

St Rule's Church, St Andrews, and early stone-built churches in Scotland

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ABSTRACT

St Rule's Church at St Andrews is one of the technical masterpieces of early Romanesque architecture in the British Isles. In recent scholarship it has been assigned to the early-to-mid 12th century, raising questions about the relative backwardness of the first stone-built churches in Scotland. This article challenges the physical evidence for this late dating and presents a new interpretation of the structure of St Rule's. Also considered are other church buildings in eastern-central Scotland which, it is argued, provide evidence of a well-established tradition of church construction in stone before the 12th century.

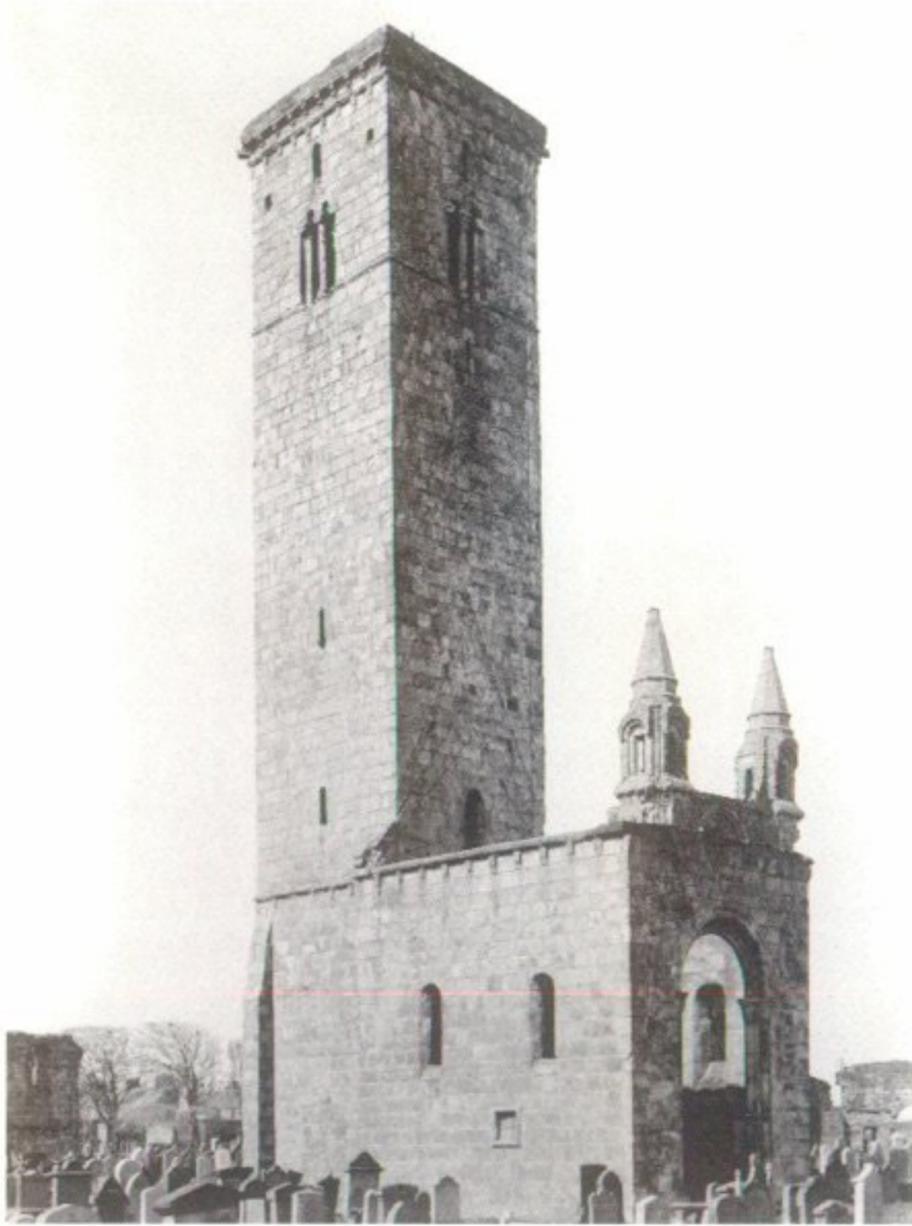
INTRODUCTION

The magnificent ruin of St Rule's Church at St Andrews (illus 1), consists of a western tower and a rectangular main chamber to the east (illus 2; Note 1). The tower, which is square on plan, rises some 33m in height and has round-headed arches in its eastern and western walls. The main chamber has a round-headed arch in its east wall. This arch gave access to a smaller eastern chamber which does not survive. Although the tower is of exceptional height for a church of the earlier Middle Ages, the most remarkable aspect of the building is the exceptional quality of its masonry construction, which is unsurpassed by any early Romanesque church in the British Isles.

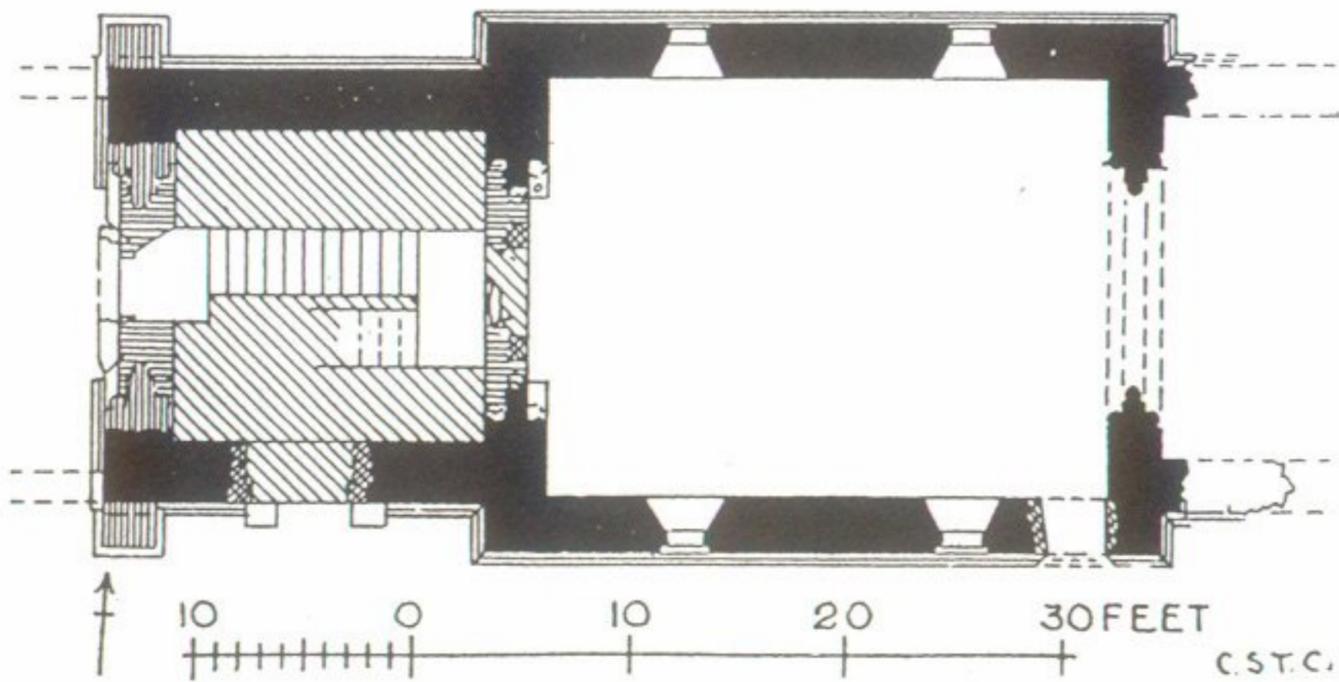
The building contains three main arches. For clarity, they may be called the west, the central and the east arches. The dating of the building really hinges on the east arch, the roll-and-hollow mouldings of which (illus 3) are evidently of early or mid-12th-century date, as has recently been emphasized (Ferne 1986, 404–5). If this arch is integral with the rest of the building, the church has to be consigned to the 12th century. If viewed as a secondary alteration, however, then the original period of building can be extended back into the 11th century, which accords with surviving historical evidence (Anderson 1976).

There is general agreement on the curious disjunction between the form of the mouldings of the east and west arches and the other stylistic features of the building. Unconvincing explanations have been provided for this, most recently that this style may have emanated from a disparate group of insecurely dated minor parish churches in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire and, unprovably, from the lost buildings of Nostell Priory (Heywood 1994, 43).

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ILLUS 1 St Rule's Church, St Andrews, from the south-east
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ILLUS 2 St Rule's Church, St Andrews: plan (Crown copyright: RCAHMS)



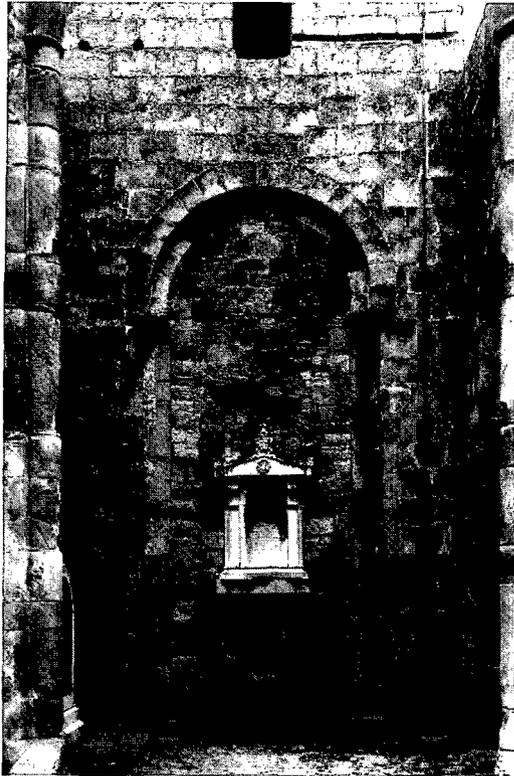
ILLUS 3 St Rule's Church, St Andrews: east arch from the east (*Crown copyright: RCAHMS*)

Previous discussion of the building has largely been polarized between those who believe the east arch to be integral, and those who consider that the opening of which it forms a part has been inserted. The principal point of this paper is to propose a new interpretation of the physical evidence of the east arch which explains the ambiguities which St Rule's has hitherto presented. A careful examination of the structure shows that the east arch has in fact been rebuilt.

Earlier writers generally agreed that the west arch has been inserted. This is a particular difficulty for those arguing for a later date, because it quite clearly has the same form of moulding as that of the east arch, which they argue is integral with the original period of construction (eg Fernie 1986, 405). The jambs and capitals of the west arch have probably been reused: the present arch almost certainly represents rebuilding undertaken in conjunction with the construction of the later nave to the west (Heywood 1994, 43).

The central arch (illus 4), which has simple right-angled voussoirs in two-order form, is universally agreed to be original. It courses perfectly with the surrounding masonry and there are no signs of its being disrupted in any way. The arch was supported by conical capitals, one of which survives, partly damaged. Below the capitals were cylindrical nook-shafts, the bases of which survive.

It has been proposed that St Rule's was built in two phases in the early-to-mid 12th century (Fawcett 1991, 38–9). This argument regards both the west and east arches as insertions made



ILLUS 4 St Rule's Church, St Andrews – central arch from the east (*Crown copyright: RCAHMS*)

shortly after the original campaign finished, the arches having been 'cut through the west wall of the tower and the east wall of the eastern compartment' (Fawcett 1991, 38). This analysis of the east arch can, however, be discounted for there is incontrovertible physical evidence that there were originally two chambers to the east of the tower, not one. This is provided by the return of the massive plinth course at the east end of the main chamber which, most obviously on the north side, lies below original masonry. This demonstrates conclusively that an eastern chamber was part of the original layout. It has been argued that the demolished eastern chamber was original and that the east arch, which linked it to the main chamber, is also original (Ferne 1986). This contrasts with the view that the east and west arches are complete insertions of 12th-century date in an earlier fabric (Taylor 1965, 711–13).

The jambs of the east arch are undoubtedly original. They course perfectly with the surrounding masonry, up to a height of some two courses below the level of the capitals. The jambs, however, rest on platforms of roughly coursed masonry some 0.6m in height which contrast strongly with the neatness of the base course in the rest of the building. Most significant, however, is the disrupted masonry around the arch, which provides a striking contrast to that of the unaltered central arch. Indeed, a number of small blocks of stone have been packed around the head of the east arch, a masonry technique that is inconceivable in a normal campaign of construction but which fully accords with the insertion of a new element into an existing structure.



ILLUS 5 St Rule's Church, St Andrews: north jamb and capitals of east arch

The interpretation here proposed is that the east arch has been partly rebuilt. The original jambs and capitals have been retained but the opening has been heightened and the arch reconstructed. The capitals have probably been reused unaltered, but close analysis of the abaci reveals compelling evidence that they have been recut. Their roughly pecked surface, which contrasts with the finely wrought abaci of the central arch, is evidently the result of pragmatic recutting from square to rounded plan to correspond with the rebuilding of the stepped angular form of the original arch with the heavy roll-and-hollow mouldings of its later replacement (illus 5).

The observation that the east arch has been heightened allows the ambiguities of the construction to be explained. The confusion regarding this element, reflected in the different interpretations previously offered in the literature, is to be explained in terms of its partial rebuilding subsequent to the original campaign of construction of the church. This analysis allows a more flexible approach to be taken to the dating, which is no longer constrained by the need to base the date on the Anglo-Norman arch mouldings, which could not conceivably be dated to before the 12th century.

Indeed, this interpretation accords with the documentary evidence, used in a selective manner by Bilson to substantiate his late dating of the monument (Bilson 1923, 70–1) and subsequently accepted by others (eg Fernie 1986; Heywood 1994). Bilson proposed that the 13th-century 'Legend of St Andrew' supported his view that Bishop Robert built the church following his consecration as Bishop of St Andrews in 1127 (Bilson 1923, 70). In fact, the text actually uses the word *ampliaretur*, indicating that Bishop Robert *enlarged* the existing church. The text relates that he 'set himself zealously to accomplish what he had much at heart – the enlargement of his church and its dedication to divine worship' (Chron. Picts-Scots, 191). That the church was mostly

complete is unequivocally referred to in the very significant and conclusive phrase *basilica ... ex majori jam parte consummata*, which has not before been referred to in the secondary literature (Chron. Picts-Scots, 191). There is therefore nothing in the text to substantiate the idea that Bishop Robert built the church anew. That he did not rebuild the church in its entirety when he came to St Andrews can probably be attributed to his great difficulties in raising revenue, referred to in the Legend (*Sed quoniam impensa erant modica, modice erigebatur et fabrica*, 'But since funds were small, building was also carried out in a limited way'). He found it necessary to raise funds by using his own share of altar revenues and by reclaiming *oblaciones* from various lay recipients (Chron. Picts-Scots, 191).

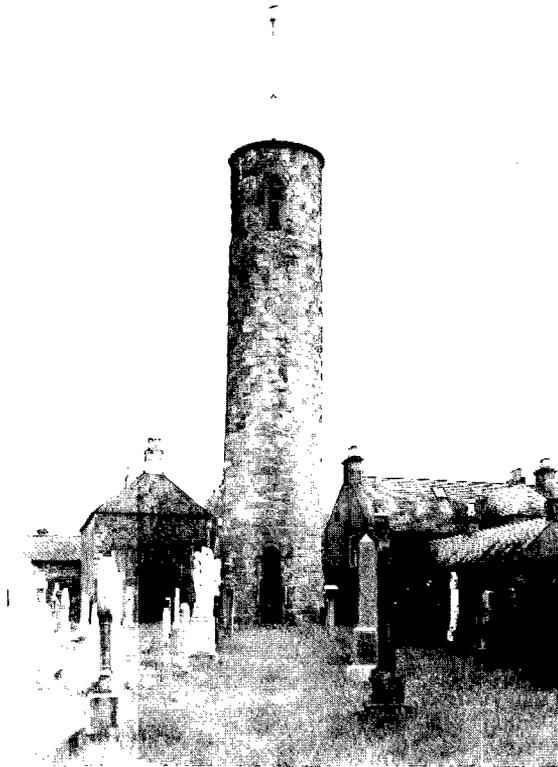
Bilson suggested that the design of St Rule's was derived from the parish church of Wharram-le-Street in the East Riding of Yorkshire, the link between the two churches being provided by Bishop Robert; he had first been brought to Scotland from Wharram-le-Street's probable mother house, Nostell Priory, to which the church of Wharram-le-Street was appropriated in the early 12th century (Bilson 1923, 69–70). Unfortunately, Wharram-le-Street cannot be securely dated by documentary evidence. A further difficulty is presented by the features Bilson sought to compare with St Rule's. The arch of the west doorway at Wharram-le-Street, which Bilson compares with the west and east arch profiles of St Rule's, appears to have been inserted. Other points which Bilson relates to St Rule's, such as the form of the Wharram-le-Street tower-arch and its capitals, also present a less than clear-cut analogy. Unlike the St Rule capitals, which have the unusual detail of necking raised above the lowest edge of the capital, those at Wharram-le-Street have no necking. In addition, the Wharram-le-Street capitals have the distinctive element of pendant triangles carved in high relief. A far closer comparison for these features is provided, for example, by the tower arch at Broughton Parish Church, Lincolnshire, which is not considered by Bilson.

A major feature of the towers of St Rule's and Wharram-le-Street is the use of twin belfry openings. A superficial examination of these suggests they are similar, as Bilson suggested (Bilson 1923, 67). In reality, there are very strong differences. It is important to emphasize that the tower of Wharram-le-Street has been reduced in height, and that the projecting shafts to each side of the belfry openings almost certainly supported a projecting round-headed hoodmould. At St Rule's, there was no such feature. Furthermore, St Rule's has recesses for nook shafts to each side of the openings; the Yorkshire church has simple right-angled surrounds. Twin belfry openings are, of course, one of the most common features of Anglo-Saxon towers, and the form of those used at Wharram-le-Street is typical of a large number of towers across the north of England. Particularly close analogies to Wharram-le-Street exist at St Peter's Monkwearmouth (County Durham), St Mary's Bishophill Junior, in York, and St Cuthbert's, Billingham (County Durham).

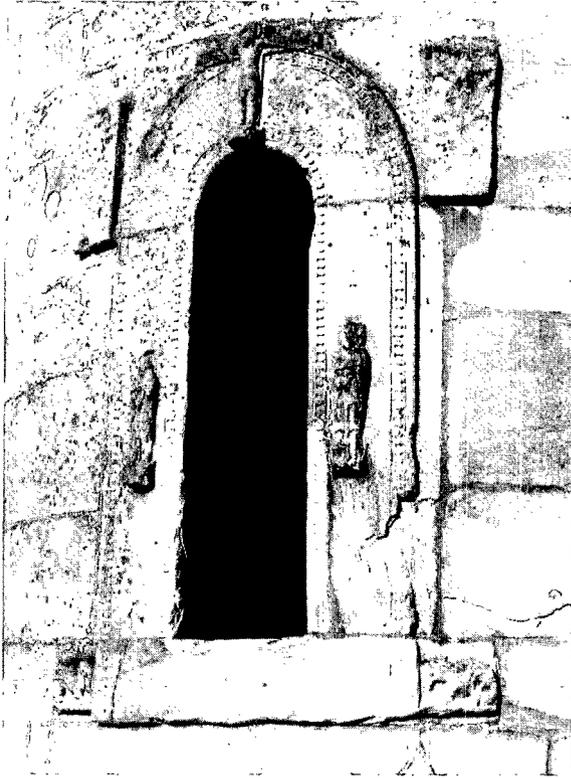
Even accepting the idea that there was an architectural connection between Wharram-le-Street and St Rule's, there is an uncritical assumption that the process of influence is from Wharram-le-Street to St Andrews, perhaps based on the unstated idea of south to north diffusionism, despite the great difference in architectural quality and functional status which divides these two buildings. In the case of St Rule's, the idea that Bishop Robert might have included Yorkshire masons in his retinue on his way north is undermined by the fact that he did not go directly to St Andrews but spent a number of years at Scone. Moreover, the link with Nostell could obviously have worked both ways, and as Wharram-le-Street is not securely dated it cannot even be assumed that it predates St Rule's. It is also unlikely that a small and poorly constructed minor parish church in the East Riding should have acted as the model for a great pilgrimage church which represents such an extraordinary level of technical sophistication. In addition, there are no significant points of comparison between St Rule's and the surviving fragments from Scone Abbey, and almost nothing is known of the original appearance of Nostell Priory.

The enlargement and rebuilding by Bishop Robert was probably undertaken to provide a more elaborate setting for the shrine of St Andrew. The building of a substantial nave to the west, considerably wider than the original church, as suggested by the existing wall-line, would have been the most conspicuous enlargement (Heywood 1994). By so doing, Bishop Robert may have tried to create a functioning cathedral from what was effectively a pilgrimage church. Although St Rule's was a most conspicuous landmark, and must have acted like a beacon for pilgrims from the south (Cant 1976, 11), its ground area was evidently extremely limited for the seat of a bishopric of the importance of St Andrews. This was an issue, indeed, in the time of Bishop Fothad II (c 1059–93), when the relics of the Apostle St Andrew were attracting such a volume of pilgrims that Queen Margaret endowed a ferry across the Forth and hostels on either bank (Anderson 1976, 6). The constrained east end of the church must have made the procession of large numbers of pilgrims very difficult. It is tempting to consider the possibility that Bishop Robert's recasting of the west and east arches – the corbels supporting the string-course above the west arch have been cut away at the arch-head – would have allowed the shrine of St Andrew, raised on a *feretrum*, to have been viewed properly from the new nave through the line of three arches. This would accord with general liturgical practice in the early 12th century, when there was a growing tendency to limit direct access to shrines to pilgrims of privileged status.

The existence of the church before the second quarter of the 12th century is also suggested



ILLUS 6 Abernethy Round Tower, from the north
(Crown copyright: Historic Scotland)



ILLUS 7 Brechin Round Tower: doorway (Crown copyright: RCAHMS)

by the status of the church of St Andrew as a centre of royal patronage. Queen Margaret and King Malcolm III buried their son Etheldred there. The description of this is of considerable significance, as it refers specifically to the building: *'Etheldredus sepultus est in antiqua ecclesia Sancti Andree de Kilrymonth sub arcuali testudine lateris chori australis; tercio natus Sancte Margarete'* ('Etheldred was buried in the old church of Saint Andrew at Kinrimund on the south side of the choir below the arch; the third born of Saint Margaret': Abbotsford Club 1842, 63). In the reign of Alexander I, the king's Arab steed was led up to the high altar in confirmation of the nearby lands of the Boar's Raik being assigned to the church (Ritchie 1954, 172). The church was also the centre of a bishopric which attracted major ecclesiastical figures such as Turgot of Durham and Eadmer of Canterbury, bishops in 1109–15 and 1120–1 respectively.

There is also a wider architectural context for St Rule's in a group of early ecclesiastical buildings in Scotland which includes Restenneth Priory, Brechin Round Tower and Abernethy Round Tower. Abernethy (illus 6) and Brechin (illus 7) are now the only surviving free-standing round towers in Scotland. Their age has been the subject of much debate, and recently a date of c 1100 or later has been assigned to them (Ferne 1986). It was noted that the tower at Abernethy has Anglo-Norman angle rolls and nook shafts around the belfry openings, indicating a post-Conquest date. This evidence was used to suggest that the doorway, with its stripwork surround, is

therefore also of 12th-century date. A further examination of the masonry reveals a more complicated story. There is clear evidence of a masonry break which steps down to each side of the doorway; the lower courses are of long, narrow reddish blocks while above the break more square and regular blocks of yellow stone are employed. Moreover, the fact that the break descends to the base of the doorway also confirms that rebuilding has been carried out. This raises doubts as to whether Fernie's 12th-century dating of the whole building can be accepted. Historically, also, there is no doubt that by c 1100 Abernethy was a major ecclesiastical centre of some five centuries standing with important communities of Culdee and regular clerics. In 1089 it was the place at which King Malcolm of Scotland paid fealty to William the Conqueror, again implying a settlement of some significance.

The round tower at Brechin also raises difficult questions about dating. It has been ascribed to the 12th century on the basis of comparisons with the windows of two churches in Ireland, at Killeslin, County Laois, and St Peakan's, County Tipperary (Fernie 1986), but these churches are not themselves securely dated by documentary evidence. Brechin was an important ecclesiastical centre as early as the late 10th century, when Kenneth II gave the great *civitas* of Brechin to the church. Most importantly, according to Boece – in a little-known reference which was excluded from later translations of his history of Scotland (Boece 1526) – when the Danes sacked Brechin c 1017 they left standing only *turrim quondam rotundam mira arte constructam*. The carved decoration of the doorway is of very high technical quality, but the zoomorphic motifs are more analogous to Pictish carving, such as that of the carved stones at Meigle (Perthshire), than anything from the Romanesque period. Moreover, the high-quality cyclopean masonry of which the tower is constructed, extremely untypical of post-Conquest architecture, has close analogies with some pre-Romanesque stone-built Irish monuments such as Gallarus Oratory, County Kerry, and St Macdara's Isle church, County Galway, and the overall appearance is similar to Irish round towers such as Glendalough in County Wicklow. There is also a close comparison between the *christus triumphans* figure at the head of the doorway and that on the Maghera lintel in Derry, usually dated to the ninth or 10th century. Strangely, the unusual pelleted border around the Brechin doorway has not previously been compared with that around the roundel of the cross-slab carved with the Virgin and Child in the cathedral at Brechin, normally dated to the 10th or early 11th century, which is also carved with zoomorphic motifs. This evidence would tend to suggest that a pre-12th-century date and possibly a late 10th-century date would be appropriate for the tower at Brechin.

Also crucial to the discussion of early ecclesiastical architecture in Scotland is the tower of Restenneth Priory near Forfar (illus 8). A foundation of Early Christian date, it has often been associated, arguably on limited evidence, with the church built c 710 at the instance of Nechtan, King of the Picts, who sought advice from Abbot Ceolfrith of Jarrow regarding *architectos...qui iuxta morem Romanorum ecclesiam de lapide in gente ipsius facerent* (Bede, *Hist Eccles*, v, 21). The lowest portion of the tower has been ascribed a variety of dates, a 12th-century date having been assigned on the questionable basis of comparison with the stripwork doorway at Abernethy dated to c 1100, and on the form of the north-east arch impost (Fernie 1986). The form of this impost would rightly indicate a post-Conquest date, but there is evidence to suggest that the tower has been rebuilt on a number of occasions, and there is a masonry break running east/west at roughly the height of the springing-point of the arches. In an English context, for example at Kirk Hammerton and Middleton, both in Yorkshire, and at Barton-on-Humber in Lincolnshire, stripwork similar to that used at Restenneth would normally be ascribed to the late 10th or early 11th century. There seems to be no reason to assume that Restenneth represents a building style over a century out of date by northern English standards.



ILLUS 8 Restenneth Priory: east tower arch before restoration, c 1890 (Crown copyright: RCAHMS)



ILLUS 9 Forteviot lintel (Copyright: Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland)

Further evidence of a pre-Conquest stone church tradition in Scotland is provided by the arched stone lintel from Forteviot in Perthshire (illus 9), now in the collection of the National Museums of Scotland (Alcock 1992). Forteviot was closely associated with the Pictish kings, a church having been founded there by King Angus I or II as early as the seventh or eighth century. The arch, of double-curved form, was most probably that of a doorway, and that it is carved with a cross indicates that it was of ecclesiastical origin. This interpretation is enhanced by what appears to be a lamb, probably intended as Pascal, beside the cross. The style of carving is hard to place in a Romanesque context, but it shows close affinities with late Pictish relief carving, for example that of the standing stones at Aberlemno in Angus. Also perhaps indicative of church building in stone before the 12th century are the foundations of the church at Brough of Birsay in the Orkney Islands which have been identified with the church built c 1060 for Thorfinn, Earl of Orkney, as seat for the bishop of his earldom, although this has been subject to debate (Cant 1993, 10–15). With an apsed east end, which may be an addition, it is broadly similar in plan to the additional church built at Dunfermline by Queen Margaret in about 1070, the foundations of which survive below the floor of the present abbey nave (Ferne 1994, 25–8).

By the second quarter of the 12th century, the date of the present Dunfermline nave, the architectural influence of Durham Cathedral, begun in 1093, was extensive in east-central Scotland. As well as Dunfermline Abbey, it included the parish churches of Leuchars in Fife and Dalmeny in West Lothian, their mature Romanesque forms quite different in character to those of the group of monuments described above (Cameron 1994). There is, therefore, substantial evidence that there was a rich pre-12th-century tradition in stone-built church architecture in Scotland, the nature of which has by no means exhausted debate.

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NOTES

The term 'main chamber' is used to minimize confusion, as this portion of the building has been described both as the nave and as the chancel in previous literature. For a detailed description of the surviving fabric, see RCAHMS (1933) and Taylor (1965).

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