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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

FORTROSE CATHEDRAL



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FORTROSE CATHEDRAL

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

The monument consists of the partial remains of Fortrose Cathedral, seat of the diocese of Ross from the 13th century until the Reformation, together with the site of its missing parts in a surrounding burial ground.

The cathedral as originally constructed - probably during the first half of the 13th century - apparently consisted of a nave and choir, possibly with a single aisle on the south side of the nave, and with a two-storey range chapter house, sacristy and treasury attached to the north side of the choir. A square tower attached to the north-west angle of the nave may also have been part of this first phase of building. At the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries, a large chantry transeptal chapel was added to the south side of the nave, and the south aisle was either added or remodelled. This work is traditionally ascribed to the patronage of Euphemia Countess of Ross. There was evidently some remodelling of the existing chapel at this time.

Although the foundations of the buttressed walls of the nave, choir and tower have been excavated (and are marked out), the upstanding remains are restricted to the south aisle and chapel and the chapter house range lying north of the choir. A group of graves and their immediate surroundings stand 'proud' in part of the nave and reflect the ground surface level before excavation and landscaping works in the last centuries.

The south aisle is vaulted in three bays and the chapel in two; the wall dividing them was subsequently pierced by a wide arch. Above was a double pitched roof, of which one gable survives. A turret, now capped by a small bell tower, gives access to what was the roof space. Nave and chapel each have an arcade of two arches, originally giving on to the nave. The blank wall separating the two arcades was later pierced to take a tomb. Buttresses survive along the south, east and west sides, and there are remains of ambitious traceried windows to east, west and south. A two-storeyed porch, now lost, attached to the south side of the aisle formed the principal entrance.

The range originally lying north of the choir is entered from the south at ground level and (by a post-medieval entrance) from the west at first-floor level. The original access to the treasury on the upper floor was by a mural stair in the west wall. The lower storey is vaulted in six bays and the walls have blank seating recesses in the east (chapter house) section, and lancet windows. The upper storey has been much rebuilt since the Reformation and is lit by square-headed windows.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

- The diocese at Fortrose is suggested to be successor of a Pictish bishopric at nearby Rosemarkie, which was dedicated to St Peter and St Curetan. St Curetan may have been responsible for establishing the Roman church in northern Pictland, from his Rosemarkie base, in the early 8th century.

- To quote Ian Cowan, 'the history of the medieval church in the Highlands is obscure', because little documentation has survived.
- c1130: The first certainly recorded bishop of Ross, Macbeth, although it has been argued that St Duthac was a bishop here in mid-11th century (it is more likely that he was associated with Tain or Dornoch). The cathedral at this time may have been in Rosemarkie.
- 13th century: a chapter of canons appears (eventually 21 canons and about 5 vicars). Bishop Robert (1214-49) is said to have relocated the see at Fortrose, and the cathedral was first built at that time. Parts of cathedral date from 13th century (see description, above). Extension was evidently initiated in late 14th by Euphemia Countess of Ross because the arms of her first husband, Walter Leslie (d. 1382) are depicted on a vaulting boss, and it is likely that the intention was to create a chantry chapel where the couple might be buried and prayers offered for their salvation. Work evidently extended into the early 15th century, since the arms of Bishop John Bulloch (1418-39) are also on the vault.
- After the 1560 Reformation the cathedral seems to have remained at least partly in use for worship. In 1572 the lead on the roof was granted to Lord Ruthven but attempts were made to provide alternative covering. In 1626 repair was urged by Charles I at the time when he was attempting to reorganise the Scottish Church in the English pattern. There is a tradition that Cromwell subsequently removed most of the masonry for the construction of the citadel at Inverness, although services still continued in part of the site. The cathedral is now one of the more ruinous of the 13 medieval Scottish cathedrals.
- 1797 One of the late medieval tombs was disturbed: a number of interesting grave goods and a timber replica crozier, now in the National Museums of Scotland, were recovered.
- The clock turret is a post-Reformation addition; this contains a recasting of a bell presented by Bishop James Tulloch (1440-60).
- Many post-Reformation tombstones and memorials were inserted when the aisle came to be used as a burial enclosure. In the 1980s Historic Scotland made a record of all the gravestones.
- Restoration was undertaken by HM Office of Works from 1851, the period at which the state assumed responsibility for the cathedral. A series of earlier sketches show the condition of the cathedral before this. Works included removal of walls infilling three of the four arcade arches, and the reduction of buttresses supporting the masonry where it once abutted the main body of the church. The upper floor of the council chamber continued to function a little longer.
- The site was cleared and the masonry marked out around 1897.

Archaeological Overview

- The site was cleared in the 19th century and has not been subject to scientific archaeological investigations. Some very minor works were commissioned by Historic Scotland in 1996 to locate buried wall lines and establish whether the existing landscape did indeed relate to known masonry. These works concluded that most of the south aisle and choir wall survives as buried footings and foundations, with the exception of the easternmost end, which has yet to be located in masonry form. The north wall seems to be preserved in a similar condition, and the west end has been located, along with the tower. Enough masonry survives below the present gravel to allow for the opening-up and consolidation of the remains for public display, though this would present problems of conservation and preservation.
- The 1996 works also revealed that the cathedral foundations appear to have been uniform across the site, and comprised a single layer of clay-bonded beach boulders, overlain with sandstone slabs (also clay-bonded), which acted as a bed for the higher courses of masonry, now absent.
- Despite the earlier clearance works, the site will retain high archaeological potential, but human remains are likely to be widespread. Nothing is known of the archaeology of the surrounding precinct or burgh.

Artistic/Architectural Overview

- Although little of the cathedral survives in upstanding form, on the basis of the plan and surviving architectural details an impression can be gained of the form of the building and where some of the architectural parallels lie. The diocese was not particularly wealthy and the building was relatively modest in scale. The surviving ruins now give fairly little impression of the scale and relative splendour of the cathedral and its contents (see crozier, below), undoubtedly stark in comparison to the surrounding settlement.
- There are similarities with **Dunblane Cathedral** in the provision of a two-storeyed elongated chapter house and sacristy range. The ground-floor level, although much altered on a number of occasions, is the only part of the 13th-century cathedral to survive in identifiable form. The monument is now unstaffed and this area, with its ribbed vaulting over the lower storey and arched recesses as seating for the chapter of canons, is not publicly accessible. This building came to be used as the burgh's tolbooth, the upper storey functioning as a court house and council chamber, the ground-floor level as a prison.
- The late 14th-/early 15th-century phase of building was influenced by works at **Elgin Cathedral**, and may even have involved the same masons, although it was not the most modern features at Elgin that were emulated. Circumstantial evidence suggests that, even if initiated by Euphemia, Countess of Ross, the works to the S of the aisle were completed after her death in 1395. The architectural details of the chapel are finer than the aisle.

- The architecture of the surrounding chanonry, any bishop's residence and burgh, is unknown.
- The burial monuments from the later 14th/15th century include notable examples to Mackenzies of Seaforth and of Coul.

Social Overview

- Not formally assessed.
- Vandalism has been a problem in the cathedral grounds.
- The graveyard still contains some gravemarkers which will be of genealogical interest.
- The lych gate to the Cathedral burying ground, on the north-west, is a war memorial that is still used an annual Remembrance Day events and is particularly valued by the local British Legion. This too is in our care.

Spiritual Overview

- The cathedral at Fortrose was one of 13 medieval diocesan centres in Scotland, and its location here is a reflection of the importance of this area to church and state from Pictish times.
- There are still some active burial lairs.

Aesthetic Overview

- The ruins have very aesthetically pleasing details, but in many respects the most satisfying visual aspect of the site is its green location in a clearing within the centre of Fortrose, edged by mature trees that presumably date from the 19th century when the boundary wall was built. It is important to retain these trees while ensuring that there is no adverse and irreversible damage to the archaeology of the site.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Little reliable is known of the archaeology of the site or its surroundings (chanonry and burgh). The same can be said of its predecessor establishment at Rosemarkie.
- There may be scope for more detailed art-historical, historical, etc work on the medieval and later burial monuments that are found on the site.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

- One of only 13 medieval Scottish cathedrals, a significant proportion of which are in state care. Fortrose is, however, one of the more ruined examples.
- The medieval cathedral at Fortrose is a reflection of the religious significance of the Rosemarkie area since Pictish times.

- Only a small part of the building survives upstanding, although this contains some fine architectural details and burial monuments.
- The more interesting parts of the unstaffed site are not directly accessible to the public: The south aisle and chapel can be viewed through railings, but the chapter house/sacristy and treasury/later court-house are locked.
- There are some interesting medieval and later burial monuments, as well as a collection of *ex situ* sculpture, the latter not accessible to the public at present.
- There is no understanding of the archaeology of the site, its surrounding chanonry and burgh, or indeed that of Rosemarkie.
- The lych gate to the Cathedral burying ground, on the north-west, is a war memorial that is still used an annual Remembrance Day events and is particularly valued by the local British Legion.

Associated Properties

Elgin Cathedral, Dunblane Cathedral, Dunkeld Cathedral, Brechin round tower as part of wider cathedral complex; **Glasgow Cathedral; St Machar's Cathedral transepts** as part of wider cathedral complex, **St Andrews Cathedral, Whithorn Cathedral, Bishop's Palace, Kirkwall** (in sense that part of wider cathedral complex associated with St Magnus'). The other Scottish medieval cathedrals were at Dornoch (still largely intact), Lismore (substantial rebuild in last centuries) and Snizort. **Beaulieu Priory** is another important religious establishment not far away. Nearby to Fortrose, Groam House Museum, Rosemarkie has Pictish sculpture which contributes to arguments for earlier significance of this predecessor, Pictish bishopric.

Keywords Pictish, medieval, Reformation, post-Reformation, cathedral, bishopric, Ross, Rosemarkie, Fortrose, Countess of Ross, burial monument, chantry chapel, chapter house, sacristy, treasury, canons, vicars, chanonry, burgh, burials, court house, council chamber, prison