

The Monymusk Reliquary: the *Breccbennach* of St Columba?

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ABSTRACT

The Monymusk Reliquary, an eighth-century house shrine, is now invariably assumed to be the Breccbennach, a battle standard of the Scots. This paper casts doubt on that identification.

INTRODUCTION

In 1933, to the considerable consternation of many Scots, a small silver-mounted wooden box, known as the Monymusk Reliquary, appeared for auction in a London saleroom. This reliquary had for long been in the possession of the Grants of Monymusk and it seemed clear that, unless immediate action was taken, one of the most significant relics of Scotland's existence as an independent country would be lost to the nation for ever. The ensuing struggle to secure it is documented in a file of contemporary correspondence preserved by the National Museums of Scotland.

The Director of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, Graham Callander, took in hand the task of gathering together the necessary money to secure it for the nation. With a small group of well-placed friends he raised interest in the relic and extracted promises of money and support from leading Scotsmen, including the Prime Minister, Ramsay Macdonald. The National Art Collection Fund was persuaded to offer a substantial proportion of the price. Others speculated in the press whether the owner had any legal right to sell it.

Not long before the sale, disaster threatened the Museum's efforts when the reliquary was suddenly withdrawn from the auction after the heir of the seller intervened. There was increased press interest and even the queen went to have a look at it. Eventually, with the acquiescence of the owner and his heir, it was acquired by the Museum and it has remained in Edinburgh ever since, much esteemed as one of its most important treasures, now displayed prominently in the Museum of Scotland.

It is not the purpose of this paper to dwell on the design and appearance of the reliquary. It has already been thoroughly described in these *Proceedings* (Eeles 1934; Stevenson 1983) and is well known as one of a small group of Early Historic Irish and Scottish house-shaped reliquaries. Nine more or less complete examples have been shown to survive along with several fragments (Blindheim 1986; Ryan 1998, 149). The Monymusk Reliquary is generally supposed to date to the early eighth century and attention has been drawn to the similarity of the stippled animal

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decoration on the front silver panels to that on the late eighth-century Pictish bowls in the St Ninian's Isle Treasure (Wilson 1973, 128–31).

The main reason for all the concern about the reliquary when it appeared on the market in 1933 was that it had been identified by scholars as the *Breccbennach* of St Columba, carried before the Scottish army in battle. It is as the *Breccbennach* that it is now valued and displayed. It has for long been separated off by the Museum from its other Early Historic material and treated as an icon of the Medieval Kingdom of the Scots. The assumption that it was carried before the victorious Scottish army at Bannockburn in 1314 has led to its depiction on recent Clydesdale Bank £20 notes along with images of the battle and King Robert Bruce.

The intention of this paper is to show that, while it cannot be proved that the Monymusk Reliquary is *not* the *Breccbennach*, it must be held most unlikely that it is. In the discussion that follows the reliquary and the *Breccbennach* are treated separately as two distinct things, before the arguments for and against them being one and the same thing are laid out.

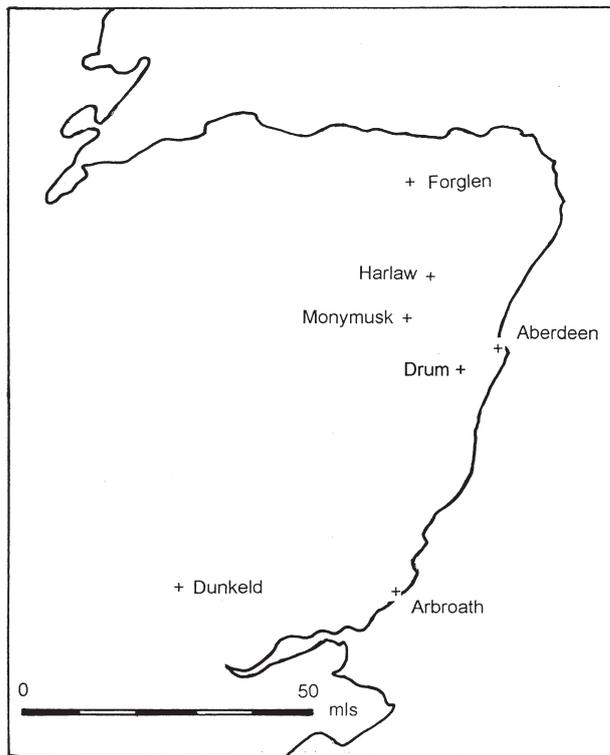
THE REDISCOVERY OF THE MONYMUSK RELIQUARY

There is no direct evidence for any traditions or beliefs held about the Monymusk Reliquary by its owners, the Grants of Monymusk, prior to its identification as the *Breccbennach* by Joseph Anderson in 1880. It is possible that such traditions are reported indirectly by the minister of the parish, William Macpherson, when he wrote (1895, 5) that no-one knew when it found its way to Monymusk House and that it had always been regarded as a much-venerated treasure. At the time it was bought by the Museum the Master of Sempill, a descendant of the Forbes of Monymusk, believed that it had been sold with Monymusk to the Grants by his ancestors in the early 18th century.

The reliquary was first displayed to the scholarly world at a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science at Aberdeen in 1859. John Stuart, Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, had published a coloured illustration in his work on *Sculptured Stones of Scotland* (Stuart 1867, vol 2, lxxxii, 75–6, pl xi). Sir Archibald Grant of Monymusk then exhibited it at a meeting of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in Edinburgh on 12 May 1879. A scholarly description of it appeared shortly afterwards in the Society's *Proceedings*, expertly written by Joseph Anderson, the Keeper of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland. Anderson briefly reviewed the ancestry of the owner and previous ownership of the lands of Monymusk. He was aware of the story about the *Breccbennach* and how it had been granted to Malcolm of Monymusk in 1315. He concluded that it was more than likely that the reliquary was this lost *vexillum* and explained its presence at Monymusk House in the 19th century as stemming from the possession of the *Breccbennach* by Malcolm of Monymusk in the 14th century (Anderson 1880), of which more below.

THE FUNCTION OF THE MONYMUSK RELIQUARY

Irrespective of its history and associations a certain amount can be deduced about the original function of the Monymusk Reliquary from a study of the object itself and by comparison with similar pieces. It is clearly a religious object, and as pointed out by Robert Stevenson (1983, 473–4), has a cross incorporated in its design. The fittings and wear on its back show that it was carried on a strap around the neck. It has generally been assumed that it would have contained one or more saintly relics; the comparable insular reliquary preserved at the Abbey of San Salvatore in Tuscany, Italy, still has fragments of bone inside it (Ryan 1998).



ILLUS 1 Key places mentioned in the text

Early sources for the church in the British Isles refer to shrines kept in churches containing the bones of saints. These included the shrine of St Columba. The Monymusk Reliquary is, however, unlikely to be such a shrine, since it would be expected to have contained all the bones of a saint, in many cases recovered not long after death and therefore not notably decayed. Nevertheless, at least some saints' shrines could be carried around and some scholars have envisaged portable examples, when not on circuit, being kept within larger permanent shrines in churches (Bannerman 1993, 20–3). Perhaps the Monymusk Reliquary is an example of such a portable shrine, designed for carrying small pieces of a saint's bones out into the community on special occasions.

Duncan (1978, 555) has supposed that a small house-shaped reliquary shrine was used at the inaugurations of Scottish kings for the taking of an oath. The basis for this is his interpretation of the design on the obverse of the second seal of Scone Abbey (Stevenson & Wood 1940, i, 200), which dates to the 14th century. It shows an inauguration ceremony and includes a cleric, supposedly offering such a shrine to the king. Bannerman (1989, 131) has gone further and suggested that it is the Monymusk Reliquary/*Brecbennach*. A simpler, and perhaps more plausible, identification of the object in question is as an open book in the process of being read.

Art historians have tended to identify the Monymusk Reliquary and related insular and continental house-shaped shrines as burses, that is containers for the corporal or altar cloth (Braun 1940, 198–205; Lasko 1972, 11–12). A possible alternative use is as pyxes, for carrying consecrated hosts. There is an insular house-shaped shrine of the early eighth century preserved in the church of Notre-Dame de Mortain in Normandy which has an inscription in Anglo-Saxon

runes identifying it as a ‘ciismeel’, that is a chrismal, or pyx (Lasko 1972, 11; Webster & Backhouse 1991, 175–6).

THE HISTORY OF THE *BRECCBENNACH* AND FORGLEN

The *Breccbennach* is first documented in 1211. On 28 June of that year, as he rested at Aberdeen, William I granted yet another charter to his favourite abbey, one he himself had founded at Arbroath 33 years earlier. He had already given to the monks the custody of the *Breccbennach*, and now confirmed this gift and added the land of Forglen in Banffshire (illus 1), given for God, St Columba and the *Breccbennach*, on condition of performing that service in the army with the *Breccbennach* which was owed from that land (*Regesta*, ii, no 499; *Arbroath Liber*, i, no 5). In other words, when the abbey’s tenants of Forglen were called upon to do their military service in the king’s host, they were to bring the *Breccbennach* with them. For the particular interpretation that the *Breccbennach* had already been given to the abbey I am grateful to A A M Duncan; he points out that the charter states the *Breccbennach* to have been conceded and confirmed, whereas Forglen is *given*, conceded and confirmed. The mention of St Columba in this document is the only piece of evidence for associating the *Breccbennach* with this saint. None of the later writs of Forglen include his name.

In that summer of 1211 King William was struggling to put down yet another rebellion. He was already a remarkable 68 years old and had been on the throne for 46 years. His son and heir, Alexander, was only 13. On this occasion his antagonist was Guthred who, as a descendant of William, son of King Duncan II, had a claim to the Kingship of the Scots. It was only in the following year that Guthred was defeated and captured, after William had sought support from King John of England (Duncan 1999a, 262–5). It is not known if it was a coincidence that William should be concerned about the safe keeping of the *Breccbennach* as he faced a crisis that threatened to overwhelm him and his kingdom. Nor is it known how or why the king had come by the *Breccbennach*.

There are several incidences in Scotland and Ireland of saintly relics held by hereditary keepers for several generations (Ó Floinn 1994, 45). In Scotland notable examples are the *Coigreach*, a crosier shrine of St Fillan, kept by a family called Dewar (from the Gaelic for keeper) in Glendochart, Perthshire until the 19th century, and now in the collections of the National Museums of Scotland; and the crosier of St Moluag, still in the possession of its hereditary keeper, the Baron of Bachuill, on the Island of Lismore (Michelli 1987, 376–8).

A distinction should be drawn, however, between those situations where a relic was held hereditarily by lay keepers, irrespective of whether or not they held land (like the Dewars and the *Coigreach*), and the case of the *Breccbennach* which belonged to the Abbey of Arbroath. The office of carrying the *Coigreach* is said in an inquest of 1428 to have been conferred on the ancestor of the Dewars by the ‘successor of St Fillan’, presumably an abbot of Glendochart (Cowan 1976, 52), and the family had held it of the king since before the time of Robert Bruce. Neither an inquest of 1428 concerning the authority and privileges of the *Coigreach* nor a letter of gift by James III to Malise Dewar in 1487, confirming him in the keepership of this relic, make mention of any land, although it can reasonably be deduced that the land of Eyich near Killin went with the keepership. The Dewars had lost Eyich by the end of the 16th century but continued to hold on to the *Coigreach* (Stuart 1878, 155–8, 179–81).

The *Breccbennach*, on the other hand, was given by William I to Arbroath Abbey along with the land of Forglen on condition that the monks provided the service in the king’s army with the *Breccbennach* owed from that land. Thus the abbey could, as I will show below, pass on the

obligation to do the army service to whoever held Forglen. It is important to appreciate that this requirement to do the service of the *Breccbennach* was removed once a tenant or his descendants ceased to hold Forglen. Instead it passed to the next tenant, no matter whether he had acquired the tenancy hereditarily, by purchase, or some other means.

Since the giving of Forglen to Arbroath Abbey for keeping the *Breccbennach* appears to have been an afterthought by William I, it is unlikely that the association of the two is any earlier. It is known that the relics of St Columba were removed from Iona in the middle of the ninth century to prevent them falling into the hands of Viking raiders. It is believed that some went to Kells in Ireland and others to Dunkeld (Bannerman 1993, 29). It is possible that the *Breccbennach* was amongst the relics that went to Dunkeld but, unfortunately, we do not have any contemporary list of them — such evidence as there is for them has conveniently been gathered together by Reeves (1874, lxxix–xcix) and Bannerman (1993).

The church of Forglen was dedicated to St Eunan (ie Adomnan), the seventh-century abbot of Iona and biographer of St Columba (Robertson 1843, 508–9; Scott 1871, 653–4; Cowan 1967, 68–9). The ruins of a church dating to 1692 stand beside the River Deveron a few miles south of Banff, apparently a replacement for an earlier building half a mile to the west at Burnend. It need not be imagined, however, that there was any intimate relationship between the *Breccbennach* and the church at Forglen. The *Breccbennach* went not with the church but the land of Forglen. The assignment of the land in support of the relic may have been for purely practical reasons unrelated to the source of the latter.

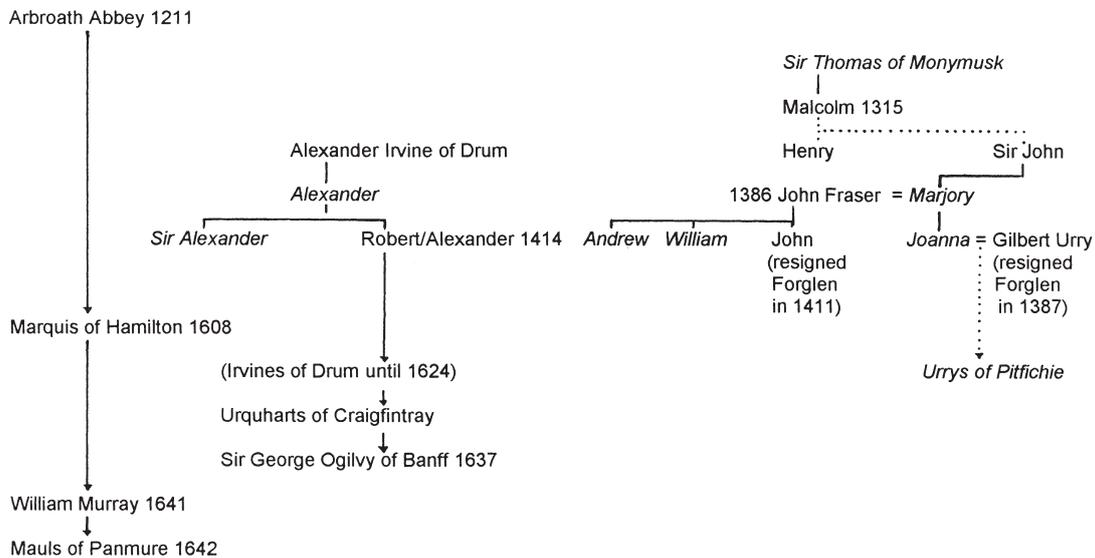
There is no reason to doubt that the *Breccbennach* did see service on several occasions with the Scottish army, although its presence in battle is never directly alluded to in any contemporary historical source. Its supposed role in the battle of Bannockburn depends on the assumption that Bernard, Abbot of Arbroath, was personally responsible for carrying it. That he was there can be supposed, since he re-created King Robert's address to his troops before the battle for the benefit of future generations (*Scotichronicon*, vol 6, 363–4). Besides, as chancellor, responsible for the king's seals, he had a duty to be within calling distance of the king.

It is probable, however, that the task of carrying the *Breccbennach* was always placed upon the abbey's tenants in Forglen. This is surely what was intended by William I's charter of 1211. Just because the earliest surviving grant by the abbey of the land of Forglen along with this responsibility, to Malcolm of Monymusk, dates to 20 February 1315 does not mean that this was the first time the monks had relinquished control of the *Breccbennach*. Indeed the grant records that Malcolm was the son of the late Sir Thomas of Monymusk, perhaps indicating that he had previously held both Forglen and the responsibility of doing service in the army with the *Breccbennach* (Robertson 1843, 511; *Arbroath Liber*, i, no 340).

This 1315 grant of Forglen, and all later grants which mention the *Breccbennach*, are framed in terms of the holder doing service with the *Breccbennach*. It cannot, therefore, be deduced whether the *Breccbennach* was kept by the holder of Forglen or by Arbroath Abbey. The writer is inclined to believe the former, and that before 1315 the *Breccbennach* would have been kept at Forglen by a steward or baillie if there was no tenant of sufficient standing to be entrusted with it. If the *Breccbennach* had been retained at the abbey there might have been some reference in the documents as to how the holders of Forglen were to gain access to it.

Malcolm and his heirs were to do in the king's army, in the name of the abbot and chapter, the service for Forglen which pertained to the *Breccbennach*. They were also to pay 40 shillings feufarm yearly. Forglen, however, was only destined to remain with this Monymusk family until the late 14th century, thereafter passing to a string of other families (see below and *illus 2*).

FEUDAL SUPERIORS

ILLUS 2 Holders of Forglen required to do service with the *Brecbennach* (others shown in italic)

As late as 1637 the writs of Forglen specify that service is due with the *Brecbennach* in the king's army (RMS, ix, no 696). This service is spelt out in a document of 1481 for the then holder of Forglen, Alexander Irvine of Drum. It was issued after an inspection of the charters of Forglen produced by Irvine, and presumably states custom. All the tenants of the lands of Arbroath Abbey were required to pass or ride, when required, to the king's army with Irvine of Drum, under the *Brecbennach*, namely under the *vexillum* (standard) of the abbot and convent of Arbroath Abbey, for defence of the king and kingdom (Robertson 1843, 514–15; *Arbroath Liber*, ii, no 208).

This document could be read to mean that the *Brecbennach* was merely a *vexillum* of Arbroath Abbey. Have recent scholars overplayed its significance by claiming it as a national icon? Of course any relic of an important saint like Columba, the presence of which was required with the national army, was obviously of significance, but not of such consequence that attention was ever drawn to it by contemporary chroniclers. Indeed, Abbot Bernard of Arbroath not only does not mention it in reporting Bruce's speech to his army prior to Bannockburn, but only has the king draw attention to John the Baptist, whose birthday it was, St Andrew, St Thomas Becket — to whom Arbroath Abbey was dedicated — and unspecified saints of Scotland (*Scotichronicon*, vol 6, 363–4). There is little evidence of medieval monarchs taking any interest in the cult of St Columba and, as far as Bruce at Bannockburn is concerned, all the evidence points to that king invoking the name of St Fillan for support on the battlefield. It is probable, as pointed out by Barrow (1988, 226–7), that Bruce's veneration of that saint dates to 1306 when he and his small band of companions most probably passed through Glendochart.

The reformation in religion in the mid 16th century undoubtedly produced a new climate of thought intolerant to the production of a saint's relic like the *Brecbennach* before a Scottish army. It would, however, be reasonable to hypothesize that the *Brecbennach*, unlike other alleged symbols of popery, would be carefully preserved, because Forglen was held by duty of service with it. If the *Brecbennach* were lost and the service could not be performed, Forglen

could be repossessed by the king. This explains the continuing mention of the *Breccbennach* in the writs of Forglen.

The Monymusks of Forglen died out through lack of male heirs in the late 14th century. The only Monymusk holder known for certain after Malcolm is Sir John, possibly Malcolm's son, who was dead by 1387. Marjory, Sir John's daughter and heir, left a daughter and heir, Joanna, married to Gilbert Urry. All this is known from an Arbroath Abbey charter of 2 March 1388 of the land of Forglen to John Fraser (of Ardendracht), widower of Marjory Monymusk, after it had been resigned on 3 August 1387 by Gilbert and Joanna (Robertson 1843, 511–13; *Arbroath Liber*, ii, no 39). In fact, John Fraser was already calling himself 'of Forglen' by 1386, when he was involved in a dispute over the teinds (*Aberdeen Registrum*, i, 171–4).

John Fraser was the younger son of Sir William Fraser of Cowie and Durriss. He had two illegitimate sons, Andrew and William, listed in the 1388 charter of Forglen as his heirs if he had no lawful issue. There is no mention in this document of his legitimate son and heir John, claimed by the *Scots Peerage* (vii, 430) as his son by Marjory Monymusk. Perhaps he was not, and this may go some way to explaining the outcome of an inquest on 24 January 1414 over the holding of Forglen made in a specially convened court in Aberdeen under the abbot of Arbroath's justiciar, John Ogilvy (NAS GD 185 8/1/1).

In this court Alexander Irvine of Drum sought a brieve of *mort d'ancestor* of the lands of Forglen which he claimed to hold in chief of the abbot and convent of Arbroath, and cited John Fraser, son and heir of the deceased John Fraser of Ardendracht, to compare. The inquest declared that Alexander was heir of the deceased Alexander Irvine, his grandfather, in the said lands of Forglen, and that John Fraser had no claim to them.

On 11 December 1411 John Fraser, Lord of Forglen — presumably the son of John Fraser of Ardendracht — had resigned Forglen into the hands of Arbroath Abbey (Robertson 1843, 513; *Arbroath Liber*, ii, no 50), but there is no evidence that they were regranted to him at this time, possibly because he was not regarded as the true heir. The inquest of 1414, on the other hand, does not give any indication that it found in favour of Alexander Irvine because he had a better claim by inheritance from the Monymusks, only from his grandfather.

There has been much confusion about the genealogy of the early lairds of Drum. Here we follow the version given by the most recent family historian (Mackintosh 1998, 9–56). By his reckoning Alexander (christened Robert) Irvine of Drum was 'the second Fourth Laird', the younger brother of 'the first Fourth Laird', Sir Alexander. His grandfather was the Second Laird, who died c 1381. We might speculate that Forglen was given to the Second Laird of Drum whilst one of the Monymusk family — Henry — was forfeited and exiled in England (see below) and that the Monymusk family later re-established its hold on the land for themselves and their Fraser heirs. That the Irvines should seek to overturn this might be viewed as a piece of opportunism allowable in the aftermath of a notable event in Scottish history, the Battle of Harlaw, which took place near Inverurie on 24 July 1411. The battle was fought between the forces of the Lord of the Isles and a national army led for the regent, the Duke of Albany, by the Earl of Mar. Although neither side conceded victory to the other, it is clear that there was a considerable loss of life, especially amongst the locals. The dead included the brother of that Alexander Irvine now granted Forglen. This Sir Alexander Irvine had fought in France with the Earl of Mar (*Chron Wyntoun*, iii, 112) and is said to have been killed in single combat with the Lord of the Isles' strongman, Hector MacLean of Duart — taking him to his grave with himself. Whatever the strength of the Irvine claim to Forglen, it was no doubt easier to press with the support of the regional magnate and patron of the Irvines, the Earl of Mar. It is noteworthy that the inquest was held in his house.

The Irvines of Drum held Forglen until 1624. It might here be noted that Irvine family historians, following a 17th-century genealogy, believe that a later Alexander Irvine (younger) of Drum fell in battle at Pinkie in 1547 (Wimberley 1894, 7; Forbes Leslie 1909, 66; Mackintosh 1998, 88, 286). Dying on the losing side was not a good way to ensure that any relics or equipment there that day could be recovered and passed on to the rightful heirs. Taking the story up to the early 19th century, Forglen was sold by the Irvines to the Urquharts of Craigfintray, and was acquired from them by the Ogilvies (Lords Banff) and then by Lady Abercromby (RMS, viii, no 1663; Robertson 1843, 511–18; NAS GD 185/17/1). The superiority of Forglen passed from Arbroath Abbey to the Marquis of Hamilton in 1608, and in 1641 from the Hamiltons to William Murray, later first Earl of Dysart, and in 1642 to Patrick Maule of Panmure (RMS vi, no 2075; ix, nos 1035, 1255). Whereas the great seal charter of 1637 in favour of Sir George Ogilvy of Banff still mentions the service of the *Breccbennach* (RMS ix, no 876), this is missing from the later documents.

THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF THE *BRECCBENNACH*

The only medieval explanations about the *Breccbennach* are in two documents of 1457 and 1481 describing it in Latin as a *vexillum* (Robertson 1843, 513–15; *Arbroath Liber*, ii, nos 108, 208). Strictly speaking, a *vexillum* was a flag or banner and the identification of the *Breccbennach* as such would be an obvious and reasonable conclusion from the scant documentary sources. Comparison to service with the *Breccbennach* might be made with the duty of bearing the royal standard. Thus, William Wallace granted lands and the constablership of Dundee Castle to Alexander Scrymgeour in 1298 in return for carrying the royal standard (*vexillum regium*) in the army (Wallace papers, 161–2). When Robert I repeated the grant to Nicholas Scrymgeour, Nicholas is described as *vexillatorus* (*Regesta*, v, nos 131, 251, 323). It was a recognized practice for churches to look after flags, such as the banner of a previous king of Scotland provided by Bishop Robert Wishart from the treasury of Glasgow Cathedral for Robert Bruce's coronation at Scone in 1306 (Duncan 1999b, 19; Palgrave 1837, 346–7).

If the *Breccbennach* were a banner of St Columba it might have incorporated, or been made from, clothing or other textiles associated with the saint. Indeed, Forbes Leslie (1909, 39–42) may not have been too far off the mark when he suggested that the *Breccbennach* might be the garment in which St Columba was wrapped at the time of his death. It has plausibly been supposed (Battiscombe 1956, 71) that the Banner of St Cuthbert kept in Durham Cathedral was made from, or incorporated, part of the linen winding sheet recovered from the saint's tomb.

Other saintly icons, apparently in the form of flags, appeared in battles in which the Scots participated. The English chronicler Richard of Hexham tells us that at the Battle of the Standard in 1138, at which the Scots were defeated by an English army on Cowton Moor, the English, under the leadership of the Archbishop of York, rallied round a standard consisting of a ship's mast hung with a silver pyx with the Body of Christ and three banners (*vexilla*) of St Peter the Apostle, St John of Beverley and Wilfrid of Ripon (*Chron Stephen*, iii, 162–3). The Banner of St Cuthbert from Durham Cathedral was taken out against the Scots in the campaigning at the very end of the 13th century and is known to have been carried again in 1346 at Neville's Cross and at Flodden in 1513. It is clear that this banner was improved or even replaced over the years (Battiscombe 1956, 68–72).

If the *Breccbennach* were a banner it too might have been re-made or re-invented at different times. It would have been relatively easy for the holders of Forglen to provide a replacement for a flag lost or damaged on campaign and thus continue to justify their possession of the land.

Whatever virtue the original had acquired by association with St Columba could be assumed to pass to the new version.

I am grateful to D R Howlett of the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* for pointing out that by the medieval period the basic meaning of *vexillum* could be extended to other objects which served a similar function. Sources of the 8th to 10th centuries demonstrate how a silver cross might be born as a *vexillum*, or a *vexillum* might be a cross or the sign of the Cross, or some object of metal. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that the *Breccbennach* might be something other than a banner. Indeed Bannerman (1993, 24–7) shows how the plural, *vexilla*, in sources of the same period, was usual as an alternative to *insignia* or *reliquae* for the relics of a saint.

The spelling of *Breccbennach* does not vary enormously from document to document, being rendered, for instance as *Bracbennoch* in 1211, *Bracbennach* in 1315 and 1388, *Breccbennach* in 1481, and *Breakbannach* in a Great Seal charter of 1634 (RMS, ix, no 200). Gaelic scholars interpret it as meaning the ‘speckled, peaked one’ (Watson 1926, 281; Bannerman 1993, 21) which could, of course, be an apt description of a house-shaped shrine like the Monymusk Reliquary. Ó Floinn (1997, 147–9), working from the assumption that the *Breccbennach* is the Monymusk Reliquary, makes the interesting suggestion that the use of the adjective *brecc* reflects the variegated nature of the relics contained in it rather than the decorative effect of the metalwork and enamelling.

At least two other early saintly relics have the adjective *brecc* in their name. First, there is the *Breac Maedhog*, an 11th- to 12th-century house-shaped shrine in the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin, long associated with the church at Drumlane in Co Cavan, and preserved as a reliquary of St Maedhog of Ferns (Harbison 1999, 296–7). Second, there is the *Morbrecc* (‘great speckled one’) mentioned in a document of about 1200 recording an agreement between the canons of St Andrews and Cellán, son of Gille Críst Mac Cúscraid, concerning the lands of Scoonie and Garrich. By it Cellán was guaranteed the privilege of carrying the *Morbrecc* (*St Andrews Liber*, 329). No further information survives on the nature of the *Morbrecc* but McRoberts (1974, 131–2) and Bannerman (1993, 21) have guessed that it was a reliquary containing relics of St Andrew. The identification of the Monymusk Reliquary as the *Breccbennach* would have made this an obvious assumption.

It was by no means unusual for saintly relics to be taken into battle in medieval times. Indeed, Columba in particular was a saint with a warlike reputation and other items associated with him were seconded to inspire martial endeavour. A crosier known as the *Cath Bhuidh* (Battle Victory) was carried before the Scottish army which defeated and killed Ivar II, the Danish king of Dublin, when he invaded Strathearn in 918 (Anderson 1990, vol 1, 408). It may be the crosier represented on the second chapter seal of Dunkeld Cathedral, dating to the 13th century, as a Scoto-Irish type with strapwork defining a series of lozenge-shaped panels, as on the crosier of St Fillan (Bourke 1997, 173–4). The *Cathach* (The Battler), an enshrined book of psalms supposed to be an example of Columba’s penmanship, was the battle standard of the O’Donnells in Ireland (Ó Floinn 1994, 12).

Another saintly relic of some relevance here is the crosier of St Moluag. A charter of 1544 by Archibald Campbell, Lord of Lorn, gave half the lands of Peyn na Bachill and Peyn Challin on the Island of Lismore, along with the keeping of St Moluag’s crosier, to John (Iain) McMilmore VicKiver and his heirs, just as Iain’s predecessors had held it of Lorn’s. Although there is no mention of what services, if any, the recipient was to perform with the crosier, it surely must be of significance that he is also described in the document as the grantee’s standard-bearer (*signifer*) (Carmichael 1909, 373–4).

It is clear too that the Dewar family, with the keeping of the *Coigreach*, had duties to perform, described in 1428 as being to pursue cattle lifted from Glendochart when the owners were unable to (Stuart 1878, 179–80). Was the Dewar expected to use the *Coigreach* as a standard? This obligation may relate to the role of the Abbot of Glendochart in the 12th century in dealing with stolen cattle and other property in ‘Argyll’ (APS, i, 372).

It is also known that kings took saintly relics on campaign with them, perhaps for private devotion. According to Boece, writing in the 16th century, Robert Bruce had a relic of St Fillan with him at Bannockburn in 1314 (Bellenden, *Chronicles*, ii, 273–4) and David II had the Black Rude of his ancestor, St Margaret, with him at the battle of Neville’s Cross in 1346 (Raine 1842, 21–2).

David II lost the Black Rude to the English when he was captured at Neville’s Cross, and the *Breccbennach* must similarly have been at considerable risk when it was taken out on campaign. Its preservation from earliest times to the 17th century in the hands of those who should have performed military duty with it would have been remarkable.

THE CASE FOR THE MONYMUSK RELIQUARY BEING THE *BRECCBENNACH*

The case for the Monymusk Reliquary being the *Breccbennach* has been most fully laid out by Anderson, particularly in his Rhind Lectures of 1879 (1881, 242–5). He advances three main arguments: first, that the *Breccbennach* must have been a shrine like the Monymusk Reliquary; second, that it was not unreasonable that the *Breccbennach* should be discovered at Monymusk House in the 19th century; and finally, that it would be a remarkable coincidence in these circumstances if the *Breccbennach* and the Monymusk Reliquary were not one and the same thing.

His first argument stems from the premise that ‘the Celtic *vexillum*’ was never a banner. He then suggests that because the *Cathach*, another Celtic *vexillum*, was a psalter enclosed in a wooden box covered with decorated metalwork, then the *Breccbennach*, if it had any resemblance to it, must also have been ‘a shrine of brass plated with silver, enclosing a wooden box which contained some relic of the saint’. He then reviews the use and meaning of the words *brecc* and *bennach* when applied to reliquaries, concluding that *Breccbennach* must mean the Blessed ‘*Breac*’ or shrine. The fact that the *Breac Maedhog* is also a house-shaped shrine is used to support his case.

Anderson did not develop his second argument in favour of the *Breccbennach* being at Monymusk House much beyond the basic proposition that since the Monymusk family who kept it in the 14th century hailed from Monymusk, it somehow got left at Monymusk despite changes in ownership of both Forglen and Monymusk.

There was a Henry of Monymusk who held lands in the barony of Monymusk in the reign of David II, specifically the lands of Petfethick (now Pitfichie) and Balnerosk. He forfeited these for serving the English king Edward III in the 1340s but they were presumably amongst the lands in Banff and Aberdeenshire restored to him in 1358 (*Cal Docs Scot*, iii, nos 1412, 1432, 1490; RMS, i, app 2, no 1103; *Regesta*, vi, no 185). A recent Irvine family historian (Mackintosh 1998, 14) has produced a genealogical table for the Monymusk family in which he shows Henry as elder son of that Malcolm given a charter of Forglen in 1315. He produces no evidence for this relationship, which has to be regarded as possible but unproven. It must be noted, however, that the 1358 remission to Henry of Monymusk is preserved amongst the Irvine of Drum muniments (NRA(S) 50, bundle 10), perhaps because the Irvine family saw it as having some relevance to their own hold on Forglen.

Assuming that Henry of Monymusk did indeed also hold Forglen, his possession of Pitfichie takes on added significance; for there was a family called Urry which later held this property and might provide another link in the chain taking the *Breccbennach* from Forglen to Monymusk House. It would work as follows.

The Arbroath Abbey charter of 1388 which granted Forglen to John Fraser, widower of Marjory Monymusk, followed on the resignation of it by Marjory's daughter Joanna and her husband Gilbert Urry in 1387. Unfortunately, the relationship of this Gilbert Urry with later Urrys of Pitfichie is less than secure. A pedigree of Mary Margaret Urry drawn up in 1669 lists 10 generations of the Pitfichie family, starting with John, whose son and heir was Gilbert, but this Gilbert is said to have been married to Elizabeth Lauder (Robertson & Grub 1847–69, iii, 500–2). Rather than guess that this was a second marriage, perhaps it would be better to postulate that the pedigree does not extend back far enough to capture the Gilbert of 1387.

It is possible that the interpretation that should be put on matters in 1387 and 1388 is that the Monymusk family's inheritance of Forglen and Pitfichie was being divided amongst the heirs, with the former going to the Frasers and the latter to the Urry family. Might Gilbert and his descendants have been less than happy with this division and have retained the *Breccbennach* despite having been forced to resign Forglen? Certainly one Andrew Urry is to be found petitioning for the land of Forglen in 1466, without success (Robertson 1843, 513n). The Urry pedigree cited above does not include Andrew Urry either, though he might possibly have been a younger brother of one of the lairds of Pitfichie — 'John of Monimosk' — who died in 1454 (*Rose of Kilravock*, 139).

It would then, however, have to be supposed that the Urry family retained possession of the *Breccbennach* until 1597 and that it was then sold with Pitfichie to the Cheynes (RMS, vi, no 598), being subsequently acquired by their feudal superiors the Forbes of Monymusk in 1661 (RMS, xi, no 88) and through them the Grants of Monymusk.

Anderson's third argument depends on the strength of his first two previous ones. If it can convincingly be shown that the *Breccbennach* should be a shrine like the Monymusk Reliquary, and there is reason to suspect that the *Breccbennach* might have ended up at Monymusk, then it would indeed be remarkable if the Monymusk Reliquary were not the *Breccbennach*.

THE CASE AGAINST

Anderson is justifiably held in high regard as a great archaeologist who turned his attention to a great variety of Scottish matters of all periods, making sound judgements and shrewd observations. Much of his work is still of great value today. It is perhaps not surprising that his near certainty concerning the identification of the reliquary was soon accepted as fact by others. It has certainly not been seriously challenged.

In 1924, when Douglas Simpson produced a thorough account of Monymusk and its church and priory, he accepted that the reliquary was the *Breccbennach* and only thought to comment that there was no ascertained link with the priory or parish church (Simpson 1925, 38). By 1934 Joseph Anderson's assertion of the reliquary's identity had been endorsed by another distinguished scholar of the medieval church, F C Eeles, who claimed that:

From that time [1314] to the present the shrine has been at Monymusk, in possession of the family owning the castle there. It is mentioned repeatedly in documents down to 1512. A fire in Monymusk Priory in 1554 caused it to be removed to the tower of the castle, now included in the present house, where it remained until acquired for the Museum. (Eeles 1934, 436)

The documents alleged to support this account are not otherwise described or referenced in Eeles's paper and I must conclude that he is relying on some secondary source circulating at the time of the reliquary's sale to the museum.

Anderson's reputation as a scholar has evidently lulled the critical faculties of others into a state of suspended animation. Besides, our museums contain so few pieces of any worth which can be directly associated with famous events and people in medieval Scotland that it has been only too easy to accept the Monymusk Reliquary as a relic of St Columba and inspiration for victory at Bannockburn. It is possible, however, to undermine all three of the arguments advanced by Anderson, which are the foundation of the Monymusk Reliquary's claim to be the *Breccbennach*.

First, there is Anderson's certainty that the *Breccbennach* was a shrine like the Monymusk Reliquary. It would not be surprising if it was, but this is not necessarily the conclusion to be drawn from its description as a *vexillum* when that word was also being used to describe the royal standard and other saintly banners like St Cuthbert's. To determine that the *Breccbennach* must have been similar to the *Cathach* because they were both Celtic *vexilla* equally fails to convince. Anderson's explanation of the meaning of the word *Breccbennach* — 'the blessed shrine' — is rejected by Gaelic scholars who, as noted above, prefer 'the speckled, peaked one'. This latter description might cover a shrine like the Monymusk Reliquary, but is not particular enough to exclude its application to other classes of objects, including flags.

Second, there is the argument developed above from Anderson's basic premise that the *Breccbennach* might have stayed at Monymusk because it was held in the 14th century by a family that had adopted Monymusk as a surname. Writing on this subject in 1910 Anderson noted, rather ingenuously, that there was no evidence that the *Breccbennach*, once given into the care of the Monymusk family, had ever left Monymusk, although the land belonging to it clearly passed to others (Anderson 1910, 265). Negative evidence of this sort is clearly rather weak. Even if we assume that the Monymusk family of Forglan also held land at Monymusk which was inherited by the Urry family, and remained with them until 1597, there are still several changes of ownership over two and a half centuries before the rediscovery of the reliquary in Monymusk House. Monymusk House only dates to the late 16th century (Simpson 1925, 46) and therefore the reliquary can only have been there for a small part of its history.

Is it really plausible that the *Breccbennach* should somehow have become marooned at Monymusk, separated from its owner, the Abbey of Arbroath, and those responsible for doing service with it, the Lairds of Forglan? Is it believable that once at Monymusk it should have passed through the hands of at least five different families, more than one house and five centuries, for no greater reason than it happened to be there? The writer thinks not, and there is, besides, a compelling reason why not. That is the requirement of the holders of Forglan to do service with the *Breccbennach*. Unless they could produce it there was the very real risk that the king would repossess the land of Forglan. The abbey and its tenants would surely not have been so neglectful as to allow the basis of their landholding to languish in the unlawful possession of others.

Anderson's third argument, that it would be a remarkable coincidence if the reliquary were not the *Breccbennach*, collapses if there is any doubt about his first two, and that, to the writer, appears to be the case.

There are other possible explanations for where the Monymusk Reliquary came from and how it got to Monymusk House that should now be reviewed briefly. The ancestor of the present owners of the house, Francis Grant, a Lord of Session with the title Lord Cullen, purchased Monymusk in 1713 from the Forbes family. They had held the lands of the priory in the parish of Monymusk since 1549 when their ancestor Master Duncan Forbes, a younger son of William

Forbes of Corsindae, acquired them from the Priory of Monymusk (Fraser 1883, i, 512; Tayler & Tayler 1937, 295–303; Robertson 1843, 179–80; *Hist MSS Com*, ix, 239, nos 3–7). If not the Grants, it may have been the Forbeses who brought the reliquary to Monymusk.

In 1544 James Forbes of Corsindae, the elder brother of the Duncan who acquired Monymusk, robbed the Bishop of Aberdeen's men of the cathedral plate and ornaments when they were carrying them off for safe keeping. He then ransomed his loot to the embarrassed bishop (*Aberdeen Registrum*, i, 427–8; ii, 179–81, 195). In 1559 Duncan Forbes was a witness to the disposal of the treasures of Aberdeen Cathedral (*Aberdeen Registrum*, i, xc). The Monymusk Reliquary cannot be identified from the listing of riches made on that occasion but it is at least a possibility that the Forbes family acquired it from this source. It might even have been one of the relics of the early church collected in the Hebrides by William Elphinstone, Bishop of Aberdeen from 1483 to 1514 (Boece, *Vitae*, 99).

One of the other witnesses to the disposal of church treasures in 1559 was John Leslie of Balquhain, the ancestor of the owners of nearby Fetternear Palace. The late Mgr McRoberts (1956, 28, n 51) believed that they were the previous owners of medieval vestments, probably of Scottish origin, preserved at St Mary's College, Blairs. They certainly owned the Fetternear Banner, a unique Scottish embroidered religious banner of c 1520, now also in the collections of the National Museums of Scotland. He has, however, convincingly associated it with the Confraternity of the Holy Blood in St Giles, Edinburgh (McRoberts 1956). There was a rroup of books and other articles at Fetternear in 1742, including 'antiques and other curiosities'. It is clear that the Laird of Monymusk was interested in buying some of these, and it might be supposed that the reliquary was included amongst them (NAS GD 345/873).

There is one further possibility, which, in the opinion of the writer, is rather more plausible than those advanced so far, and that is that it is associated with the Priory of Monymusk and was acquired with its lands by the Forbeses, and then the Grants. This is the assumption, in fact, made by Stuart in the earliest publication on the reliquary (Stuart 1867, 75–6). The priory may only have been founded in the 12th century (Cowan 1976, 51, 93) but it may have been the successor of an earlier Celtic house. The priory was dedicated to St Mary but it seems unlikely that it should have claimed possession of any of her relics. There is certainly no record that this was the case and it is therefore difficult to advance any argument that the reliquary was preserved because of her. Forgotten connections with another saint venerated locally are possible, for example St Finan, said to have been commemorated at a chapel and burial ground at Abersnethock in the parish of Monymusk (MacKinlay 1914, 84). An early association with Monymusk, in the heart of Pictland, would also square with the supposed Pictish character of the animal decoration on its front.

These suggested origins for the Monymusk Reliquary are clearly at least as flimsy as its identification as the *Breccbennach*. The sad conclusion must be that it will never be possible to explain what it is and where it came from.

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