

Kilmartin Stones in Scotland

By

Sir Knight David P. McCash

One of the fascinating periods of Templar history is the order's legacy in Scotland. The persecutions that took place between 1307 and 1314 left surviving groups of Knights Templar removing themselves from the hands of their persecutors. One place of refuge was to be found in Scotland. Even though historians agree that the supporting documentation is miniscule, the "legends and traditions" are there. What about physical evidence, the empirical witness that would substantiate the "legends and traditions?"

In the western part of Scotland, in the heart of Argyll is a small village named Kilmartin. Within and immediately around the Kilmartin area there are "eight hundred historic monuments."¹ The parish church at Kilmartin has an adjacent graveyard that contains a collection of early Christian and medieval carved stones. In the graveyard, there are row after row, close to eighty, weathered flatstones or grave-slabs that are used for covering a gravesite. Some of these grave-slabs contain decorative motifs, clan devices, and Masonic symbols. The most telling of the grave-slabs are the ones that contain

no markings or names except an incised imprint of a real, life size, straight sword.

A plaque at the church indicates that the earliest flatstones or slabs at Kilmartin date to around 1300. It was a custom of the time to take the deceased man's sword and lay it upon a flatstone and outline the sword and chisel the outline into the stone. The plaque also indicates that "most" of these grave-slabs were the work of sculptors from the 14th and early 15th centuries.

The "Baillie" of Kilmartin and Loch Awe from the year 1296 on, was Sir Neil Campbell, an ally and brother-in-law of Robert the Bruce. It is assumed that the earliest graves at Kilmartin were the men that served under Sir Neil's command. It is the belief of Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, the authors and researchers of the book, *The Temple and The Lodge*, that these grave-slabs at Kilmartin that contain only a straight sword likeness on the stone are those of Templar knights. They are familiar with known Templar

sites that are found in England, France, Spain, and the Middle East along with burial sites that are accepted to be those of Knights Templar. They write, "those graves displayed the same characteristics as



the graves in Kilmartin. They were invariably simple, austere, devoid of decoration. Frequently, though not always, they were marked by the simple straight sword. They were always anonymous.”²

After the fall of Acre in 1292, Robert the Bruce became Earl of Carrick. Robert the Bruce wielded power in Scotland during the period that the order of the Temple was being suppressed elsewhere. Robert the Bruce’s career extended through the period of Philippe IV’s orders in 1307 to have all Templar knights arrested in his domain in France to the period of the battle of Bannockburn in 1314, just after Jacques de Molay’s death.

It needs to be remembered that outside of papal power and authority itself over Christian monarchs, “the most powerful, most prestigious, most apparently unshakable institution of its age” was the order of the Temple. At the time of King Philippe of France, the order was already two hundred years old and one of the pillars of Christendom in the West. It wasn’t until 1312 that the order of the Temple was officially dissolved by papal decree. It can be shown that Philippe’s power subverted the papacy at that time, and it must be considered that Philippe wanted all Templar knights arrested because of his fear of military retaliation against him for his arresting and torturing of the leading knights of the order. For the purpose of this article, it isn’t my intent to list reasons why Philippe and papacy moved against the order. What is important is the effect that Philippe’s power and the papacy had upon the order and where it sought refuge.

When Philippe sent an envoy to King Edward II of England, soliciting his help to

seek out, arrest, interrogate, and imprison Templar knights within his dominion, Edward sent a letter to the kings of Portugal, Castile, Aragon, and Sicily stating that Philippe’s envoy, “dared to publish before us...certain horrible and detestable enormities repugnant to the Catholic faith, to the prejudice of the aforesaid brothers, endeavoring to persuade us...to imprison all the brethren...” Edward then instructed them to, “...turn a deaf ear to the slanders of ill-natured men, who are animated, as we believe, not with the zeal of rectitude, but with a spirit of cupidity and envy...”³

Shortly after this, Edward received a papal bull sanctioning and justifying the arrests. It will be shown later why Edward was under obligation to obey papal edicts. Edward then reluctantly ordered all sheriff’s to arrest Templar knights within their respective domains. As key members were arrested, many others took the opportunity to mix into the English population or to leave the country. Even though Edward arrested some members of the order, it took papal inquisitors arriving in England for Edward to issue another order to officials in Ireland and Scotland to arrest the Templar knights within their dominions. This indicates that Edward had knowledge that more Templar knights existed who had not been arrested as of 1309 when these papal representatives arrived in England. There are letters sent by Edward to his sheriffs indicating that after some of the Templar knights were placed under arrest within corresponding castles, they were allowed to freely walk about. Even though Edward formally rebuked the sheriffs for allowing them to do so, it was the papal inquisitors who wanted to torture them to extract confessions of wrong doing that



they asserted was unwarranted.

Interestingly, Robert the Bruce in 1306, before the persecution of the Templar knights began, was excommunicated from the church of the Holy Roman Empire and would remain so for the next twelve years. In 1304, Bruce's father died, leaving Robert with a direct claim to the throne. John Comyn, Bruce's rival, was under English control and thus papal edict. Bishop Lamberton in 1299 returned from Rome and was appointed as third guardian over Scotland. Lamberton supported Robert the Bruce in becoming king and on 10 February 1306, at the church of the Grey Friars in Dumfries, Robert the Bruce stabbed John Comyn with a dagger before the high altar and left Comyn

on the stone floor of the church to bleed to death. Comyn's death was not immediate, and monks who hoped to save the life of Comyn carried his bleeding body off to safety. When Robert the Bruce learned of this, he "returned to the church, dragged him back to the altar, and there slaughtered him."⁴ Historians believe that Robert the Bruce's act was in defiance not only against English influence and power in Scotland but against the church in Rome itself. The papacy reacted swiftly and excommunicated Bruce from the church. The two greatest ecclesiastical authorities in Scotland, Bishop Lamberton and Bishop Wishart of Glasgow, supported Bruce when he then laid claim to the throne. Six weeks after Comyn's death, at Scone, Bishop Lamberton crowned Robert the Bruce king, performed a mass for the new monarch, paid homage, and pledged fealty to the new king.

Because the papacy ceased to recognize Robert the Bruce, it was impossible for the pope to exercise his will over Robert the Bruce's dominion in Scotland. As the suppression of the order of the Temple spread from France to the rest of Europe, Scotland became a place of refuge for Templar knights under Bruce's protection from the edicts of the pope and Catholic monarchs.

One historian records these events in this way, "The Templars...found a refuge in the little army of the excommunicated King Robert, whose fear of offending the French monarch would doubtless be vanquished by his desire to secure a few capable men-at-arms as recruits."⁵

The geopolitics of the time put pressure on the King of England to gain control over Scotland, and the persecution of Templar knights coerced the surviving remnants to seek refuge from their inquisitors. Robert the Bruce in Scotland needed soldiers and



supplies to help in resisting the power of the papacy as manifested through Edward's vassalage in England and would welcome such refugees as the Templar knights. The events in history that gave the papacy in Rome so much power in England arose from the embroilment between King John and Pope Innocent III a hundred years earlier.

During King John's reign in England from 1199 to 1216, a power-play between Rome and the English throne led King John to issue a letter of concession to Pope Innocent III. When it came to the election and installation of Stephen Langton as Archbishop of Canterbury, the pope accused King John of "impi-

ous persecution” and trying to “enslave” the entire English church. From 1208 to 1214, the pope imposed an interdict wherein no religious services were to be performed in England. When this didn’t have the desired effect, the pope then excommunicated King John. In 1213 King John gave in to the pressure of Rome and issued his concession, essentially making England a fiefdom of Rome. In this concession, King John writes that he does, “offer and freely concede to God... and to...the holy Roman church, and to our lord Pope Innocent and to his Catholic successors, the whole kingdom of England and the whole kingdom of Ireland, with all their rights and appurtenances, for the remission of our own sins and of those of our whole race...receiving and holding them, as it were a vassal,” and that England will “perform and swear fealty for them to him our aforesaid lord Pope Innocent, and his Catholic successors and the Roman church.” This concession would then put succeeding kings of England like Edward I and Edward II under obligation to do the bidding of Rome when it came to persecuting the knights of the Temple.

When King Edward I died in 1307, Robert the Bruce continued his operations against the English. In fact, for the following seven years after Edward I’s death, the Knights Templar were being sought after on the mainland of Europe and in England.

In 1309, the parliament at St. Andrew’s officially recognized Robert the Bruce “King of the Scots,” sovereign over all of Scotland. Only the pope in Rome and Edward II in England refused to recognize it. In fact, it was Edward II’s intent to bring Scotland under his dominion. Another knight templar

historian records, “In 1309 when persecutions began, an inquisition was held at Holyrood, only two knights appeared, the others were legitimately occupied in the fighting, having joined Bruce’s army, which was marching against the English.”⁶

In 1314, Edward II was determined to subdue Scotland and place the Scots under his dominion. Edward led his forces to an area about two and half miles from Stirling Castle to engage the Scottish forces in what ultimately would win the Scots their independence. This conflict is known in history as the Battle of Bannockburn. This battle fully engaged the Scottish forces against the English. When both forces were weakened and exhausted, English chroniclers record that a “fresh force” appeared, lined up behind the engaged Scottish forces with banners waving in the air.

After a full day of fighting, the combat left the English and Scottish forces battered. This “fresh force” of mounted Knights Templar, dressed in their white mantles with a red blazoned Templar passion cross on their chest and their black & white Beauseant banner waving overhead, must have been an unwanted sight for the English forces to see. As it has been shown, King Edward II was reluctant to pursue and persecute these Christian soldiers that were known as Knights Templar. Because of necessity, these Templar knights sought refuge in Scotland, and it became the last place for them to make their final stand against the Holy Roman Empire that was now engaged against them. Perhaps King Edward’s conscience got the best of him, and he decided not to participate in slaughtering soldiers of Christ. King



Edward and about five hundred of his knights retreated off the field, leaving the king's foot soldiers to follow suit. In doing so, the English left their belongings, supplies, money, and equipment. As a Christian Monarch, King Edward II nobly retreated as a true guardian of the faith.

As another historian has written, Templar knights indeed did ally themselves with Robert the Bruce, specifically at the battle of Bannockburn, "we are told...they ranged themselves under the banners of Robert the Bruce and fought with him at Bannockburn...Legend states that after the decisive battle of Bannockburn...Bruce, in return for their eminent services, formed these Templars into a new body."⁷ This battle would determine Scottish independence for almost two hundred ninety years.

After the official dissolution of the Temple by papal decree in 1312, the lands owned by Templar knights, along with their preceptories, were given to the Knights Hospitaller of St. John. Half a year after the battle of Bannockburn, King Robert the Bruce "issued a charter" to the Knights Hospitaller, "confirming all their possessions in the kingdom."⁸

It wasn't until ten years after the battle of Bannockburn that Pope John XXII finally acknowledged Robert the Bruce as monarch over Scotland. Before Robert the Bruce's death in 1329, he requested that after his death, his heart be removed, placed in a small casket, then taken to Jerusalem and buried in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Sir James Douglas and four other knights embarked for Jerusalem for that purpose. Sir James Douglas carried the small casket of Robert the Bruce's heart around his neck as he and his small contingent travelled to Jerusa-

lem. In Spain these knights joined with King Alfonso XI of Castile and assisted him in a campaign against the Moors of Granada. During this campaign, these knights were surrounded, and the chronicles record that Sir Douglas took the casket with Bruce's heart and flung it into the attacking hordes and shouted: "Brave heart, that ever foremost led, Forward! as thou wast wont. And I shall follow thee, or else shall die!"⁹ All the knights died in this conflict except for Sir William Keith who couldn't participate in the battle because of a broken arm. After the battle, he was able to retrieve the casket containing Bruce's heart from off the battle field and to return to Scotland.

Robert the Bruce's heart was brought back to Scotland and buried in Melrose Abbey. Robert the Bruce himself was buried at Dunfermline Abbey where, according to tradition, his leg-bones were crossed just under where his skull rests, which indicates that Scots want the life of Robert the Bruce to be linked to those that hold such symbolism important.

It is said that stones cannot speak. In Kilmartin, Scotland, are flatstones or grave-slabs from the 1300s that date to the events described in this paper and those stones speak volumes.



End Notes

1. Kilmartin Museum, www.kilmartin.org
2. Baigent & Leigh, *The Temple and The Lodge*, pg. 7
3. Addison, *The History of the Knights Templars*, pg. 206
4. Barrow, *Robert the Bruce*, pg. 208, quoting *The Chronicle of Walter of Guisborough*, pg. 367
5. Aitken, *The Knights Templar in Scotland*, pg. 34
6. Bothwell-Gosse, *The Knights Templars*, pg. 105
7. Hays, *The Persecution of the Knights Templars*, pg. 114
8. Cowan, Mackay and Macquarrie, *The Knights of St. John of Jerusalem in Scotland*, pgs. 47-48
9. Barbour, *The Bruce*, pg. 468

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