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GOVAN: AN EARLY MEDIEVAL ROYAL CENTRE ON THE CLYDE

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In recent years ancient features have been identified in the heart of Govan that confirm it as a major religious and political centre of the Early Middle Ages. Although there are no contemporary texts that document Govan as a royal centre, there is a substantial body of archaeological evidence that points in that direction. This short contribution will review the current state of knowledge about Govan and consider how this may help to understand Scone and its famous stone.

INTRODUCTION

It has long been recognised that Govan was special because the parish church of St Constantine holds a remarkable collection of early medieval sculpture, the third largest in Scotland (Radford 1967a and 1967b, Ritchie 1994). Apart from the sculpture, the physical evidence of Govan’s former eminence is not readily identified in this built-up area of Glasgow (illus 30). Nevertheless in matters of layout and organisation we know more about this battered post-industrial landscape than we do about picturesque Scone. For some of this knowledge we are dependant on 18th- and early 19th-century descriptions and images of Govan when it was still a small, rural village at a ferry crossing (Brochie 1938). Despite the colossal scale of the 19th-century industrial activity, the main elements of old Govan can be discerned well enough. They reveal the presence of the physical apparatus of early medieval kingship amongst the northern Britons in a period before they came under the dominion of the kings of Scots in the 12th century.

Govan stands on the south bank of the Clyde, opposite its confluence with the river Kelvin at a point where the Clyde is still tidal. Before it was dredged, the river was easily fordable here and this place is likely to have been an important river crossing from earliest times. Not only was the medieval parish extremely large (about 6 miles by 3.7 miles [10km by 6km]), but, exceptionally, it also spanned the river. On the north bank of the Clyde, the parish included the royal estate of Partick, now occupied by a scrap metal yard. The church site may originally have been a peninsula or perhaps even one of the many islands that used to lie in the river between Renfrew and Glasgow. The present church, a testimony to the prosperity of late 19th-century Clydeside, is sufficiently grand to house comfortably the large collection of sculpture.

The assemblage of early medieval sculpture at Govan consists of 47 pieces all of which were found in the churchyard. These can be divided into two broad types: upright crosses, of which there are four, and burial monuments which account for the remaining 43 stones. Most of the burial monuments are recumbent slabs (col illus I.3), but there are also
five hog-backed monuments and a unique monolithic sarcophagus. Recent art-historical analyses collected together in *Govan and its Early Medieval Sculpture* have dated the sculpture to the 10th and 11th centuries, with none of it clearly earlier (Ritchie 1994). This outstanding collection is unparalleled in Scotland for this period. Four monumental crosses is an exceptional number and is indicative of a major church, even if the three most ambitious crosses now survive as shafts only. Even more exceptionally, the great quantity of burial monuments indicates a cemetery of considerable importance. The size and quality of the hogbacks and the sarcophagus surely indicate patronage at the highest, probably royal, level. This secular reading of the sculpture is reinforced by the images of mounted warriors found on several of the monuments.

Without question the most striking relic at Govan is its elaborately carved sarcophagus, which is covered with interlace and figurative panels (see illus 29, chapter frontispiece). The most prominent scene is of a mounted warrior out hunting. This horseman (and those that appear on two of the crosses), together with the interlace, invites comparison with Pictish sculpture. Although the quality of carving is amongst the finest to survive
from this period in Strathclyde, it does not approach the artistic heights of the best Pictish work. It does, however, illustrate a common interest in the ideologically-loaded mounted warrior motif, which is such a prominent feature of Pictish sculpture. The more direct stylistic features point to influences from the west. The style of the interface on the sarcophagus and on the hog-backed stones share traits with sculpture found in areas of Norse settlement. Although it is impossible to know for whom this sculpture was made (as there are no contemporary inscriptions), it would appear that Irish Sea Vikings were among the patrons of Govan.

RECENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

An extensive programme of trial excavation in and around Govan Old parish church investigated the perimeter of the churchyard and its interior (see illus 30) (Driscoll 1995, 1997). Although these excavations were not sufficiently large to allow the site to be fully reconstructed, they have established the presence of an early Christian cemetery and located the probable site of an early church, to the east of the existing one. Two orientated burials, found stratified below this putative church, have calibrated radiocarbon dates spanning the 5th to 6th centuries, making them the earliest dated Christian burials in Strathclyde (samples GU–9024: AD 435–601 and GU–9025: AD 474–601).

The excavations also confirmed that the elevation of the churchyard is an artefact of an original vallum formed by a bank and ditch and that the pear-shape plan of the enclosure is ancient (illus 31). Charcoal recovered from a secondary ditch fill has produced a calibrated date of AD 886–983 (GU–9023), while charcoal from a hearth in the lee of the
vallum has produced a calibrated date of AD 775–887 (GU–9021). In the SE corner of the churchyard, the excavation revealed a metalled roadway, which incorporated a deposit of charcoal with a date of AD 734–892 (GU–9022). This road appears to lead from an original entrance in the east towards the Doomster Hill, an artificial mound, c 45m in diameter and c 5m high, which formerly stood at Govan cross. The Doomster Hill was swept away as the shipyards expanded in the 19th century, but an engraving made in 1757 shows it as a flat-topped mound, with a wide step halfway up, towering over the surrounding cottages (illus 32). Labourers inserting a water tank into the mound in the 1830s discovered bones and what may have been a timber chamber. Archaeological excavations in the 1990s located its massive quarry ditch, some 8m wide, but did not examine enough of the site to address the question of whether there was some sort of elaborate burial at the heart of the mound. Unfortunately no evidence was discovered which could provide a construction date for the ditch, which contained later medieval pottery in its fill. If, as seems likely, the name Govan derives from the Brittonic gw-.ge-, ‘small’ and ban, ‘hill’, this may refer to the Doomster Hill (Clancy 1996b). This would mean that the mound was an established feature in the landscape before the British tongue was replaced by Gaelic. It must presumably have therefore been built by the end of the 9th century. Although there is no contemporary evidence for the mound’s function, the name ‘Doomster Hill’ was recorded in the late 18th century and is believed to be ancient. The name suggests that the mound was a site where justice was performed – a court hill or law hill. An alternative view, that the Doomster Hill was the earthen base (motte) of a

32 View of Govan made by Robert Paul in 1758, from Yorkhill looking across the Clyde. The church is on the right, but is largely obscured by trees. Only the roof and belfry are visible. In the centre of the image, a line of houses, Water Row, marks the ferry landing. At the extreme left, Doomster Hill is shown as a large, stepped mound. The quarry ditch can be clearly seen on the right of the mound and, although the summit has slumped, the step appears broad and level. To the right, a small rowing boat is moving across the mouth of the Kelvin and approaching the Partick shore (Mitchell Library, Glasgow).
timber castle, has little to recommend it. A motte cannot account for the prominent step and, moreover, there is no historical tradition of a castle at Govan.

This court hill interpretation is supported by the stepped form of the mound, which can be paralleled at the Tynwald in Man and at the Thingmote in Viking Dublin. The immense scale of the mound and proximity to the royal seat at Partick may imply it was the king’s court. The importance of the Govan complex as a setting for political ceremony can be appreciated by further comparison with the Tynwald, which is linked like Govan by a processional way (reconstructed in modern times) to a nearby church. The combination of palaces with important churches, with and without a dynastic burial ground, is a phenomenon of northern medieval Europe and can be found at places as widespread as Jelling, Aachen and Winchester. Such places also could serve as places of assembly and the juxtaposition of a major church and possible dynastic mausoleum with a site of royal justice raises the possibility that Govan too was a site of ‘national’ assembly, perhaps even a place where kings were made.

The abundance of sculpture and the presence of the Doomster Hill, suggests that, in the late Viking Age, Govan was the pre-eminent political centre on the Clyde. The character of the sculpture and the form of the court hill both indicate a Norse influence and there is every reason to believe that there was a significant Scandinavian presence in the north British kingdom during the 10th and 11th centuries (Smyth 1984, Crawford 1987). During the 10th century, Dublin and York were frequently under the rule of the same Viking dynasty, which heightened the strategic importance of the Clyde.

DUMBARTON AND THE KINGS OF ALT CLUT

At an earlier period, it was Dumbarton, 12 miles (20km) downstream, that was the political centre of the British kingdom of the Clyde. Several 7th-century British kings are identified explicitly as kings of Alt Clut, ‘Clyde Rock’. The fortifications of Dumbarton, ‘fort of the Britons’, occupy the rock, a twin-peaked volcanic plug that towers 74m above the north bank of the river. Dumbarton looms over the upper navigable reach of the Clyde (prior to modern dredging) at the mouth of the river Leven. This highly strategic position allowed its occupants to control traffic into the central Clyde valley and via the Leven to Loch Lomond and the Lennox. Scant traces of the early medieval defences were revealed by Leslie Alcock’s excavations (Alcock & Alcock 1990), but the interior layout—of hall, accommodation and outbuildings—remains completely unknown. All evidence of early medieval buildings and most of the fortifications seem to underlie or have been swept away by successive modern military works, which continued until World War II. The exceptional character of early medieval Dumbarton is revealed in fragments of imported pottery and glass. This includes Mediterranean amphorae, pottery and glassware from Bordeaux and perhaps from elsewhere on the Continent, all of which is evidence of an extended participation in long-distance trading networks, which may have been driven by the wine trade. The majority of finds date from the 5th to 9th centuries and this range is reinforced by calibrated radiocarbon dates which fall between AD 450–850.

After its destruction in AD 870, following a four-month-long siege by Dublin Vikings, Dumbarton drops out of the historical record until the 13th century. The centre of power seems to have shifted upstream to Govan. Tellingly, Dumbarton has produced only two pieces of early medieval sculpture, both 10th-/11th-century recumbent gravestones in the Govan tradition. In its fully integrated form, Govan, with its assembly place, royal palace
and church, would appear to be largely a creation of the 10th century, whose rise post-dates the demise of Dumbarton. The church at Govan, with its exceptionally large parish, can now be seen to pre-date the 10th century by several centuries and there are hints of an early political importance too. It has only recently been recognised that Simeon of Durham is referring to Govan when he states that, following an attack on Dumbarton in 756, the Northumbrian army began its journey home from *Omanias* (Breeze 1999).

Historical evidence for the north Britons from the late 9th century to the 11th century is almost entirely lacking and there are no historic references to Govan for the period which archaeology indicates was its hey-day. Partick's royal connections are first documented during the 12th century in the *nilas* of St Kentigern and in other legal sources (Macquarrie 1986, 1993). The first contemporary historical notice of Govan occurs in David I's grant of the parish to Glasgow cathedral in 1128x1136 (Barrow 1999, 72), but from this point on Govan declined in importance as Glasgow rose. Although Glasgow's origins are almost as ancient as Govan's (Driscoll 1998; 2002), St Kentigern's foundation appears to have remained a purely ecclesiastical centre prior to 1100. The earliest excavated burial in the cathedral dates to between the 7th and 8th centuries, but significantly—and almost uniquely amongst Scottish mainland cathedrals—there is no early medieval sculpture known from Glasgow.

**GOVAN AND SCONE – NEW POWER CENTRES**

What insights does Govan offer for our understanding of Scone? In geographical terms they share many qualities. They occupy geographically analogous positions at the upper tidal reaches of their respective rivers, adjacent to major fording places. Both are thus at natural nodal points in the landscape and there must always have been a tendency for people to gather at Govan and at Scone, if only to cross the river. At both places there were significant early churches with royal estates on the opposite bank.

Although we understand the configuration of Govan better, we appreciate the setting of Scone more. Scone appears to be situated to draw deliberately upon a prehistoric ritual landscape as a backdrop for the large popular assemblies (Driscoll 1999, forthcoming). The same may have been true of Govan, but Glasgow's dense urban fabric obscures any potential traces of prehistoric remains. However, it may be worth noting that the only complete cross at Govan, known as the 'Sun Stone' from its prominent snake-boss swastika, may have been shaped from a prehistoric standing stone to judge from its irregular shape.

Govan provides an interesting point of comparison with Scone. The emergence of these places as political centres appears to be more or less contemporaneous. Both are products of the Viking Age and were constructed to celebrate the authority of dynasties that remade themselves in the aftermath of disruptive onslugs. The earliest reference to Scone comes at the beginning of the 10th century. In AD 906 Constantine II and Bishop Cellach of St Andrews jointly presided over an assembly at which they swore to uphold a new covenant to keep the laws and customs of the Church in the new kingdom of Alba. The lack of earlier historical references to Scone is significant. While Pictish kings are noted at various places nearby, they were never associated with Scone.

The rise of Scone and Govan seems to represent a significant stage in the development of the public apparatus of kingship in Scotland. It marks a shift away from hillforts
(Moncrieff Hill and Dumbarton respectively), which were the ancient, emblematic foci of royal authority. Power and legitimacy became associated with lower central places, where the key regal components were purpose-built and closely linked to a palace and a church. At both Scone and Govan the new power centre seems to draw the Church more closely into the process of conferring legitimacy. The proximity of the assembly place to prestigious churches at the least offered the Church more ceremonial visibility and may reflect some tentative administrative role as well. Apart from the Moot Hill at Scone, there is little evidence relating to the early medieval arrangements, so further comparison would be unwarranted speculation.

In Govan the model for the most innovative component, the Doomster Hill, apparently derives from traditions of lordship developed within the Norse Irish Sea province, while the origins of the Moot Hill at Scone are less clear, but also appear western. Scone and Govan are indicative of a new sort of kingship that increasingly looked to the Church and the law for authority and came to typify the medieval kingship. To gain a rounded view of what a royal centre of the 10th century looked like, we need to combine Scone’s landscape setting with the ceremonial complex at Govan.

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