust of those of Canmore's line,
And he whose heart lies deep in Melrose earth.

Long may your tower with finger point the sky,
Your buttressed walls the bite of northern rain,
A faith enshrined so nobly cannot die,
Each stone a prayer, each high arch an anthem.

