

## II.

NOTICE OF THE CHURCH OF ST CONGAN AT TURRIFF, IN ABERDEENSHIRE, AND OF A FRESCO OF ST NINIAN DISCOVERED IN IT IN DECEMBER 1861. BY JOHN STUART, Esq., Sec. S.A. Scot. (PLATE XXVI.)

The ecclesiastical history of Turriff reaches back to a very remote period. The remarkable position occupied by the church, on the brow of a lofty bank, overlooking the valley through which the river Deveron sweeps close to its base, on its seaward course, seems to have pointed it out as a suitable site for one of those numerous monastic communities through which the knowledge of Christianity was imparted to the Celtic tribes of Pictland. The monastery of Turriff survived till the middle of the twelfth century. At that time we find Cormac, its abbot, witnessing a charter of King David I. in favour of the monks of the monastery of Deir, which had been planted in the same district of Buchan, by Saint Drostan. He is also a witness to a grant in favour of the same monastery of Deir, by Colban, the Mormaer of Buchan.

At a somewhat earlier period we discover another officer of the Celtic monastery of Turriff, when Demongart, its ferleiginn or lector, witnesses a grant by Gartnait Mac Cannech, Mormaer of Buchan, and Ete, daughter of Gillemichel, in favour of the monastery of Deir.

It is probable that the monastery of Turriff with its territory became secularised like many other of our Scotch monasteries. In the beginning of the thirteenth century, the church of Turriff was given to the monks of St Thomas at Arbroath, by Marjory Countess of Buchan; and in the year 1272 her son Alexander Cumyn, Earl of Buchan, by a charter dated at his castle of Kelly, in Buchan, and witnessed by King Alexander III., conveyed to an hospital which he had founded at Turriff all the right which he had to the church of Turriff. This hospital was for the maintenance of a master, with six chaplains, and of thirteen poor husbandmen of Buchan, and was dedicated in honour of St Congan. The chaplains were to perform service in the church of Turriff, and wear the habit of secular canons, living in common, and sleeping in one dormitory. From subsequent events, it appears that the master of the house was also the rector of Turriff, which might have been anticipated, as the church

is declared to be the property of the house, along with the lands erected into church lands.

The Earl's charter, which is printed in the Register of the See of Aberdeen,<sup>1</sup> is there entitled "Carta foundationis terre ecclesiastice ville de Turref continens limites ejusdem." It conveys to the hospital the whole lands of Cnookikuby in the neighbourhood of Turriff. One of the lines by which these lands are said to be bounded, runs from the Standing-stone of Balmali and Cokuki, as far as the Monk's Road, "usque ad viam monachorum"—an expression which suggests a connection of the lands with the territory of the early monastery, and the monks to whom it belonged.

It seems likely indeed that we may account for the gift of these lands for ecclesiastical purposes, by supposing that having been diverted from their first purpose, and become the property of the later Mormaers or Earls of Buchan, they were at least partly restored to the new institution, when a change of feeling led to its foundation.

It would seem that a like fate befel St Drostan's Monastery at Deir, and it is remarkable that William Cumyn, Earl of Buchan, father of the founder of St Congan's Hospital at Turriff, founded a monastery of the Cistercian Order at Deir, close to the site of St Drostan's primitive institution. He probably endowed it with the lands which had belonged to the earlier monastery, for we can recognise among the possessions of the Abbey, at its dissolution in the sixteenth century, some of the very lands granted to God and to Drostan, as recorded in the Book of Deir.

Shortly before his death, King Robert Bruce granted to the master and hospital of Turriff the lands of Pets, in the parish of Fyvie, for the maintenance of a chaplain to pray for the soul of his brother Nigel.<sup>2</sup>

In the year 1412, the church of Turriff, by consent of the patron, John Earl of Buchan, was erected into a prebend of the Cathedral of St Machar at Aberdeen. The whole fruits of the benefice (in which the Hospital of Saint Congan seems to have merged, "una cum terris ecclesiasticis") were assigned to the prebendary, under the burden of six merks yearly, and of a surplice, a black cape, and other vestments, to a

<sup>1</sup> Vol. i. p. 30 (Spalding Club).

Antiq. of the Shires of Aberdeen and Banff, vol. ii. p. 339.

chaplain officiating in the cathedral, and of twelve merks yearly, with a toft and croft, to a perpetual vicar serving the cure of souls in the parish, making his residence at Turriff.

The patronage of the church of Turriff was confirmed by King James II., in the year 1450, to William Lord Hay, Constable of Scotland. The reason of this grant may be gathered from a procuratory executed in the year 1440 by the said William, for the recovery of his right of patronage of the church of Errol, in Gowrie, which formed part of the early possessions of the family. From this instrument it appears that Lord William's grandfather had through fear surrendered the patronage of the church of Errol to King James I., when that monarch wished to bestow it on his newly founded church of the Carthusians at Perth, and on promise of receiving other church patronage of like value, but that although he had often required the promised recompense, he had hitherto failed to obtain it.

The patronage of the church of Turriff was at last conceded to him in exchange, with which he professed his satisfaction.

About a month after the patronage of Turriff was thus vested in the family of Hay, we find a bond granted by Gilbert the Hay, which sets forth that "frae the tyme that I sal be God willand in peaceable possession resaiuand and joysand freely the benefice of Turray prebend of Aberdene that I sal yeirly give and pay till my Lord the Constable of Scotlandis bretheren to hald them at the Scule that will be clerkis ay [and] while thay be beneficed, or any of thame that may hald the lawe, fourty pundis of Scots payment, or els three score of golden crownis of French gold."<sup>1</sup>

It appears that Gilbert succeeded to the benefice about ten years after this time.<sup>2</sup>

In 1511 King James IV. erected the ecclesiastical lands, town and glebe, of the church of Turriff into a burgh of barony, with power to give feus of the burgh roods. In 1521 the bishop and chapter granted a charter to Alexander Hay, rector of Turriff, authorising the grant of feus and this consent was renewed by a subsequent charter granted by the

<sup>1</sup> Antiq. of the Shires of Aberdeen and Banff, vol. ii. p. 343.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 344.

bishop and chapter in 1548. In the following year, Alexander Vaus, then prebendary, conveyed to Gilbert Hay of Delgaty, the lands of Cakeinche, part of the ecclesiastical lands, for payment of a yearly sum of ten merks, and on other conditions which are significant of the period. The said Gilbert was to defend and protect the prebendary in his rights; he was not injuriously to seize on the fruits of his lands, nor encroach on the church lands adjoining to those of Cakeinche.

Down to 1627 certain lands were held by the parson of Turriff as kirk lands; but in that year Mr Thomas Mitchell, parson of Turriff, with the sanction of the Bishop of Aberdeen, the Earl of Errol, and others, granted a charter of these lands to Francis Hay, son of Francis Earl of Errol, when they were finally secularised.

St Congan, in whose name the Hospital of Turriff was dedicated in 1272, is represented in the legendary history of the Scottish Church to have been the son of a chief in the province of Leinster in Ireland, and sister of St Kentigerna. He succeeded to his father's rule; but in consequence of some domestic tumults and bloodshed, he forsook his patrimony and country, and devoted himself to religion. Leaving Ireland, with his sister Kentigerna, and her sons St Felan, St Fursey, and St Ultan, with seven other clerics, he came to Lochalsh, in Northern Argyle, where he spent a solitary and ascetic life. On his death a church was built at that place in his honour by his nephew St Felan, and in the beginning of the sixteenth century the name of St Congan continued in reverence by the inhabitants of the district.

It is not now easy to suggest a reason for his selection as the patron saint of Turriff, unless we suppose that, like St Drostan, he was the founder there of one of those monasteries which seem to have been numerous throughout Alba. The dedications of the neighbouring parishes also connect them with members of that band of Irish missionaries who carried the light of the gospel into Pictland—the parish of Forglan, on the one side, being dedicated to St Adamnan, and that of Alva, on the other, to St Columba. When Turriff was erected into a burgh of barony, it received the privilege of holding two public fairs, one of which was to be on the feast of St Congan; and after his memory had faded away in its religious aspect, it was preserved by this fair, which till lately was held annually on the 13th of October, being the

day observed as the festival of St Congan in the calendar of the Scottish Church.

The old church of St Congan was a long narrow structure, with no architectural features sufficient to fix its date. It measured 120 feet in length, by 18 feet in breadth.

In its eastern wall are built fragments of sculptured stones, which appear to have been portions of an older fabric. Some of these represent groups of heads looking upwards, as if a fragment of tympanum—probably of Norman character. In 1794 a new parish church was erected, and the only part of the old fabric now left is its eastern end, still known as “the quire,” and the belfry, in which is hung a fined-toned bell, dated in 1557.

Fortunately we have the means of ascertaining pretty closely the date of the choir, which otherwise, from the appearance which the remaining part of it presents, would have been doubtful.

In a volume of *Illustrations of the Antiquities of the Shires of Aberdeen and Banff*, prepared for the Spalding Club by Mr Joseph Robertson, he has printed the following notice from a manuscript pedigree of the House of Glammiss in the possession of the Maitland Club:—“John [fourth] Lord Glammiss succeeded his father [in the year 1497], who when he was master married [in the year 1487] Elizabeth Gray, daughter to the Lord Gray. . . . He had children, George and John, both Lords of Glammiss, and Mr Alexander Lyon Chanter of Murray, who was a singular scholar in these tymes and was tutor to his brothers sones, and lyeth buried in the quire of Turreffe which he built; of whom being a churchman and unmarried came no lafull succession. He dyed in the year of God 1541.”<sup>1</sup>

In December 1861 portions of the wall of the choir were removed as materials for improving the dilapidated dyke of the churchyard. A window in the south wall had been built up at some former period, and the workmen were engaged in removing the stones, when they discovered on the splay of one side a figure painted on the plaster in bright colours.

Several sketches were made, and a photograph was secured of the painting before the plaster was destroyed. One of the sketches was

<sup>1</sup> *Antiq. of the Shires of Aberdeen and Banff*, vol. ii. p. 338.

lithographed for the *Banffshire Journal*, where it appeared, along with an accurate notice of the circumstances of the discovery by the editor, who has done much to diffuse a taste for archæology in his own district.

My friend Mr Gibb of Aberdeen went to Turriff at my request, and made an accurate drawing of the fresco for me. From a copy of it, along with the photograph now exhibited, the character of the painting will be fully understood. (See Plate XXVI.)

It represents an episcopal figure, fully habited, with his pastoral staff in his left hand. *His right hand is elevated in the act of benediction.* The background is diapered in lozenge patterns. An inscription in Gothic letters, divided by the head of the figure, reads S. NINIANUS.

Another similar figure was on the opposite splay of the window, but was destroyed, and there is reason to believe that there was a series of like pictures all round the church. The fresco of St Ninian was broken up in the course of a few days after its discovery.

From what has been said, it would appear that we may regard the choir as a work of the first quarter of the sixteenth century, and we may therefore believe that fresco painting was in use for the decoration of the walls of our churches at that time.

An interesting passage in the history of the Abbots of Kinloss by Ferrerius, shows indeed that this style of painting was greatly prized throughout Scotland at the period in question. In describing the many good deeds of Abbot Robert Reid, he tells us that, in the year 1538, he engaged a painter, Andrew Bairhum, "celebrated indeed in his art, but withal contentious and difficult to manage." For three years Andrew was retained at Kinloss, during which time he painted three tables for adorning the chapels of the Magdalene, of John the Evangelist, and of St Thomas of Canterbury. He painted also, but in the lighter style, which, as the writer adds,<sup>1</sup> is now so prevalent throughout Scotland, "*sed pictura levior quæ nunc est per Scotiam receptissima,*" the chamber and oratory of the abbot, as well as a larger chamber in front of the stair leading to the abbot's chamber.

We know so little of the style of frescoes used in our churches that even the copy now exhibited of this fragment, snatched from the rude hands which destroyed the original, will, I trust, be regarded with interest.

<sup>1</sup> Hist. Abbat. Monasterii de Kynlos, p. 51 (Bannatyne Club).

I have already stated that the same record which has preserved to us a notice of some of the abbots of the early monastery of Turriff, has also handed down the name of one of its *ferleiginn*s or scholastic lecturers, from which we may believe that Turriff was not only a seat of religion, but a school of learning.

Domongart, the *ferleiginn* of Turriff, as a witness of a grant to the monastery of Deir by Gartnait, the Mormaer, about 1132, is associated with Nectan the Bishop of Aberdeen, Leod the Abbot of Brechin, Ruadri the Mormaer of Mar, Matadin the Brehon, and others, who were also witnesses.

The Grammar School of Turriff enjoyed a considerable reputation in later times.

Of Thomas Austin, who was its rector about the middle of the sixteenth century, and taught for about 40 years, Dempster speaks in the highest terms:—He was learned in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, and (what *we* ought to value fully as much) he was “*antiquarius incomparabilis.*”

Dempster received the rudiments of his early education at Turriff, under the auspices of Andrew Ogsten, who is described (perhaps partly in consequence of the vigour with which we learn he used his rod) as “*vir ingenio mediocri.*” He was, however, Dempster adds, “not unlearned,” and wrote various poems, some of them “*elegiaco versu nou inculto.*”<sup>1</sup>

The small volume or register now exhibited, belonging to me, contains all the deeds relating to the church lands of Turriff to which I have referred, beginning with the “*Carta fundacionis terre ecclesiastice ville de Turreff, continens limites earundem anno Domini 1272,*” and ending with “*Carta consensus Episcopi et capituli Aberdonensis Magistro Willelmo Hay rectori de Turriff facta ad locandum terras ville seu burgi de Turriff in empheteosim pro edificiis policia et hospitalitate habenda,*” in 1548. The deeds in this volume are extracted from the chartulary of the bishopric of Aberdeen, and this copy was probably made about the date of the charter last quoted, when the rector, under its authority and that of a previous deed, was probably engaged in granting feus of the lands for buildings and policy.

<sup>1</sup> T. Dempsteri, *Hist. Eccl. Gentis Scot.* t. i. p. 55; t. ii. pp. 514, 673.





A. GIBBS F.S.A.S.

Keith & Co. Lithog. Aberdeen.

FRESCO FROM CHURCH OF S. CONGAN, TURRIFF.