

The hand-bells of the early Scottish church

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SUMMARY

Quadrangular hand-bells of iron and bronze were characteristic of the early insular church. Nineteen of these have been catalogued in Scotland, and it is suggested that their dating and distribution may shed light on the area of activity of the Columban monks.

Nineteen quadrangular hand-bells are known to have survived from the early Scottish church. A brief account of these is given here, in advance of full publication, together with a list and distribution map.

The distinction between bells made from a single sheet of iron coated with bronze and those made entirely from cast bronze has long been recognized, and all of the Scottish bells belong to one or other of these classes. A recent discussion of the typology and methods of manufacture of Irish hand-bells (Bourke 1980) can be applied without modification to the Scottish series. The iron bells of Ireland, Scotland and Wales form a homogeneous group and are not readily distinguishable, while those of bronze have a tendency to regional variation. Fourteen iron bells and five of bronze make up the Scottish total. This disproportion has been noted in Ireland where the corresponding figures are 44 and 31 respectively.

The iron bells of Scotland have a greater size range (exclusive of handles) than those of either Ireland or Wales. The smallest specimen, that from the Broch of Burrian, is a mere 60 mm tall, while the largest bell, that from Birnie, Morayshire, is 326 mm tall. The smallest and largest Irish examples are 143 and 306 mm tall, respectively. The status of the very small Burrian bell is somewhat uncertain, and the possibility that it functioned as a cow-bell cannot be ruled out. However, the example from Kilmichael Glassary, which is only 22 mm taller, is clearly from an ecclesiastical context since it has been enshrined.

The Scottish bronze bells fall within the size range of the Irish series, but they are only five in number and show a much greater degree of uniformity. Four examples have a continuous flaring at the lip on faces and sides, and all five have handles with almost horizontal cross-pieces (for terminology, see Bourke 1980, 53). These features are rare in the Irish series, and occur only in the case of two bells which are securely dated to c 900 on the evidence of an inscription on one of them (Bourke 1980, 57-9). The Scottish bronze bells can differ little from each other in date and are probably contemporary with these two Irish examples.

The map (fig 1) illustrates that the bronze bells are distributed across central Scotland, while those of iron have a more scattered distribution, including three examples from Orkney. This is consistent with the impression that the five bronze bells are roughly contemporary. Conversely, the distribution of the iron bells might indicate that they were a more long-lived type, and the perishable nature of iron as opposed to bronze must here be taken into account.

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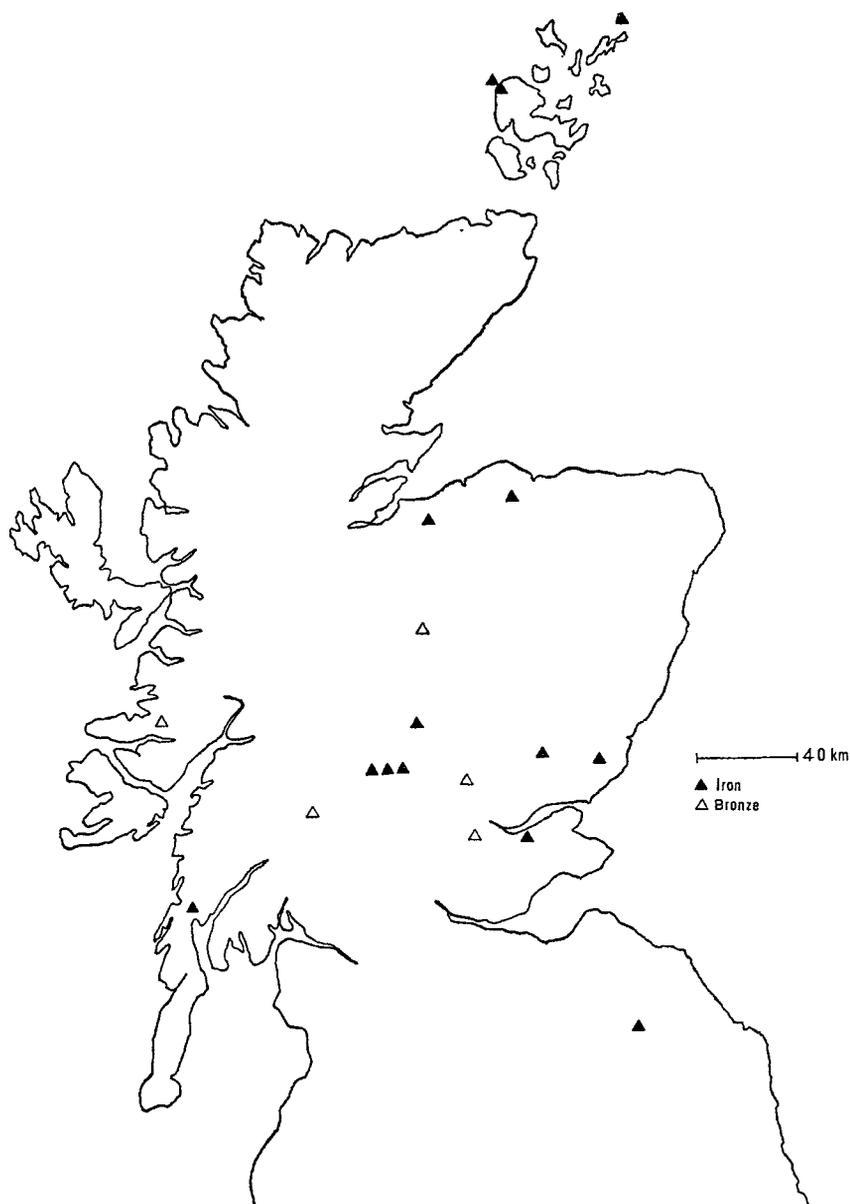


FIG 1 Distribution of iron and bronze hand-bells in Scotland

The use of hand-bells in Scotland can reasonably be attributed to the influence of the Irish church. Bells were central to Irish ecclesiastical tradition, and the surviving total of 75 examples far exceeds the totals of 7 and 19 known from Wales and Scotland respectively. In Ireland bells of both types were probably being produced in the period 700–900, although the iron series probably originated in the 7th century (Bourke 1980, 59).

Adomnán, writing in the years before 700, provides what appears to be the earliest contemporary reference to the use of bells in the early insular church (Anderson & Anderson 1961, 226–7, 528–9).

Adomnán refers specifically to Iona, and the bells in question were almost certainly of iron rather than bronze. Moreover, the distribution and associations of iron bells in Ireland suggest a possible connection with the monastic churches, in contrast to those of bronze which may have been used by the smaller churches under the control of Armagh (Bourke 1980, 61–2). It is reasonable, therefore, to attribute the use of iron bells in Scotland to the influence of the Columban church. The production and use of tomb- or church-shaped reliquaries might similarly be traced to the Columban federation (de Paor 1977, 96), a possibility which may be reflected in a number of Irish place-names incorporating the uncommon element *scrín* (shrine) which are associated with Adomnán and Columba (listed in Hogan 1910, 593).

The occurrence of iron bells in Orknèy is consistent with the interest of the Columban monks in the islands of the far north, as attested by Adomnán (Anderson & Anderson 1961, 440–3). Elsewhere, the iron bells occur principally in Perthshire and Angus, apparently within the Pictish regions of Fotla and Circhenn (Anderson 1973, 127, 142–3). These were territories of the southern Picts, whom Bede describes as having been converted to Christianity long before the coming of Columba (*HE*, 111, 4). However, it has been argued that the Columban monks were active in the southern region, from which they were expelled in 717 at the orders of the Pictish king Nechtan (Anderson 1965, 34). This exclusion may have been of short duration (Anderson & Anderson 1961, 99). The distribution of the iron bells calls seriously into question the extreme view of Cowan that

the principal achievement of the Columban church was not the conversion of Pictland and the Northern Isles, but in its southwards expansion, which culminated in the resuscitation of Christianity in Northumbria (1975, 17; see also Cowan & Easson 1976, 1).

The distribution of the bells argues strongly in favour of a direct involvement on the part of the Columban monks in the regions of the southern Picts. It seems unlikely that all of the bells date to before 717, and some may have been made in the course of the 8th and 9th centuries.

Two iron bells are associated with churches which may have been dedicated to saints of Irish origin: Barevan in Nairnshire (Watson 1926, 271), and Struan in Perthshire (Anderson 1881, 183; with Anderson 1965, 26).

While the iron bells are concentrated in the territory of the southern Picts, they occur also in the area of Dalriada (Kilmichael Glassary), near the Moray Firth (Barevan and Birnie) – where Bede would perhaps place the missionary activities of Columba (*HE*, 111, 4; Anderson 1965, 32–3), and in lowland Scotland (Ednam).

The Scottish bronze bells have been dated to c 900 on typological grounds, and cannot be used as evidence for early missionary activity in the east. That they differ from most Irish examples may be due to the increasing cultural separation of Ireland and Scotland in the course of the 9th century (Byrne 1973, 260), and their relatively late appearance might be explained if iron bells alone were traditionally used by the Columban church.

One of the bronze bells is attributed to St Fillan (also possibly associated with the iron bell from Struan), who may be the ‘Fáelán the Dumb’ commemorated on 20 June in the Irish calendars (Anderson 1965, 26). Another bronze bell is known from Insh, a site which Joseph Anderson believed to have been originally dedicated to Adomnán (1881, 196–7). A third bell, from Little Dunkeld, could date either to the reign of Constantine son of Fergus (789–820), who may have established the church of Dunkeld (Anderson 1973, 169, 194), or to the reign of Kenneth mac Alpin, who built a church to house the relics of Columba, probably at Dunkeld, in the years 848–9 (Anderson 1973, 250; 1982, 117; Henderson 1982, 99). This is consistent with the date of c 900 suggested independently above. A further bronze bell is known from Forteviot, Perthshire.

The date of the founding of this church has not been established, but the site may have been a royal centre of the later Pictish kings (Alcock 1982). It was at Forteviot that Kenneth mac Alpin died in 858 (Anderson 1982, 117), and a carved stone arch from the site may be from an ambitious church building of the later 9th century (Alcock 1982, 229). It is tempting to speculate that two of the five bronze bells from Scotland, those from Little Dunkeld and Forteviot, might be traceable to royal patronage of churches in the east in the later 9th century, in the years following the union of the Picts and Scots.

A LIST OF SCOTTISH HAND-BELLS

The bells are listed alphabetically by county and find-place; the present location and museum number (where applicable) accompany each item in the list.

Iron bells

| | | |
|--------------|---------------------------|---|
| Angus | Guthrie Kingoldrum | NMAS 1922: 40 NMAS KA 3 |
| Argyll | Kilmichael Glassary | NMAS KA 4 |
| Berwickshire | Ednam | NMAS L1933: 2126 |
| Fife | Mare's Craig Quarry | Perth Mus 2700 |
| Moray | Birnie | Birnie Church |
| Nairnshire | Barevan | Private possession, Cawdor Castle |
| Orkney | Birsay Burrian | Tankerness House Mus, Kirkwall NMAS GB 306 |
| | Saevar Howe | NMAS KA 1 |
| Perthshire | Balnahannait, Glenlyon | Not located |
| | Fortingall, Glenlyon | Fortingall Church |
| | Kerriemore, Glenlyon | Innerwick Church |
| | Struan | Perth Mus 3-1939 |

Bronze bells

| | | |
|-----------------|----------------|--|
| Argyll | Loch Shiel | Private possession |
| Inverness-shire | Insh | Insh Church |
| Perthshire | Forteviot | Forteviot Church |
| | Little Dunkeld | Little Dunkeld Church (formerly NMAS KA19) |
| | Strathfillan | NMAS KA 2 |

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The writer gratefully acknowledges a grant towards the cost of fieldwork and museum study from the Archaeological Research Fund of the Royal Irish Academy.

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