



The Tomb of Robert the Bruce

As part of the commemorations of the 700th anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland supported a project to research and reconstruct the lost tomb of Robert the Bruce. The project involved partners from across the heritage sector, including the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, Historic Scotland, National Museums Scotland, the Hunterian, the National Registers of Scotland, Fife Cultural Trust and the Abbotsford Trust.

After King Robert I died in 1329, he was buried in the choir of Dunfermline Abbey. Contemporary sources record that his grave was then marked by a monument commissioned prior to his death and imported from Paris. This monument was later lost, probably having been destroyed during the demolition and quarrying of the monastery in the aftermath of the Reformation.

As is well known, during the building of the present parish church in 1818, workmen discovered a skeleton, believed to be that of the king. Whether or not the skeleton is actually that of Bruce, or one of the other kings known to have been buried in the choir, is still a subject of debate. However, other excavations between c1790 and 1820 also discovered fragments of carved and gilded stone, variously described as marble or alabaster, which were identified as pieces of Bruce's vanished monument. These pieces are now preserved in the collections of The Hunterian, National Museums Scotland, and Dunfermline Museum.

In contrast to the skeleton, the fragments have attracted relatively little attention or academic study. Until this project they had never been brought together in one location for comparison. The fragments remained largely mute, and obvious questions remained unanswered: what are they pieces of, and are they all from the same structure? What is the stone? Can the pieces be dated? Can the identification with the tomb of Bruce be confirmed?

The project was set up to answer these questions, utilising the particular skills and resources of the partners. In partnership with the three museums, RCAHMS and HS have now examined and recorded the pieces in detail with the aim of reconstructing the form of the original structure. Although the pieces were all clearly derived from a gothic monument, their fragmentary nature meant that the exact form of this was far from clear.

Iain Fraser (RCAHMS) has identified the original form of the monument as following the model of French royal tombs of the early fourteenth century: an arcaded tombchest surmounted by an effigy of the king and a canopy, in black and white marble. A generous grant from the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland has allowed research visits to Paris to examine comparable material at the French royal mausoleum of St Denis, and in the collections of the Louvre, and also other pieces now in the Metropolitan Museum, New York. Using the reconstruction drawings, combined with detailed photography by Steve Wallace (RCAHMS) and 3-D digital scanning by Colin Muir (HS), Alasdair Rawlinson and Craig Logan of the Digital Design Studio, Glasgow School of Art, have created a three-dimensional digital model of the monument as it would once have looked.

Analysis by National Museums Scotland and Historic Scotland has confirmed the stone to be a true marble, and to retain traces of gilding. It is hoped that further analysis will be able to identify the source of the marble more precisely. Experts at the Louvre have suggested that the stone, like that of the French royal tombs, is highly likely to have been quarried at Carrara, northern Italy.

With the known pieces of the tomb dispersed through three different collections, it was hoped that the project might uncover yet more, unrecorded, fragments, possibly still in private hands. One of the most exciting outcomes of the project was the discovery of an additional piece, hitherto unrecognised and undocumented, among Sir Walter Scott's collections of antiquities at Abbotsford House. This piece was also of crucial importance in fitting and confirming the accuracy of the reconstruction. The project is currently attempting to locate a further piece, believed to have been donated to a museum in the United States.

This research, imagery and model will allow all four collections to reinterpret their own fragments of the monument, and to display them more visually, showing how they would have fitted into the intact tomb.

Dr Iain Fraser FSA Scot