

I.

GLASGOW CATHEDRAL IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY, FROM AN ANCIENT SEAL: WITH SIDELIGHTS ON CONTEMPORARY HISTORY. BY REV. JAMES PRIMROSE, M.A., F.S.A. SCOT.

In historic research too little attention, generally speaking, has been devoted to seals as a source of information; yet here is a field awaiting exploration. As is frankly admitted, architects are uncertain as to the exterior appearance of Glasgow Cathedral in the latter half of the thirteenth century; that is to say, as to how much of the fabric had then been constructed.

Authorities on seals, however, tell us, that the art of seal-engraving was far advanced in Scotland in the thirteenth century, and that the seals of this period throw valuable sidelights on contemporary history. Among the early specimens of ecclesiastical seals those of Glasgow present features of great excellence,¹ especially those executed during the episcopate of Robert Wishart (1272-1316).

"The seals of capitular bodies," remarks Dr. Walter Birch,² "are among the most notable of Scottish seals, both for antiquity and importance." "In this class," he adds, "no conventionalism has been observed, a local tradition, a patron saint, an historical event suffice to mark the theme for the design on the seal." Here then is an arresting statement—"no conventionalism has been observed"; and this opinion has been endorsed by one who is, perhaps, our greatest living authority on Scottish seals, Mr W. Rae Macdonald.

In support of this contention that real and not conventional churches are represented on the earlier seals we have, it seems, examples in the following:—In a thirteenth-century chapter seal of St Andrews, in which St Rule's Church is clearly depicted; in a chapter seal of Dunfermline of 1200 or 1226; in a seal of Cambuskenneth Abbey of the thirteenth century; and in a seal of Holyrood Abbey of 1141.

If this be correct, the representations of churches engraved on thirteenth-century seals are not conventional but real—not necessarily accurate, however—of the churches as they stood. But further, this remark applies not only to the churches and their style of architecture, but to the costumes of the clergy, the altar furniture, and the symbols depicted.

¹ Glasgow is particularly rich in seals at this period. Would some French artificer in seals reside here?

² Dr Birch, *History of Scottish Seals*, vol. ii., "Ecclesiastical Seals," see pp. 143, 211, 197, 219.

Let us confine attention to the second chapter seal of Glasgow appended to a document *circa* 1280 A.D.,¹ that is, during the episcopate of Bishop Robert Wishart, who befriended Wallace and Bruce in the Great War of Scottish Independence.

This seal is round and not vesica or pointed oval in shape, as is more usual among ecclesiastical seals, and was in use, says Birch, from the latter part of the thirteenth century to the beginning of the fifteenth century, and perhaps earlier and later than the dates mentioned.²

Being a chapter seal, it was affixed to all documents to give authentication to the resolutions agreed to by the chapter or majority thereof.³ It was thus most important, guarded with jealous care and kept secure under triple locks.



Fig. 1. Chapter Seal of Glasgow Cathedral, *circa* 1280 A.D. (Obverse side.)

THE, OBTVERSE SIDE.

On the obverse side of the seal is the representation of a church which contains some striking features. If this then be not a conventional but an actual church, we have a rough kind of picture of Glasgow Cathedral as it existed towards the latter half of the thirteenth century. Observe, there is a central belfry, a low stone base with a spire as at Pluscardine,

but clearly differing in style from the massive tower and elegant spire of our day.

M'Ure tells us that in Bishop Glendoning's time (1387-1408) the steeple of the Cathedral church, which was built of wood and covered with lead, was burnt down with lightning.⁴ This then might be a representation of the steeple that was standing in 1280, but burnt down over a century later, and not the campanile or north-west tower as is frequently stated.⁵

¹ *Liber de Melros*, i. p. 290. The *Liber de Melros* was compiled from the Melrose charters in possession of the Earl of Morton.

² Laing's impression of the seal is good, but the cast in plaster is more accurate. *Laing's Catalogue of Scottish Seals*, i., Plate xxii., Nos. 1024-5.

³ This seal was appended to a convention between the master and brethren of Torphichen and Sir Reginald le Chene regarding the patronage of the Church of Ochiltre in the diocese of Glasgow. The cyrograph mentioned is an instrument divided into two parts.

⁴ *History of Glasgow*, edit. 1830, p. 17. Note the cross fleury surmounting the spire and a plain cross at either end of the roof.

⁵ MacGeorge, *Old Glasgow*, 3rd edit., p. 100.

After this, Bishop William Lauder (1409-1425), Glendoning's successor, whose arms are upon the perforated parapet, erected the tower we now see—the earliest example, it has been said, of the Scottish type of belfry. Then Bishop John Cameron (1426-1446) crowned the tower by the addition of the elegant octagonal spire, the design of which excited a powerful influence on later Scottish mediæval steeples.

THE SYMBOLS OVER THE ROOF.

Above the roof of the Cathedral to the right is represented a crescent moon between the horns of which there is a star. While we are familiar, in our day, with this conjoint emblem as emblematic of the Turkish Empire, it appears that a similar emblem has been found on Grecian coins struck about the year 200 B.C.

The ancient Greeks, to judge from their coins, seem to have associated the symbol of the crescent moon and the star with the goddess Aphrodite or Venus. This later, somehow, was revived by the Christian Church in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and regarded as an appropriate emblem of the Virgin and of John the Baptist: the crescent being symbolic of the Virgin, and the star of John the Baptist. King John of England, when he visited Ireland early in the thirteenth century, caused the emblems of the crescent moon and the star to be painted for decorative ornament on the walls of St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin.¹

Turn attention now to the left side: we see a radiant sun or star; and this is generally accepted as symbolic of Jesus Christ, the Sun of Righteousness.

THE LOWER COURSES.

Look now at the lower courses of the walls of the nave underneath the windows. This seems more than ordinarily conspicuous among the early seals. Is there any countenance given by this to the opinion of architects that the lower courses of the nave—the chancel having been already completed—were laid down all round by Bishop Bondington or one of his predecessors, and that subsequently, upon those courses, Bishop Robert Wishart proceeded to erect the nave and the two western towers?

THE INTERIOR.

Pass now to the lower portion of the obverse side of the seal. Here an interior is evidently open to view and designed to represent the celebration of the mass. There are three niches, under three Gothic

¹ *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 1879, series ii., vol. ii. p. 468.

arches in the style then in vogue. In the central niche observe an altar, or God's board, with a design somewhat like a chevron in front, or is the design wrought upon a frontal hanging? Does the form of this altar—the high box type—suggest a relic altar placed over the grave of St Kentigern in the lower Church?¹

Now, if we look narrowly at this altar, it would seem to have something like feet upon which to stand. If so, it would be a feretrum or portable altar. Now, we know that Edward I. when he visited Glasgow in August and September 1301 made offerings ad feretrum—at the feretory—of St Kentigern in the church of Glasgow Cathedral.² Here then, in all probability, in this seal of 1280, we are gazing on a picture of the shrine of St Kentigern in the Lower Church, before which the King of England knelt in adoration in 1301.

But again, standing upon this altar is the sacred chalice or mass cup, apparently richly carved. Observe, the cup is broad and rather shallow, while the knop and the base are circular, the prevailing design of a chalice of the thirteenth century.³

From above the chalice there issues a hand—the Divine right hand—pointing with the thumb and two forefingers to the cup, as if in the language of symbol it uttered the words of consecration, "This is my blood." This hand of the Invisible was sometimes represented on seals with rays of light emanating therefrom, symbolising the irradiation of the Holy Spirit. Owing to the diminutive scale of representation on a seal, we do not see the cross engraved on the pedestal of the chalice, which, being the sign of consecration, must not be wanting in any mass chalice.

In the niche to the right of the central one is the full-length figure of a priest reading at the lectern from which the Gospel was read. As a rule, the simple desk was the earlier form of lectern belonging to the thirteenth century; it was not till the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that the "eagle" lectern came into vogue.⁴

In the left niche, again, there is a priest with hands uplifted in adoration of the sacrament. These figures, be it noted, show the style of priestly vestments worn in Scotland in the thirteenth century. This interior, as has been pointed out, bears a striking resemblance to that depicted on a seal of Dunfermline Abbey of 1200 or 1226.⁵

Now, some might object to the church on this seal being regarded as

¹ Lubtke's *Ecclesiastical Art in Germany* (Middle Ages), p. 129, translated by Wheatley, 1876.

² *Reg. Epis. Glasg.*, vol. ii. p. 621.

³ *Catholic Ency.*, art. "Chalice." The shape of the chalice varied according to the fashion of the times.

⁴ *English Church Furniture*, Cox and Harvey, p. 78.

⁵ Birch, *Scott. Seals*, *Eccles.*, vol. ii. pp. 86, 211.

an actual, albeit somewhat inaccurate, representation of Glasgow Cathedral in 1280, for various reasons. The clerestory windows, for example, are deficient in number, only a fourth of the whole. Again, there are no aisles and apparently no transepts. In short, it may be said there is, after all, little resemblance to Glasgow Cathedral. Here then is a problem for the architects, and one that may not be lightly dismissed. Perhaps few of our Scottish cathedrals have experienced more rebuilding than Glasgow; hence the proverb, "Like St Mungo's wark, it was never finished."

How account for the omission of the aisles? Were they still unbuilt in 1280?¹ Or did the engraver not wish to unduly elongate the elevation of the church on the seal, with the limited space at his disposal, and so purposely omit them? How account for the lack of transepts? It appears that architects are not quite decided as to whether the transepts we now see were erected towards the end of the thirteenth or the beginning of the fourteenth century. At any rate, the transepts of Glasgow are unusually short and by no means conspicuous.

Again, how account for the small number of clerestory windows? Whatever explanation be offered, it is well to bear in mind the restrictions of space necessary in a seal, and also what an authority like Blunt remarks, that seals were often engraved from memory, so that one can only expect a rough representation and not strict accuracy of detail.

Some who may be dissatisfied with the above explanation might say the representation on this chapter seal is not that of the Cathedral itself, but rather that of the shrine of St Kentigern, that stood in the Lower Church.² To this we reply, that shrines were sometimes actual models of churches.³ Besides, the shrine of St Kentigern was described in the year 1301 as a feretrum or portable shrine⁴—one, in all probability, that would stand on feet, as is clearly visible in the thirteenth-century chapter seal of Dunkeld.⁵ At any rate, there is nothing about the representation of the church on this seal that suggests a shrine or a feretory,—whatever evidence there be, points to its being the Cathedral itself.

THE REVERSE SIDE.

Turn attention now to the reverse side of the seal. Here is a half-length figure of St Kentigern, face bearded, wearing mitre and vestments,

¹ P. Macgregor Chalmers, *Glasgow Cathedral*, p. 26.

² P. Macgregor Chalmers, *Shrines of St Margaret and St Kentigern*.

³ Art. "Seals," *Ency. Brit.*

⁴ *Reg. Epis. Glasg.*, vol. ii. p. 621; and Joseph Bain's *The Edwards in Scotland*, p. 35.

⁵ Birch, *Scott. Seals*, *Eccles.*, plate 73.

his right hand upraised, with thumb and forefinger bestowing benediction, his crozier slightly ornamented and turned outwards.¹

Ostensibly in all the Glasgow pre-Reformation seals the chief figure is that of St Kentigern, the patron saint of the city, in his pontificals. A study of the faces on the various seals, however, reveals that they are the faces of different persons and not invariably one and the same. Why this? The reasonable explanation seems to be that the faces are those of the different prelates whose seals they are. As is well known, on the death

of a prelate his seal was solemnly broken in presence of the chapter and a new matrix designed for his successor, while the seal of the new bishop was made the occasion for an interesting ceremony. Besides, coins, medals, medallions usually bore the likeness of the sovereign or the distinguished individual in whose honour they were struck. Why not seals? The probability, which is suggested with some diffidence, is that the face on this seal is meant to portray the face of Robert Wishart, the bishop during whose rule it was designed.



Fig. 2. Chapter Seal of Glasgow Cathedral, circa 1280 A.D. (Reverse side.)

Unfortunately the plaster cast of this seal does not bring out the features with the distinctness exhibited in Laing's impression. It

would seem as if the matrix gave a somewhat blurred likeness, and that Laing accordingly was forced to copy the features from a later seal of Bishop Wishart's.²

Turn attention now to the mitre. Originally this was a simple linen cap, as we see in the seal of Bishop Jocelyn; then it became two-lobed, a kind of crown cleft in the middle, as in the seals of Bishops Walter and William. Then it passed during Bishop Wishart's long episcopate from the two-lobed shape to that of the peak in front, such as now obtains;³ so

¹ There seems to be no difference in the significance whether the crozier was turned outwards or inwards, other than what suited the seal-maker's convenience. The crozier here is a simple pastoral staff, only beginning to be ornamented— characteristic of the thirteenth century.

² For the seals of Glasgow, see *Reg. Epis. Glasg.*, vol. ii. p. xxxiv, etc., plate i. fig. 6, plate ii. fig. 1, plate iii. fig. 1, plate v. fig. 2.

³ If we study the seals in chronological order, we observe the evolution of the crozier, mitre, chalice, etc. (art. "Mitre," *Catholic Ency.*, and *Reg. Epis. Glasg.*, vol. ii. p. xxxiv, etc.).

that the shape of the mitre here is that which came into vogue in the later thirteenth century.

With reference to the vestments, if they be those of the bishop to whom the seal belongs, they are likely to be correct; but if they are supposed to represent those worn by St Kentigern, they are incorrect and misleading. We are not left to conjecture as to how the saint was attired. Jocelyn of Furness, his biographer, expressly informs us that St Kentigern used the roughest haircloth next to his skin, then a goat-skin coat, then a cowl like a fisherman's bound on him, above which, clothed in a white alb, he always wore a stole over his shoulders. His crozier was not ornamented, only of simple wood and merely bent, while he held in his hand his manual book.¹

Archbishop Blackadder, who regarded St Kentigern with great veneration, followed Jocelyn's description in the main, as we find upon a seal of his of 1500 A.D. Here St Kentigern is habited as a monk, with a cowl on his head surrounded by a nimbus, while underneath the outer garment at the neck is seen the ciliciæ or hair shirt, and in his hands a manual.²

It would be well if, the representation of the City Arms of Glasgow, granted by a patent from the Lyon Office in 1866, were rectified in this respect: true, they might not appear quite so picturesque, but they would be historically accurate. While heraldic art is usually conventional rather than realistic, as Sir James Balfour Paul observes, nevertheless the Glasgow Arms are peculiar, inasmuch as they are emblematic of the history and legends associated with St Mungo and the city.³

If now we examine the lower half of the reverse side, underneath three rounded arches—a distinctively Scottish feature of the Gothic—we observe three figures of clerics, one in each niche, with uplifted hands and kneeling, making intercession to the patron saint, as the inscription in Latin on the outer of the two circles round the edge of the seal informs us, "O Kentigern, benign father, bless thy servants."

THE WESTERN TOWERS.

Observe the spires over the first and third arches. This appears to be a representation of the western towers of the Cathedral as existing or designed when the seal was made.

It seems from an examination of the early seals that it was not an uncommon practice thus to represent the western front. It is found in a twelfth-century chapter seal of Battle Abbey, in a thirteenth-century

¹ *Historians of Scotland*, vol. v. p. 57.

² Archbishop James Beaton I. has a similar design of St Kentigern upon his seal.

³ MacGeorge, *Armorial Bearings of the City of Glasgow*.

chapter seal of St Paul's, London, and in a fourteenth-century chapter seal of Lichfield.¹

Nor was Glasgow alone in Scotland in the possession of western towers, for the same feature was exhibited in the churches of Elgin, Aberdeen, Brechin, and Paisley. These western towers of Glasgow were termed respectively the north-west and the south-west towers. The north-west tower was also known as the Campanile or Steeple, while the south-west tower was known as the Treasury. The latter contained the Consistory House on the ground-floor and the Library House on the upper storey. Both of these towers seem to have had a chequered career, and passed through several vicissitudes till their most unfortunate demolition in 1846-48.

If this seal give the appearance of the western towers as originally designed, there must have been subsequent alterations. In 1277, Bishop Wishart procured from the Lord of Luss a grant of timber for the building of a campanile and a treasury for the cathedral.² Yet in 1291 the bishop is represented as begging from King Edward I. a supply of timber for building a "clocher"—evidently the campanile—showing that he had not enough of material on hand to finish it. Then the Great War of Independence took place and stopped further building operations for a considerable period.³

The next mention of the campanile—termed the "steeple"—occurs in 1524, when the castle and the kirk steeple, which had been fortified, were besieged by the great guns of Regent Arran; after which, doubtless, it would be more or less damaged.⁴

From the style of these western towers in the earliest pictures taken when they were still standing, architects consider it apparent that additions and alterations were subsequently made from time to time.⁵

To sum up the information gleaned from this chapter seal of 1280, it may be said from the style of the architecture depicted, from the designs of the altar, chalice, mitre, crozier, and lectern, that the whole atmosphere is undoubtedly that of the thirteenth century. And since these are all real and not merely conventional representations, it is difficult from this and other considerations to resist the conclusion that the church represented is a rude, diminutive sketch of the Cathedral, and that the face—ostensibly that of St Kentigern—is more probably a likeness of the bishop who ruled the diocese at the time—Robert Wishart, the warrior bishop, who warmly supported Wallace and Bruce, and whose besetting sin was patriotism, during the Great War of Scottish Independence.

¹ J. H. Blunt, *English Seals*, pp. 206-8.

² *Reg. Epis. Glasg.*, No. 229.

³ Palgrave, *Documents and Records, History of Scotland*, vol. i. pp. 346-7; *Medieval Glasgow*, by Primrose, pp. 38-40.

⁴ *Medieval Glasgow*, p. 196.

⁵ Eyre Todd's *Book of Glasgow Cathedral*, p. 275; Macgregor Chalmers, *Glasgow Cathedral*.