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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ABERNETHY ROUND TOWER



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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ABERNETHY ROUND TOWER

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1 Summary

1.1 Introduction

The monument comprises a medieval round tower that is located in the southwest corner of the parish churchyard of Abernethy. It is one of only three Irish-type round towers to be found outside Ireland. A Pictish symbol stone is attached to the tower.

The tower is situated in the centre of Abernethy. It is some 22m high by about 5m in diameter, with a raised doorway and four large open belfry windows. There appear to have been at least two building phases; the first not before the later 11th century and the second in the early 12th century.¹ The tower has a later iron jugs or pillory attached to it. The present bell dates to 1782; the modern clock from 1868.

The symbol stone (or symbol-bearing slab) was found below the foundations of a house in School Wynd some distance from the tower and mounted on the wall of the tower in the 20th century. Truncated during its use as building material, the surviving Pictish symbols are what are known as the tuning fork, crescent, V-rod, hammer and anvil.²

The key to access the tower is available from the adjacent Berryfields tearoom during its opening hours.

1.2 Statement of significance

The round tower at Abernethy is an exceptionally well-preserved example of a distinctive Irish form of bell-tower associated with wealthy churches of the early 10th to late 12th centuries.³

While common in Ireland, only three examples of round bell towers are found elsewhere in the British Isles, two of these in eastern Scotland, where they may be associated with the patronage of Gaelic kings of Scotland. Abernethy itself would appear to have been a very important and early Pictish religious foundation, with a dedication to St Brigid (Brigit).

The tower is one component of a wider contemporary ecclesiastical landscape about which very little is yet known, although a collection of sculptures from around Abernethy suggests it was a rich foundation.

¹ Fawcett, R. *The architecture of the Scottish medieval church, 1100-1560*, (London, 2011) p. 7

² Description of unearthing of stone in *The early Christian monuments of Scotland*, 1903, pp. Pt 3, 282

³ For Irish round towers generally see for example Stalley, R. *Irish Round Towers* (2000); Stalley, R. 'Sex, symbol and myth: some observations on the Irish round towers' in *Irish art from the early Christian to the late Gothic period and its European context*, ed., C. Hourihane (Princeton, 2001); O'Keeffe, T. *Ireland's Round Towers. Building, Rituals and Landscapes of the Early Irish Church*, (2004).

The fragmentary Pictish symbol stone attached to the tower is well-preserved, but does not necessarily have any direct association with the early medieval church that once existed in Abernethy.

2 Assessment of values

2.1 Background

In early medieval times Abernethy was a very significant place, sited in the heart of Strathearn, and a place of importance within the Pictish and later Alpinid kingdoms.⁴

The area around Abernethy was probably Christian from the 5th century. The accounts of its foundation give it a very early date, but are 'irreconcilably muddled'.⁵ Both legends ascribe its foundation to a Pictish king (either Gartnait or his successor Nechtan) with a dedication to St Brigid (Brigit) of Kildare (the cult of this Irish saint was Leinster-based).⁶ It is known that non-Columban clerics from Ireland were working throughout Scotland and one of them may have been responsible for this dedication. It can be reasonably suggested that a church existed at Abernethy by the 7th century.⁷

Bower notes (admittedly writing some 500 years after the fact, though reference is made to access to a couple of Chronicles of the Church of Abernethy) that it was the principle royal and episcopal seat of the kingdom of the Picts and that there were three elections there at a time when there was only one bishop in Scotland.⁸

Historians differ as to when it became a bishopric: whether towards the end of the 7th century or early in the 8th century.⁹

In the later middle ages, Abernethy shared its house with a Celi Dé (Culdee) community and in c. 1100 was an important centre of literature and learning, similar to St Andrews.¹⁰ It was not an isolated community; in part it had a public function serving the spiritual needs of the local community. It is probably around this date that the majority of the surviving tower was constructed.

In 1072 William the Conqueror received the submission of the Scottish king, Malcolm III (Canmore), at Abernethy. This testifies to its continuing importance to kings.¹¹

⁴ For example see Woolf, A. *From Pictland to Alba, 789-1070* (Edinburgh, 2007)

⁵ Macquarrie, 1992, p. 111

⁶ *Scotichronicon*, 1989, p. 303; 'Chronicle of the Kings of the Picts' in *Early Sources of Scottish History A.D. 500 to 1286*, 1990, pp. cxx–cxxi, 121,

⁷ For an overview of the political and ecclesiastical developments see for example Fraser, J. *From Caledonia to Pictland: Scotland to 795*, (Edinburgh, 2009)

⁸ *Scotichronicon*, 1989, p. 303

⁹ *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 1990, p. Bk 4 chpt 12 p.225; chpt 26 p.255

¹⁰ Reeves, W. (1864). *The Culdees of the British Islands*.

¹¹ 'Chronicle of Melrose' in *Early Sources of Scottish History A.D. 500 to 1286*, 1990, p. 35

Abernethy lost its place in the ecclesiastical hierarchy as the new diocesan structure developed in the 12th century. It did not become a bishopric in the new organisation of the Church, and seems to have lost its role as a centre of the church to St Andrews in later Pictish times.

2.2 Evidential values

Little is known of the archaeology of settlement in the Abernethy area. The symbol stone has no direct association with the church site, but seems likely to pre-date the establishment of a formal church in this area. At least eight fragments of early medieval sculpture have been found in the graveyard and re-used throughout the village.¹² Several of these are clearly biblical in their content (including a very rare scene of the Crucifixion)¹³ and provide further evidence for the wealth, intellectual sophistication and importance of the early church that must have existed here.

In 1821, excavation inside the base exposed a skeleton and 'fragments of a light green urn, with a row of carving round the bottom of the neck'. Below these were some flagstones, with many more human bones below, including seven skulls, all male.¹⁴ These burials may pre-date the construction of the tower, but by how long is not certain. It would be unusual for an early Christian burial to include grave goods. Alternatively, they may have been deliberate internments within the tower. Since the excavations were not carried out or recorded to modern standards it is now almost impossible to say anything with certainty about their date or how they came to be within the tower.

In 1994, as a result of the cutting of a drainage track by contractors during environmental improvement works, accidental damage was caused to the circular foundation base of the tower. This revealed a foundation plinth, of larger diameter than the tower, in pink sandstone blocks, but no dating evidence.¹⁵

Excavations of the nearby walled garden in 2006 revealed the presence of several phases of activity. The major find was the stone foundations for an earthen wall. Charcoal was found beneath the foundation and was carbon dated, suggesting construction in the ninth or tenth century. Therefore, using comparative models (such as Inishmurray in Ireland), it may have been an

¹² *The early Christian monuments of Scotland*, 1903, pp. pt 3, 308–10

<http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/27995/details/abernethy/>,

<http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/27996/details/abernethy/>,

<http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/27997/details/abernethy/>,

<http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/27999/details/abernethy+churchyard+gravestone/>,

<http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/27926/details/abernethy+churchyard+ogam+stone/>,

<http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/28000/details/abernethy/>,

<http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/27998/details/abernethy+churchyard/>,

<http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/242534/details/abernethy+school+wynd/>,

<http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/27931/details/abernethy/>,

¹³ Abernethy no.4, Allen & Anderson, 1903, pp. pt 3, 310

¹⁴ Brash, 1859, p. 318; Small, 1823, p. Appendix F

¹⁵ MacKenzie, 1994

inner division of the Culdee monastery. An earlier phase had three pits; one containing numerous heat-damaged stones, another silt and one, flanked by two postholes, with an extremely compacted fill indicating repeated mechanical activity. Charcoal was extracted from the fill and carbon dated to the eighth or ninth century.¹⁶

Bearing in mind the small amount of excavation that has led to so much discovery, the clear evidence of continuous occupation in the area since at least the eighth century and the clear importance of the site in the early medieval, the archaeological potential seems, therefore, to be extremely high.

2.3 Historical values

A record of a land grant kept in St Andrews identifies and names several clerical personnel of Abernethy in the late 1000s. It offers a glimpse into the functioning of the monastic community at that time.¹⁷

The choice by Malcolm III of Abernethy as the site of his submission to William in 1072 may help to illustrate the role of ecclesiastical sites in the wider politics of the time.

Walter Scott is associated with the tower because, according to a Victorian account, he took one of the skulls from the 1821 excavation into his possession.¹⁸ The early Victorian accounts also help to demonstrate early antiquarian interest in such monuments and highlight how ideas of their function and use have evolved over time.

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

Round towers are as Irish as the broch is Scottish. Nearly 100 examples may have been built in Ireland between the start of the 10th and end of the 12th centuries, of which just over 60 survive today. Their prime function was as bell towers (their early Irish name – *cloicthe[a]ch* means bell-house), although they may have been used for other purposes too, such as treasuries, refuges at time of need, etc. There is no information to prove whether or not hand- or hanging-bells were rung from them.

The idea of building stand-alone, round, bell towers was almost certainly brought to Ireland by pilgrims returning from the Mediterranean (such as Italy) and/or west central Europe north of the Alps (Carolingian and Ottonian empires). There is an argument that the towers had additionally a greater liturgical function than we tend to ascribe them (to do with relics, processions and kings), and that they owe their origin to interest in the round church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

¹⁶ SUAT Ltd, 2009

¹⁷ Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba*, p.319

¹⁸ Small, 1823, p. Appendix F p.15

Only three Irish round towers are known of outside Ireland: at Abernethy, Brechin and Peel (Isle of Man). Probably the result of royal patronage, they are certainly symbols of the wealth and status of the monastery in question. Contrary to popular perception, there is no relationship between these towers and the round towers attached to churches that are found in Orkney and Shetland at around the same time (eg St Magnus, Egilsay).

It is difficult to date the Abernethy tower precisely on architectural grounds. The two main diagnostic features are the door and the belfry windows. Also there is a clear difference in masonry between the lower levels, up to about 3 metres, which is a grey hardwearing type and the upper levels (including the door) that is of a soft yellow sandstone. The door is much larger than usual for a round tower and is surrounded by Anglo-Saxon style strip-work. This is usually taken to date the work involving the door to the later 1000s. The belfry windows have Anglo-Norman style angle rolls and nook shafts. This dates the windows to after the Norman conquest and likely to the early 1100s.¹⁹ There is no dating evidence for the grey masonry of the lower level or the pink sandstone blocks of the below-ground foundations, though they would, of course, be older.

The original roof was replaced by the late 18th century with the present string course. The internal spiral stair is late 19th century. In addition to being scheduled, the tower is Category A listed.

With regard to the Pictish symbol stone, in Pictland a unique range of at least 50 designs have been found incised, usually in groups of at least two, on a range of stones and other objects. Abernethy is one of the 200 or so examples of these designs found on unworked stones. Several of the symbols may relate, in some way, to blacksmithing or other forms of metalworking, which is of particular interest because there does seem to be a close relationship between the art of the Pictish symbols in general and designs found in metal. The precise meaning of the symbols is the subject of much debate.

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

The round tower still dominates the surrounding settlement. Its imposing presence would have been even more acute in early medieval times when the majority of buildings were probably low, single-storey constructions of stone, timber and earth. Even the associated church would have been very low in comparison.

2.6 Contemporary/use values

Towards the end of the 19th century the Irish round tower became a strong symbol of Gaelic-Irish identity because the architectural form was unique to

¹⁹ 'On analogy with comparable details (strip-work door and rolled window) in both Ireland and England, a date before the later eleventh century must be deemed unlikely for the start of work, and the nook shafts and roll mouldings to the windows indicate that building work could have extended into the early years of the twelfth century.' Fawcett, 2011, pp. 6–7, Cameron, 1994, pp. 374–375

Ireland, monumental, and interpreted as built in defiance of the Vikings and, by extension, foreigners in general.²⁰ There are hints that the form was used as a symbol of Irish identity in medieval times too. 19th- and 20th- century round towers that mimic this Irish style are also occasionally found in Scotland, for instance St Leonard's Church, Dunfermline.²¹

The round tower was the bell tower of an important early medieval Scottish church. The earlier church building probably lies to the south east or north east of the tower, to judge from Irish arrangements. We can only guess how the bells might have been used, such as to ring out the time for services, or to herald important religious days, in addition to times of crisis.

The Abernethy tower still functions as the bell-tower for the modern church. There has been no formal assessment of attitudes to the monument within the local community but anecdotal evidence suggests there is an attachment to the tower.

3 Major gaps in understanding

We know very little of the nature of the early medieval monastery and any surrounding settlement that was associated with this tower, apart from the few fragments of sculpture that have been recovered from around the village and excavations in 2006. Nor do we know much of the later life of the site. There ought to have been a major Pictish church here. How early is the church site here? What was its full extent? What form did it and its buildings take? Detailed survey and photography of the tower might have the potential to illuminate further details of its construction.

4 Associated properties

Brechin and Peel (Isle of Man). In Ireland examples include: Clonmacnoise, Cashel, Devenish, Glendalough, Kells, Monasterboice and Nendrum.

Belonging to roughly the same period: **Brechin, Egilsay, Restenneth, St Margaret's Chapel at Edinburgh Castle, St Rules at St Andrews.**

Other early medieval sculptures from Abernethy (none of them being Pictish symbols, however) can be found in the National Museums of Scotland or with the Abernethy Museum Trust.

5 Keywords

Round tower, bell tower, Irish, kings, monastery, church, Christian, St Brigid, Pictish symbol stone, Romanesque, William the Conqueror, Malcolm Canmore, Celi De (Culdee), pillory.

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²⁰ For example see O'Reilly, S. 'Birth of a Nation's Symbol: the Revival of Ireland's Round Towers', *Irish Arts Review Yearbook* 15 (1999), pp.27-33

²¹ P McGregor Chalmers, 1904.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Timeline

Around 524 Some legends state the foundation of Abernethy, and dedication to St Bridget to an early date. Supposedly she served as Abbess here until her death in 524. However the foundation legends of Abernethy are 'irreconcilably muddled'.²²

Late 600s or early 700s Abernethy may be the chief episcopal seat of the Pictish kingdom.²³

Late 1000s Likely date of first/second construction phase of tower (at least going by architectural evidence of strip-work door).

1072 William the Conqueror received the submission of the Scottish king, Malcolm Canmore, at Abernethy.²⁴

c.1100 Abernethy shared its house with a Celi Dé (Culdee) community and is an important centre of literature and learning.²⁵

Early 1100s Second/third phase of construction of the tower (at least going by architectural evidence of bell windows)

1100s Abernethy lost its place in the ecclesiastical hierarchy as the new diocesan structure developed. It did not become a bishopric, and had in fact lost its role as centre of the church to St Andrews in later Pictish times.

c. 1272 or 1273 The community restructured itself and transformed into a house of Augustinian Canons.²⁶

c. 1328-31 Transformed into a college of secular canons, possibly under the patronage of the first Earl of Angus.²⁷

1560 Reformation. After the Reformation, the college and its possessions passed first to the Douglas Earls of Angus, and thence to the Earls of Home. The tower and church survived because of their continuing use.

1929 Site passes into guardianship.

²² See Anderson A. O., 1990, p. cxx for sources; see Macquarrie, 1992, p. 111 for discussion of them.

²³ *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 1990, p. Bk 4 chpt 12 p.225; chpt 26 p.255; Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, p.228

²⁴ Chronicle of Melrose in *Early Sources of Scottish History A.D. 500 to 1286*, 1990, p. 35

²⁵ See for instance Clancy, T.O. 'Scotland, the 'Nennian' recension of the *Historia Brittonum*, and the *Lebor Bretnach*' in Taylor, S. (ed.) *Kings, Clerics and Chronicles in Scotland, 500-1297* (Dublin, 2000), pp.87-107

²⁶ *Scotichronicon* book X,

²⁷ Cowan & Easson, 1976, p. 215

Appendix 2: Summary of archaeological investigations

- 1821** Excavation inside base of tower: exposed a skeleton and 'fragments of a light green urn, with a row of carving round the bottom of the neck'. Below these were some flagstones, with many more human bones below, including seven skulls, all male.
- 1994** Cutting of drainage track: accidental damage was caused to the circular foundation base of the tower. This revealed a foundation plinth, of larger diameter than the tower, in pink sandstone blocks, but no dating evidence.
- 2006** AOC survey work of nearby walled garden: noted an unidentified spread of rounded stones.
- 2006** SUAT walled garden watching brief: revealed the presence of several phases of activity. The major find was the stone foundations for an earthen wall. Charcoal was found beneath the foundation and was carbon dated, suggesting construction in the ninth or tenth century. Therefore, using comparative models (such as Inishmurray in Ireland), it may have been an inner division of the Culdee monastery. An earlier phase had three pits; one containing numerous heat-damaged stones, another silt and one, flanked by two postholes, with an extremely compacted fill indicating repeated mechanical activity. Charcoal was extracted from the fill and carbon dated to the eighth or ninth century.
- 2012** Derek Hall Kirk of St Bridge floodlighting watching brief: three trenches to the depth of 0.13–0.20m were dug for cables on the south side of the church. Nothing of archaeological significance was found.