

Icons of the North

I often try to pitch history programmes to people who think history ought to be modern and 'relevant'. They love 20th century history with its wars and familiar newsreels and sound recordings, but sometimes 'relevant' ends up being just another word for 'safe' or 'well-worn': history that doesn't take us very far from home. Sometimes I don't want things for their 'relevance', I want things for their wonderful otherness. That's the kind of thing that our medieval history can give us.

But what is this strange and wonderful otherness that I'm talking about? In the 'Miracula of St Margaret', a book of the miracles of the famous Queen of Scotland, there's a tale that really stuck in my mind because of the way it upset my preconceptions. It told how the saint intervened on behalf of one of the local Dunfermline criminals, William, a carpenter who had carried out a rape. He was forced to undergo a trial by ordeal: carrying a red hot iron and then having his hand bound up - so if it blistered, he was guilty and if it didn't he was innocent. Knowing he was guilty, he prayed to the saint to help him. She appeared, blew on his hand and healed the burn - so he was found innocent, and he was so grateful he promised her he would go on crusade to the Holy Land. When you think about it and the whole story is full of fascinating and alien assumptions. How could people think that making someone carry a red-hot iron would show their guilt or innocence? Did people really believe that saints could cure people by appearing in their dreams and blowing on their hands? Why is a saint helping a guilty man when she knows he's guilty? Why doesn't she smite him? Was his hand really healed? Why did he think going on crusade was the right way to say 'thank you' to Margaret? How strange!

Yet it's also familiar and human: we can all understand a guilty man desperately praying, hope beyond hope, for supernatural aid. Part of this story is something we can instantly relate to. We meet people we can recognise, yet they're doing and saying and believing things that require great leaps of imagination for us to understand, and we have much less to go on to bridge that gap. Our written sources become increasingly fragmentary and difficult to interpret, and then they don't exist at all. But that doesn't mean the history stops, there is archaeology and material culture too, telling their stories, but getting at those stories requires greater ingenuity and there is much we can't know because we have so few survivals from very early times. Instead of a wealth of films, newsreels, photos, we have a few iconic images and texts, and you'll often see and hear the same ones appearing in nearly every history programme, because they're what we've got - we have to work with them, and yet the fresh insights into what even these most famous pieces tell us never stop.

Look at how much we can glean about the stone of destiny, which looks just like a big lump of stone with a handle attached. How do we begin to elicit knowledge from such a blank page? Ewan Campbell has given the stone a wonderful life story, beginning as a link to the power and prestige of Rome, perhaps as an altar stone in a Roman fort like Carpow, then becoming a much-loved focus of devotion perhaps in a Pictish monastery, and showing that long before Edward I's task force

grabbed her, 'Destiny' the stone had led a long and complex life. You wouldn't think a stone could speak, but in the right hands it can.

Metal might not seem more promising than lumps of stone, yet Gareth Williams of the British Museum has opened up the Skail hoard to us, the largest silver hoard found in Scotland, showing us how in the pre-modern world, connections by sea were of the utmost importance. The Orkneys, where the hoard was found, sat at a busy sea-crossroads in Viking times and silver could come from very far away, down trade routes reaching into the Baltic and from there into the great rivers of Russia, all the way to the Muslim caliphate in Baghdad. Susan Young has looked at the earlier 8th-9th century St Ninian's Isle hoard from Shetland showing us the wealth and sophistication of our almost forgotten Pictish church, so often obscured by our focus on Iona. This treasure too shows us something unexpected to non-experts: the extensive cross-over between metalworking designs and manuscript art: the way Pictish church artists working in a variety of media all manage to 'sing off the same hymn sheet' of design.

This crossover take us back to Pictish stones. You can almost think of the great Pictish cross slabs as manuscripts in stone - art works that couldn't have been produced except by people deeply engrossed in their gospel books. I still remember the shock of realisation when I looked at the Nigg stone in that little church in the North East and was told what I was looking at was one of the earliest depictions of the mass - two of the desert fathers Saints Paul and Anthony with a bird bringing them the bread to the celebrate the eucharist. Now Pictish art historian Jane Geddes has shown us even more about Paul and Anthony: those Pictish ideals of the perfect monk, with her interpretations of the St Vigean stones. Here they are again contrasted with another character, the baddie of the piece Simon Magus. The flying magician of legend is shown on the stone plummeting to his death after apostolic prayers shot him down. This instructive work of art shows us both what to do and 'what not to do' - pagan bull sacrifices were also right out - please stick to praying in a seemly and non-airborne fashion and leave the prize Aberdeen Angus and spell book at home! Joking aside, the St Vigean stones take us into an unexpected world of magic and wonder and yet we still have a place to stand as Scots to comprehend them. We're part of a culture that after over a thousand years still knows some of these stories and can recognise them. We're beginning to realise what we can know about the Picts.

When I was growing up the popular image of them was still of a mysterious pagan people who all painted themselves blue and spoke a language like Basque and had matrilineal succession, so it was reasoned that they must have had strong women! In my own lifetime that's been washed away - some of it by people here in this room like Alex Woolfe. We've seen a new vision of Pictishness emerge - Fortriu has moved north to Moray, the mysterious language has disappeared to be replaced by a less romanised form of British, and we've started to think much more of our Pictish church and its monasteries. It's been one of the major achievements of Scottish historical scholarship in recent times .

Alex began this morning by urging us to think of our medieval 'icons' as things which help us focus the mind, giving not answers but questions and this is exactly what I think Ragnall Ó Floinn has done, building on David Caldwell's work on the

Monymusk reliquary - the tiny gorgeously-worked little silver casket you see when you enter the National Museum of Scotland's 'Kingdom of the Scots' exhibition. It was formerly accepted that some of relics of Columba once lay in this little Pictish-style art-work, and that it was the Breccbennach, the 'Speckled Peaked One' carried before Bruce's army at Bannockburn. Thus it gave us a wonderful tangible link both to the saint and to Bannockburn, but now this is stripped away and we find ourselves left to contemplate the object itself in its Irish and continental context. It may seem a shame to strip this iconic story from our twenty pound notes, but it actually puts us at a new beginning for scholarship, where new questions can be asked and studies made, to find out more about these miniature tomb-shaped shrines and their meanings.

Perhaps we'll get lucky and next year's archaeological work at New Deer will turn us up another one! We await further results from Olivia Lelong and the team as they explore the monastic site.

New beginnings and new scholarly paths are also opening up on The Book of Deer itself. Professor David Dumville revealed to us an astonishing piece of monkish jiggery-pawkerly with pumice erasers at the back of the book, thus making its royal confirmation of charters confirm a little more than the King suspected. But what was erased and why? We long to know and perhaps combinations of imaging technology and scholarship will one day tell us. It's just as well those monks weren't able to fire up photoshop or there's no telling what they might have done with the wonderful images that Heather Pulliam worked on. Heather contemplated the ambiguities of those famous images of the Book of Deer. Were those breastplates or book satchels across the chests of the Evangelists? Perhaps they thought of the written word as a talismanic as good as or better than armour. How powerful and complex this book was and is!

The Book of Deer and its context reminded me that Aberdeenshire once spoke not Doric, but Gaelic, and before that Pictish. Indeed parts of Aberdeenshire were Gaelic speaking much more recently than that. In the 1881 census, in the westernmost area of Braemar 65% of people's first language was Gaelic. In some places like Inverey, nearly 90%

Now it's gone completely. The last native Gaelic speaker was Jean Bain who died in 1984. She spoke a mix of Gaelic and Doric and she died, I was told, in the very year the first Gaelic playgroup was set up in Aberdeen. If asked for a Gaelic word and she couldn't remember it, she'd things like "Oh I dinna ken - Chan eil fios'm" in her mix of Doric and Gaelic. That Gaelic heritage which you see in the Book of the Deer, with the first written Scottish Gaelic, went within our lifetimes, we've seen it slip away and we've forgotten to what extent Scotland was once Gaelic speaking. Once upon a time there would have been a Pictish Jean Bain, the last bearer of the language of the stories whose echoes we sometimes see on the stones.

Huge parts of our heritage can be so easily be lost from our memory and imagination. We forget that the kingdom of the Scots once had a Gaelic identity. And that Gaelic identity itself came from melding other identities in turn, recasting Picts, and Britons and even Northumbrians into Gaels: Pictavia into Alba.

That Gaelic identity was not forgotten by the men who drafted the Declaration of Arbroath, who held to the Myth of Scota and Gathelus, indeed as late as the 16th century when Kennedy flyted with Dunbar he reminded him that

Thow Iufis nane Irische, elf, I understand, Bot it suld be all trow Scottis mennis lede; It was the gud language of this land, And Scota it causit to multiply and sprede,

But that famous letter to the Pope was not in one of our native languages but in Latin, the 14th century language of choice for Scottish diplomacy. The significance of the Wars of Independence period goes beyond nationalistic struggle to shed light on how medieval people thought about the very fabric of their society.

In his *tour de force*, Professor Ted Cowan illustrated how the Declaration of Arbroath was an important, well-thought out and forceful appeal to the Pontiff which considered a King's responsibility to his subjects. But it also reminds me of where we came in earlier concerning the Picts. People have preferred the 'Woad Warrior' image of Scottish history to that of diplomats making war with their quills at the cutting edge of thinking about authority, kingship and identity. They've preferred the notion of painted illiterate pagan Picts to the well-educated and thoughtful craftsmen of our gospel books. It's easy to see why no-one would make an action movie on papal diplomacy or book illumination but at the same time these are crucial facets of our identity which we've chosen either to play down or not to make enough of.

What our speakers have brought out most of all is the complexity of Medieval Scotland and its cultural depth, and we see this again in Professor Jane Stevenson's intriguing exposition of the Aberdeen Breviary - not as straightforward as you'd think. Here was a book that entirely misjudged its times and market, falling dead born from the press as David Hume might have put it, and yet it's become a mine of information for us: possibly Scotland's most important remaindered book!

We've seen today a kaleidoscope of Scottish art and new ideas derived from it, but what impresses me most is the carefulness of the scholarship which brings to mind for me some of the lines from Hugh MacDiarmid's poem 'Scotland'

It requires great love of it deeply to read
The configuration of a land,
Gradually grow conscious of fine shadings,
Of great meanings in slight symbols,
....

So I have gathered unto myself
All the loose ends of Scotland,
And by naming them and accepting them,
Loving them and identifying myself with them,
Attempt to express the whole.

I think our speakers have done quite a good job of that.

It remains for me to thank our chairs - Alan Cameron, (**Book of Deer Project**) **Colm O'Boyle (Aberdeen)** **Sally Foster (Historic Scotland)** **Alastair Macdonald**. Our conference organiser **Clare Downham**