



HISTORIC  
ENVIRONMENT  
SCOTLAND

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**Property in Care (PIC) ID:** PIC012

**Designations:** Scheduled Monument (SM90041)

**Taken into State care:** 1846 (Ownership)

**Last reviewed:** 2015

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# BRECHIN CATHEDRAL ROUND TOWER



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# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

## BRECHIN CATHEDRAL ROUND TOWER

### CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>Summary</b>	<b>2</b>
1.1	Introduction	2
1.2	Statement of significance	2
<b>2</b>	<b>Assessment of values</b>	<b>2</b>
2.1	Background	2
2.2	Evidential values	4
2.3	Historical values	4
2.4	Architectural and artistic values	4
2.5	Landscape and aesthetic values	6
2.6	Contemporary/use values	6
<b>3</b>	<b>Major gaps in understanding</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Associated properties</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Keywords</b>	<b>8</b>
	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>8</b>
	<b>APPENDICES</b>	
	Appendix 1: Timeline	9
	Appendix 2: Summary of archaeological investigations	10

## 1 Summary

### 1.1 Introduction

The monument is a medieval round tower. Originally free-standing, since 1806 it has been attached to the south west angle of the nave of Brechin Cathedral. Its chief original feature is the carved doorway, which has the crucifixion at its apex, unidentified saints on the jambs and crouching beasts flanking the threshold.

Brechin Cathedral (not in HS care) is largely early 19th-century in build, although it retains some of its medieval features. The Cathedral contains several important early medieval carvings and is sited within an interesting graveyard.

Visitors can only view the exterior of the tower.

### 1.2 Statement of significance

The round tower at Brechin is an exceptionally well-preserved example of a distinctive Irish form of bell-tower associated with wealthy churches of the early 10th to late 12th centuries.

While common in Ireland, only three examples of round bell towers are found elsewhere in the British Isles, two of these in eastern Scotland, where they may be associated with the patronage of Gaelic kings of Scotland. The first floor entrance to the tower preserves very ornate moulded decoration, the dating of which is fundamental to the dating of the tower itself. However, art historians disagree as to whether it pre- or post-dates the beginning of the 12th century.

The tower is one component of a wider contemporary ecclesiastical landscape about which very little is known. This should be born in mind in decisions taken regarding development within the conservation area.

## 2 Assessment of values

### 2.1 Background

The round tower, with upward tapering walls, rises to a height of about 26.5m, from a base 4.6m in diameter. There are six internal string-courses running round the tower; they average about 10 inches deep on face, and 6 inches projection from wall. The first of these is immediately under the door-sill.<sup>1</sup> The octagonal cap is a later medieval addition (probably 14th or 15th century). There is some debate as to when the tower was constructed. This is more fully discussed in Architectural and Artist Values.

The earliest documentary reference to Brechin is to Kenneth II (971-95?) granting the Brechin church freedom from certain royal taxes.<sup>2</sup> The date of

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<sup>1</sup> Brash R. B., 1862, p. 190

<sup>2</sup> 'Kenneth II (971–5) 'Offered the great civitas of Brechin to the Lord'[ in *Chronicle of Kings of Scotland*. 10], either a record of its fd'n., or perhaps more likely, of a grant to an existing

foundation is therefore unknown, and a religious foundation could well have already been there for some time (carved stones in the cathedral belong to around this period).

A reference, quoted in the 16th century, if reliable, indicates that when Danes sacked Brechin in about 1017 they left only the tower standing.<sup>3</sup>

While Brechin does not seem bigger or more important than religious houses such as St Vigean or Meigle, it was singled out in the early 12th century to become a cathedral (with a diocese restricted to the churches of its own parochia in comparison to Dunkeld and St Andrews, which acquired great territorial diocese). The earliest reference to a bishop is in c. 1150.<sup>4</sup> If the round tower at Brechin pre-dates the foundation of the diocese, its presence would be evidence for the high level of royal support Brechin received at an earlier date.

In the 12th and 13th century a hereditary family of lay abbots is recorded, at the same time as a community of Celi Dé (Culdees) headed by a prior.<sup>5</sup> The Celi Dé transformed into a chapter of canons before 1250.<sup>6</sup>

The church grew during the middle ages. The square tower was begun in the 13th and completed in the 14th century, with a stone spire added to it in 15th century that rose higher than the round tower.<sup>7</sup> In 1806 the round tower was incorporated into the church during extensive rebuilding of the cathedral when the nave was re-roofed as a single span over aisles and clerestory. A general restoration was overseen by John Honeyman of Glasgow in 1900-1902 when the south aisle and transept were rebuilt and the north aisle was added.<sup>8</sup>

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community of their freedom from secular exaction.' Cowan, I. B., & Easson, D. E. (1976). *Medieval Religious Houses : Scotland* (2nd ed.), (New York, 1976), p. 46

<sup>3</sup> 'turrim quandam rotundam mira arte constructam' Boece, 1527, p. Bk. xi p.251

<sup>4</sup> Secular canons, cathedral: 'First recorded bp. appears c. 1160, *Early Scottish Charters prior to 1153*, Lawrie, A.C. (Glasgow, 1905), 180; but the origins of the see, though uncertain, are probably earlier.' Cowan & Easson, 1976, p. 203

<sup>5</sup> *Registrum Episcopatus Brechinensis, Cui Accedunt Cartae Quamplurimae Originales*, (Bannatyne Club, 1856), p.v; Reeves, W. *The Culdees of the British Islands*, (Dublin, 1864) pp.119-20n; Barrow, G.W.S. *Scotland and its Neighbours in the Middle Ages* (London, 1992) pp.111-13

<sup>6</sup> 'Community of Céli Dé is on record in the second half of the twelfth c. and first half of the thirteenth c. (LIBER S. THOME DE ABERBROTHOC (Bannatyne Club, 1848-56) i, 49, 52, 122-3, 125-8, 130, 132-4)...' The formalization of this body into a chapter of secular canons was evidently completed by 18 Feb. 1249/50 when a bull of Pope Innocent IV refers to the fact that 'the brethren who have been wont to be in the church of Brechen were Keledei and now by change of name are styled canons' (CHARTULARY OF THE ABBEY OF LINDORES (SHS, 1903) no.xcix).' Cowan & Easson, 1976, p. 47

<sup>7</sup> Gourlay, R. & Turner, A. *Historic Montrose and the Archaeological Implications of Development*, (Glasgow, 1977), p. 7

<sup>8</sup> Gifford, J. *Buildings of Scotland: Dundee and Angus* (location, date), pp.357-365; Dictionary of Scottish Architects [http://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk/architect\\_full.php?id=200245](http://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk/architect_full.php?id=200245)

## 2.2 Evidential values

Nothing is known of the below-ground archaeology of the tower, and a stone-by-stone drawn record of the upstanding archaeology, accompanied by photography, might reveal new evidence. The wider cathedral precinct can be assumed to be of high archaeological potential (early medieval and later).

## 2.3 Historical values

Documentary evidence for the round tower and its community is limited. It is therefore difficult to say much about associations with past events and persons with any certainty. That the earliest documentary reference is to a royal grant of Kenneth II may add to knowledge of royal ecclesiastical patronage in the early medieval period.

The tower's use and what it demonstrates regarding religious practice in the early medieval period is dealt with below (see Architectural and Artist Values).

## 2.4 Architectural and artistic values

Round towers are as Irish as the broch is Scottish. Nearly 100 examples may have been built in Ireland between the start of the 10th and end of the 12th centuries, of which just over 60 survive today. Their prime function may have been as bell towers (their early Irish name – *cloicthe[a]ch* means bell-house), although they were used for other purposes too, such as treasuries, refuges at time of need, etc. There is no information to prove whether or not hand- or hanging-bells were rung from them.

The idea of building stand-alone, round, bell towers was almost certainly brought to Ireland by pilgrims returning from the Mediterranean (such as Italy) and/or W central Europe N of the Alps (Carolingian and Ottonian empires). There is an argument that the towers had additionally a greater liturgical function than we tend to ascribe them (to do with relics, processions and kings), and that they owe their origin to interest in the round church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. This argument provides an explanation why many of them have highly decorated doors so far above the ground. The supposition is some kind of high officiant would ascend the external stair, provide some kind of office in front of the door and then ascend the tower, the crowd outside catching glimpses of him through the windows before the end of the ascent being signalled by a bell.<sup>9</sup>

Only three Irish round towers are known of outside Ireland: at Abernethy, Brechin and Peel (Isle of Man). Probably the result of royal patronage, they are certainly symbols of the wealth and status of the monastery in question. Contrary to popular perception, there is no direct architectural link between these towers and the round towers attached to churches that are found in Orkney and Shetland at around the same time (eg St Magnus, Egilsay).

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<sup>9</sup> O'Keeffe, 2004, pp. 105–106

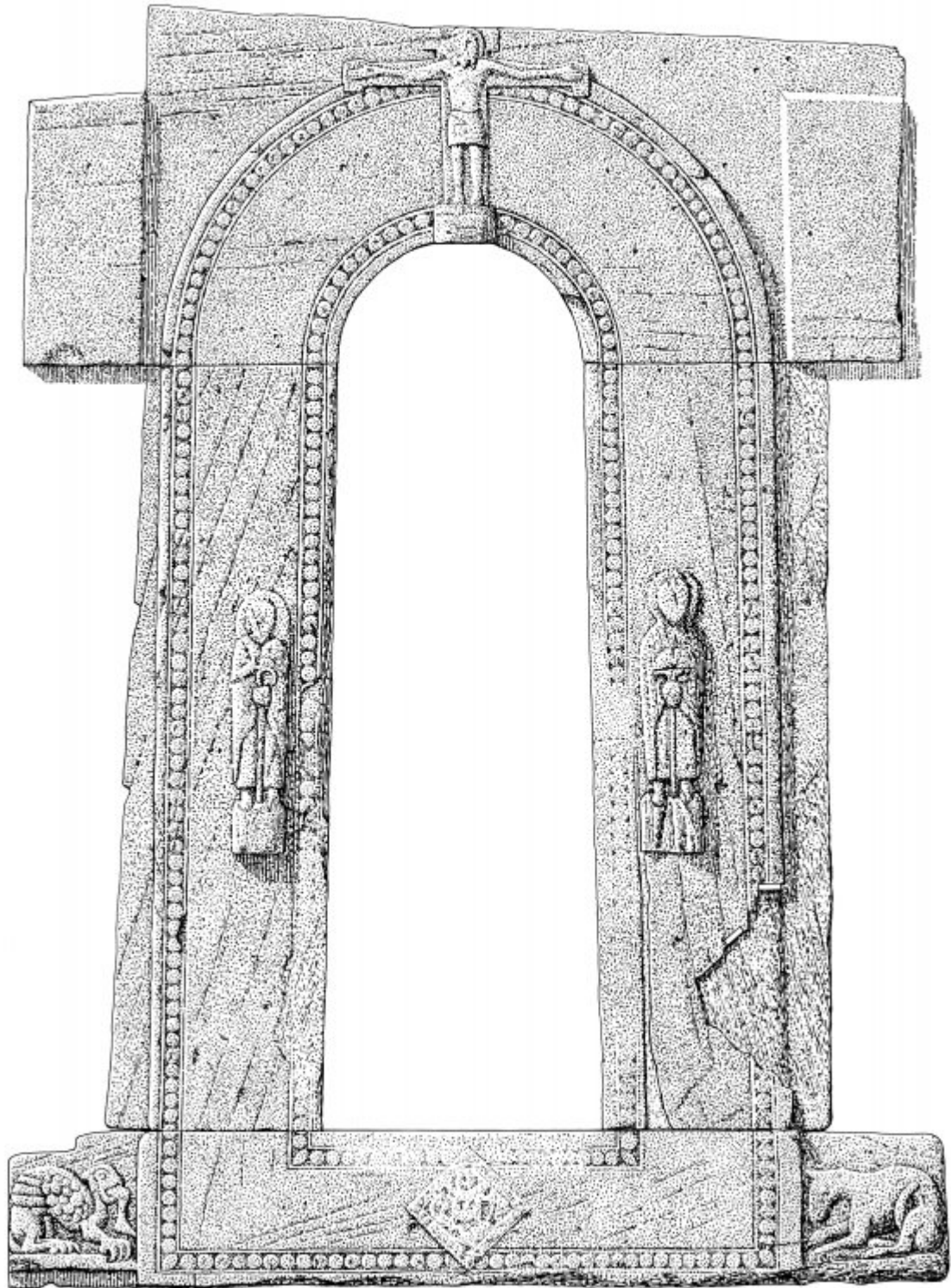


Figure 1 RCAHMS drawing of doorway

Brechin's decorated doorway (see Figure 1) is particularly distinguished: the opening is surrounded by a raised margin with two bands of pellet decoration around its edges and with a lozenge motif at the centre of the sill. At the apex of the arch is a carved crucifixion and there is an unidentified saint carved on each jamb, while a crouching beast flanks the sill on each side.

Eric Fernie considers the tower could date to early 12th century through comparing the door mouldings to internal windows at Killeshin and St Peakan's churches in Ireland. But Neil Cameron notes that these churches do not have definitive dates and instead compares the door to the Brechin Mary cross-slab and Maghera lintel in Derry and suggests that there are earlier Irish and Pictish parallels for the decoration, thus indicating a pre-12th century, if not late 10th-century date.<sup>10</sup> This would have the added benefit of fitting in with the limited documentary evidence.

A carved cross in Dysert, O'Dea in County Clare, Ireland, has a similar Christ figure, and an elongated saint figure, like those on the door. It is usually dated to the early 12th century and suggests that, at least the door, was constructed by Irish masons.

The original form of the roof is not known; the present octagonal form is later medieval.

The hogback gravestone housed in the cathedral (but not in HS care) could date to around the late 10th century; the very important fragmentary Mary cross-slab with its Evangelist and Virgin and Child symbolism may be slightly later; these testify to the wealth and religious intellect of the foundation, as well as access to accomplished masons and sculptors.

The tower is a scheduled ancient monument. The whole of the Cathedral is listed Category A, but is ecclesiastically exempt, and is a key landmark within the Brechin Conservation Area.

## 2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

The round tower is still a distinctive feature of the ecclesiastical landscape at Brechin, despite now being dwarfed by the adjacent, later church. Its imposing presence would have been more acute in early medieval times when the majority of buildings were probably low, single-storey constructions of stone, timber and earth. Even the associated church would have been very low in comparison.

The plan and scale of the church contemporary with the round tower is unknown, but the present-day relationship between the two gives an indication that the tower stood to the south-west of the church, as is frequently the case in Ireland.

## 2.6 Contemporary/use values

### **Community Values**

Towards the end of the 19th century the Irish round tower became a strong symbol of Gaelic-Irish identity because the architectural form was unique to Ireland, monumental, and interpreted as built in defiance of the Vikings and, by extension, foreigners in general. There are hints that the form was used as

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<sup>10</sup> Fernie, 1986, Cameron, 1994



a symbol of Irish identity in medieval times too. 19th- and 20th- century round towers that mimic this Irish style are also occasionally found in Scotland, for instance St Leonard's Church, Dunfermline.<sup>11</sup>

In 1806, during Napoleonic War coin shortages, Brechin halfpennies were issued carrying on one face the round tower and Cathedral and on the other East Mill (issuers of the coinage) illustrating that the tower was recognisable as a symbol of the burgh and reflecting also the rebuilding then underway.

### **Spiritual values**

The round tower was the bell tower of an important early medieval Scottish church. The earlier church building probably lies to the south east or north east of the tower, to judge from Irish arrangements. We can only guess how the bells might have been used, such as to ring out the time for services, or to herald important religious days, as well as in times of crisis.

Apart from the tower itself, the cathedral is still in ecclesiastical use. Since the Reformation it is no longer the seat of a bishop. The Diocese of Brechin is however still the term used by the Scottish Episcopal Church, albeit its cathedral is St Paul's in Dundee, the Brechin cathedral having been retained by the Church of Scotland (compare Glasgow and Dunblane). Therefore Episcopalians and Catholics will feel some attachment to the building as well as the Presbyterians who now use it.

## **3 Major gaps in understanding**

- We know nothing of the nature of the early medieval monastery and any surrounding settlement that was associated with this tower, apart from the few fragments of sculpture that have been recovered. Nor do we know much of the later life of the site. How early is the church site here? What was its full extent? What form did it take?
- The art-historical dating of the doorway at Brechin is fundamental to dating of the tower, but art historians disagree about this (see above).
- Documentary evidence for the foundation, construction and use of the round tower is limited at best. It is difficult to determine its use and function in the later medieval period, particularly after the change in community to a cathedral chapter in the 1200s and the construction of the cathedral itself.

## **4 Associated properties**

**Abernethy** and Peel (Isle of Man). In Ireland examples include: Clonmacnoise, Cashel, Devenish, Glendalough, Kells, Monasterboice and Nendrum.

Belonging to roughly the same period: **Abernethy, Egilsay, Restenneth, St Margaret's Chapel at Edinburgh Castle, St Rules at St Andrews.**  
Linked by close proximity and early medieval connections: **Aberlemno, Restenneth.**

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<sup>11</sup> P McGregor Chalmers, 1904

## 5 Keywords

Round tower, bell tower, monastery, Celi De (culdee), cathedral, early medieval.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1:Timeline

- **971-95** Kenneth II grants the Brechin church freedom from certain royal taxes.<sup>12</sup>
- **1017** The Danes sack Brechin but leave the tower standing.<sup>13</sup>
- **c.1150** The earliest reference to a bishop at Brechin.<sup>14</sup>
- **1100s & 1200s** century a hereditary family of lay abbots is recorded, at the same time as a community of Celi Dé (Culdees) headed by a prior.<sup>15</sup>
- **before 1250** The Celi Dé transformed into a chapter of canons.<sup>16</sup>
- **1200s** Cathedral square tower begun.<sup>17</sup>
- **1300s** Cathedral square tower completed.<sup>18</sup>
- **1400s** Stone spire added to square tower.<sup>19</sup>
- **1806** the round tower is incorporated into the church during extensive rebuilding of the cathedral when the nave was re-roofed as a single span over aisles and clerestorey.
- **c.1850** the Crown accepts responsibility for the fabric of the round tower
- **1899–1902** A general restoration is overseen by John Honeyman of Glasgow: the south aisle and transept are rebuilt and the north aisle added.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> 'Kenneth II (971–5) 'Offered the great civitas of Brechin to the Lord'[ in *Chronicle of Kings of Scotland*. 10], either a record of its fd'n., or perhaps more likely, of a grant to an existing community of their freedom from secular exaction.' Cowan & Easson, 1976, p. 46

<sup>13</sup> 'turrim quandam rotundam mira arte constructam' Boece, 1527, p. Bk. xi p.251

<sup>14</sup> Secular canons, cathedral: 'First recorded bp. appears c. 1160 (Early Scottish Charters prior to 1153, A. C. Lawrie (Glasgow, 1905), 180); but the origins of the see, though uncertain, are probably earlier.' Cowan & Easson, 1976, p. 203

<sup>15</sup> Barrow, G.W.S. *Scotland and its Neighbours in the Middle Ages* (London, 1992) pp.111-13

<sup>16</sup> 'Community of Céli Dé is on record in the second half of the twelfth c. and first half of the thirteenth c. LIBER S. THOME DE ABERBROTHOC (Bannatyne Club, 1848–56) i, 49, 52, 122–3, 125–8, 130, 132–4'...' The formalization of this body into a chapter of secular canons was evidently completed by 18 Feb. 1249/50 when a bull of Pope Innocent IV refers to the fact that 'the brethren who have been wont to be in the church of Brechen were Keledei and now by change of name are styled canons' CHARTULARY OF THE ABBEY OF LINDORES (SHS, 1903) no.xcix.' Cowan & Easson, 1976, p. 47

<sup>17</sup> Gourlay & Turner, 1977, p. 7

<sup>18</sup> Gourlay & Turner, 1977, p. 7

<sup>19</sup> Gourlay & Turner, 1977, p. 7

<sup>20</sup> Gifford, J. *Buildings of Scotland: Dundee and Angus* (location, date), pp.357-365;

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[http://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk/architect\\_full.php?id=200245](http://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk/architect_full.php?id=200245)

Appendix 2: Summary of archaeological investigations

Date	What	Reference
1996	<p>SUAT watching brief within grounds: confirmed that the existing access area overlies what was once part of a medieval cemetery, showing that the entrance to the cathedral has been widened since the medieval period. The depth at which burials were found, at only 0.6m below the existing ground surface, implies that the ground surface has been reduced since the medieval period. This change most likely occurred during the extensive rebuilding work of the early 19th century.</p> <p>The human remains indicated that the burials were in situ and in keeping with standard Christian burial practice (extended, supine, and aligned W-E).</p>	(MacKenzie J. , 1996)
2003	Watching Brief on Positioning of Flood-Lighting at Brechin Cathedral, Brechin, Angus: nothing reported	<a href="http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/event/553743/">http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/event/553743/</a>