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# Faith in war: the religious experience of Scottish soldiery, c.1100–c.1500

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**A B S T R A C T**

This paper examines the comparatively patchy evidence for the pastoral provision and personal faith of late medieval Scottish combatants below the rank of knight. By examining such sources as papal applications, royal financial accounts, parliamentary rolls, chronicles, poetry and the cartularies of Scottish monastic houses and burgh collegiate churches, it is possible to identify elite and parish provision of churchmen serving the needs of Scottish troops as they mustered, trained and prepared for battle. In addition, this evidence also highlights a number of cults and relics popular with the social ranks of the ordinary Scottish soldiery, including those of SS Ninian, Leonard, Thomas Becket, Columba, the Blessed Virgin Mary and — often cast as the nemesis of Scottish troops — Cuthbert. However, this survey also points to some tensions between the spiritual interests of Scottish servicemen and their ruling elites.

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The aim of this paper is to explore pastoral provision for Scottish medieval soldiers below the rank of knight and to search for the religious voice of that ‘ordinary’ section of what remained, throughout the period, a largely Scottish *feudal* host. In such an attempt scholars have to deal with a predictable paucity of Scottish records. A search of the database of *The soldier in late medieval England* project reveals, as yet, no entries for chaplains, priests or confessors within the rolls surveyed from 1369 to 1453: historians have to turn to alternative record and narrative sources to locate pastoral activity in and around England’s armies, even for clerical military service at the

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height of the Hundred Year War.<sup>1</sup> But for Scotland the situation is far more problematic, not least due to the complete failure to survive of the Scottish muster rolls at 'wappinschaws' or hostings, and of any pre-reformation Scottish parish registers containing, say, the form of simple obituary entries affordable to the less wealthy (and thus including obsequies for those slain on military service).

Moreover, these are lacunae compounded by universal medieval attitudes to the social class of the ordinary soldier. This is typified, for example, by the Auchinleck chronicler's annal of a skirmish at Lochmaben Stone on 23 October 1448, where 4,000 Scots faced 6,000 Englishmen and won with the loss of only 26 casualties: 'bot na man of reputacioun was tane or slane, bot Sir John Wallace deit efter he came hame.' While Wallace was buried in his family's chapel the names of the 'ordinary' dead were certainly not recorded — they may even have been buried close to where they fell in a common pit grave rather than returned to their parishes.<sup>2</sup> In the same fashion, as in the English record, numerous Scottish examples survive of supplications by laymen for access to portable altars and private confession, often in advance of a military campaign, pilgrimage or crusade; but these supplicants do not descend below the rank of knight.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these issues, the participation of the Scottish clergy in war has long proved compelling to students and historians who are willing to accept such images as preachers rousing the Scottish populace with sermons of crusading rhetoric or Arthurian prophecy against Edward I; or of the Scottish host shriven during communal Mass before the Battle of Bannockburn; or of the 'fighting' Bishop Sinclair of Dunkeld, defending the Fife coast from invasion in 1318.<sup>4</sup> But, in the same way, modern analysts are often just as ready to distrust as conventional chronicle bias the repeated claims of English monastic writers in the Borders that Scottish troops, especially brutal Galwegians, at times in defiance of the orders issued by their captains or king, repeatedly defiled and looted consecrated churches regardless of their altar dedications, on one occasion even decapitating the image of St Andrew at Hexham priory. In such annals between 1070 and 1346 Scots burnt or blackmailed monastic lands, stole livestock, raped women and skewered babies with alarming regularity.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, investigation of Scottish sources, while frustrating in many ways, does expose possible and striking tensions within these potent images and between the religious experience of ordinary Scottish troops and their superiors.

Turning first to pastoral provision, we may encounter a fundamental contrast to the English soldiering experience. With the exception of the Bruces' Irish campaign of 1315–18 and the Scottish expeditionary army in France, c.1419–24,<sup>6</sup> Scottish forces were not usually absent or distant in the field long enough to

<sup>1</sup> <<http://www.icmacentre.ac.uk/soldier/database/search.php>>, accessed 11 November 2010. A search of the project database for those of the status of 'clerk' returns the following: Muster roll, five individuals; Protections, 90 individuals; Normandy Garrison, no individuals. For examples of alternative sources, see A.K. McHardy, 'The English clergy and the Hundred Years War', in: *Studies in Church History*, ed. W.J. Sheils, 20 (1983), 171–8; A. Goodman, *The Wars of the Roses: the soldiers' experience* (Stroud, 2005), 176, 192, 197; G.E. St John, 'War, the church, and English men-at-arms', *Fourteenth Century England VI*, ed. C. Given-Wilson (Woodbridge, 2010), 73–94, drawn from G.E. St John, 'The religiosity of English men-at-arms in the fourteenth century' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> C. McGladdery, *James II* (Edinburgh, 1992), Appendix 2: The 'Auchinleck Chronicle', 164, 113r.

<sup>3</sup> For example, *Calendar of Scottish supplications to Rome, 1418–22*, ed. E.R. Lindsay and A.I. Cameron (Scottish History Society, 3rd series, 23, Edinburgh, 1934), 2, 8, 68, 282 (Sir John Stewart of Darnley, serving in Scottish expedition to France 1419–24, for a confessor for 'him and all in his train'), 286. However, there is no Scottish evidence to match that in English rolls for supplications from clergy to be permitted to leave their living to serve in war; see St John, 'War, the church, and English men-at-arms', 76–7.

<sup>4</sup> *Calendar of documents relating to Scotland*, ed. J. Bain, 5 vols (Edinburgh, 1881–8) [hereafter CDS], vol. 2, nos. 822, 1926; *John Barbour — The Bruce*, ed. A.A.M. Duncan (Edinburgh, 1997), 472, 608–14; G.W.S. Barrow, *Robert the Bruce and the community of the realm of Scotland*, 4th edn (Edinburgh, 2005), 207, 310.

<sup>5</sup> *Scottish annals from English chronicles, A.D. 500–1286*, ed. A.O. Anderson (London, 1908), 91, 100, 105, 171, 176–80, 181, 182, 185–6, 247; *Chronicon de Lanercost*, ed. J. Stevenson (Maitland Club, Glasgow, 1839), 384; *Knighton's Chronicle 1337–96*, ed. G.H. Martin (Oxford, 1995), 388.

<sup>6</sup> S. Duffy, 'The Gaelic account of the Bruce invasion *Cath Fochairte Brighite*: medieval romance or modern forgery?', *Seanchas Ard Mhacha*, 13, part 1 (1988), 59–121; P. Contamine, 'Scottish soldiers in France in the second half of the fifteenth century: mercenaries, immigrants or Frenchmen in the making?', in: *The Scottish soldier abroad 1247–1967*, ed. G.G. Simpson (Edinburgh, 1992), 1–15; B.G.H. Ditcham, 'Mutton guzzlers and wine bags: foreign soldiers and native reactions in fifteenth-century France', in: *Power, culture and religion in France*, ed. C.T. Allmand (Liverpool, 1989), 1–13; B. Chevalier, 'Les Alliés écossais au service du roi de France au XVe siècle', in: *The auld alliance: France and Scotland over 700 years*, ed. J. Laidlaw (Edinburgh, 1999), 48, 55–6.

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