St Fergus, of Glamis and perhaps Scone

I first became interested in St Fergus while writing my book, *The Mysterious Case of the Stone of Destiny* (Tippermuir, 2023). This considers whether the stone which Edward I removed from Scone Abbey in 1296 was in fact the original enthronement stone of the kings of Alba, later of Scots, and if not, who made off with the real one. I am far from the first to ask this question. In fact, in the last period of serious debate, following the removal of the stone in Westminster Abbey by four Glasgow students on Christmas Eve 1950, sceptics included Professor W Croft Dickinson of Edinburgh University and James S Richardson, former HM Inspector of Ancient Monuments for Scotland. However, I had the advantage of the findings of scientific research conducted prior to its move to Perth Museum in 2024.

Among the methods used to analyse the stone was X-ray fluorescence, which found that a stain on its upper surface could only have been caused by prolonged contact with copper alloy – effectively a brass or bronze object. The most likely explanation would involve some sort of sacred item such as a reliquary being placed on the stone during high days and holy days. This might have occurred over a considerable number of years, in a generally cold and damp atmosphere.

Reliquaries tend to contain remains of a venerated person, quite possibly a saint, so the question then became, if a saint, which one? Now, I knew very little, in fact, nothing, about medieval saints associated with the Scone area. However, some research turned up the result that there was only St Fergus. His origins are uncertain but we know that he founded churches in upper Strathearn before moving on to Wick, then Aberdeenshire and finally to Glamis. He may well have called in at Scone at some point. According to sources the site was used by a Celtic Christian community, the Culdees, as early as the year 700. This was around 30 years before St Fergus died.

The connection with Scone seems to have been strong enough to motivate a later abbot to bring the head of St Fergus from Glamis. In return, he built a marble tomb there for the rest of the saint's body, though this happened during the reign of James IV (1488-1513), much too late for any connection with the stone now in the Perth Museum. However, given that one of St Fergus' arms went off to Aberdeen at some point, it doesn't seem unlikely that another part of him, perhaps a hand or even a few finger bones, would have gone to Scone. Its abbey was the most important in the kingdom and subject to royal visits, so the idea of it being short of a relic to display is unlikely. King James donated a silver case for the head and in previous years visitors would also have been expected to give offerings to the abbey.

Analysis has also shown that the top surface of the stone now in Perth has signs of wear from side to side and towards the back. Obviously, this could not have come from various abbots and the occasional king sitting on it, either in Scone or Westminster. This has led some writers on the subject to suggest that it might have been a cover for a recess in the abbey floor. A possible explanation for the staining would be that the stone was lifted out and a reliquary taken from its place of safety and displayed on top during days when visitors would come to the abbey. Practicalities of raising the stone would also explain the rings attached to each end and it being tapered towards the back.

In one source I read, St Fergus is described as an obscure saint. Well, he may have had the last laugh – how many obscure saints have a gas terminal named after them?

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