

THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH IN THE NORTH: CONTRASTING INFLUENCES IN THE DIOCESES OF ROSS AND CAITHNESS

Ronald G. Cant

The contrasting political and cultural influences and inter-relationships at work around the firthlands of Easter Ross and Sutherland have influenced a wide variety of problems here over successive historical periods. It is the purpose of this paper to examine them in relation to the medieval church.

CHRISTIAN ORIGINS *c.* 400–850

Probably no-one can be completely certain, save in a few particular instances, precisely when 'organised Christianity' first appeared in the various parts of Scotland. That the earliest indigenous centre of significant missionary activity was that of St Ninian at Whithorn around 400 is generally agreed. But beyond that is the problem of how long and how far its influence extended among the northern Britons and the Picts. In the view of A. B. Scott and Douglas Simpson it continued for at least three hundred years and, through a series of missionary saints, penetrated into the farthest north.

As against this, it may be doubted whether church dedications commemorating these saints can be accepted as proof of their personal involvement without supporting literary or archaeological evidence. Nevertheless there is good reason to believe that a strong Christian presence linked with Whithorn, by way of Strathclyde, eastern Pictland and northern Ireland, existed in the far north before St Columba established his much publicized centre at Iona in the late sixth century; and that even in his own lifetime his influence here was probably less than that of St Donnan of Eigg, and was considerably exceeded in the late seventh century by St Maelrubba of Applecross in Wester Ross.

By the time of the Viking impact, around 800, in the area of Ross, Sutherland and Caithness, we can envisage a generally Christian population grouped around a series of centres marked by cross-slabs of characteristic Pictish design as at Farr, Reay, Skinnet, Ulbster, Golspie, Creich, Edderton, Shandwick and Nigg (though some might be of a purely sepulchral character) [Figs. 4.1–4.5]. And there were monasteries of major

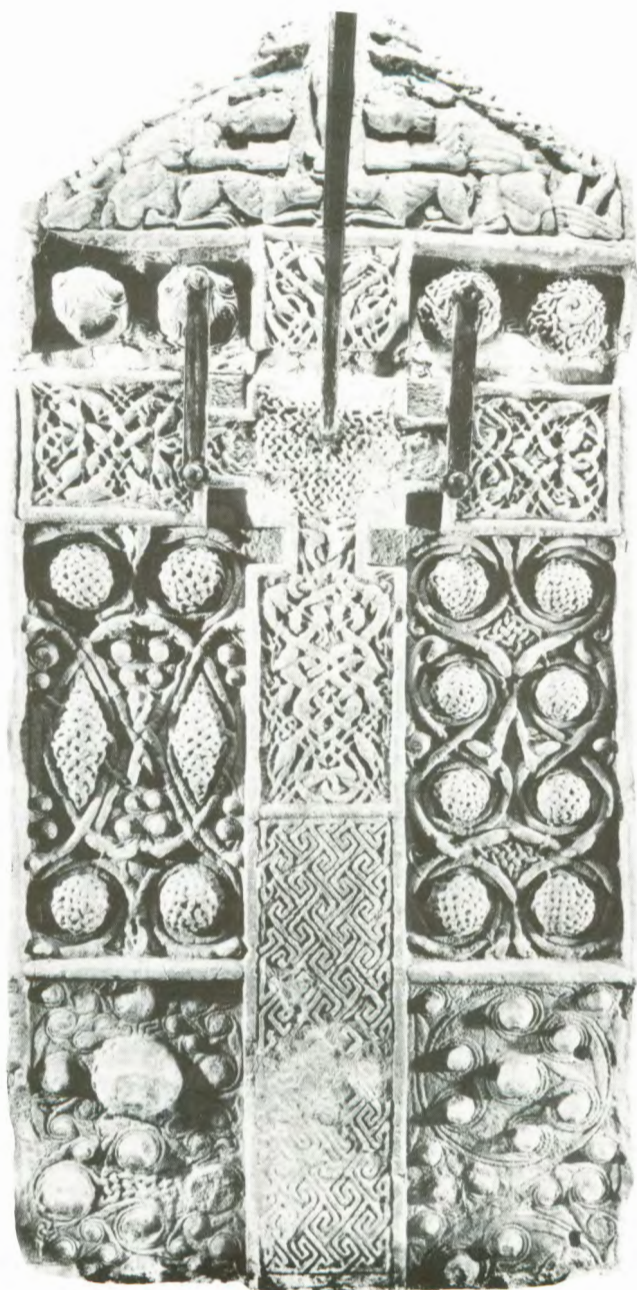


Fig. 4.1 Cross Slab, Nigg.



Figs. 4.2; 4.3 The Shandwick Stone.

importance at Applecross, Mid-Fearn, and Rosemarkie. A slab from the second of these commemorates its abbot Reodatus who died in 762, while the third may have acquired some kind of episcopal status over its neighbourhood as a result of the activities of St Curitan or Boniface around 700, but the relative importance of such centres clearly varied from time to time [Fig. 4.6].

POLITICAL AND ECCLESIASTICAL DEVELOPMENTS c. 850–1100

The change from a predominantly monastic to a predominantly episcopal form of organization in the Celtic Church took place in the period after 850. By this time Norse settlements were well established in the northern and western isles and in the coastal areas of the adjacent mainland. One consequence was the end of Iona for the time being as a major ecclesiastical and cultural centre, and the virtual destruction of the Scottish kingdom of Dalriada (in origin a fifth-century colony from northern Ireland) with which Iona had been so strongly identified since its foundation by St Columba three centuries before. Nevertheless it was a member of its royal house, Kenneth mac Alpin, surviving precariously on the eastern borders of his former realm, who took over control of the Pictish central monarchy in the 840s, so drawing together in the Gaelic-speaking kingdom of *Alba* or Scotland the parts of northern Britain outwith Nordic control.



Fig. 4.4 Cross Slab,
Edderton.



Fig. 4.5 Cross Slab from Reay
(in Royal Museum of Scotland,
Edinburgh).

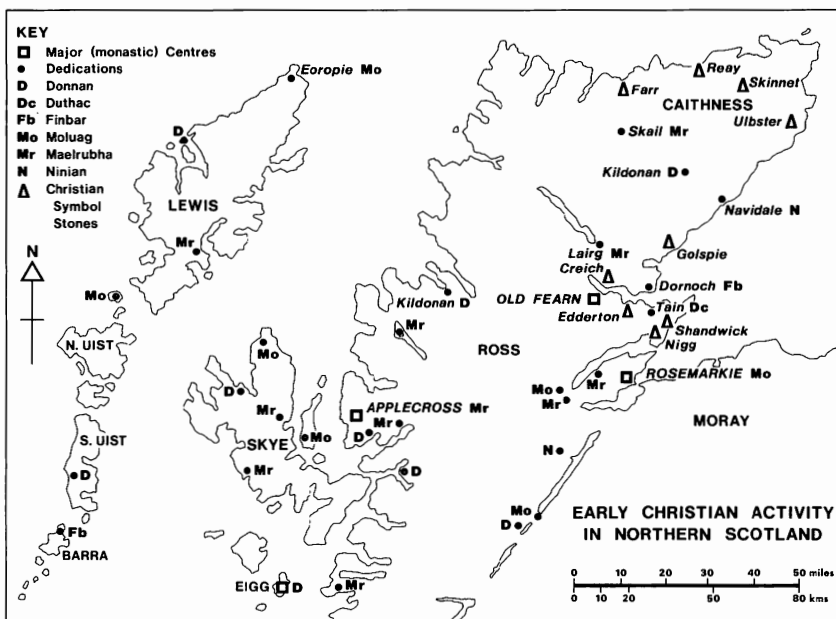


Fig. 4.6 Early Christian Activity in Northern Scotland.

This 'kingdom' was, of course, not much more than a loose aggregation of sizeable regions (whose rulers did not hesitate to call themselves kings), which were in turn aggregations of smaller communities. In the lists of the 'provinces' of Pictland — of which Alba was the essential successor — the most northerly were *Cait* or *Cathanesia* and *Fidach* or *Muref et Ros*. The first would seem to have included most of the territory north of the River Oykeil and the Dornoch Firth, the second Moray and Ross. These lists, imperfect as they are in many respects, are associated with the *Pictish Chronicle* and probably give a reasonably accurate interpretation of the situation in the 'Pictish dominions' in their final form. They also make geographical sense, especially in the linking of the lands on the inmost reaches of the Moray Firth.

When territorial bishoprics can be identified in Scotland, from the later ninth century onwards, they tended to be associated with this well-established pattern. Thus in the eleventh century St Duthac (d. 1065) seems to have served as a bishop in the area of Tain and Dornoch, perhaps also of Rosemarkie, while another bishopric may have functioned in the lowlands or *laich* of Moray [Fig. 4.6]. By this time, of course (nominally since 995), the Norse settlers were also Christian, a bishopric of Orkney being in existence by 1035 and having a firm base by about 1060 at Birsay, in close association with the great Earl Thorfinn. And just as the authority of the earldom extended from Orkney to Shetland and Caithness (or nordic north-eastern *Cait*), so did that of the bishopric.

THE TWELFTH AND THIRTEENTH CENTURIES

The Diocese of Caithness

In 1098, during a period when the earldom was divided between Thorfinn's sons Paul and Erlend, the Norwegian monarchy became concerned to assert its authority over the Norse colonies 'west-over-sea'; but as an act of 'imperial stabilisation', King Magnus Barelegs agreed with King Edgar of Scotland to recognize the Pentland Firth as the boundary between their realms in this northern area and Caithness as part of the Scottish kingdom. In practice the arrangement made very little difference to the local situation, Caithness remaining under the immediate control of the dynasty of the Orkney earls, though now conceived as a separate earldom held from the King of Scots.

From 1139 Harald Maddadson, son of Earl Paul's sister Margaret and the Scottish Earl Maddad or Modach of Atholl (though then a mere boy), was accepted as joint Earl of Orkney by Earl Rognvald. This seems to have been done under pressure from King David I of Scotland who further instructed the earls to ensure the safety of a community of Benedictine monks from Dunfermline apparently being settled in Dornoch at this time. When Harald Maddadson came of age in 1150 the king took the even more remarkable step of establishing a bishopric in Caithness. As the area already had a reasonably well organized system of parochial churches and chapels in association with the bishopric of Orkney, this can only be

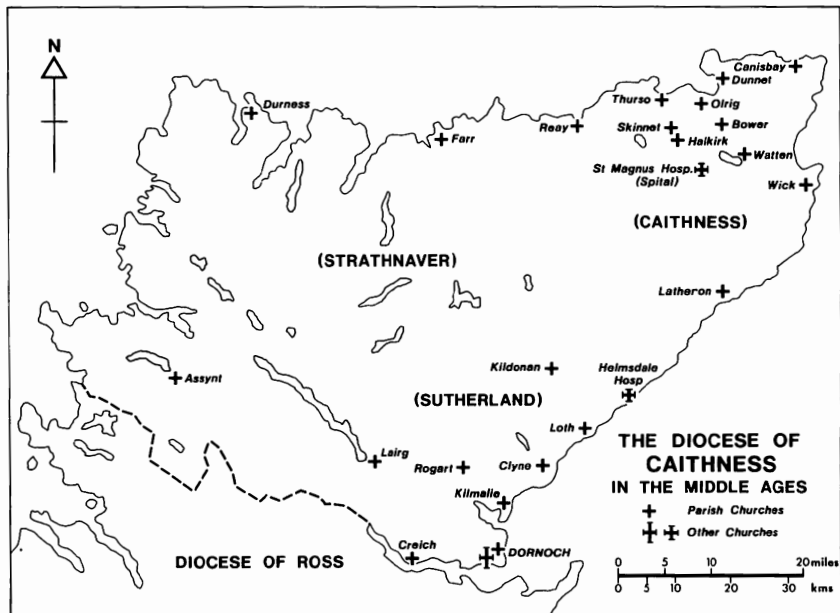


Fig. 4.7 The Diocese of Caithness in the Middle Ages.

regarded as an act of deliberate aggression, made more pronounced by the location of the new Scottish bishop at the principal church or minster of Halkirk, close to the Earl's castle at Braal [Fig. 4.7].

In fact the position of these bishops proved to be highly precarious. Not only did they lack the support of Earl Harald, but provoked his hostility and that of the Norse population in a way that led to the mutilation of Bishop John at Scrabster in 1202 and the murder of Bishop Adam at Halkirk in 1222 in the time of Earl Harald's son John. King Alexander II, having conducted a punitive expedition into Caithness (as his father King William had done in 1196 and 1202) then decided to re-locate the administrative centre of the diocese far to the south at Dornoch. Here it would be further protected by a new Earldom of Sutherland held by the great family of de Moravia or Moray, which also provided the first bishop of the reorganized diocese.

As founded by Bishop Gilbert in 1224 the cathedral of Dornoch, if of no great size and lacking its nave for two centuries more, was a cruciform structure of high architectural quality served by a community of 'secular' canons. But to sustain this central organism all twenty-two parishes in the diocese — half being in 'Caithness' in the narrower (and correct) Nordic sense, and all but three of the rest in easter Sutherland — were 'appropriated' to the bishopric, to the canonries (initially ten, later thirteen, headed by the customary 'dignities' of Dean, Precentor, Chancellor, Treasurer and Archdeacon), or for the upkeep of the cathedral fabric and services [Fig. 4.7].

As a result, the parish churches were served by *vicars* or deputies of the non-resident *rectors* drawing only a proportion of the parochial *teinds* or tithes; and although the Norwegian church order allocated one-quarter of the tithes to the bishop, the remainder was retained for parochial use and divided between the priest, the church fabric, and the poor. It may be a consequence of this that the churches of the Norse period in Caithness proper seem to have been of better quality than those in the remainder of the diocese. It would also appear that the hospital or hospice of St Magnus at Spital near Halkirk was founded by the Earls of Caithness for use by pilgrims to the great Nordic shrine of Kirkwall, and that the other hospital at Helmsdale on the approach to the Ord may have served a like purpose.

The Diocese of Ross

By contrast with the tensions involved in the creation of the bishopric of Caithness, that of Ross had a somewhat more settled history. As has been seen, there is evidence of its existence in the eleventh century and perhaps earlier. As with most Scottish sees, however, it is only from the time of King David I (c. 1130) that something like a regular succession of bishops appears. In the twelfth century they were usually styled 'of Rosemarkie', thereafter 'of Ross'. Although royal nominees, and generally from outside the diocese, they seem to have encountered little local hostility. Politically, however, Ross like neighbouring Moray was an extremely independent

region of the Scottish kingdom, the situation being further complicated by associations of both with claimants to the throne and by the intervention of Earl Harald Maddadson from the north and Somerled from the west. By the time of King Alexander II, however, stability was established under Farquhar Mactaggart (son of a lay abbot of Applecross) who was created Earl of Ross *c.* 1215 and established a dynasty on reasonably good terms with the monarchy and the church for nearly two centuries thereafter.

At some time in the 1220s Earl Farquhar brought Premonstratensian canons (and relics of St Ninian) from Whithorn to establish a house of the order at the old monastic centre of Mid-Fearn, but about 1238 transferred it to a better site at New Fearn between Tarbat and Nigg [Fig. 4.8]. This development prompts two thoughts. The first is the apparent strength of a tradition that after more than five hundred years linked Ross with Whithorn and to the extent that the election of the Abbot of Fearn was regularly confirmed by the Prior of Whithorn. The second is the possibility that the Earl may have envisaged this abbey as a potential cathedral for the diocese of Ross, as Whithorn was for Galloway.

If so it may be more than a coincidence that about 1240 Bishop Robert decided to move his cathedral from its historic but restricted location at

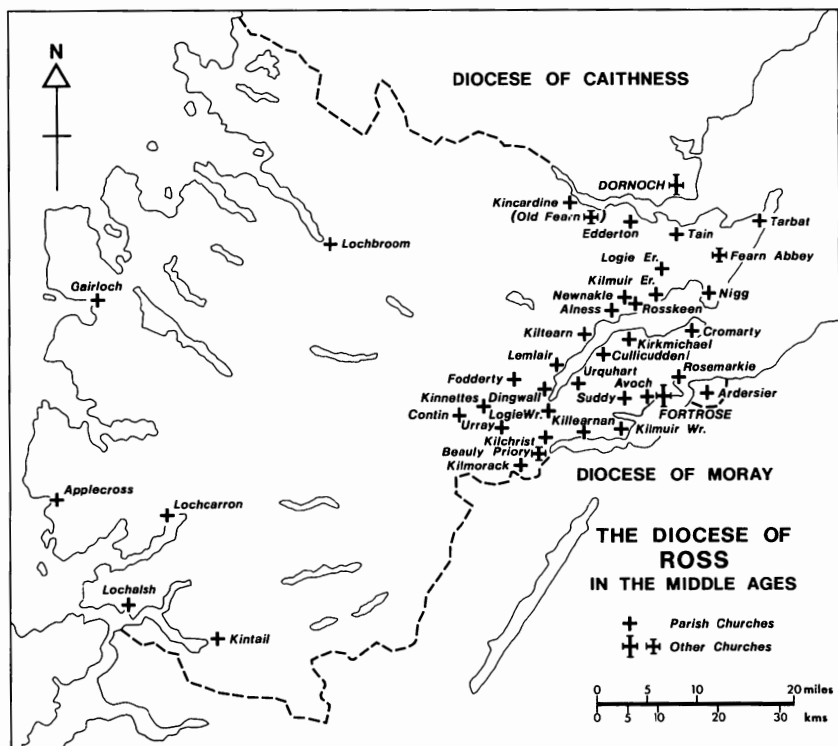


Fig. 4.8 The Diocese of Ross in the Middle Ages.

Rosemarkie, to a more spacious and level site one mile to the south-west at Fortrose. In scale and design the new structure was similar to those being built at this same time at Dunblane and Dunkeld but of a more simple form, consisting as it did of a long unaisled choir and nave separated by a massive arched screen, itself probably surmounted by a belfry. To serve the cathedral a chapter of secular canons was formed (or reorganized), consisting originally of Dean and Sub-Dean, Precentor and Succentor, Chancellor, Treasurer, Archdeacon and perhaps two ordinary canons, making nine in all at this stage of its development.

Almost contemporary with Fearn Abbey and Fortrose Cathedral was Beaulieu Priory, probably founded by Sir John Bisset of Lovat about 1230 for monks of the Valliscaulian order. The Valliscaulians were 'reformed Benedictines', not unlike the Cluniacs, Cistercians, and Tironians and like them dependent on their mother-house the monastery of Val de Choux in France from which, in its Latin form, they derived their name. Of this relatively small order, almost unknown elsewhere in the British Isles, Scotland had three houses, the other two being at Pluscarden in Moray and Ardchattan in Argyll. Though of more modest scale than these, the church at Beaulieu impresses by its relative length and the refinement of its detail.

LATER DEVELOPMENTS: 1300–1560

The thirteenth century marked the climax of the religious and architectural inspiration of the Middle Ages. But in the two ensuing centuries there was to be further development, or at least elaboration of the medieval ecclesiastical pattern. At Fearn the abbey church was rebuilt between 1338 and 1372 in a mature gothic design, still impressive despite a reduction of length and height. At Fortrose the cathedral chapter was increased to twenty-one *prebends*, a figure only slightly smaller than Dunkeld with twenty-two and Elgin with twenty-five, and not so far short of the largest Scottish examples of Aberdeen and Glasgow with thirty and thirty-two. The fabric was also enlarged by the addition of a bell-tower at the north-west corner of the nave and, in the early fifteenth century, by a south aisle and Lady Chapel of remarkably high quality compared with the simple arcaded nave added at about this time to Dornoch Cathedral [Fig. 4.9]. Surrounding the church as at Dornoch, but in a more regular form comparable to Elgin, was a precinct comprising the manses of its clergy together with the bishop's palace, the whole known as 'the Chanonry of Ross' or plain 'Chanonry'.

Regrettably, however, all this was achieved mainly at the expense of the parishes of the diocese, virtually every one of the thirty-six being appropriated to the bishopric or cathedral and served by a vicar. And almost more than Caithness, Ross suffered from a concentration of its parochial provision in the fertile lowlands of the east [Fig. 4.9], though even here the parish churches appear to have been of relatively modest size and construction. In its six vast western parishes (those of Gairloch and Lochbroom far exceeding their northern neighbours of Assynt, Durness

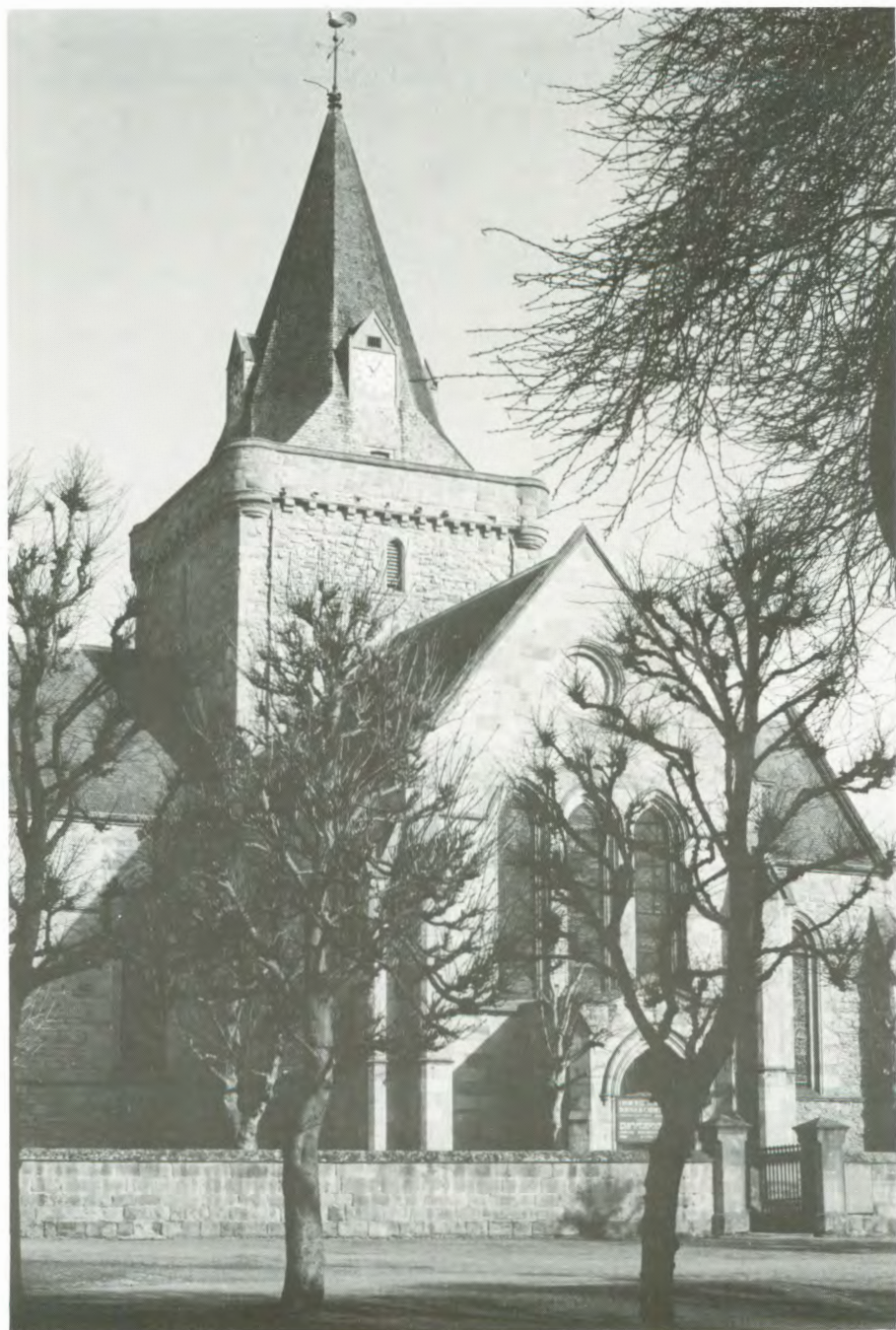


Fig. 4.9 Dornoch Cathedral.

and Farr in sheer extent), the main church might be supplemented by local chapels for outlying districts, but this did little to ameliorate the situation. Beyond this, the area was totally devoid of monastic foundations, for unlike Fearn and Rosemarkie in the east, such ancient centres as Applecross had no successors in the main medieval period. And although Gaelic was overwhelmingly the vernacular speech of the diocese, there is no evidence comparable to that at Dunkeld of provision for its study in the cathedral schools of Fortrose.

The Lady Chapel of the cathedral was served by chaplains supported by a special 'chantry' foundation to provide for the spiritual welfare of the Earls of Ross, and especially of the Countess Euphemia (I), last of the old Mactaggart line who died about 1395 and whose tomb was located here. Such foundations were very characteristic of the later Middle Ages, sometimes forming independent corporations associated with a 'collegiate church'. Of such the most northerly in mainland Scotland was that of St Duthac at Tain. Deriving from a much older cult in this locality, the structure of the church was certainly in existence by 1457 even if it was not until thirty years later that the foundation was formally incorporated by Bishop Thomas Hay. It was a favourite place of pilgrimage of King James IV who, like James II, endowed a special chaplainry within it. Alone of all the major medieval churches of Ross its fabric remains virtually intact, a simple but impressive design both within and without.

CONCLUSION

It will be seen, then, that the history of the medieval church in Ross and Caithness has features that tie it into the general pattern of ecclesiastical development in northern Europe at this time, the sporadic evangelizing of the early missionary saints being succeeded by the more settled 'tribal-monastic' form of 'Celtic Christianity' and then by the full organization of the 'Roman and Catholic Church'. But even in this definitive stage, developments here have a character very much their own, initially in the fact that this organization came from two sources, producing in Caithness, at least, parochial arrangements more akin to Norway than to Scotland.

There must also have been other local differences arising from the circumstance that although the liturgical language of the church, as of ecclesiastical and civil administration, was Latin, the area contained three vernaculars — Gaelic, Norn, and (in the towns) the form of northern English that would come to be known as 'Lowland Scots'. The social and political structure, too, within a broadly feudal outline, embodied ancient 'Pictish' as well as 'Gaelic' elements, represented at a higher level by the Earldom of Ross and its association for much of the fifteenth century with the Lordship of the Isles. Yet within this strongly idiosyncratic geographical and human context were to be found cathedrals and monasteries representing some of the finest qualities of medieval art; and in the parish churches, at least a semblance of the majesty of the universal liturgy so grandly, perhaps over-grandly, maintained in the two diocesan centres.

Acknowledgement

Figures 4.1, 4.2, 4.3 are reproduced by kind permission of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Buildings of Scotland; Figure 4.5, the Royal Museum of Scotland (formerly NMAS); Figure 4.8, the Scottish Tourist Board. The Society is grateful to Dr J. Close-Brookes for permission to reproduce Figure 4.4. Figures 4.6–4.8 have been redrawn by Douglas Lawson.

References

- Barrow, G. W. S. *Kingship and Unity* (New History of Scotland 2). 1981.
Beaton, D. *Ecclesiastical History of Caithness*. 1909.
Bentinck, C. D. *Dornoch Cathedral and Parish*. 1926.
Cowan, I. B. The Organisation of Scottish Secular Cathedral Chapters, in *Records Scot. Church Hist. Soc.* 1960–62. xiv.
Cowan, I. B. *The Parishes of Medieval Scotland*. (Scot. Rec. Soc. 93). 1967.
Cowan, I. B. & Easson, D. E. *Medieval Religious Houses, Scotland*. 2nd ed. 1976.
Cowan, I. B. The Medieval Church in the Highlands, in Maclean of Dochgarroch, L. ed. *The Middle Ages in the Highlands*. 1981.
Crawford, B. E. The Earldom of Caithness and the Kingdom of Scotland, in *Northern Scotland*. 1974–77. II.
Curle, C. L. The Chronology of the Early Christian Monuments of Scotland, in *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot.* 1939–40. LXXIV.
Dunbar, J. G. The Medieval Architecture of the Scottish Highlands, in Maclean of Dochgarroch, L. ed. *The Middle Ages in the Highlands*. 1981.
Duncan, A. A. M. *Scotland: The Making of the Kingdom* (Edinburgh History of Scotland 1). 1975.
Gray, J. *Sutherland and Caithness in Saga-Time*. 1922.
Innes, C. *Origines Parochiales Scotiae* (II.2: Dioceses of Ross and Caithness) (Bannatyne Club). 1854.
Maddowall, C. G. *The Chanonry of Ross*. 1963.
MacGibbon, D. & Ross, T. *Ecclesiastical Architecture of Scotland*. 3 vols. 1896–97.
Mackay, A. (ed. Beaton, D.) *The History of the Province of Caith (Sutherland and Caithness)*. 1914.
Munro, R. W. & J. M. *Tain through the centuries*. 1966.
Omand, D. ed. *The Caithness Book*. 1972.
Omand, D. ed. *The Sutherland Book*. 1982.
Royal Comm. on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. *Inventory of ... Caithness*. 1911.
Royal Comm. on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. *Inventory of ... Sutherland*. 1911.
Scott, A. B. *The Pictish Nation, its people and its church*. 1918.
Simpson, W. D. Dornoch Cathedral: The High Church of Caithness, in *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot.* 1923–24. LVIII. Also in Bentinck, *Dornoch*.
Simpson, W. D. *The Celtic Church in Scotland*. (Aberdeen Univ. Studies III). 1935.
Smyth, A. P. *Warlords and Holy Men* (New History of Scotland 1). 1984.
Topping, P. Harald Maddadson, Earl of Orkney and Caithness, 1139–1206, in *Scot. Hist. Rev.* 1983. LXII.
Watt, D. E. R. ed. *Fasti Ecclesiae Scotticanae Medii Aevi*. 2nd draft. 1969.