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## 17 General discussion *by Gordon Ewart*

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The results of the excavation have been expressed as a simple sequence of building, repair and decline, but clearly also demonstrate the evolution of the house within key historic periods. In discussing the significance of the findings, evidence of this evolution is reviewed in terms of specific episodes of construction work on the site. There are three historical periods against which the episodic development of the buildings within the abbey complex can be best reviewed, in as much as prevailing conditions enabled the abbey to be successful, and which also more acutely prescribed and determined the scale and nature of the changes to the buildings.

### 17.1 Colonisation and early success: 12th to late 13th centuries

As suggested above the foundation of the abbey by Fergus, Lord of Galloway in 1142 is likely to have been inspired, at least in part, by David I of Scotland's support for the Cistercian Order. However, it should be borne in mind that Dundrennan was essentially part of the Lordship of Galloway, whereas the Border Abbeys of Kelso, Jedburgh and Melrose were all seen by their royal patron as being at the heart of his kingdom. The king had close associations with England and these latter foundations were intended to serve territories on either side of what was to become the Scottish border. Their subsequent role as sites close to the frontier between two hostile powers was not a factor, therefore, in their original foundation. In contrast, Dundrennan was seen as an expression of the aspirations of an independent lord, representing a distinct territory, in Galloway. With the emergence of Fergus during the early decades of the 12th century, a line of succession was established for Galloway, culminating with Alan (d.1234), himself buried at Dundrennan. Over almost a century Dundrennan was closely associated with Fergus and his heirs, although it was Fergus himself who was the most pious and generous to the foundation, granting it extensive lands and estates, reflected in the later parish of Rerrick. It is probable that concern for the welfare of his immortal sole was a prime concern for Fergus, but as a lord and patron to the abbey, he was an individual who considered himself of the same degree of nobility as the royal house itself. The scale of the donations to Dundrennan at once identify Fergus as a man of considerable means, as well as sincere piety.

The sequence of building and conversion revealed in the excavations indicates how the independence of the Cistercian Order initially functioned alongside, and later became a function of, Gallovidian interests

from the 12th to the 16th century. The family of Fergus were of Hiberno-Norse stock, and they appear to have owed much of the structure of their lordship of Galloway to earlier Celtic customs. They depended on a strong and active fleet for the maintenance of their power-base, and in their campaigns against Norse and mainland Irish neighbours. Alan of Galloway was regarded as the greatest warrior of his time, and as a successful ruler was able to protect Gallovidian interests and secure its frontiers after the various attempts to invade by English and Scottish forces. It was only his failure to produce a legitimate male heir which brought the line of Fergus, and with it that of the early lords of Galloway, to an end. The consequent uncertainty and political instability which developed, as factions strove to lay a claim to the lordship, heralded not only the demise of the lordship of Galloway, but the onset of war between England and Scotland. This larger conflict subsumed the particular interests of the ancient lordship of Galloway, as many of the active participants, the Baliols, de Lacys, Stewarts and Bruces, had strong connections with southwestern Scotland, and the territorial cohesion of the early lordship was soon lost.

It is significant therefore that the burgeoning success of the early lords, seen in Fergus and his heirs, coincided almost exactly with the development of the abbey up until the completion of the major building works of Period II (c 1230–1320). The prestigious rebuilding work within the nave and chapter house in particular reflects the ongoing success of the Cistercian Order, as the *conversi* and increasing revenue enabled expensive reinvestment in the fabric of originally more austere buildings. The most dramatic examples of this period of high-quality building work found during the excavation comprise rooms 4 and 5 (see 4.3.2 Room 4 and 4.3.3 Room 5), featuring fine architectural details, both *in situ* and implied by the quantities of worked stones from the stone vaulting. Within the typical Cistercian plan, these rooms are likely to represent the monks' and novices' day rooms, respectively (illus 5). The relatively high quality of the architecture in rooms 4 and 5 can be compared to that of the more elaborate extant work in the chapter house, giving the Period II east range a very impressive appearance. After the church, the chapter house was the most important structure in the hierarchy of monastic buildings, followed by the refectory.

The abbey's prosperity could only be achieved, however, within a secure socio-political context, and the requirements for effective trade and estate management saw increased economic integration with the local area. It has been argued that disciplinary

measures taken against superiors of the house during the 13th century were inspired by their affiliation with the interests of Thomas of Galloway, the illegitimate son of Alan. Whatever the facts of this particular matter, it is certain that recruitment by the Cistercians within Galloway would have given the community a particular social allegiance which would not have impinged on its European network of interests with other houses of the Order. The choice of Dundrennan for the burial place of Alan of Galloway confirms this central role for the abbey as the pre-eminent foundation for his dynastic group. It in turn became part of the landscape of secular power, alongside early castle sites such as Buittle, the Motte of Urr, Threave and Kirkcudbright, which formed an important defensive line for the early lordship. The abbey resides within a landscape rich in early medieval prestige sites, reflecting the power and status of its patrons, yet within its wooded valley it remained sufficiently secluded to meet the requirements of the Order.

In considering to what extent local factors, other than the provision of sufficient economic resources and physical security from attack, influenced the design and character of the Cistercian planned architecture, comparison with Irish foundations is enlightening. It is probably as appropriate to review Dundrennan in an Irish/western seaboard context as it is in relation to Anglo-Norman influences via Rievaulx, given the role of St Malachy (see 3. Historical context) and the distinct separation between the lordship of Galloway and the rest of mainland Scotland. Yet there is little which can be identified with native building traditions in the architecture of contemporary Irish Cistercian houses. Any comparisons therefore between Dundrennan and Irish houses of the Cistercians reside within the motives of Irish-based patrons who, like Fergus, favoured the Order in their attempts to rationalise the existing systems of Celtic Christian observance. In the case of Galloway, the importance of Whithorn and the veneration of St Ninian represented well-established Christian interests which the Cistercian Order was able to exploit to its benefit, and the later (13th-century) Bishops of Whithorn display a distinct Cistercian bias. In due course, with the foundation of its daughter houses at Glenluce and Sweetheart, Cistercian interests were extended during the 13th century, allowing Dundrennan increased influence in greater Galloway, probably as part of an established tradition of pilgrimage to Whithorn. The success of the Order in Ireland and Galloway may be regarded in part as a product of the existing and well-developed Christian tradition of these areas, onto which the highly centralised administrative and economic regime of the Cistercian order could be superimposed.

The hybridised nature of the government of Galloway – a ‘kingdom within a kingdom’ – where feudal duty and traditional overlordship were coincident, is also paralleled by the colonisation of Ireland by Anglo-Norman lords. It is possible that alongside the

need to fulfil the criteria for the enclosed, ascetic life of the community in the 12th century, the broader life of such a community within a Celtic society would inevitably influence the character of that community. The brethren at Dundrennan may have existed within a self-defining spiritual community over the first 100 years of the abbey’s life. With the inevitable increase in integration with the local community through trade, and also through the progressive dilution of original ideals, the character of the house may well have owed as much to western seaboard culture as it did to rules and policies imposed from the mother house. Existing traditions of pilgrimage and trade, alongside the links with France and Spain and combined with the independence of Galloway, remained consistent factors in the later history of the house, and of the area as a whole.

Local factors apart, and in keeping with general Cistercian trends prior to the later 14th century (Period III), the house benefited from the increased wealth generated within the Order as a whole, particularly by the exploitation of the *conversi*. At Dundrennan the lay brothers’ dormitory is thought to have extended along the west range, and the increased size of the community is certainly implied by the changes to the great drain. This was modified in Period II to serve a variety of waste-disposal functions, probably centring on the lay brothers’ ranges further to the west (see 4.3.6 Great drain modified). Prestige building works within the nave and the chapter house are seen as part of the general completion of the abbey buildings in stone (Period II). Although the excavated evidence for Period I was slight and the work may well have progressed in stages over an extended period, a distinction is maintained in the archaeological account between an earlier cloister layout and its completion (Period II).

From colonisation to the mid 13th century, the gradual extension and refinement of the abbey, featuring an important example of Early Gothic in Scotland, was facilitated by the continuity of the lordship of Galloway.

## 17.2 Remodelling in the 14th-century

The evident remodelling of Dundrennan in the 14th century fits well with our knowledge of the religious and economic conditions which prevailed at the time. The monasteries of Galloway suffered much during the wars with England. In 1299 the abbey of Dundrennan and Sweetheart petitioned Edward I on a number of issues including confirmation of their lands ‘held by charter of their founder and others’ and for ‘relief from seignurages and talliaiges imposed contrary to their franchise and founder’s charter, to their great impoverishment, whereby they can neither maintain themselves, the service of God, nor the alms of the house’ (*Calendar* II, no. 1123, 286). It is not known when these taxes were imposed, but it was undoubtedly the case that their

collection in time of war must have placed a substantial burden on monastic resources. The abbey suffered at the hands of both English and Scottish troops. The abbot of Sweetheart sought 'restoration of 8 sacks of good wool taken for the king Edward I by Sir Harsculf de Cleseby out of a grange at Holm Cultram where they had placed it for safety from the Scots'; and both Dundrennan and Sweetheart also sought reparation for their respective destruction and burnings in the war – the abbot of Sweetheart estimated that the destruction cost his abbey £5,000, whereas the abbot of Dundrennan sought £8,000 (*ibid*). Unfortunately, the exact nature of the damage is unknown; on one hand it may have referred to destruction wrought on the buildings of the monastic complex itself, on the other, it may have referred to the burning of crops and the destruction or spoilation of monastic granges and food reserves. Moreover, at the outbreak of hostilities the monks of Dundrennan were ejected from the abbey's Irish possessions 'for no other reason than that they were Scots' (**Calendar** V.i, no. 2414, 479). Dundrennan would have lost all income from those lands.

While it is true to say that the wars with England had a detrimental affect on Dundrennan and the abbey's ability to successfully exploit its agrarian and economic resources, the decline in the monastery's fortunes had set in well before the 1290s and involved a series of factors apart from the dislocation caused by war. The number of lay brothers in the Order (the normal workforce of the abbey) declined during the 13th century to such an extent that by 1300 they no longer played a role in monastic organisation. By the 14th century the great age of monastic construction and endowment was at an end. The huge blocks of territory such as those which had been donated to the abbey in the 12th and 13th centuries were no longer available. More importantly, the nobility no longer looked to monastic patronage as a means of demonstrating their piety or noble status and, consequently, donations to the monasteries declined markedly over the course of the 13th century.

Furthermore, after 1350 Scotland experienced a period of general economic decline which must have had an appreciable influence on monastic economy: in a revision of land values undertaken in 1366 the Church's total assessment was reduced by 37% (**Grant 1984**, 95). After 1400 income from wool also fell, and considering the importance of wool as the chief monastic trading commodity, it is perhaps safe to assume that the abbey would have experienced a dramatic fall in income.

Overall, an increasing number of financial burdens during the 13th century, the loss of lay brothers (leaving areas of the monastic complex on the west side of the cloister underused) and the dislocation and destruction brought about by war with England led eventually to the necessity for remodelling of the monastic buildings in the 14th century. Of course, there is evidence that at least one French stonemason worked in Galloway in the years around 1400, and it is tempting to think that he may have

worked at Dundrennan, although this cannot be proven. John Morow of Paris is known from an inscription at Melrose Abbey where he listed his name, place of birth and the places where he had worked in Scotland. These included St Andrews, Glasgow, Melrose, Paisley, Nithsdale and Galloway.

The precise causes of damage which prompted the repairs to the latrine block are not known, but there is good circumstantial evidence to suggest that it was the destabilisation of the south and east façades of the Period II buildings in this part of the site which necessitated those measures. The east and south walls of the two-storey latrine block appear to have been located at the extreme edges of the preferred building platform for the cloister. Shallow terracing is evident in a progressive step-system along the rooms of the south range, and also leading down from the chapter house towards the south-east corner of the cloister. The net effect of these shallow steps is an overall drop in level between the cloister and the floor of room 5. One of the important roles of the south and east walls of the latrine block therefore was to retain the weight of masonry coming from both directions (west and north) and torevet the building terraces. In Period III it is clear that the additional buttresses, and room 12, served in part to strengthen the south side of the latrine block, as well as to mitigate the loss of a significant part of room 5 and the storey above (see 4.4.3 Room 12). In functional terms these measures can be seen as an attempt to reduce the east/west alignment by a critical amount, and to reinforce a north/south alignment for this, the junction of the east and south ranges. The natural flood plain of the meandering river to the east was clearly artificially enhanced to receive the stone ranges. The present boggy nature of the terrain to the east of the abbey and the indications that terracing was also required for secondary abbey buildings to the east suggests that drainage in this area was always a difficulty (see 5. Geophysics and trial trenches). Later agricultural evidence from the 17th and 18th centuries suggests that the ground was extensively top-dressed to alleviate this tendency. The presence of a likely monastic pond towards the angle of the river bend to the east of the site also tends to confirm the natural propensity of the area to flooding.

There was a need to carry out the repairs outlined above, therefore, but prevailing economic factors at the end of the 14th-century were apparently far from conducive to extensive rebuilding. The effects of almost 100 years of war with England, in terms of loss of trade, as well as damage to the abbey buildings themselves, the effects of the Black Death after 1350, and the loss of a free labour force in the form of the *conversi*, all combined to deplete the resources of the house and the Order in general during the later 14th century. The needs of the reduced community were very different, therefore, from those of the earlier colonists.

The character of the Order towards the beginning of the 15th century changed, being more inclined

towards the 'individual' in terms of residential requirements in the absence of a permanent contingent of servants. Consequently the great communal spaces of the refectory and dormitory were of declining importance. The tendency towards individual accommodation does not, however, necessarily imply any decline in the conduct of the brethren, nor the dedication of their faith. However, at this time the new house of Stewart – in the person of King Robert II – saw advantages in maintaining, or in recreating a stable framework for the re-establishment of trade and social order after the relative chaos of the decades of the Wars of Independence. From this perspective there would have been mutual advantages in the preservation of this and other Cistercian communities. The depredations of war and disease had affected royal resources considerably and it is testament to the efficient organisation of the king's vastly reduced revenues that the work at Dundrennan and other great buildings, both secular and religious, was commissioned under Robert II. The close mutual interests of the royal house of Scotland and the Cistercian Order were further cemented by their mutual adherence to the Avignon Papacy during the Great Schism. As an Order with French origins, the Cistercians plainly had to affiliate themselves with a French Pope, a policy which was also followed by the Scottish kings, in contrast to their English counterparts.

So in considering the changes made during Period III, they may well reflect straightforward maintenance, but they occurred at a time when the evolving interests and character of the Order could be accommodated by the adaptation of the earlier monastic plan. The changes in day-to-day routine are defined through the progressive sub-division of the rooms excavated, toward less and less communal access and function, even ultimately replacing communal latrines with cruder, but separate external garderobes (see 4.4.4 Great drain and garderobes). This trend is evinced on most monastic sites, but it is all the more marked at Dundrennan, given the extreme asceticism and regularity of the original Cistercian regime, and consequent impact on its 12th- and 13th-century layout. Thereafter, an important role for Dundrennan in both regional and national affairs was maintained, by adapting to the requirements of a new regime.

### 17.3 Commendatorship

The role of abbatial estates as potential sources of revenue and political advantage was an increasing aspect of the later years of the 15th century. In addition, the practice of appointing lay administrators recruited from the local nobility – or commendators – became well established in the early decades of the 16th century. This trend, along with the gradual decline of numbers of monks within the monastic houses in general, heralded the demise of the monastic tradition. The progress of the Reformation in

Scotland did not, however, echo the cathartic changes of the English Reformation, and the role of the abbeys again reflects a gradual, rather than a dramatic shift of emphasis, from serving the needs of a dwindling community of monks to those of a landlord in residence. Despite the fact that the abbey as a monastic institution came to an end with the Reformation of 1560, some of the monks continued to live there alongside successive commendators.

The long-standing trade links with France and Spain emanating from the great network of associated houses thrived throughout the 16th century, particularly in the movement of wine and luxury goods. It was only with the Union of Crowns in 1603 that the trade between mainland Europe and south-west Scotland diminished to any significant degree. This economic background, coupled with the maintenance of monastic estates, enabled the commendators at Dundrennan to prosper and to develop a particular political agenda, based on their Catholic faith.

The changes enacted at Dundrennan show how the large open spaces in the ranges were now subdivided further, given timber floors and ultimately blocked-off, creating cellars, arguably for the storage of goods deriving from the still intact, formerly monastic estates around the abbey (see 4.6.1 Rooms 1 and 3; and 4.6.2 Rooms 4 and 6). Edward Maxwell, who was commendator between 1562 and 1598, may have lived at the abbey, at least until his marriage. The wealth of 16th-century deposits found in association with the sub-divided warming house and novice's day room could well date from this period. It is known that Edward Maxwell had a considerable household of servants, who in part were maintained to protect his own livestock, pastured on the old abbey estates. Edward in turn was an active Catholic in the political arena alongside his father, Sir John Maxwell of Terregles, 4th Lord Herries. Dundrennan was valued by the Maxwells to the extent that his appointment as commendator had occurred when he was a minor, to ensure that the estate remained within family hands. The importance of the house of Dundrennan and its estates is reflected by the findings of the excavation. Despite the high degree of disturbance, due primarily to the effects of demolition and stone robbing programmes of the 17th and 18th centuries, the continued occupation of the site throughout the 16th century is reflected by the assemblages retrieved.

To conclude, a relatively cursory examination of the archaeological sequence at Dundrennan has provided a useful addition to the corpus of archaeological evidence relating to the Cistercian Order in Scotland. The results represent both a sequence of building adaptation within the abbey and also its changing role within a wider historical context: the condition of the Cistercian house at Dundrennan was critical both to the community within its walls and to the wider community of Galloway. The combined motivations of an imposed, alien model (the Cistercian foundation), fully formed and

independent, alongside the political aspirations of its patrons and ultimately its owners, engendered the progressive building programmes identified as Periods I–V. The abbey buildings certainly ceased to be of significance with the establishment of the temporal lordship in 1606, and their swift demolition

soon followed (other than the church) as most of the buildings served no useful function within the new parish of the Reformed church. With the archaeological investigations of the site during the 19th and earlier 20th centuries, the abbey was once again heralded as a great cultural and community resource.