

***Donald of Harlaw “Made a covering of gold and silver
for the relic of the hand of St Columba”. (c.1412)***

The utmost importance of Saints relics and their reliquaries in this period cannot be overemphasised.

“Church relics play a crucial role in understanding the symbolic meaning of the place of worship in medieval Christianity; for they were the foundation of both the physical and the institutional church.

Relics were believed to possess the same power that had animated the saints while they were alive; they bridged the gap between heaven and earth, connecting the faithful with the virtuous who had died, often as martyrs. Medieval craftsmen created elaborate reliquaries to enshrine them, using precious materials encrusted with gems, to reflect the sacredness of the objects within. Used in the liturgy and in public rituals, relics became the focus of pilgrimages, but they also functioned as objects of private devotion, enclosed in rings or pendants and worn on the body as protective amulets.

The idea that the fragmentation of these holy bodies retained the entirety of the saints’ power in each part likely formed in analogy to Christian conceptions of the Eucharist, which contained the body of Christ in each division. Relics contained the real presence of the saint just as the bread and the wine contained the real presence of God. The saint’s identity and presence persisted in each division and distribution. In the late sixth century, theologians such as Pope Gregory the Great (ca. 540-604) worried about how the powers of the saint, which one might expect resided in their holy souls, might still be available in their bodies, even after the separation of the soul and body after death. Nevertheless, it seemed sufficient that the holy soul, now residing with God in heaven, had been in contact with the saintly body and maintained a connection with it.

The saints’ power also resided in items of a personal nature, especially the saint’s clothing, and could be transmitted to substances like oil and water that came into contact with the saint’s remains. It seems clear that medieval patrons and artists created reliquaries with the hope of shaping the souls of their viewers. In other words, the form of the reliquary had more to do with its impact on the viewer than its presentation of information about its contents.”¹

A CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLE (TO DONALD II’S) WHICH DEMONSTRATES NOT ONLY THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF RELICS, BUT ALSO THE MAGNITUDE OF THEIR EXORBITANT AND DIFFICULT ATTAINMENT.²

Sir William Preston of Gorton was a benefactor of St. Giles’, Edinburgh:-

“In 1454, after much trouble and expense abroad, and aided by “a high and mighty prince, the King of France, and many other Lords of France,” he succeeded in obtaining an arm bone of the Patron Saint, which he generously bequeathed to the church. The Town Council were so gratified with the gift that they resolved to add an aisle to the choir in commemoration of the event, and to place therein a tablet of brass narrating the bounty of Sir William. This aisle was to be built within six or seven years, “furth frae our Lady Isle where the said William lyis.” From this it appears that the (large) south aisle of the nave was known as the lady chapel, and that Sir William had been buried there.”

¹ *Treasures of Heaven : Saints, Relics, Devotion in Medieval Europe*; British Museum Press. pps 7-8, 106, 163- 166, cover. 2011.

² *The Ecclesiastical Architecture of Scotland*, VOL II; p. 438. David MacGibbon and Thomas Ross; 1897.

(St Giles was of course buried in France whereas St Columba was buried in Iona).

THE HAND/ARM OF ST COLUMBA RELIQUARY

This was a rarity and the only corporeal relic of St Columba repatriated from its five centuries of safekeeping in Kells, Ireland - a prestigious, sacred "Hebridean Holy Grail". Donald and his artists enshrined it in a 'charismatic' gold and silver reliquary of 'dazzling, wondrous beauty'.

"These arm reliquaries were made to be used theatrically, to extend and magnify gestures as though they were of the Saint. As golden images of limbs, reliquary arms are caught in a moment of performance, realising their potential as instruments of divine action accomplished on earth. Many make a blessing with the fingers." (Treasures of Heaven; p.166.)

This particular reliquary, most probably containing a bone of St Columba's arm or hand (these type can sometimes contain any relic/s of the Saint) was therefore used as an extension by the ordained Iona Abbott to bless his congregation. In effect a benediction by Saint Columba himself, from heaven! This was not "theatre" then, it was genuine, divine belief. (It would contain a hand bone if it too had an in situ viewing window.)

(A) Where did the relic come from?

It would definitely not be from Dunkeld, Scotland just right after the Battle of Harlaw and what's more, there were never any body parts listed amongst their St Columba relics. It is certain that the entirety of St Columba's relics were originally removed c.849 mostly to Ireland and some to Scotland. All relics then ended up in Ireland, even those from Dunkeld due to an east coast Viking threat in 878, including the portable shrine made of "precious metals wherein lie the holy bones of St Columba".¹ (Four Masters : "The shrine of Colum Cille, and his relics in general, were brought to Ireland, to avoid the foreigners"). Then, for example, a set of Columba's secondary relics were lost at sea, returning to Iona.

St Columba was an Irish royal (Northern Ui Neill; of Cenel Conaill, an O'Donnell). Iona had been the royal church of the Northern Ui Neill for centuries. Not only would his high status body parts been sentimentally returned (*conductio*) home but were required to be located with the new headquarters of his confederation – Kells, then Derry from 12th c. (not in Saul, Downpatrick!). They were 'the title-deed of the Columban community', p.317; Reeves.

¹ William Reeves; Adomnan's *Life of St Columba*; p.315; 1857. Yeoman, P; *Pilgrimage in Medieval Scotland*; 2009; pps.44,80

The Chiefs of "CLANN DOMNAILL a nEIRINN agus a nALBAIN" (MS 1337; H3., 18), because of their exceptionally long and close historic, political, professional and blood ties with Ireland, had considerable status and sway there which was essential for obtaining a relic from Derry (head of the *Coluim Cille familia* since Somerled's time and seat of the Bishop of Cenél nEógain, Tyrone, since 1254). Toirdhelbach O'Donnell's mother was the "daughter of The MacDomnaill of the Isles", ie, Angus Mor. She was the second wife of Chief Donal Og O'Donnell (Cenél Conaill) and her dowry included Clan Domnaill galloglaigh. Dr. Sean Duffy (Trinity College) says there was an on-going relationship, a "family alliance", between the O'Donnells and the *Mac Somurli* sept of *Donnell mac Raghnaill*.

The dynasticism of Clan Donald is no more evident than with the frequent marriages of both sons and daughters to the Northern Ui Neill. Almost every High King of Ireland came from the Ui Neill dynasty down to the end of the 11th century, and the supremacy of the Cenél nEógain (O'Neill) kings of Tyrone was hardly challenged for another 400 years. Importantly :-

- Donald of Harlaw's grandmother was an O'Cahen Royal of Derry, who was first married to *The (Great) O'Neill*. His father, Good John of Islay, had a royal O'Neill half brother.
- The incumbent Bishop of Derry, "*Bishop of Cenél nEógain*",² from 1415-19, around the time the relic was obtained, was Donnell MacCawley (MacCaul).³ They were a clan of the Cenél nEógain which had close (military) ties to the "nobilis" *MacAlaxandair* (Macdonnell) High Constables of Ulster to *The O'Neill* in Tyrone and who were first cousins to the Iona Abbot at the time, John *MacAlasandair* (MacAllister).

² The bishopric has its origin in the Columba abbey of Derry, founded by the abbots of Iona in the sixth century. By the High Middle Ages, the monastery of Derry was one of the chief monasteries of the Columban familia and its abbots often bore the title Comarbai Coluim Cille, successor of Saint Columba. **The episcopal diocese emerged from the reorganisation of the Irish church in the twelfth century. The see was founded to cover the lands of the Cenél nEógain, i.e. Tyrone. [Not Cenél Conaill, Donegal, as most would imagine!]**

³ Incumbent : appointed on 20 February 1514, but was never consecrated, and died before October 1419. NB : Annals of Ulster (U) 1220.1. "Fonachtan Ua Bronain, successor of St. Colum-cille, rested in peace..... the Community of Daire (Derry) chose Mac Cathmail (MacCawley) into the succession and Aedh Ua Neill and the Cenel-Eogain chose Flann Ua Brolcain". U1353.12. "Nicholas Mac Cathusaigh, bishop of Airghialla, died (in the harvest), and Brian Mac Cathmail (MacCawley) was chosen in his stead."

- The secretary to the Lords of the Isles around the time was Roger **O'Brolchan**, a long standing Derry family of high artisans, scholars and leading ecclesiastics (been *comarbai Coluim Cille*). They had been associated with the MacDonald Lords on Iona for centuries as Chief Masons, etc, and still of considerable status and influence in Derry.

No other “Scotti-sh” clan or entity, east or west, could have attained the sacred acquisition of a relic of St. Coluim Cille.

(For more on this see Attachment “K” : *Eirinn* - Birthplace of Somerled and Clan Donald, *Clann Cholla*.)

There is no evidence that a “hand of Columba” bone relic was back on Iona before Donald II’s gift of a reliquary. (No historical or archaeological evidence of a translated tomb or shrine in the main church’s “crypt” or high altar, feretory/reliquary area.) And if there was a 13th century St Columba *tomb* created in the “crypt” then it would have been empty (Yeoman, P; p.21). These precious relic “treasury items” and symbols of political power were well accounted for, catalogued and “asset managed”. There is no account, record or any evidence at all of a returned corporeal relic to be placed in a postulated crypt tomb, one that was never the burial place of St Columba in any case (unlike the others, eg, St Kentigern in Glasgow.) This being the case, no translation of bone relics to an *elevated* tomb shrine in the feretory area could have occurred. Pilgrimage did occur without saint relics. There were many other sacred places and objects to be venerated (Yeoman, P), eg, translate the “miraculous” soil/*corpse dust* from the accepted St Columba grave in his “chapel” (at church’s west door), ie, the “*power of the dynamis-virtus of the spiritual burial dust and bits of stone.*” (NB: W. Reeves says “*St Columba’s bones should be sought for in the Reilig Odhrain*”! – p.317, notes ‘*it lies*’.)

This question is manifest : knowing full well the potential it would have for a huge, positive impact on their status and reputation, why wasn’t a reliquary made for the prestigious, sacred relic of Columba’s “hand” at any time during the prior two centuries of the Royal Family of MacDonald’s Lordship of their ecclesiastical capital of Iona?

The answer is evident : it was not there in Iona Abbey.

(B) Where was the reliquary/shrine made? Because it is coeval with, therefore said to be “similar to the shrine of St Patrick’s hand,” and knowing that Donald’s royal *O’Neill* uncle was a half brother to his father Good John of Islay, and his grandmother was an O’Cahan royal of Derry, it is a reasonable supposition that it had been commissioned by Donald in this ancient milieu, in Ireland – **where the relics actually were.** It may have been made in the same workshop as the contemporaneous St. Patrick reliquary - Good John and his mother Agnes O’Cahan (with John’s son Donald?) travelled regularly in Ireland with *safe conduct* from the King of England. ¹ However, it could have been made in Iona’s own renowned metal workshop.

(C) When was it first used? Almost surely on the Feast (death-*translation*) Day of St Columba, 9 June, 1412-20. Imagine the huge crowd consisting of the large retinue of the Lord of The Isles, Donald of Harlaw, the emotional pilgrims especially attracted that year (even without dispensations), the vassal Clan Chiefs with their lesser retinue, church hierarchy and gathered locals, with scores of galleys beached and extra camps all around the Abbey boundary – even in St Oran’s graveyard (custom). What a glorious sensation it would have been when the Abbott (probably John MacAllister) first came through the *rood* screen past all the choir monks singing Colmille Feast Day chants.

Holding the shining hand aloft, blessing the congregation and then in procession to those gathered outside with embellished gestures of the “*hand of St Columba*” – a surreal blessing, miraculously *transmitted* by the then internationally revered, heavenly Saint himself, residing in heaven with God. What splendid satisfaction Donald II would have had! His son and grandson both became Bishops of the Isles. (In 1433, Bishop Angus I MacDonald removed the Bishop’s Seat, the *Cathedra*, from Snizort, Skye to the Clan Donald’s ecclesiastical capital, Iona.)

¹ Agnes O’Cahan was first married to *The O’Neill* before Angus Og de Yle. She had an O’Neill son, Brian Balloch, to this first marriage and his half-brother Lord John and mother Agnes, supported Brian in an unsuccessful struggle for leadership against *The O’Neill* (Niall) who was backed by the “Mac Alaxandairs”. This was the Macdonnell High Constable of Galloglaigh who were also the “*de Yle*” challengers to the Clan Donald Chiefship, ie, Raghnaill Mac Alaxandair (Og), and who probably “*usurped the government of the Isles*” for 9 years :- *The World of the Galloglass*; p.,98; Dr K Nicholls. Sean Duffy Editor, 2007. It was not *Ruari*, whom it is widely acknowledged was obviously never a “*de Yle*” (as it was clearly shown.)

JOHN HAD EXPECTATIONS!

Did the Abbot, Bishop of the Isles, or even the Pope, regard *“this (relic/reliquary) acquisition as a symbolic gloss”* on the Lord of the Isles himself and *“a sign of the blessing and collective merit of the entire community”*?¹

At enormous expense, Donald’s grandson, Lord John II, rebuilt and enhanced almost the entire church with the intention of it being raised to the **Clan Donald’s Cathedral of the Isles**. This is consistent with a political power play and should be viewed in context of the far reaching and well known 1461 Treaty of Ardtornish-Westminster between John II and King Edward IV of England. John II’s expectations were very high.



Above : The original AD 1269 elevated Shrine of St Edward The Confessor, d.1066 (canonised 1161), in Westminster Abbey which was rebuilt by Henry III. The shrine, behind the high altar, was dismantled by monks during the 16th c. Reformation and then restored in the same place but rebuilt/ assembled quite differently in the reign of Mary I. The gold feretory/chasse on the top went missing at that time (it used to be covered with a protecting canopy that was lowered and raised by pulley.) The 1066 sub-terranean (grave) tomb in the original abbey church built by Edward is actually 8 feet below the shrine (Dr Warwick Rodwell, 2005, using GPR). Crippled and ill pilgrims get as close as they can to the translated corporeal relics with some crouching in the recesses of the stone and cosmati inlay base and wearing away the steps with their knees (and collecting the sacred *dust*?) Note the pilgrim with no legs on a wood trolley using short poles for locomotion and the dying person laying prone in the lap of his carer. (David Gentleman illustrator; Westminster-Abbey.org.)

¹ “The reception of relics by great cities like Constantinople, and later, after the sack of Constantinople, by thirteenth century royal Paris, was a sign of the blessing of entire communities of whatever form. When Louis IX gained the Crown of Thorns from the Emperor of Constantinople in the 1230s, the Pope regarded this acquisition as a symbolic gloss on the crown of France itself. The national saint, together with the elevated and often dynastically-related dead that gathered around it, was a sign of collective merit; the impact of the dead was as ever-widening as the rings in water brought about by the casting of a stone”. (*Medieval death: Ritual and Representation*; Binski, Paul. 2001; p.21)