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IV.

THE MONYMUSK RELIQUARY OR BRECBENNOCH OF ST COLUMBA.

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The recent acquisition by the Nation of the famous Monymusk Reliquary makes it desirable to remind the public of to-day about the history and character of this beautiful work of the art of the Celtic period. That period was one of very high artistic development in things of small size. It produced no great buildings; its churches, though numerous, were remarkably small, but in metal-work, in the writing and illumination of manuscripts, and also in certain forms of sculpture we may claim that it has never been surpassed. If the Monymusk Reliquary has not the superlative quality of the Hunterston brooch or the Ardagh chalice, it belongs to the same category of art, and the fact that we in Scotland possess few such treasures compared with those in Ireland, gives it an added importance, and makes the securing of it for the Nation an event of outstanding significance.

It is not possible to add anything very material to what the late Dr Joseph Anderson said about it in *Scotland in Early Christian Times*, as far back as 1881 (pp. 241 *sq.*). Subsequently Dr Anderson dealt more fully with this and other similar objects in a paper entitled "The Architecturally Shaped Shrines and other Reliquaries of the Early Celtic Church in Scotland and Ireland." This was printed in our *Proceedings*, vol. xlv., 1909-10. In reviewing the available material on the subject one is amazed at the brilliance and ability of Dr Anderson. With the passage of time it becomes increasingly evident how very great an antiquary he was, and how acute and accurate were his judgments. It is true that an occasion has arisen, an occasion upon which Dr Anderson would have rejoiced more than anyone, when it is necessary to go over the facts once again, but I cannot do so without feeling that it is almost an impertinence to attempt to cover the same ground, for there is little, if anything, that I can add.

Four classes of objects of personal use seem to have been specially cherished in the Celtic Church on account of association with the saints. These are their books, bells, crosiers or staves, and portable reliquaries to be hung round the neck. We are familiar with objects of each kind. There is the Cathach of St Columba, a psalter in a silver shrine, now at Dublin; there are the bells of Saints Patrick, Fillan, Finan, and

others; the crosiers of Saints Fillan and Moluag. Of the reliquaries only six exist, of which the Monymusk Reliquary is one. Dr Anderson considered it the finest of all as a work of art.

In the case of books, bells, and crosiers, we have objects actually used by the saints, afterwards enshrined in elaborate metal cases for their better preservation. In that of the reliquaries we have only the shrines without the contents and we do not know what these were. Is it possible to make any suggestion as to this? At first sight the shape of the reliquary, so like that of the larger shrines in the great churches of non-Celtic lands, from which has been traced the shape of the hog-backed stones, suggests that it contained some portion of the body of the saint. But this is by no means certain. It is the shrine itself, the Brebennoch, and not its contents, which is specified in the documents concerned with its use and custody. Its importance does not seem to have been other than that of the bell or the book or the crosier, objects used in the service of the church by the saint. If we follow this line of inquiry, we may be led to ask for what liturgical purpose these shrines could have been used. The answer may be that they were used for carrying the reserved Eucharist and the holy oils for the use of the sick. This would explain their oblong form. It must be remembered that the idea that the Eucharist must not be reserved in the same aumbry as the holy oils belongs to the latter part of the mediæval period, if not to the time of the counter-reformation abroad. If there be any truth in this theory it would account for the suspensory form of these vessels and also for the close parallel between their treatment and that of the other personal relics of the Celtic saints.

The other Celtic shrines of reliquary type which have survived are the following:—

(1) The Breac Mogue or Shrine of St Moedoc or Aedan of Ferns, now in the National Museum, Dublin. Probably eleventh century, and has not hipped ends like the rest.

(2) A shrine found in the Shannon, now in the National Museum here.

(3) A shrine brought up on a fishing line from the bottom of Lough Erne in Ireland, now in the National Museum, Dublin.

(4) A shrine taken by Vikings to Norway, now in Copenhagen Museum.

(5) Another found in a Viking grave mound at Melhus in the Namdalen Valley, Norway, now in Trondhjem Museum. Believed to be of the seventh century.

The Monymusk Reliquary, for reasons to be explained later, was identified by Dr Anderson as the Brebennoch of St Columba. It consists of a rectangular box and a hinged lid in the form of a hipped roof,



THE MONYMUSK RELIQUARY (Full Size).

both of wood and roughly hollowed out of the solid. The front of the casket and the lid are covered with thin plates of silver, and the back, bottom, and ends with similar plates of bronze, the junctions being clasped by semi-tubular bindings of the latter metal. The ridge on the top is surmounted by a rounded bar with flat projecting terminals, rounded above and flat on the under side. At one end of the casket is a hinged bronze arm to receive the end of the strap by which the reliquary could be suspended round the neck of the individual who carried it on his breast. This arm is hinged on a semicircular plate attached to the side of the box, and at the top is a small free ring. The corresponding attachment on the opposite end is lost, but the rivet holes where it was fixed remain. The reliquary measures $4\frac{3}{8}$ inches in length and 2 inches in breadth at the base and $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches in total height.

The silver plates on the front of the box and on the lid are decorated by interlaced lacertine animals, lightly incised, the background being stippled with small punctulations.

In the medial line of the plate on the lid are three applied plaques. The central one is circular, and it is enclosed by a moulding of semi-circular section, decorated with three equally spaced segmental settings of red enamel, and on either side is one of rectangular shape, with similar mouldings on the border, having inlays of red enamel at the corners. The circular panel has a rosette in the centre surrounded by a running interlaced pattern cut in relief, and the two at the sides have four interlaced designs between the margin and a small rectangular protuberance in the centre. On the front of the box there had been originally three plaques of similar shape and design to those above, but the central one has been rectangular and those at the sides circular. Only the circular one on the left side survives. The back and ends are without ornamentation. All the plaques and the top bar have been gilded.

In the centre of the bar on the ridge is a rectangular slightly projecting panel of interlaced work, the terminals being similarly ornamented back and front, with a circular setting of dark blue glass in the centre: the glass setting in the left projection is the only one which remains. The top of the panel in the centre has been filled with red enamel. The edges of the projections bear a herring-bone milled design.

The hinge plate is enamelled red with a semicircular star in the centre enamelled yellow. The loose arm is also enamelled red, with S-shaped scrolls on the sides and bottom appearing through the colour, and with a triquetra above. At the top is a small round socket which, presumably, had contained a setting of blue glass.

It may be noted that in Dr Anderson's illustrations and descriptions of the shrine the two missing ornamental plaques in front are

represented as existing; this was in 1880. Apparently this was a restoration for the purpose of the illustration, as Stuart's picture in his *Sculptured Stones of Scotland*, vol. ii. plate xi., shows that they were missing in 1867.

There seems no reason to dispute the identity of this reliquary with the object described in documents as the Brebennoch of St Columba. In a charter of William the Lion, before 1211, he grants to the monks of Arbroath this Brebennoch and

"the lands of Forglen given to God and to St Columba and to the Brebennoch, they making therefor the service in the army with the Brebennoch which is due to me from the said lands."

Now the church of Forglen in Banffshire was dedicated in honour of St Adamnan, St Columba's successor and biographer, and Dr Anderson suggested that the shrine had very likely been attached to Forglen before it and its lands were granted to Arbroath.

In 1314, after having been at the battle of Bannockburn, Bernard, Abbot of Arbroath, with consent of his chapter, no doubt to avoid further military service, granted the Brebennoch and its lands to Malcolm of Monymusk, on condition that he should perform in their name the military service connected with it.

From that time to the present the shrine has been at Monymusk, in possession of the family owning the castle there. It is mentioned repeatedly in documents down to 1512. A fire in Monymusk Priory in 1554 caused it to be removed to the tower of the castle, now included in the present house, where it remained until acquired for the Museum.

It has been suggested that the name Brebennoch meant "the blessed Brec" or "the speckled blessed one, breac bennaichte." Professor W. J. Watson, F.S.A.Scot., derives the name from "breac-bennach," the variegated or speckled peaked one;¹ the older spelling would be, in Middle Irish, "breacc-bennach," and Brec is the name by which the similar shrine of St Moedoc or Aedan of Ferns in Ireland is described.

It is manifestly impossible to question the identification of the reliquary till recently at Monymusk Castle with the Brebennoch of these mediæval documents.

It should hardly be necessary to add that, as pointed out by Dr W. Douglas Simpson in *Proceedings*, vol. lix., 1924-5, p. 38, the shrine "has no ascertained connection either with the Culdee settlement or with the Priory" at Monymusk.

The *cultus* or veneration of the relics of saints is ancient and widespread in the Christian Church. Attention has often been drawn to the strange practices—as they seem to us—which went on in this

¹ *Celtic Place-names of Scotland*, p. 281.

connection in the Middle Ages, the theft of relics by churchmen, the traffic in spurious ones, the financial scandals. But as early as the fourth century there is evidence of the belief in the association of certain phenomena with the relics of saints. However little understood or greatly abused, there seems reason to believe that such phenomena had a sufficiently objective existence to account for some, at any rate, of the uses to which relics soon came to be put. Any further consideration of this side of the subject, however desirable it may be, or whatever light future investigation may shed upon it, is no concern of ours in this connection. But it seems desirable to go so far as to suggest that the uses to which relics were put of old were dictated by phenomena which some to-day would call "psychic" and which, if better understood, might help to explain why in actual practice certain lines were followed which, taken at their face-value, seem somewhat arbitrary.

Relics of saints included not merely bones or fragments of their bodies, but objects that had been in specially close contact with them. Such objects seem to have been thought to constitute in some mysterious way links by which it was possible to make contact with the spirit of the saint and so secure his presence and help.

It was believed that such relics helped to keep away evil influences or evil spirits, and that they had healing properties. Hence we find them carried by persons and used for protection. Thus came the special regard attached to such small shrines as that we are considering now and the particular use to which we believe they were put, namely, carrying on the field of battle.

This is specified in the documents, and the name of Cathach given to the psalter of St Columba means that which is connected with a battle.

This psalter was carried in battle in Ireland as late as 1497 on the breast of its keeper. The crosier of St Columba was carried in like manner and was called the Cath Bhuath. The use of the word *vevillum* in Latin, as referring to these relics, when carried in battle, has caused some confusion, as it has been misread as referring to a banner in the ordinary sense instead of to these relics when used in this particular way.

From Rome there spread, it would seem, the custom of consecrating a church by means of the burial of some martyr within it, beneath its altar. This derives from the custom of meeting for worship at the martyr's grave and celebrating the Eucharist over his tomb. In A.D. 787, the Second Council of Nicæa forbade the consecration of an altar without the enclosing within it of the relics of a saint. But the Gallican or non-Roman method of consecrating a church or altar was different, and there is reason to think that in the Celtic Church altars were

consecrated without relics. Certainly in the later Middle Ages, when the services for consecrating churches and altars consisted of a conflation of both Roman and Gallican elements, there is some evidence that in this country the use of relics was at times dispensed with. So far as we can tell the chief use of relics in the Celtic Church was that of the permanent preservation and endowment of these objects of personal association with the great saints, which were safeguarded by being committed, not so much to any one church as to the custody of a hereditary keeper or Dewar. This is the most striking use with which we are brought in contact in Celtic Scotland and Ireland, but it obviously does not exclude other uses of relics such as are to be found elsewhere.

The reader who desires more information about the Breckennoch and similar personal relics of Celtic saints should read the writings of the late Dr Joseph Anderson, to which reference has already been made.

The reliquary was bought by subscriptions received from friends of the Museum in Scotland, and by a contribution of more than half of the purchase price given by the National Art Collections Fund. It may now be rightly regarded as one of the greatest treasures of the Scottish nation.