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Comforting sentences from the warming room at Inchcolm abbey

Inchcolm abbey has the best-preserved medieval conventual buildings in Scotland.¹ A house of Augustinian canons, its most famous abbot was Walter Bower (abbot 1417–49), author of *Scotichronicon*.² The last abbot proper resigned in 1544, but members of the community were still living on the island as late as 1578.³ Having been converted into a secular dwelling, the monastic buildings to the west and south of the tower survived the demise of the community. The later medieval church, however, was demolished for masonry towards the end of the sixteenth century, and all that is left is its footprint and the south aisle or transept (the Lady Chapel).⁴ The site passed in 1924 from the earl of Moray to the care of H. M. Commissioners of Works under the direction of John Wilson Paterson, and during the 1930s extensive preservative and restorative work was carried out.⁵ As a result of this work the roofed portions of the monastic buildings remain water-tight.

Through the east wall of the dorter or *dormitorium*, on the level above the east cloister, one can gain access via a narrow stair to a room above the chapter house. With the unusual amenity of a fireplace on the northern wall, this is presumed to have been the warming room or *calefactorium*, the place where the canons could warm themselves.

¹ We three made a visit to Inchcolm on 25 June 2012. Our best thanks to Alan Reid and Grace for getting us off the island after the last ferry and back across Mortimer's Deep to Aberdour.

² Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon*, ed. D. E. R. Watt *et al.*, 9 vols (Aberdeen, 1987–98). For Walter Bower's resources and abilities, for example, see *ibid.*, ix, 234–320.

³ *The Heads of Religious Houses in Scotland from Twelfth to Sixteenth Centuries*, ed. D. E. R. Watt and N. F. Shead, Scottish Record Society (Edinburgh, 2001), 106–7; *Charters of the Abbey of Inchcolm*, ed. D. E. Easson and Angus Macdonald, Scottish History Society (Edinburgh, 1938), xliii.

⁴ The masonry of the church was sold to Edinburgh burgh council in 1581 to build the tolbooth: Richard Fawcett, 'Inchcolm abbey', in *Church, Chronicle and Learning in Medieval and Early Renaissance Scotland: Essays Presented to Donald Watt on the Occasion of the Completion of the Publication of Bower's Scotichronicon*, ed. Barbara E. Crawford (Edinburgh, 1999), 93–108, at 101.

⁵ John Wilson Paterson (1887–1969), CVO, MBE, was chief architect of H. M. Office of Works, Edinburgh.

This room has been judged a late addition over the chapter house, and it may be thought to form part of the early fifteenth-century work on the conventual buildings.⁶ On the wall to the left of the fireplace, moreover, under a protective perspex panel, there are visible, in fragments, two lines of writing, painted in a Gothic script.⁷

The first to notice and comment upon this writing on the wall was the renowned eighteenth-century antiquary, Francis Grose (1731–1791), who honoured his name in corpulence of figure. From his second tour of Scotland, in 1789, which formed a research-expedition for the second part of his two-volume work, *The Antiquities of Scotland*, Grose made the following observation:⁸

The octagonal Chapter-house, with its stone roof, is also standing; over it is a room of the same shape, in all likelihood, the place where the charters were kept. Here are the remains of an inscription, in the black letter, which began with Stultus.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the inscription was found again by Alan Reid, who, in stirring prose, links it with the fanciful notion that this was Abbot Bower's writing-room:⁹

Ascending to the SCRIPTORIUM, or chamber over the Chapter House, we examine it with a renewal of interest and curiosity. Here, as has been repeatedly affirmed, Abbot Bower penned his continuation of Fordun's *Scotichronicon*; and if we could but be certain of that fact, we might safely feel that now we stand in one

⁶ Richard Fawcett, *The Architecture of the Scottish Medieval Church* (New Haven, CT, 2011), 217, suggests the early fifteenth century against Paterson's fourteenth century. This upper room was first recognised as an addition by David MacGibbon and Thomas Ross, *The Ecclesiastical Architecture of Scotland*, 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1896–7), ii, 325.

⁷ Black and white photographs of this writing, taken long before the perspex was put up, can be viewed on http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/50895/digital_images/inchcolm+abbey/?&z=160 (accessed 30 September 2012). There are seven photos of the text: canmore_image_sc_12_1209651, _1209652, _1209653, _1209659, _1209679 and _1209682, each photo titled simply 'inscription on wall'. The seventh is _12_1209649, wrongly titled '13th century mural enclosed behind protecting doors'. There are in this same set of photos two remarkable images of painted text on the chapter house wall, now no longer visible. It seems to consist of three lines of writing, with part of a decorative border below the bottom line. The two images of this chapter house text are _1209650 and _1209681. They, too, are titled simply 'inscription on wall', with no indication on the RCAHMS website that they come from a different wall. This chapter house text has yet to be deciphered.

⁸ Francis Grose, *The Antiquities of Scotland*, 2 vols (London, 1789–91), ii, 303. The last word is printed in black letter.

⁹ Alan Reid (1853–1917), *Inchcolme Abbey. A Notable Fifeshire Ruin* (Dunfermline, 1901), 72–3.

of the most famous places of Scotland. Certain it is that Bower wrote his history *somewhere* in these buildings, and where more probably than in this pleasant room? Doubtless this was the Library and Muniment room of the Abbey; it was free to the Abbot alone; it was isolated, quiet, and in every respect suitable for his literary pursuits. From its window the view is inspiring and magnificent. Standing a few feet from it, you can frame Edinburgh and the Forth like a glorious picture within its arched embrasure. One feels disposed to cling to the tradition, and to venerate this Scriptorium as a veritable birthplace of our national records. We examine the walls for traces of the painted texts, a portion of which Grose tells us was visible in his day, though Mr Dickson assures us it is not there now.¹⁰ *Mirabile dictu*, there it is! and not very difficult to see, either, under Mr Todd's guiding finger.¹¹ Whether it be 'the ominous word *Stultus*,' or some other portion of the surrounding legend, who knows? But it is there, and its presence is significant of much that the flight of years has otherwise left uncertain.

After this glimpse, the writing on the wall disappeared once more, obscured by a layer of lime deposit. This we learn from Paterson's scholarly guide-book.¹² Paterson had carried out a survey of the abbey in 1924 for H. M. Commissioners of Works, the results of which were published in several forms, but it was not until the guidebook of 1937 that he mentioned the inscriptions in the warming house.¹³ 'Although a careful search was made no trace of the inscription could be found until one very wet day', he tells us, 'when, owing to the mist saturating the plaster surface, the inscription became visible'; the surface was then treated with wax, drawings were prepared and submitted to Dr W. Mackay Mackenzie, who 'succeeded in deciphering and

¹⁰ John Dickson (1840–1921) was Free Church minister of St Ninian's in Leith between 1882 and his retirement in 1904; the reference is to his *Emeralds Chased in Gold: or The Islands of the Forth. Their Story Ancient and Modern* (Edinburgh and London, 1899), 71, 'No traces are now to be seen of the Black Letter inscription which, in Grose's time, adorned the walls of this "literary lighthouse", but of which nothing could even then be deciphered except the ominous word *Stultus*'.

¹¹ It is made clear elsewhere in Reid's text that Mr Todd was the custodian living on the island.

¹² J. Wilson Paterson, *The Abbey of Inchcolm*, Official Guide (Edinburgh, 1937; 2nd edn, 1950), 10.

¹³ J. W. Paterson, 'The development of Inchcolm abbey', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 60 (1926), 227–53; 'The development of Inchcolm abbey', *Transactions of the Edinburgh Architectural Association* 9 (1928), 146–76; *Inchcolm Abbey*, Official Guide (Edinburgh, 1929); *The Abbey of Inchcolm*, Official Guide (as in n. 12 above).

translating the inscription'.¹⁴ They dated the writing to the period of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The square, uniform, Gothic-textura lettering, however, applied to the plaster with a reddish pigment, has the features of the mid- to late fifteenth century.¹⁵ Paterson printed the text of the inscriptions as follows:¹⁶

No. I.—STULTU(M) E(ST) TIMERE Q(UO)D VITARI NO(N) P(OTEST).

(‘It is foolish to fear what cannot be avoided’) occurs in *Pseudo-Seneca de Moribus* and elsewhere.

No. II.—TUTISSI(M)[A R]ES E(ST) NIL TIMERE P(RAE)TER DE(UM).

(‘The safest thing is to fear nothing but God’). This saying, though it has other forms, can be found, in the source indicated below, as it is on the inscription.

No. III.—Of this only a small portion remains, and the passage has not yet been identified.

No. IV.—Of this there is just as little, but it has been traced as follows: [SUPERAT CONSCIENTIA] QUI[CQUID] MALI FINXERIT L[INGUA].

(‘Conscience overcomes whatever evil the tongue has composed’). The saying, with CONFINXERIT and the change of MALI to MALA for ‘an evil tongue’, also appears among the *Sententiae* of Caecilius Balbus, but elsewhere as on the inscription.

The passages given will be found in *Syri Sententiae*, Otto Friedrich (I), pp. 88, 107; (II) p. 280, cf. p. 95; (IV) p. 259, cf. p. 85.

Sentence No. III., of which ‘only a small portion remains’, and in the 1930s could not be identified, became an obvious object of the present authors’ interest during their midsummer visit. It is possible to read ‘M / N(IS)I REP(RE)HE(N)SIBIL’. An internet search has enabled us to identify the fragment as part of a quotation from *De quattuor uirtutibus cardinalibus* (‘The Four Fundamental Virtues’), a pseudo-Senecan composition by Martin of Braga (died 579), which started its career as *Formula uitae honestae* (‘The Pattern of an Honourable Life’). In the standard edition, the sentence runs, ‘Nam timidum non facit animum nisi reprehensibilis uitae conscientia mala’ (‘For nothing produces a

¹⁴ Paterson, *The Abbey of Inchcolm*, 10. William Mackay Mackenzie (1871–1952) was Secretary of the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, 1913–35.

¹⁵ We are grateful to Dr James Willoughby for his judgement on the dating of the script.

¹⁶ Paterson, *The Abbey of Inchcolm*, 10–11; round brackets indicate abbreviation, square brackets missing words or letters. The reference is to *Publilius Syri Mimi Sententiae*, ed. Otto Friedrich (Berlin, 1880).

fearful soul except the bad conscience of a blameworthy life'.¹⁷ The question remains, however, of the Inchcolm canons' immediate source for their little selection of sentences, for they all derive from a sea of proverbial sentences that circulate in the middle ages.¹⁸ We could conjecture that they were selected from more than one such collection. There is, however, a specific popular text that includes all four sentences. This is *Manipulus florum* ('The Bouquet of Flowers'), compiled by Thomas of Ireland at Paris in 1306.¹⁹ *Manipulus florum* survives in at least 180 manuscripts and was one of the most successful books of the later middle ages.²⁰ It consists of extracts from a wide assortment of sources arranged alphabetically into 266 topics. It has long been regarded as a systematic reference tool for preachers, but more recent work makes the case that it was meant as a resource for self-formation directed at students in medieval universities.²¹

No. III occurs under the heading, 'Magnanimity' (*Magnanimitas* g), in a form without *mala*, and attributed to *De quattuor uirtutibus*, but as

¹⁷ *Martini Episcopi Bracarenensis Opera omnia*, ed. Claude W. Barlow (New Haven, CT, 1950), 236–50, at 241; Barlow concurred with E. Bickel ('Die Schrift des Martinus von Bracara Formula Vitae Honestae', *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* neue Folge 60 (1905), 505–51, at 543–51) that the *Formula* is an epitome of Seneca's lost work, *De officiis* (Claude E. Barlow, 'A sixth-century epitome of Seneca, *De Ira*', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 68 (1937), 26–42, at 42).

¹⁸ For a survey of this genre and proverb books, see Barry Taylor, 'Medieval proverb collections: the west European tradition', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 55 (1992), 19–35, esp. 26–7.

¹⁹ Richard Sharpe, *A Handlist of the Latin Writers of Great Britain and Ireland before 1540* (Turnhout, 1997), 662.

²⁰ Evidence for medieval Scottish library-holdings is very poor, but there were two copies of *Manipulus florum* in Aberdeen cathedral library, where they feature in the only fifteenth-century library catalogues from Scotland, dated 1436 and 1465; both lists are printed by John Higgitt, *Scottish Libraries*, Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues 12 (London, 2006), 9, 32.

²¹ Richard H. Rouse and Mary A. Rouse, *Preachers, Florilegia and Sermons: Studies on the Manipulus florum of Thomas of Ireland*, Studies and Texts 47 (Toronto, 1979), and more recently, Chris L. Nighman, 'Commonplaces on preaching among commonplaces for preaching? The topic *predicacio* in Thomas of Ireland's *Manipulus florum*', *Medieval Sermon Studies* 49 (2005), 37–57. Dr Nighman, of Wilfrid Laurier University, Ontario, has edited a searchable version available on line at www.manipulusflorum.com (accessed 25 July 2012). His personal website includes a bibliography of relevant studies since the Rouses' book appeared. The work was first printed at Piacenza in 1483; a digital facsimile of the second printing, Venice [c. 1494] (BSB-Ink T-339), is available on line through istc.bl.uk. The book is designed to be used like a dictionary, with the topic-headings arranged alphabetically; there are no page-numbers; the beginning of a new topic is signalled by a large capital, and each entry is referenced with a letter of the Latin alphabet, a–z; then aa, ab, ac, etc. The references that follow refer to the Venetian printed edition and can also be found through the electronic edition.

part of a longer passage. The same sentence, with *mala*, but without the conjunctive *Nam*, also occurs together with Nos I and II under, ‘Fear’ (*Timor* ao) in the same order as the warming-house wall, and all are there attributed to the *Prouerbia* of [pseudo-]Seneca.

No. IV is the odd man out: it is to be found in exactly the form of the warming-house wall under ‘Conscience’ (*Conscientia* ac) and is attributed to [pseudo-]Seneca, *De moribus* (‘Manners’). The connection with the other three sentences is obviously conscience, picked up from No. III.

The whole inscription, then, consists of two lines and, following the forms found in *Manipulus florum*, may now be reconstructed in full (using the same editorial conventions as Paterson; [/] represents the line-break):

STULTU(M) E(ST) TIMERE Q(UO)D VITARI NO(N) P(OTEST) TUTISSI(M)[A R]ES
E(ST) NIL TIMERE P(RE)TER DEU(M) [TIMIDUM NON FACIT ANIMU]M / N(IS)I
R(E)P(RE)HE(N)SIBIL[IS VITE CONSCIENTIA MALA SUPERET CONSCIENTIA]
QUI[CQID] MALI FINXERIT L[INGUA]

Stultum est timere quod uitari non potest.

Tutissima res est nil timere preter deum.

Timidum non facit animum nisi reprehensibilis uite conscientia mala.

Superet conscientia quicquid mali finxerit lingua.

It is foolish to fear what cannot be avoided.

The safest thing is to fear nothing but God.

Nothing produces a fearful soul except the bad conscience of a blameworthy life.

Let conscience overcome whatever evil the tongue will have composed.

Painted inscriptions were a common feature of medieval wall-decoration.²² In this case what survives may be only part of the decorative scheme. Such material has nowhere been brought together nor their sources examined. In the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries Scottish decorative painting would include biblical quotations or proverbial sayings, more often in Scots than in Latin, so much so that Michael Bath has written of ‘the extended anthology of moralising or

²² David McRoberts (1912–1978), edited and expanded by Stephen Mark Holmes, *Lost Interiors: The Furnishings of Scottish Churches in the Later Middle Ages* (Edinburgh, 2012), 8, makes the point for Scotland: ‘The later examples that remain are so few, so faded and fragmentary, that they merely indicate that Scotland, as we would expect, did not vary in any marked degree from the normal painting techniques and themes of Europe. [...] The use of pious texts can be seen in the faded remains in St Anne’s aisle at Cullen and in the choir of Culross’.

biblical inscriptions'.²³ Our reconstruction of these fragmentary lines from the fifteenth century offers an insight into the use of one proverbial, but not biblical, source of morally and spiritually encouraging sentences. It opens another little window on to the books available to the canons of Inchcolm.

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²³ Michael Bath, *Renaissance Decorative Painting in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2003), 169.