

Dunfermline Palace and Abbey



Summary of the history and royal significance of Dunfermline in Scotland.

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The Culdee (Celtic Christian) community built the first Christian Church at Dunfermline c.800 AD, probably on the site of an earlier Druidic sanctuary. At some point thereafter it became a royal centre, including that of Malcolm III (Malcolm Canmore, r.1058-1093).

In 1068, following their defeat at the Battle of Hastings, Edward Atheling and his family—including Edward's sister, Margaret of Wessex—sought sanctuary at the court of Malcolm III in Dunfermline. In 1069 the exiles returned to England, to join a spreading revolt in the north, but this was unsuccessful. Later in the year they returned to Scotland, following which, in 1070, Malcolm and Margaret (later to become Saint Margaret of Scotland) were married, reputedly at Dunfermline, by Fothad, the Culdee bishop of St. Andrews. Shortly after, in 1072, King Malcolm and Queen Margaret invited Benedictine monks from Canterbury to come to Scotland to found a priory church (the Church of the Holy Trinity) at Dunfermline. This was the first Catholic monastic community in Scotland. Margaret and Malcolm both died in 1093, and sometime after their deaths their bodies were reinterred together near the high altar of Dunfermline priory church.

Three of their sons—Edgar, Alexander I, and David I—became kings of Scotland after them. On their deaths, all of them were buried in Dunfermline Abbey. In fact, Dunfermline Abbey has received more of Scotland's royal dead than any other place in the kingdom, excepting Iona, including (after Malcolm III and Margaret), Duncan II of Scotland (1094), Edgar of Scotland (1107), Alexander I of Scotland (1124) and his queen, David I of Scotland (1153) and his queen, Malcolm IV of Scotland (1165), Alexander III of Scotland (1286) and his first wife, Margaret of England (1275), their sons David of Scotland (1281) and Alexander of Scotland (1284), and Robert the Bruce (1329).

In 1128 David I, youngest son of Malcolm and Margaret, raised the Church of the Holy Trinity at Dunfermline to the rank and dignity of an abbey, and had a new Romanesque abbey church built on a grand scale to replace the earlier priory church. In 1250, during David's reign, Pope Innocent IV canonized David's mother, Queen Margaret, and her remains were reinterred in a shrine in the abbey, together with those of her husband Malcolm III. Thereafter Dunfermline Abbey became a major pilgrimage centre. In 1153 David I died and was buried at Dunfermline. A century later, when Robert I (Robert the Bruce) died on 7 June 1329, his body was also buried in Dunfermline Abbey, before the high altar, while his heart was interred in Melrose Abbey.

In c.1590, during the reign of James VI of Scotland, the abbey guest house was transformed into a royal palace, which James gifted to his wife, Queen Anne (of Denmark). In 1596 Queen Anne gave birth to Elizabeth (her eldest daughter, later Winter Queen of Bohemia) in this palace. Ten years later, in 1600, also at Dunfermline palace, Anne gave birth to her second son, Charles (later Charles I of England and Scotland). In 1603, when James was offered the throne of England as James I of England, VI of Scotland, James and Anne left for London, and thereafter interest in the palace waned and it was left to fall into disrepair.