History and Hagiography: The *Vita Sancti Servani* and the Foundation of Culross Abbey

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Abstract

The Cistercian abbey of Culross was founded in 1217 on the site of an earlier church known locally to have been established by St Serf. This heritage was successfully appropriated by the new abbey through the adoption of the cult. As successors to the saint and his church, the monks were entitled to inherit their patron’s landed territories, but much of this property seems to have been in other hands. A comparison of the earliest landed endowment of Culross Abbey with the cult landscape presented by the *Vita Sancti Servani* reveals that certain alienated properties appear to have been reclaimed on this basis. For this reason, the *Vita* must be understood as a piece of history writing: it recorded past events as they were known locally to have occurred. The *Vita* is our window into what that version of history was.

Keywords

Cistercians, hagiography, history, landscape, medieval, saints

Introduction

The *Vita Sancti Servani* survives in its complete form in only one manuscript, written probably in the 13th century and likely belonging originally to Glasgow Cathedral. Despite this provenance, it has been demonstrated that the Life is a product of the cult of St Serf emanating from Culross in Fife, the site (according to the *Vita*) of Serf’s principal church and the place of his burial. A Cistercian abbey was founded here in 1217 by Malcolm, earl of Fife, but, as Alan Macquarrie has convincingly argued and this article aims to demonstrate, despite the dating of the manuscript, the content of the narrative does not make sense as a creation of this abbey. Instead, it is the traditions and jurisdictional claims associated with an earlier church of Culross, evidenced by the...
presence of 8th- or 9th-century carved stones at the site, which are represented in the *Vita*. As shall be shown, the Cistercian monks of Culross actively positioned their abbey as the successor to the earlier church and, by extension, themselves as the heirs to the legacy of St Serf; the events surrounding the foundation demonstrate that this was also how the surrounding community understood the identity of the abbey and its place in the locality. This raises important questions about how the history of Culross was understood locally, the process by which the past was appropriated by the new abbey, and how this all played out in practical terms. Unfortunately, there is very little in the way of documentary evidence: only meagre charter material survives for Culross Abbey, while the earlier church is almost entirely obscure. This article will argue, however, that the content of the *Vita Sancti Servani* provides crucial insight into contemporary understandings of the past, and for this reason, the text should be understood as a piece of history writing. This is not because the *Vita* preserves accurate details of past events, which it may indeed do, but because the content represents the only version of history that mattered in its immediate context: that which was known, accepted and acted upon.

**Hagiography as history writing**

The status of hagiography as a form of historiography has been a matter of academic dispute. Hagiography was long the victim of the post-Enlightenment view of history as objective truth. For many 19th-century, and indeed 20th-century, historians, hagiography was, at best, unconcerned with the truth and, at worst, downright fraudulent. In his attempt to rescue what he termed ‘sacred biography’, Thomas Heffernan argued in 1988 that an empirical view of these texts misunderstood, and misrepresented, the form of history they contained. For Heffernan, the crucial point that modern scholars had missed was whether the concept of ‘truth’ as understood by medieval hagiographers differed from their own. For the former, the ‘real’ was always hidden, and ‘the evidence of the senses was at best only a corroborating proof’. A preoccupation with verifying the events recounted in these texts ignored the contextual meaning of the stories and, crucially, what the community believed about the individual. Felice Lifshitz also took up this theme in a 1994 article: while acknowledging that a rehabilitation of hagiography as historical source had taken place, she argued that the characterisation of hagiographical narratives as ‘untrue’ continued to obstruct a full appreciation of the function of these sources as history writing.

This point about the nature of ‘truth’ continues to be of interest to historians. Recently, Hilary Powell has argued that hagiographical truth is ‘not primarily rooted in an empirical epistemology, but rather a transcendent truth about divine grace’. That is not to say that hagiographical writers had no concern for the veracity of their accounts; indeed, quite the opposite for the many concerned to stress, for example, the written or oral authority for their texts. But events described need not have been factually true in order to convey truth, and even the incorporation of eyewitness accounts may have been primarily to testify to a higher, universal truth. Moreover, Björn Weiler argues that this conception of truth is equally applicable to all types of medieval history writing. An event’s true meaning, that is, the moral and spiritual truth it signified, was just as
important as finding out what actually happened. An author might record what he and the local community knew to be true; this did not require evidence. Of course, a modern audience may struggle to discern (what we understand as) history within hagiographical texts, but that is because the medieval writer was operating within an entirely different context of what was true: saints did work miracles, they punished those who infringed upon their lands and they healed those who sought their aid. There was no reason to suppose these things had not happened.7

In this cultural environment, the job of the hagiographer was the same as the historian: to interpret data about a subject in a way that provided meaningful knowledge. As Rico G. Monge notes, that the meaning given was a sacred one rather than, for example, a socioeconomic one does not diminish the historiographical nature of the work.8 A similar point is made by Lifshitz, who argues that the fact that hagiographical narratives concern saints is tangential to their categorisation, just as the modern genre of biography encompasses persons of a different profession or status. While the application of the label hagiography rather than biography or historiography may make sense in a modern secular context, the use of such definitions is invalid if the criteria do not make sense in the particular medieval context to which the text belongs: ‘Nothing authorizes us to excise from the history of historiography everything which is now perceived as “false,” or to excise from the roll-call of historians everyone whose methods and conclusions we do not accept’.9

This has very important implications for the classification of hagiography as a genre distinct from history writing. And, indeed, there are further issues with making such distinctions. They often rely on an understanding of medieval historiography as ‘factual’ or ‘critical’ in the manner of modern historiography. Yet many of the central functions of medieval history writing render it an entirely different beast to its modern counterpart. Medieval history writing was about preserving and transmitting knowledge of the past, but it was also a hermeneutic tool which sought to reveal the meaning of past events and uncover universal truths. Historical narratives had didactic significance: they should convey moral guidance and prompt pious contemplation. Writing history could thus be an act of pastoral care, intended to promote spiritual well-being.10 If medieval historiography is acknowledged as literary, moralising and uncritical, then these categories break down. The distinction between different textual types and the sort of information appropriate to each, so obvious to modern scholars, would have been far less, if at all, perceptible to medieval authors and their audiences. Numerous medieval texts combine stories of saints with what we might think of as secular histories or with administrative records, a clear indication that such material was considered to be interrelated.11 There is continuous cross-over in the sources: foundation legends appeared in royal charters; land grants were copied alongside narrative accounts.12 As a result, a monastic literary work could have archival status and play a role in legal or political conflicts.13 That is certainly not to say that hagiographical writing should not be studied in its own right, or that it does not operate within its own, distinctive literary parameters. It is to argue that our understanding of hagiography can be greatly augmented through an appreciation of how this type of writing functioned and was understood by contemporaries.

Few historians nowadays would dismiss the value of hagiography as a source type on the basis of factual accuracy. Research continues to cautiously sift these texts for data
relating to the period which the Life purports to record, to identify genuine historical figures and trace their activities. Several historians have utilised the *Vita Sancti Servani* in this way, including its modern editor, Alan Macquarrie.14 This is a worthwhile endeavour, particularly since we have so few sources to illuminate the early development of ecclesiastical organisation in Scotland, and hagiographical writing throws up such tantalising hints. Of course, to consider a text a piece of history writing, it need not accurately record past events. The more prevalent methodology of recent scholarship is to focus on the production of the text itself, identifying contemporary political, social and cultural realities and the impact these had on form and content. This may involve comparative analysis to trace changes in the construction of a saint, considering each version of the Life as a product of its own time, reshaped and rewritten to better serve a different set of realities.15 ‘Revision’ of earlier texts was not necessarily a cynical or even wholly conscious process; after all, surely even the most rigorous modern historiography cannot escape the charge of being an interpretation which makes sense to *us*. The account of the creation of St Serf’s four staffs in the *Vita Sancti Servani*, for example, may have been a means of explaining the existence of multiple crosier relics.16

Yet such an approach to the material is not entirely satisfactory if attempting to understand hagiography as history writing from a perspective contemporary with the texts themselves. As Rachel J. Smith argues, in this type of analysis, ‘true’ understanding of a vita is achieved through the translation of its contents into matters of interest to the modern historian, for example, political networks – that is, the rendering of the Life into terms that are considered empirically verifiable and so ‘real’, consequentially disregarding what the author and his audience would have understood to be real or true within the text.17 With this in mind, we may also consider hagiography as history writing from another angle, one which looks beyond historical accuracy or contextualised construction and, in many ways, beyond the traits of the narratives themselves. If the details of a saint’s Life and their association with particular locations were widely known and played a part within the life of a community, that is, if the narrative was established in people and place in a usable form, then hagiography represents a form of writing which captured the only version of history that really mattered to that locality: that which was accepted and acted upon. If it was known that a saint had founded a certain church or that a miracle took place at a particular site, then we may consider this the history of that location; the origin or purpose of the stories makes little difference.

**Inheriting the past**

The Cistercian abbey of Culross was founded on a site understood to have been an earlier church founded by St Serf and the location of his tomb. This type of scenario was fairly typical in medieval Scotland. As Kenneth Veitch has shown, the extent to which Scotland’s reformed monastic institutions were mapped onto existing religious sites is striking.18 In some instances, this involved the conversion of existing communities to a reformed rule; in most cases, monasteries were founded on or very near to abandoned religious sites of historic significance. These new communities were actively promoted as the heirs to earlier churches. The *Historia Fundationis* compiled by the Augustinians of St Andrews is a rather extreme example of this, in that it portrayed the canons as the
direct successors of the site’s original clergy despite the fact that there was still a surviving Céli Dé community at St Andrews at the time. Yet continuity of site alone was not always enough to ensure that claims to an earlier heritage were accepted within the locality. Appropriation of a saint closely associated with the site was an important way of affirming for contemporaries that these houses were the continuation of earlier communities. The status of the Cluniac priory of Paisley as successor to the earlier church on the site, for example, was greatly reinforced by the monks’ adoption of the cult of St Meadhhrán/Mirren, whose shrine made the priory a pilgrimage destination.

A useful comparison can also be made with the refounding of abandoned Anglo-Saxon sites in post–Conquest England, where the appropriation of saints was crucial to the construction of a narrative of continuity which allowed the present to inherit this past. Possession of the relics of Sts Wulfhad and Ruffin allowed the 12th-century Augustinian incarnation of Stone Priory to manufacture equivalence with the earlier Anglo-Saxon, female foundation. Elsewhere, the establishment of a Cluniac cell on the site of the earlier Much Wenlock nunnery in 1079 received saintly approval via the discovery of the remains of St Milburga. When an Augustinian priory was established in Oxford on the site of the church of St Frideswide, 8th-century Anglo-Saxon princess and founder of the earlier church, the 12th-century canons were quick to revive the cult and produce a *Miracula S Frideswidae*. Possession of relics substantiated claims to antiquity and authority, while custody of a saint’s body confirmed an abbot as the ‘heir’ of their patron. Probably the most striking example of this was the community of St Cuthbert: despite significant discontinuities over many centuries in terms of both site and religious observance, apparently including a period where the community comprised a small group of itinerant clerks, the constant presence of the saint’s body was enough to tie these disparate elements together as the history of a single institution. The 12th-century narrative produced by the Benedictine community of Durham, founded 1083, claimed a historic identity and purpose originating with the 7th-century community of Lindisfarne.

For the monks of Culross too, the cornerstone of the abbey’s inherited identity was the cult of the saint. Unusually for a Cistercian house, Culross was founded with a dual dedication to St Serf and the Virgin Mary. The abbot was often referred to as the ‘abbot of St Serf’ in Scottish charters, and this title for the abbey also appears in the records of the Order, although the unfamiliar saint is rendered Sergius or Servacius, evidently by confused foreign scribes. A surviving mid-15th-century psalter belonging to Abbot Richard Marshall contains the feast day, which was not part of the official Cistercian kalendar, on 1 July and places Serf among the confessors in the litany of saints. It seems highly likely that the construction of the abbey was accompanied by the translation of Serf’s relics to an elaborate shrine within the monastic church and all of the festivities that accompanied such occasions. It may even be that this prompted a gathering together of information about Serf, from oral or written accounts, or some combination of both, and the version of the Life contained in the *Vita Sancti Servani* is the product of these efforts. Hagiographical revivals were often fuelled by the demand of monastic communities for high-quality texts commemorating local saints. The deliberate curation of earlier material by these monks and nuns proved crucial to its survival: the Welsh Cistercians, for example, played a central role in preserving local Welsh history and literature.
Crucial, too, to the construction of such narratives of continuity was a very particular understanding of the nature of time and space. Time is a fundamental condition of human life, but its representation, its measurement and the perception of it are social and historical categories subject to change.\textsuperscript{29} Time-keeping measures are what give meaning to its passage; it follows that marking time in different ways will change this meaning. While there can be no absolute definitions, there are fundamental differences between medieval conceptions of time and space and our own. As Talal Asad explains,

The complex Christian universe, with its interlinked times (eternity and its moving image, and the irruptions of the former into the latter: Creation, Fall, Christ’s life and death, Judgement Day) and hierarchy of spaces (the heavens, the earth, purgatory, hell), is broken down by the modern doctrine of secularism into a duality: a world of self-authenticating things in which we really live as social beings and a religious world that exists only in our imagination.\textsuperscript{30}

For medieval Christians, earthly or human time began with the Creation and would end at the Final Judgement. It could therefore be shaped and altered by divine power. Eternity, that is, God’s ‘time’, was timeless and unmoving. This was the condition that the world was inevitably advancing towards.\textsuperscript{31}

Saints occupied a unique middle ground described by Cynthia Turner Camp as ‘holy stasis within temporal flux’. Saints lived earthly lives, and their shrines and communities existed within earthly time: human and linear. Yet, at the same time, saints were supratemporal, existing in the aevum. The historical events of their lives, and afterlives, revealed a divine power which was wholly unconstrained by time.\textsuperscript{32} We get a strong sense of this in hagiographical writing: when things happened and in what order often seem to matter little or not at all. In a way, these events are always happening ‘now’. We must also add a further layer to this: liturgical time, which was cyclical. Aside from the day of death, hagiographical materials are generally uninterested in dates and particularly calendar years. What mattered was the day of commemoration, which occurred every year regardless of the chronological distance from the life of the saint. No dating of any kind is given in the \textit{Vita Sancti Servani}, although the first portion does follow a linear arrangement and indicates the passing of time by the number of years spent by Serf in particular locations or vocations: 13 years studying in Alexandria, 20 years as bishop of Canaan and so on. Once Serf arrived in Scotland, the \textit{Vita} is clear on the ordering of the stages in his journey to Culross to found his church, where he spent ‘some time’, and then to Lochleven. After this point, however, the remainder of the text describes a non-sequential assortment of miracles and events which took place ‘at one time’ or ‘another time’.

It could be argued that it is this treatment of, or disregard for, time which denies hagiography the label of history writing. Hanz-Werner Goetz, for example, sees the situating of events in their chronological order as one of the key criteria which delineates medieval historiography from other genres. Yet he acknowledges that the treatment of time, even by those medieval chroniclers who took care to record precise dates, lacked a sense of the truly historical character of the past. Their depiction of events gives an impression of ‘a certain “timelessness”’ that ignored real differences in the character of different time periods and seemed oblivious to historical anachronisms. The medieval understanding of the past was, therefore, peculiar and ambiguous: ‘a
(temporal) development corresponding to the saeculum, the earthly time, with an unchanging character and essence’. This allowed past events to be directly applied to the present: authors often detached these events from their chronological context, transferring them to a level that was independent of time. Again, this comes down to the medieval understanding of the nature of history itself: historical events communicated the divine plan.\textsuperscript{33} The dual temporal existence of a saint, operating within earthly time while remaining apart from it, allowed saints to act as conduits between moments in chronological time, bridging gaps in linear history.\textsuperscript{34} This was what made it possible, and entirely logical, for the 13th-century Cistercian community of Culross to assume a unified identity with an earlier foundation that it had no realistic connection to and for their neighbours to easily comprehend this continuity.

The role of landscape

Landscape played a central role in the relationship between saints, communities and history. Saints had stretches of territory, conceived of in much the same way as a secular lordship. In Scotland, the boundaries of these lands were often marked by place-names which invoked those saints.\textsuperscript{35} Further south, the inhabitants of the lands of St Cuthbert were the ‘haliwerfolc’ (Old English): folk of the holy man; the term was used to directly describe the territorial extent of the bishopric of Durham.\textsuperscript{36} As noted by Michel de Certeau, hagiography is ‘marked by a predominance of precise indications of place over those of time’; the Life of a saint was, in many ways, a composition of places.\textsuperscript{37} There is a very clear geographical ordering to the \textit{Vita Sancti Servani}. The narrative follows the journey of the saint, from Canaan to Jerusalem, Constantinople and Rome, then to the Alps, before his arrival at Inchkeith in the Firth of Forth. Serf’s activities in Scotland are structured by place, from his coming to Culross via Kinneil; his time at Lochleven, where he founded a monastery; a series of miraculous events in different locations: Dysart, ‘Tuligbotuan’ (Tullibody or Tullibole),\textsuperscript{38} Tillicoultry, Alva, Aithrey and Dunning; and finally, the return of his body to Culross. As Sarah Foot argues, writers used geography as an organising principle to create imagined maps of events which linked these places together for the reader.\textsuperscript{39} Hagiography of this type was intrinsically local in place and meaning: such narratives comprised local histories of local places. Stories of saints set in real, recognisable locations directly connected the miraculous to everyday life.\textsuperscript{40} Place is essentially stable and non-temporal, providing a concrete connection to the past. Landscape can therefore act as a powerful repository of historical memory; it was the land that contained the version of the past presented by the \textit{Vita} as much as the text.\textsuperscript{41}

There were practical implications of this intimate connection between saint and place. Possession of relics was closely tied to ownership of landed property: the acquisition of one was commonly accompanied by the other.\textsuperscript{42} In medieval Scotland, the relationship between relic and land was formalised in the position of the deorad (older Gaelic) or dewar (Scots): the custodian of a relic. The office was often held by a layman and typically attached to a portion of land; property and relic were passed together, hereditarily or otherwise.\textsuperscript{43} Where a monastery acted as the custodian of a saint’s body, guardianship of the saint’s lands was usually part and parcel of the role. This was not always an entirely straightforward process. Following the founding of the Benedictine priory at
Durham, for example, the division of St Cuthbert’s lands into episcopal and monastic estates was greatly complicated by the fact that, in the past, the interests of the bishop and the church had been one and the same, and so both held a credible claim to be the heritors of the saint.44

Where a monastery was a refoundation of an earlier site, the patrimony of the earlier church may have been known, or assumed, from local traditions, but the new monastery could find itself without written records of property ownership, and direct administration of these lands may not have taken place within living memory. In these cases, the saints could be called upon to reinforce landed claims. The 12th-century monks of the refounded abbey of Peterborough, for example, created charters alleging to record endowments made to the original 7th-century church in which Sts Cyneburg and Cyneswith appear as witnesses.45 Whitby Abbey employed a similar strategy to support its territorial and jurisdiction franchise in the liberty of Whitby Strand. Based on charter evidence, the liberty, in its high medieval form at least, was a late 12th- or early 13th-century creation. What these charters record, however, is the claim that the franchise had been granted for the 7th-century abbess, St Hild. This tradition was well established by the time of a boundary dispute in the 1280s, when the community swore that the Strand’s limits had been laid out by the saint.46 It would be wrong to characterise these documents as cynical forgeries; instead, we can think of these activities as the creation of charters which the community knew should exist.

Hagiographical writing also played a part in this. Claims to property and rights are routinely expressed in these texts, often embedded in the narrative itself. Furthermore, Thomas Head has argued that accounts of the miraculous protection of monastic property may represent the gathering together of oral traditions where ownership and rights were not adequately attested to in written records. He points to examples where writers carefully recorded precise details regarding the location of the property, the circumstances of its acquisition and the identity of the actors, in a manner they rarely bothered to for, say, miraculous cures. Indeed, the canon of the abbey of Meung-sur-Loire who composed the *Miracula S. Lifardi* expressly stated that he began his work after being unable to locate records concerning certain properties of his monastery: ‘Since we are unable to restore stolen property, let us try to restore, in as much as it will prove possible, the praises of God in his saint’. Inclusions in the *Miracula* demonstrated the abbey’s possession of these properties instead.47

Not only was a church entitled to claim ownership over the territory of a saint, but that saint could be relied upon to defend these interests for the community. Protection for the institution which housed the tomb was one of the main tasks of a patron, and hagiography had the power to legitimise monastic rights in the face of secular challenges. The Life of St Haldalini, founder of the monastery of Chelles, contained a miracle story whereby a hunting party who trespassed into monastic space awoke to find their horses and dogs dead. Local church authorities used this event as a justification to ban all horsemen from the monastery’s property. For the laity, there were serious risks involved, both spiritually and physically, in denying a saint his or her rightful possessions. Hagiographical accounts of miraculous punishments meted out by saints functioned as a deterrent and were intended as such. The *Miracula Remacli* recalled that a man who seized land that belonged to the monastery of Stavelot was punished when the saint caused all of the hair
on his body, along with his finger and toenails, to fall out. Rigoldus of Alsunza may have
had this story in mind when, in 1104, he restored land to Stavelot which had been seized
and passed down for generations by his ancestors, agreeing to come to the monastery
every year on the feast of St Remacle to renew his gift.48

Vengeful miracles of this type were common. The Miracles of St Bavo of Ghent, for
example, contain numerous instances of the protection of his dependants and punishment
for offences including the usurpation or damage of monastic property, the witholding of
rents or dues, and even insufficient respect for the feast day.49 Among the miracles of St
Mildrith of Mister-in-Thanet was that of a peasant whose eyes fell out after he claimed
that land did not belong to Augustine’s Abbey, the custodians of Mildrith’s relics. The
12th-century Ely history, the Liber Eliensis, contained a story of a noble called Ingulf
who seized the lands of St Æthelthryth’s at Brandon in Norfolk. Ingulf died after the saint
rendered him incapable of eating or drinking, as did his wife and son when they contin-
ued to withhold the lands. Ingulf’s brother then wisely restored them to the community.50

Elsewhere in this same text, the author recounts with evident confusion that St Æthelthryth
did not similarly punish the sheriff of Cambridgeshire for seizing her lands.51 Again, one
of our best examples is the cult of St Cuthbert, a saint with a fierce reputation as protector
of his lands and community. Texts such as Capitula (or Liber) de miraculis et transla-
tionibus sancti Cuthberti and Symeon of Durham’s Libellus de exordio procursu istius,
hoc est Dunhelmensis, ecclesie contain an array of vengeful miracles: a man who dese-
crated Cuthbert’s land and questioned his power became fixed to the spot and died;
another stole coins from Cuthbert’s tomb and they immediately turned red hot in his
mouth; and various others who deceived, stole or trespassed went mad. Even a horse was
struck down after feeding on monastic land. Sally Crumplin has demonstrated that the
role of the saint was malleable: violent, punitive miracles proliferate in Cuthbertine texts
produced during periods of upheaval and insecurity for the community, while a more
benevolent portrait of the saint emerges in times of stability, as in Reginald of Durham’s
later 12th-century Libellus de admirandis beati Cuthberti virtutibus. Even in Reginald’s
work, however, a quarter of the miracles performed by Cuthbert are punishments.52

Cuthbert was also known as the defender of the region of Northumbria against invad-
ers. The banner of St Cuthbert was carried by the English army at the battle of Neville’s
Cross near Durham in 1346, a disastrous defeat for the Scots which resulted in the cap-
ture of King David II; various English sources mention the role of St Cuthbert in this
outcome. This explanation is also given in Walter Bower’s Scotichronicon, a 15th cen-
tury Scottish chronicle. Bower recounts that Cuthbert had appeared to King David in a
dream to request that the Scots should not invade or damage his lands. Evidently for
Bower, Cuthbert had given the king adequate warning, and the saint’s retribution for the
violation of church lands was justified and, indeed, to be expected.53 Themes of protec-
tion and punishment are a recurrent feature of cults in Scotland. St Machan turned cattle
thieves to stone, while a thief who stole books from the bishop’s house was struck blind
by St Moluag.54 The 12th-century Song on the Death of Somerled recorded how St
Kentigern, patron of Glasgow Cathedral, protected the people of the diocese against an
attack by Somerled in 1164.55 St Margaret of Scotland performed this role on a national
scale in 1263 when she repelled the Norwegian invasion of the country, shortly after
which King Haakon IV died.56
also mirrored in the role of the dewar. Gilbert Márkus has convincingly argued that his duties included the execution of the saint’s protection over a certain territory, particularly in the protection of livestock. Thus, the dewar of Tarves acted as guardian of the abbot of Arbroath’s herds, while victims of theft in the parish of Glendochart could call upon the services of the dewar of St Fillan’s crosier.57

The endowment of Culross Abbey

The abbey of Culross, then, was founded within a cultural context where the relationship between church, saint and place was deeply embedded. As the successors to the church founded by St Serf, it was accepted, and expected, that the abbey would lay claim to its possessions. The lay community knew that by denying these rights they risked the displeasure of the saint himself and possible bodily harm. Unfortunately for the abbey, however, in 1217, it was rather late to the party. A Benedictine priory had been established at Dunfermline, just six miles from Culross, during the reign of King Malcolm III (1058-1093) by Queen, and later Saint, Margaret. The priory was raised to abbey status by their son, King David I, in the 1120s. As Márkus argues, the landed endowment of Dunfermline seems to have been carved out of what had been the paruchia of St Serf and his church at Culross.58 The cult was certainly still active in close vicinity to the site at this time: a charter of King David I addressed an individual named Gilleserf (“servant of St Serf”) of nearby Clackmannan.59 Yet the redistribution of its lands, if that is indeed what took place, strongly suggests that the church lacked the status or power to resist royal plans for the ecclesiastical reorganisation of the region. Dunfermline may not have been the only beneficiary of this. The Vita Sancti Servani states that Serf travelled around Fife founding churches: while the nature of any historic relationship with Culross is unknown, almost every one of the Vita’s miracles are situated within a medieval parish with a known dedication to St Serf. By c.1200, however, the churches of Tillicoultry and Alva were in the possession of Cambuskenneth Abbey, while the church of Dunning belonged to Inchaffray Priory.60

There is no documentary evidence to suggest an existing community at Culross by 1217, displaced or absorbed by incoming monks of a reformed rule as happened elsewhere. The monastery at Lochleven, for example, was an active community of Céli Dé when it was converted to the Augustinian Order by King David I in roughly 1150. During the 12th and 13th centuries, various other native religious communities were reformed along the same lines through the efforts of regional nobles and clergy; Kenneth Veitch argues that the Augustinian Rule was chosen because, unlike the Benedictine Rule and particularly the Cistercian interpretation, it was flexible enough to be adapted to encompass local customs and allow a peaceful and consensual transition for these communities.61 Just how long the site at Culross may have been without an active community by 1217 is unknown, but it seems more than likely that the Cistercian monks found themselves in a situation where the patrimony of the earlier church would have to be actively recovered, at least as far as was possible by then. As Veitch notes, it was only through the survival of earlier traditions in popular consciousness that such claims could be enacted.

The Tironensian priory at Lesmahagow provides a useful comparative example: by the time of its founding in 1144 on the site of the earlier church of St Machutus, there had
evidently been no active religious community in situ for long enough that the church’s lands had passed into the hereditary possession of local families. Significantly, members of these families bore the personal name Gille Magu. That the Tironensian monks were able to gain control of these lands while successfully assimilating into this semi-secularised native religious landscape was due in large part to their appropriation of Machutus’ cult: in 1316, King Robert I granted an annual payment of 10 marks to the priory to fund the lighting of the tomb. For Culross Abbey, too, it was the place of the saint and his church in local historical memory which facilitated the salvage operation. In arguing that the *Vita Sancti Servani* represented the interests of the early church of Culross, Macquarrie stated that none of the churches or places mentioned in the Life had any subsequent connection with the Cistercian house. This is not the case. In fact, a comparison between the *Vita* and the endowment of Culross reveals some strange and complex elements of the foundation which are only explainable with reference to the cult of St Serf and local understandings of the past.

The core lands granted to the abbey by Malcolm, earl of Fife, were Culross itself, Inzievar, Crombie and Cults. Inzievar bordered the land of Culross to the east. The land of Crombie also lay to the east, but physically separated from Culross and Inzievar by the land of Torry. The land of Cults was around 10 miles to the north and was a detached portion of Crombie parish. Inzievar, meanwhile was a detached portion of Saline parish, the main body of which bordered Cults. The system of parish boundaries in Scotland was superimposed onto pre-existing patterns of geographical organisation. Detached portions like these indicate earlier territorial units. Sometime prior to 1213, however, Earl Malcolm had granted the church of Crombie with the tithes (teinds) of Cults to Dunfermline Abbey. The earl’s subsequent endowing of Culross Abbey with the lands of this parish had the effect of completely undermining his earlier grant. In 1227, Culross and Dunfermline settled a dispute over the tithes of Crombie, overseen by the bishop of Dunkeld, whereby it was agreed that the tithes would pertain to Culross in exchange for 15 marks yearly compensation paid to Dunfermline. In real terms, this amounted to the transference of control of the parish church: at the Reformation, the minister of Crombie was funded by Culross. Indeed, since Culross held all of the land in the parish, including the detached portion at Cults, it would hardly have made sense for Dunfermline to retain the church without any of the tithe income.

There are several puzzling aspects to this: Earl Malcolm’s actions contradicted each other in a way that would inevitably cause conflict, but he had stopped short of directly revoking his earlier grant; the monks of Dunfermline, an institution with the stature and resources to defend its rights, surrendered a church in their possession in return for the rather insubstantial sum of 15 marks, despite a seemingly open-and-shut case in their favour considering that the Cistercian tithe exemption was revoked by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215; and the bishop of Dunkeld seems to have considered this outcome a fair resolution. It would seem, therefore, that the rights of Culross Abbey in Crombie had some deeper merit; it is plausible that these claims rested upon the earlier territorial organisation of these lands and probably their possession by the earlier church. At the very least, Earl Malcolm’s conflicting behaviour suggests this.

The only parish church, aside from Culross itself, which was directly granted by the earl to Culross Abbey upon its foundation was Tullibole. This may have been the
location for one of the *Vita*’s miracles, where St Serf cured a man possessed by an evil spirit, depending on our reading of the placename ‘Tuligbotuan’. That the church was included in the initial endowment of the abbey would seem to indicate that, in the early 13th century at least, Tullibole was understood to be the place referred to and that the parish had known associations with Culross. Such a link is also suggested with the parish of Logie-Airthrey, the location of another of the *Vita*’s miracles. This church belonged to North Berwick Priory, established by Duncan, earl of Fife, around 1150. Upon the foundation of Culross Abbey, an annual payment of £20 was established to be made in perpetuity by the priory to the abbey. The reason is unspecified, but, based on the available evidence, the only connection between these two houses was Logie-Airthrey, and the high value of the annuity certainly suggests that it relates to a church income. This proposition is further strengthened by the fact that the abbey of Culross was also endowed with the land of Gogar within the parish. The payment, therefore, appears to be compensation for rights of some kind held by the church of Culross.

If this is correct, as in the case of Dunfermline Abbey and Crombie, Earl Malcolm did not revoke possession from North Berwick, but the payment surely represented a significant portion of the parish revenue and thus undermined a grant that he himself had previously confirmed. His actions are even stranger in this instance since, as earl of Fife, he was patron of both houses involved and surely had no personal interest in providing for one at the expense of the other when alternative options must have been available. We are left with the impression that the redistribution of the property of the church of Culross was being rectified in some way now that the institution had been revived. The nature of the miracle performed by St Serf may be of significance here. The *Vita* records that a man in Airthrey who had stolen a sheep belonging to the saint was discovered when he attempted to swear an oath to the contrary upon the staff of St Serf and bleated instead. Márkus argues that the story represents the power of Serf’s crosier to protect livestock, a role likely performed by a dewar of Airthrey who held the land of the relic in return for guarding the sheep of the monks of Culross. The suggestion is a very intriguing one, and if correct may represent a self-perpetuating truth: the miracle story justified the responsibility of the dewar to protect the flocks, and the dewar performed this role because of the miracle associated with his relic. If this is the case, the land associated with the relic would appear to be at Gogar.

Also of interest is another important portion of land belonging to the abbey. The *Vita* records that St Serf stood at Kinneil and threw his staff across the sea, which sprouted into a tree where it landed. An angel then told the saint that this would be the location of his burial. The medieval parish of Kinneil was directly across the Firth of Forth from Culross. We can detect the cult of St Serf in the neighbouring parish of Carriden, where early 13th-century renders for land were due on the feast. The Cistercians of Culross were in possession of, or at least advancing a claim to, land in this area, probably upon or very shortly after the foundation of the abbey. Sometime in the early 1200s, a dispute between the monks and Reginald of Carriden over this land was settled when Reginald offered an acre in Carriden in exchange, along with the sale of the adjoining land for 25 shillings. This subsequently became a monastic grange situated at the north-western corner of Carriden parish, on the boundary with Kinneil parish by the shore of the Forth. It is difficult to offer any detailed
discussion of this episode, since the circumstances of the abbey’s initial acquisition are unknown. It may have been a grant by an unknown donor which Reginald sought to block, although it seems odd that the resolution charter made no mention of it. It may have been that the monks were making a claim to this land, one with enough weight that Reginald felt compelled to offer an alternative. Either way, it seems indisputable that it was understood locally that this was the location of an important miraculous event, integral to the foundation of the church of Culross, and that the land should properly be in the hands of the successor to St Serf.

Conclusion

Culross was one of a large number of historic ecclesiastical sites in medieval Scotland which became reformed monastic communities. The Cistercian abbey fused its identity to an earlier church known locally to have been founded by St Serf; the appropriation of the cult was the key to securing this heritage. The custodians of a saint were entitled to inherit their patron’s territories, but, while direct conversion of a site meant patrimony could be easily transferred, the process was much more complex in a case like Culross, involving the resurrection of long dormant claims where much of the property was now in the hands of other monastic houses. Yet a comparison of the earliest landed endowment of the abbey with the landscape of the cult as presented by the Vita Sancti Servani reveals that certain alienated properties do indeed appear to have been salvaged on the basis of the rights of the church of Culross, at least as they were understood in the early 13th century. That this could have taken place would only have been possible if particular knowledge of the history of these places existed in popular memory. The claims of Culross Abbey were based on the understanding that the lands belonged to St Serf: he had walked upon them, performed miracles and founded churches. Individuals like Reginald of Carriden knew that to withhold possession from the successors of St Serf was to risk offending the saint himself and invite disaster. The Vita Sancti Servani must be understood as a piece of history writing: it recorded local historical events as they were known to have occurred. This was the only version of the past that mattered: the one which guided present action. The Vita is our window into what that version of history was.

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Notes

1. MS Z 4.5.5, Marsh’s Library, Dublin, fols. 1r-6v. This article owes a great debt to the work of Alan Macquarrie in editing and translating the manuscript: Alan Macquarrie, ‘Vita Sancti Servani: The Life of St Serf’, Innes Review, vol. 44 (1993), pp. 122–52.
2. Macquarrie, ‘Vita Sancti Servani’, passim. Hagiographical traditions emanating from Glasgow make Serf a prominent character in the Life of St Kentigern. The Vita Sancti Servani makes no mention of this. See Victoria Hodgson, ‘Cistercians and Saints in Scotland: Cults and the Monastic Context’, Irish Theological Quarterly, vol. 85, no. 2 (2020), pp. 183–99 (pp. 194–5).
3. Macquarrie, ‘Vita Sancti Servani’, pp.127–8. The reuse of an existing site for a particular reason is also suggested by the nature of the location: the abbey was situated on such a steep slope that buildings south of the church were constructed on two storeys.

4. Thomas J. Heffernan, Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 38–9, 55, 57, 59.

5. Felice Lifshitz, ‘Beyond Positivism and Genre: “Hagiographical” Texts as Historical Narrative’, Viator, vol. 25 (1994), pp. 95–113 (p. 95).

6. Hilary Powell, ‘Demonic Daydreams: Mind-Wandering and Mental Imagery in the Medieval Hagiography of St Dunstan’, in New Medieval Literatures 18, ed. Laura Ashe et al. (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2018), pp. 44–74 (pp. 48–9).

7. Björn Weiler, ‘Monastic Historical Culture and the Utility of a Remote Past: The Case of Matthew Paris’, in How the Past was Used: Historical Cultures, c.750-2000, ed. Peter Lambert et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 91–120 (p. 119).

8. Rico G. Monge, ‘Saints, Truth, and the “Use and Abuse” of Hagiography’, in Hagiography and Religious Truth: Case Studies in the Abrahamic and Dharmic Traditions, ed. Rico G. Monge, Kerry P. C. San Chirico and Rachel J. Smith (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 7–22 (pp. 13–8).

9. Lifshitz, ‘Beyond Positivism and Genre’, p. 97, quote at p. 100.

10. Björn Weiler, ‘Historical Writing in Medieval Britain: The Case of Matthew Paris’, in Medieval Historical Writing: Britain and Ireland, 500–1500, ed. Jennifer Jahner et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 319–38 (pp. 328–29); Katherine J. Lewis, ‘History, Hagiography and Re-writing the Past’, in Sarah Salih (ed.), A Companion to Middle English Hagiography (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2006), pp. 122–40 (pp. 125–6).

11. David W. Rollason, Saints and Relics in Anglo-Saxon England (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 212.

12. Ellen F. Arnold, Negotiating the Landscape: Environment and Monastic Identity in the Medieval Ardennes (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), pp. 111–2.

13. Cynthia Turner Camp, Anglo-Saxon Saints Lives as History Writing in Late Medieval England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 5–6.

14. Macquarrie, ‘Vita Sancti Servani’, pp. 123–5, 131–3; James E. Fraser, From Caledonia to Pictland: Scotland to 795 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 254–6; Gilbert Márkus, Conceiving a Nation: Scotland to 900 AD (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 107–8.

15. For example: Helen Birkett, The Saints’ Lives of Jocelin of Furness: Hagiography, Patronage and Ecclesiastical Politics (Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2010); Sally Crumplin, ‘Rewriting History in the Cult of St Cuthbert from the Ninth to the Twelfth Centuries’ (PhD Thesis, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, 2005).

16. Suggested by Macquarrie, ‘Vita Sancti Servani’, p. 146.

17. Rachel J. Smith, ‘Devotion, Critique, and the Reading of Christian Saints’ Lives’, in Hagiography and Religious Truth: Case Studies in the Abrahamic and Dharmic Traditions, ed. Rico G. Monge et al. (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 23–36 (p. 31).

18. For an extended discussion of continuities of site, see Kenneth Veitch, ‘A Study of the Extent to which Existing Religious Society Helped to Shape Scotland’s Reformed Monastic Community, 1072-1286’ (PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, 1999), pp. 65–138.

19. Veitch, ‘A Study of the Extent’, pp. 123–4.

20. Veitch, ‘A Study of the Extent’, pp. 95–6.

21. Camp, Anglo-Saxon Saints Lives, pp. 2, 11–3.
22. Andrew Brown, *Church and Society in England*, 1000-1500 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 64.
23. Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record, and Event*, 1000-1215 (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987) pp. 82–7.
24. Gilbert Márkus, ‘Dewars and Relics in Scotland: Some Clarifications and Questions’, *Innes Review*, vol. 60 (2009), pp. 95–144 (pp. 105–7).
25. Rollason, *Saints and Relics*, pp. 197–9, 205–6; A.J. Piper, ‘The First Generations of Durham Monks and the Cult of St Cuthbert’, in *St Cuthbert, his Cult and his Community to AD 1200*, ed. Gerald Bonner et al. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1989), pp. 437–46 (pp. 445–6).
26. Matthew Hammond, ‘Royal and Aristocratic Attitudes to Saints and the Virgin Mary in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Scotland’, in *The Cult of Saints and the Virgin Mary in Medieval Scotland*, ed. Steve Boardman et al. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2010), pp. 61–86 (p. 80); *Statuta Capitulorum Generalium Ordinis Cisterciensis ab Anno 1116 ad Annum 1786*, 8 vols, ed. Joseph Canivez (Louvain: Bureaux de la Revue, 1933–41), II, p. 226 (= no. 52); Arne Johnsen and Peter King, *The Tax Book of the Cistercian Order* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1979), pp. 68–69.
27. Culross Psalter, Adv MS 18.8.11, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. For a discussion of additions to Scottish Cistercian calendars, see Hodgson, ‘Cistercians and Saints in Scotland’.
28. Thomas O’Donnell, ‘Monastic History and Memory’, in *Medieval Historical Writing: Britain and Ireland*, 500–1500, ed. Jennifer Jahner et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 35–50 (pp. 48–9).
29. Hanz-Werner Goetz, ‘The Concept of Time in the Historiography of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries’, in *Medieval Concepts of the Past: Ritual, Memory, Historiography*, ed. Gerd Althoff et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 139–66, (p. 140).
30. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 194.
31. Goetz, ‘The Concept of Time’, p. 141; Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, pp. 92–3, 97.
32. Camp, *Anglo-Saxon Saints Lives*, pp. 15–7, quote at p. 17.
33. Goetz, ‘The Concept of Time’, pp. 143–45, 155–57, 161–2, 164–5, quote at p. 162.
34. Camp, *Anglo-Saxon Saints Lives*, p. 15, 20.
35. Márkus, ‘Dewars and Relics’, p. 95.
36. Rollason, *Saints and Relics*, p. 206; Gaillard Thomas Lapsley, *The County Palatine of Durham: A Study in Constitutional History* (London: Longman, Green, 1900), pp. 22–4.
37. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 280–1.
38. The manuscript reads ‘Tuligbotuan’. Macquarrie interprets this as Tullibody, while Glasgow University’s *Database of Scottish Hagiotoponyms* (https://saintsplaces.gla.ac.uk/) gives Tullibole.
39. Sarah Foot, ‘Mental Maps: Sense of Place in Medieval British Historical Writing’, in *Medieval Historiographical Writing: Britain and Ireland*, 500–1500, ed. Jennifer Jahner et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 139–56, quote at p. 141–2.
40. Arnold, *Negotiating the Landscape*, p. 13.
41. Robert Allen Rouse, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2005), pp. 60–1, 65, 68–9.
42. For several English examples of monasteries acquiring land and relics as a package see Rollason, *Saints and Relics*, pp. 208–11.
43. Márkus, ‘Dewars and Relics’, pp. 136–40.
44. Everett U. Crosby, *Bishop and Chapter in Twelfth-Century England: A Study of the ‘Mensa Episcopalis’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 132–5, 141–2.
45. Rollason, *Saints and Relics*, pp. 202–3.
46. Tom Pickles, ‘Whitby Abbey, the Liberty of Whitby Strand, and the Cult of St Hild’, paper given at University of Stirling, Centre for Environment, Heritage and Policy Seminar Series, 12 September 2017; Matthew L. Holford, ‘Locality, Culture and Identity in Late Medieval Yorkshire, c.1270–c.1540’ (PhD Thesis, University of York, York, 2001), p. 251.
47. Thomas Head, *Hagiography and the Cult of Saints: The Diocese of Orléans, 800–1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) pp. 186–7.
48. Arnold, *Negotiating the Landscape*, pp. 117, 120–1, 125.
49. Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things? Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 404–6.
50. Rollason, *Saints and Relics*, p. 208.
51. Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead*, pp. 405–6.
52. Crumplin, ‘Rewriting History’, pp. 116–7, 137–9, 193.
53. Tom Turpie, ‘A Monk from Melrose? St Cuthbert and the Scots in the Later Middle Ages, c.1371–1560’, *Innes Review*, vol. 62 (2011), pp. 47–69 (pp. 47, 53–6).
54. Márkus, ‘Dewars and Relics’, pp. 128.
55. *The Triumph Tree: Scotland’s Earliest Poetry, AD 550–1350*, ed. Thomas Owen Clancy (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 1998), pp. 212–14.
56. *The Miracles of St Æbba of Coldingham and St Margaret of Scotland*, ed. Robert Bartlett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), pp. 88–9.
57. Márkus, ‘Dewars and Relics’, pp. 126–30.
58. Márkus, ‘Dewars and Relics’, pp. 114, 133–4.
59. *The Charters of King David I*, ed. G.W.S. Barrow (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1999), pp. 118–9 (= no. 135).
60. *The Acts of William I, 1165-1214*, ed. G.W.S. Barrow (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press: 1971) pp. 333, 411 (= nos. 324, 439); *Scottish Episcopal Acta, Vol. 1: The Twelfth Century*, ed. Norman F. Shead (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2015), pp. 44–5 (= no. 41).
61. Kenneth Veitch, ‘The Conversion of Native Religious Communities to the Augustinian Rule in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Alba’, *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, vol. 29 (1999), pp. 2–5, 21, and passim. As Veitch stresses, this was in no way an ‘organised purge’ of native communities but rather a gradual process driven by changing expectations of organised religious life in line with continental trends.
62. Veitch, ‘A Study of the Extent’, pp. 96–9, 138; *The Acts of Robert I, 1306-1329*, ed. A.A.M. Duncan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1987), p. 368 (= no. 85).
63. Macquarrie, *Vita Sancti Servani*, p. 128.
64. The composition of Earl Malcolm’s foundation grant survives in confirmation charters: William Douglas, ‘Culross Abbey and its Charters, with Notes on a Fifteenth-Century Manuscript’, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, vol. 60 (1925–26), pp. 69–71, 73–5.
65. *The Books of Assumption of the Thirds of Benefices: Scottish Ecclesiastical Rentals at the Reformation*, ed. James Kirk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 335. The National Library of Scotland has created an interactive online map of historic parish boundaries (https://maps.nls.uk/geo/boundaries).
66. For example see John M. Rogers, ‘The Formation of the Parish Unit and Community in Perthshire’ (PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, 1992); Alasdair Ross, *Land Assessment and Lordship in Medieval Northern Scotland* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015).
67. *Registrum de Dunfermelyn*, ed. Cosmo Innes (Edinburgh: Bannatyne Club, 1842), p. 83 (= no. 144). It is possible that an independent parish church of Crombie only came into being upon this grant.

68. *Registrum de Dunfermelyn*, pp. 126–7 (= no. 214).

69. *Books of Assumption*, p. 292.

70. *Scottish Episcopal Acta, Vol. 1*, pp. 36–7 (= no. 35).

71. *Carte Monialium de Northberwic*, ed. Cosmo Innes (Edinburgh: Bannatyne Club, 1847), pp. 8–9 (= no. 7).

72. Márkus, ‘Dewars and Relics’, pp. 127–8.

73. RH 1/2/51, National Records of Scotland, Edinburgh.

74. *Analecta Scotica, Second Series*, ed. James Maidment (Edinburgh: Thomas G. Stevenson, 1837), pp. 14–5 (= no. 6).

75. Referred to variously as the Grange of Carriden or the Grange of Philipstoun (Douglas, ‘Culross Abbey and its Charters’, pp. 75, 87–8).