



A Critical Appreciation of the Life of Saint Kentigern (Vita Kentigerni)

Write a critical appreciation of any saint's Life associated with one of the Celtic regions. In your answer you should consider issues such as the text's authorship, its purpose, transmission, key themes, literary and historical context.

Saint Kentigern (c. 518 – 604 CE) was a Christian missionary in the Kingdom of Strathclyde who became the patron saint and founder of the City of Glasgow, where he is affectionally known as “Saint Mungo”. There are several sites of worship associated with him across southern Scotland, Cumbria, and Wales. Two extant *vitae* are known: one commissioned by Bishop Herbert of Glasgow during his bishopric (1147 – 1164), referred to as the “Herbertian Life”, surviving only as a fragment of a larger document;¹ and the complete *Vita Kentigerni* commissioned by Bishop Jocelyn of Glasgow during his bishopric and written by Jocelyn of Furness circa 1175 – 1199. It is on this latter *vita* that this essay will focus, although comparisons with the Herbertian Life will also be made. Two translations were used: an 1874 translation in “*Lives of S. Ninian and S. Kentigern*”, by Alexander Penrose Forbes,² and a modern translation completed in 1998 by Cynthia Whiddon Green.³

The *Vita Kentigerni* contains a prologue and 45 chapters of varying length. Two versions of the manuscript are known to exist, one held at the British

¹ British Library Cotton Titus A XIX. Unfortunately, due to the on-going cyber incident at the British Library, this document is not currently online and I cannot be certain of the folio numbering.

² A. P. Forbes, *Lives of S. Ninian and S. Kentigern. Compiled in the Twelfth Century* (Edmonston and Douglas, 1874) <<http://archive.org/details/livesofsniniansk00forbrich>>.

³ Cynthia Whiddon Green, ‘Jocelyn, a Monk of Furness: The Life of Kentigern (Mungo)’, 1998 <<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/Jocelyn-LifeofKentigern.asp>>.

Library in London,⁴ and one held at Marsh's Library in Dublin.⁵ The version at Marsh's Library is thought to have been copied by a scribe in the 12th or 13th century and is not thought to be Jocelyn's original work. The version held at the British Library is also thought to be a scribe copy, but one likely completed contemporaneously in the fourth quarter of the twelfth century.⁶

Commission, Authorship, and Dissemination

The *Vita Kentigerni* was commissioned by Bishop Jocelyn between 1175 and 1199, but the roots of this commission are complex and go much further back. In the first quarter of the 12th century the Diocese of Glasgow was substantially reformed by Prince David of the Cumbrians (later King David I of Scotland).⁷ David was born in Scotland but spent his adolescence in England and Normandy, which undoubtedly influenced the many legal, administrative, and religious reforms he introduced to Scotland which reflected those of the Anglo-Normans in England. As part of his religious reform, the seat of the diocese was moved from Govan to Glasgow. Govan, now an area of Glasgow but then an independent

⁴ British Library Cotton MS Vitellius C VIII, f. 148r – 212r

⁵ Marsh Library V. 3. 4. 16

⁶ British Library, 'Kentigern Vita - Original or Scribe Copy?', 3 March 2025.

⁷ I use the word reform here as there is some evidence that points to at least three bishops of Glasgow in the 11th century, but they were appointed by the Archbishop of York and there is no evidence of them ever performing ecclesiastical duty in Scotland.

settlement, was the religious and political heart of the Brittonic Kingdom of Strathclyde until the end of the 11th century, with a church dedicated to Saint Constantine of Strathclyde.⁸ The reasons for the diocese seat move are unclear, but as Prince of Cumbria he may have been familiar with Kentigern's story and realised its potential as a reformatory tool – and it is possible that he thought Govan to be representative of the old, pre-Scoto-Norman dynasty which needed to change.⁹ David appointed the first post-reformation bishop, John, and work began on building the first iteration of Glasgow Cathedral, allegedly built on the site of Kentigern's burial place.

The Scottish Church was under the control of the Archbishop of York, but Bishop John refused to recognise his metropolitan status despite York and Canterbury both pressing Glasgow for submission. Rome intervened and ruled that Glasgow should submit to York, and in reaction Bishop John declared his backing of the anti-pope in France, a clear indication that both David and Bishop John wished for ecclesiastical emancipation from England. Bishop John died in 1147, and Bishop Herbert of Selkirk was appointed – commissioning what is now the fragmentary Herbertian Life. It is likely that this first *vita* was written as part of a campaign to raise the

⁸ John Reuben Davis, 'Bishop Kentigern Among the Britons', in *Saints' Cults in the Celtic World* (The Boydell Press, 2013).

⁹ Peter Yeoman, *Pilgrimage in Medieval Scotland* (B. T. Batsford / Historic Scotland, 1999).

profile of the Diocese of Glasgow by establishing an importance and significance to the settlement by association of a Saint, therefore contributing substantially towards a campaign of independence from England.

In 1175, after continuous campaigning, Rome eventually agreed to grant Glasgow “special sister” status, releasing it from the rule of York. It is during this time Bishop Jocelyn of Glasgow commissioned Jocelyn of Furness, an English Cistercian monk and accomplished hagiographer,¹⁰ to write the *Vita Kentigerni*. Jocelyn of Furness had previously written the first *Vita Waldevi* (Life of Waltheof) on a previous commission for Bishop Jocelyn when the latter was Prior of Melrose, successfully promoting the cult of Waltheof.¹¹

The impetus for the *Vita Kentigerni* commission can only be speculated. Because Pope Alexander III declared in 1170 that saints could be venerated unless canonised by the church,¹² and additionally because Jocelyn denigrates previous versions of the life in the introduction to his *vita* on account of their “uncultivated language” and messages which were

¹⁰ Jocelyn wrote not only Kentigern’s Life, but also the lives of St Patrick, St Waltheof, and Saint Helena of Constantine.

¹¹ *A Mediaeval Chronicle of Scotland : The Chronicle of Melrose* (Lampeter : Llanerch, 1991) <http://archive.org/details/isbn_094799260>.

¹² Yeoman, *Pilgrimage in Medieval Scotland*.

“contrary to the doctrine of the Catholic faith”,¹³ it is probable that the new version was created as part of the wider ecclesiastical independence and legitimacy campaign; the *vita* would show that Glasgow has the backing of a powerful saint. Furthermore, Bishop Jocelyn was also in the process of physically expanding the cathedral in 1181,¹⁴ which would require funding. Unfortunately, shortly after completion a fire broke out, requiring a complete re-build of the structure.¹⁵ The costs of original construction and the subsequent re-building could be raised by the creation of a Cult of Kentigern, again justifying the need for a new *vita*.

Jocelyn opens the *vita* with a description of his time in Glasgow, stating that he conducted extensive background research which involved analysing two existing *vitae*. One of these documents is said to belong to the cathedral and is described as “...discoloured by an uneducated language and obscured by a poorly written style” and “the beginning of the narrative itself are stories obviously contrary to doctrine and the catholic faith”.¹⁶ It is thought this is the copy which now survives as the fragmentary Herbertian Life.¹⁷ We know that the surviving document is not a complete document

¹³ Whiddon Green, ‘Jocelyn, a Monk of Furness: The Life of Kentigern (Mungo)’.

¹⁴ *A Mediaeval Chronicle of Scotland*.

¹⁵ ‘History’ <<https://www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/places/glasgow-cathedral/history/>> [accessed 6 March 2025].

¹⁶ Whiddon Green, ‘Jocelyn, a Monk of Furness: The Life of Kentigern (Mungo)’.

¹⁷ Helen Birkett, *The Saints’ Lives of Jocelyn of Furness: Hagiography, Patronage and Ecclesiastical Politics* (Boydell & Brewer, 2010).

because the surviving pages only cover the story until the birth of Kentigern, and contain a reference to a future episode which is now lost.¹⁸ The second document described by Jocelyn is said to be “composed in the Scottic style,¹⁹ which is filled with solecisms all the way through”.²⁰ This manuscript is now lost, and no further detail is known about it – though it is assumed that Jocelyn of Furness and the author of the Herbertian Life both used this document as source material.²¹ Jocelyn also mentions the beliefs of the local people, which implies some oral sources were additionally used to compile his work.²²

Two other (abbreviated) versions of Kentigern’s Life are known to exist, both contained in breviaries : the Sprouston Breviary from the late 13th century,²³ and the Aberdeen Breviary from the 16th century.²⁴ Both versions contain an Office of Saint Kentigern which appear to be derived from Jocelyn of Furness’ work, although the Aberdeen Breviary does contain an Office of

¹⁸ Forbes, *Lives of S. Ninian and S. Kentigern. Compiled in the Twelfth Century*.

¹⁹ Likely meaning written in Gaelic, but could also mean Cumbric – the native tongue of the Strathclyde region which was similar to old Welsh.

²⁰ Whiddon Green, ‘Jocelyn, a Monk of Furness: The Life of Kentigern (Mungo)’.

²¹ Birkett, *The Saints’ Lives of Jocelyn of Furness*.

²² Whiddon Green, ‘Jocelyn, a Monk of Furness: The Life of Kentigern (Mungo)’.

²³ National Library of Scotland, Adv.MS.18.2.13B

²⁴ National Library of Scotland, Sa.3

Saint Taneu which appears to have been adapted from the Herbertian Life.²⁵

Synopsis

The *Vita Kenigerni* opens with a prologue, written in the first person, describing how Jocelyn of Furness researched the subject matter and discusses the purpose of writing a new *vita* less than half a century after the Herbertian Life was written. The *vita* then moves briefly onto the story of Taneu,²⁶ Kentigern's mother, who is punished for her pregnancy by being thrown from a hill by her father and then cast out to sea when she survives, and his birth on the beach at Culross. Several passages then describe his time at a monastic school run by Saint Servanus and descriptions of his first three miracles, performed whilst still an adolescent. Kentigern leaves the school, guided by God, and settles in a rural hamlet which eventually becomes the city of Glasgow²⁷. Kentigern is made Bishop of Glasgow and lives an ascetic lifestyle. Several more

²⁵ Cynthia Whiddon Green, 'Saint Kentigern, Apostle to Strathclyde: A Critical Analysis of a Northern Saint', *Medieval Sourcebook* <<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/CynthiaWhiddenGreen-SaintKentigern1998.asp#St.%20Kentigern,%20Apostle%20of%20Strathclyde:%20A>> [accessed 15 February 2025].

²⁶ Taneu is known by many names across the various versions of the story, and indeed in modern Glasgow is known as "Enoch". For the purposes of consistency, I am using the name Taneu as spelt by Jocelyn of Furness regardless of which version of the *vita* I am discussing.

²⁷ "Cathures, which is now called Glasgow" – we only have Jocelyn's word that Cathures is Glasgow, although there are several places and geographical features in the area today which contain the name or some variant thereof.

miracles are performed as the hamlet grows into a town. Kentigern is challenged and mocked by King Morken of Strathclyde for his Christian belief and eventually leaves Glasgow after hearing of a plot to kill him, fleeing in exile to Wales. In Wales, he meets Saint David and is given authority by King Cathwalain to establish a monastery, which prospers under his leadership. After several years, he leaves Wales to return to Glasgow where he becomes revered. He meets Saint Columba, performs more miracles, and eventually passes away at age 185.²⁸ A table outlining details of the miracles described in this story can be seen in the appendices (appendix 1).

Themes and Motifs

The story depicted in both the Herbertian Life and Jocelyn's *Vita* differ substantially from each other. It is clear from his own words that Jocelyn's text is meant to be reformative and more in line with contemporary (to him) doctrine compared to the fragmentary text, and the *vita* does contain many examples of Kentigern acting as a proto-Cistercian monk, using Cistercian practices to challenge the old religion in the region.²⁹ Jocelyn himself was a

²⁸ Jocelin actually gives two ages – in chapter IX he states that Kentigern passes away at age 160, but in chapter XLIV (which details the manner of his death), he states he passes away age 185. For the sake of simplicity I have chosen 185 here.

²⁹ Whiddon Green, 'Saint Kentigern, Apostle to Strathclyde: A Critical Analysis of a Northern Saint'.

Cistercian monk, and would undoubtedly have been aware of David I's support of the Cistercian houses and would want to express Cistercian values through this story perhaps in order to stimulate financial support of Cistercian houses within the diocese – in a way mimicking David's own religious reform efforts, as Kentigern metaphorically battles with older religions.

Taking both Alwyn Rees' and Dorothy Ann Bray's lists of motifs present in Celtic saint hagiographies and comparing them to the story,³⁰ it is clear that Jocelin has rooted the story in the tradition of what Alwyn Rees calls the "ascetic hero".³¹ Using this established formula for creating a hagiography, consciously or otherwise, Jocelyn is ensuring that the story will be more readily accepted by the diocese.

Taneu

In the Herbertian Life, Taneu is raped by the Welsh prince Urien of Rheged (leaving no question as to whom Kentigern's biological father is), after she turns down marriage to him in favour of a local swineherd. The rape occurs whilst Urien is disguised in women's clothing, and he tells her that her

³⁰ Unfortunately, I was unable to access anything other than a review of Bray's Motif article, even via the library, so I am basing this on the slides that accompany the Hagiographical Motifs lecture.

³¹ Alwyn D. Rees, 'The Divine Hero in Celtic Hagiology', *Folklore*, 47.1 (1936), pp. 30–41.

virginity is still intact because “I have not known thee as a man is used to know a virgin”³². Additionally, five miracles are attributed to Taneu in this manuscript. Three of them pertain to the punishment issued to her: the wooden cart she is strapped to razes through the stone on the hill “indenting (the stone) as if it were melted wax”, leaving behind deep gouges; part of the cart strikes the earth and a “limpid fountain” sprouts from the ground; and her survival of the punishment. The fourth miracle occurs when she is cast into the Firth of Forth from a coastal village: the fish in the village waters follow her across the sea to Culross and never return, destroying the prolific fishing industry. The final miracle occurs on the beach at Culross: ashes from a fire on the beach said to have been extinguished the day before spontaneously re-ignite in her presence to warm her as she goes into labour and gives birth to Kentigern. All of these miracles seem to occur solely by her presence, as an act of God, rather than her consciously performing them – which could be an attempt by the unknown author of the Herbertian Life to show a family dynasty of sainthood without having her own miracles overshadow the ones later performed by her son, implying that she is not in control of the miracles attributed to her, whereas he is. The monks who find her on the beach

³² Forbes, *Lives of S. Ninian and S. Kentigern. Compiled in the Twelfth Century*.

inform her that because she was raped, her virginity is still intact. Taneu's virginity is stressed repeatedly in this version of the story, a pattern common across most female Celtic saints' lives.³³

In *Vita Kentigerni*, Taneu's role is diminished substantially and has little background story, other than informing the reader she is of noble birth and that she venerates the Virgin Mary so much that she wishes to replicate the immaculate conception and virgin birth. The conception of Kentigern is more ambiguous, with Taneu effectively being raped by an unknown party whilst unconscious after taking a drug ("lethargion"). Jocelyn explicitly stating that it is futile to ascertain who the father is ("Truly we think the matter absurd to inquire further as to who the sower was and in what manner he ploughed or even planted the earth, when by the Lord's goodness, this earth produced good and abundant fruit"³⁴). Furthermore, no mention at all is made of Taneu's miracles (other than surviving the fall). It is likely that Jocelyn attenuated her story to reduce her importance and to quickly get to the story of Kentigern after establishing his unusual birth, typical of Celtic saints.³⁵ He also states that "the foolish and unwise people

³³ Jane Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru / University of Wales Press, 2008)

<<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=7386140>>.

³⁴ Whiddon Green, 'Jocelyn, a Monk of Furness: The Life of Kentigern (Mungo)'.

³⁵ Rees, 'The Divine Hero in Celtic Hagiology'.

living in the diocese of Saint Kentigern still do not fear to say that he was born a virgin” – but by adding ambiguity into the *vita* over the conception of Kentigern he may be attempting to appeal to the laity in the diocese to accept this version, leaving a gap for them to fill.

Kentigern

Jocelyn repeatedly uses biblical imagery throughout the story, strongly linking Kentigern to Jesus Christ through reverence and imitation, but not in such a way to be heretical.³⁶ Starting with Taneu’s desire to imitate the virgin birth and inverted fulfilment of the wish, the story goes on to have Kentigern part water to cross like Moses, parallels with raising Lazarus in his miracles (the robin and the cook), and his green martyrdom with extreme ascetism and self-expulsion to forests for the period of Lent mimicking that of Jesus in the Temptation of Christ. In presenting Kentigern this way, Jocelyn is setting a standard for sainthood – saying that it is not

³⁶ Presumably anyway. The propagation of this text in the breviaries and into the modern age, as well as the multiple copies of it that exist, would suggest it was accepted. Also factor in the reason it was written in the first place – to reinforce Glasgow as an independent diocese approved by Rome.

enough to be “good” to become a saint, but one must be as holy and selfless as Christ was as well.

Numerous other saints appear in the story. Starting with Taneu and his upbringing in the house of St Serf, Kentigern goes on to meet Saints Fergus, Asaph, and most notably Columba and David – who at the time were already established as important saints in Scotland and Ireland (Columba), and Wales (David). David requests a meeting with Kentigern when he arrives in Wales, and later Kentigern is present at David’s death. However, Kentigern is not mentioned at all in any version of Saint David’s Life – and it is likely this is an attempt by Jocelyn to link Kentigern to David – who by this time had become the important patron saint of Wales.³⁷

Unusually for a hagiography, the text contains a direct reference to homosexuality. A candidate for priesthood is presented to Kentigern who immediately spies a “sulphurous flame” emanating from the chest of the man and he realises “what vice labours in his body”. After Kentigern delivers a speech on why he believes this is against the will of God, the candidate leaves and is later “struck dead”. However, a second candidate who is guilty of the sin of heresy has a substantially more graphic death and

³⁷ There is some evidence for the transmission of Kentigern’s story in Wales however, as the cathedral in St Asaph does apparently have carvings of a fish with a ring in its mouth (as well as more modern stained glass depicting the same thing).

is sent to Hell,³⁸ which may imply that the church viewed heresy as a worse sin than homosexuality.³⁹ Furthermore, when Kentigern meets David and Columba, the text seems to imply that the bonding goes above that of homosociality,⁴⁰ which could be something that warrants further research.

Kentigern's Legacy

Kentigern is still seen as an important figure in the city of Glasgow. Miracles described in Jocelyn's *vita* appear on the city's coat of arms (appendix 2), accompanied by a poem which all Glaswegian school children are taught:

"Here is the bird that never flew

Here is the tree that never grew

Here is the bell that never rang

*Here is the fish that never swam."*⁴¹

³⁸ "Tartarus"

³⁹ Brent L Kopfensteiner, 'St. Kentigern and the Sodomite: Constructions of Medieval Masculinity and Sexuality in 12th- Century Scotland', *The Department of Historical Studies, University of Toronto Mississauga Stabl*, Vol 4.Issue 1 (2015)
<<http://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/prandium/article/view/25693>>.

⁴⁰ The text takes on an intimate note when Kentigern meets these two saints – it's possible that I am missing some Christian context but it seems very overt to me.

⁴¹ I am unable to locate a source for this poem, but it seems to have been created in the 1800s. It's also not accurate – none of the things in the poem actually happen in the *vita*. The bird does fly, the tree does grow, the fish does swim, and the bell is never mentioned at all!

Kentigern's tomb is still present at the cathedral, although the reformation destroyed the shrine that once held it. In addition, the cathedral has several stained glass windows which portray scenes from his life (appendix 3).

Kentigern's story is also in a secular manner – with murals around the city depicting various scenes from the *vitae* and the presence of the saint on products such as local beers (appendix 4). Each January, a Festival of St Mungo is held in the city with both religious and secular events part of it.⁴²

Taneu's story is not so well known, her only surviving monument being St Enoch Square in Glasgow, which is said to have been the site of a medieval church devoted to her.

The story of St Kentigern lives on, especially in Glasgow, and although depictions of him and the reasons for using his story have changed over time, there is no sign of the end to the reverence he receives, both in a secular and in a religious manner, that all started with Jocelyn's *vita* and the building of the cathedral.

⁴² <https://stmungofestival.co.uk/>

Appendices

Appendix 1: Table of Miracles performed by Kentigern

Type of Miracle	Details
Revival	Revival of a robin and a man back from death
Restorative	Several instances of healing people, ⁴³ including some performed post-mortem
Punitive	Giving a disease (possibly cancer) to a pagan king who physically assaults him Punishing a cow thief with death (miracle performed post-mortem)
Agricultural / food	Sowing a field with sand that sprouts into grain

⁴³ “...for he restored sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, movement to the lame, and understanding to the insane”

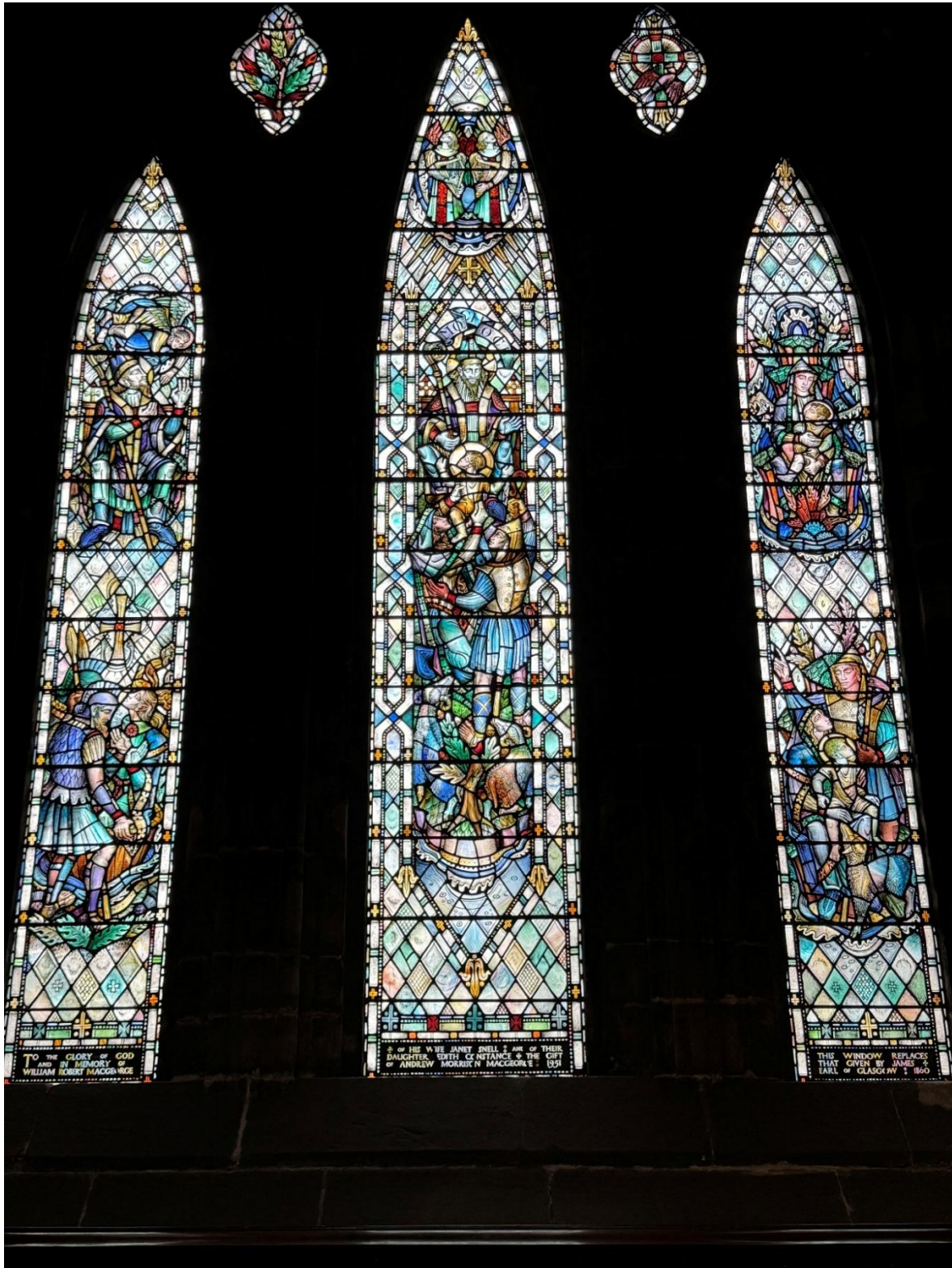
	Turning milk instantaneously into cheese Spontaneously creating out-of-season berries
Miscellaneous	Raising a hill underneath where he gave a sermon Parting of water Pyrogenesis Taming a wolf with speech Identification of a salmon that had swallowed a ring and subsequent retrieval of the ring

Appendix 2: The Glasgow City Coat of Arms ⁴⁴

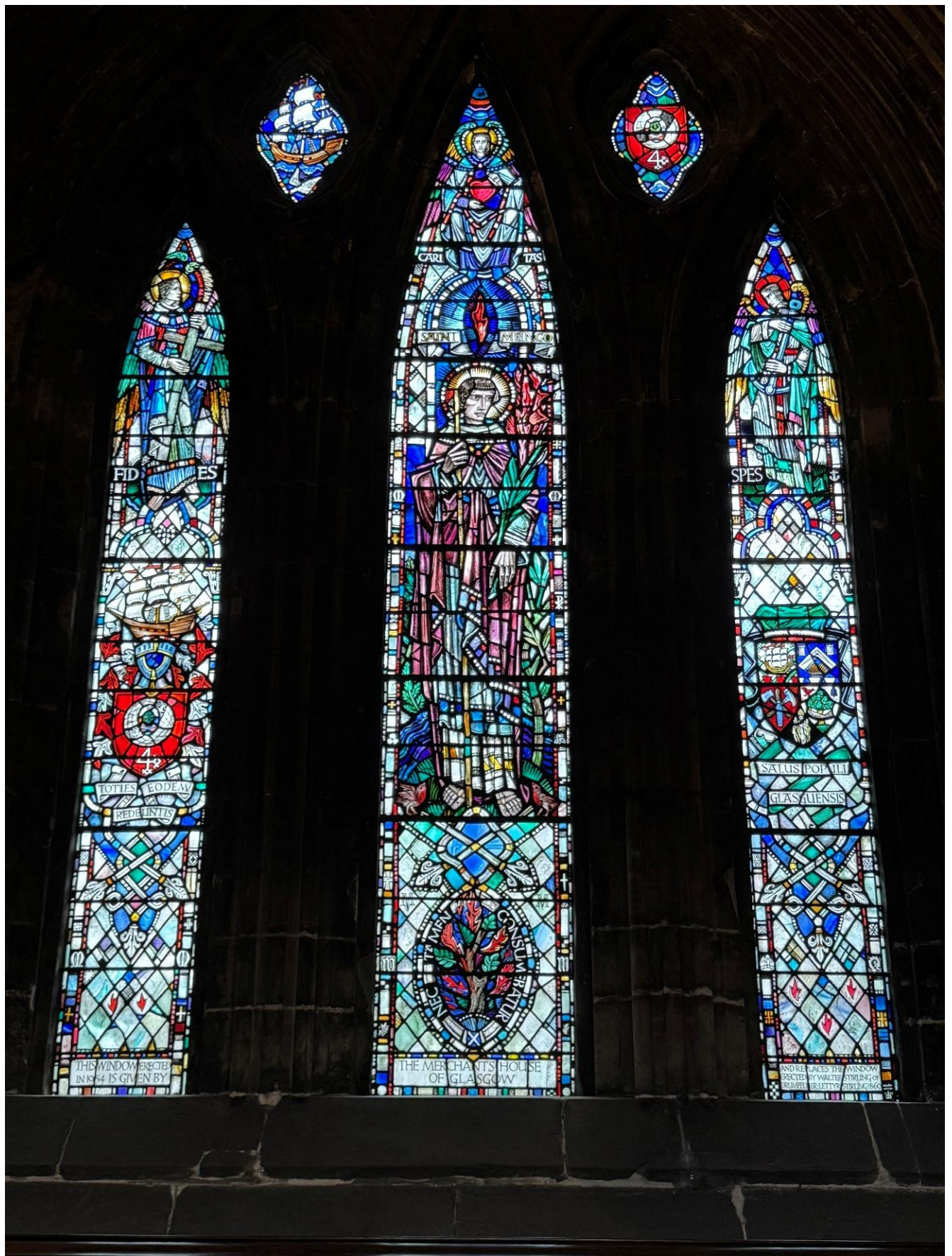


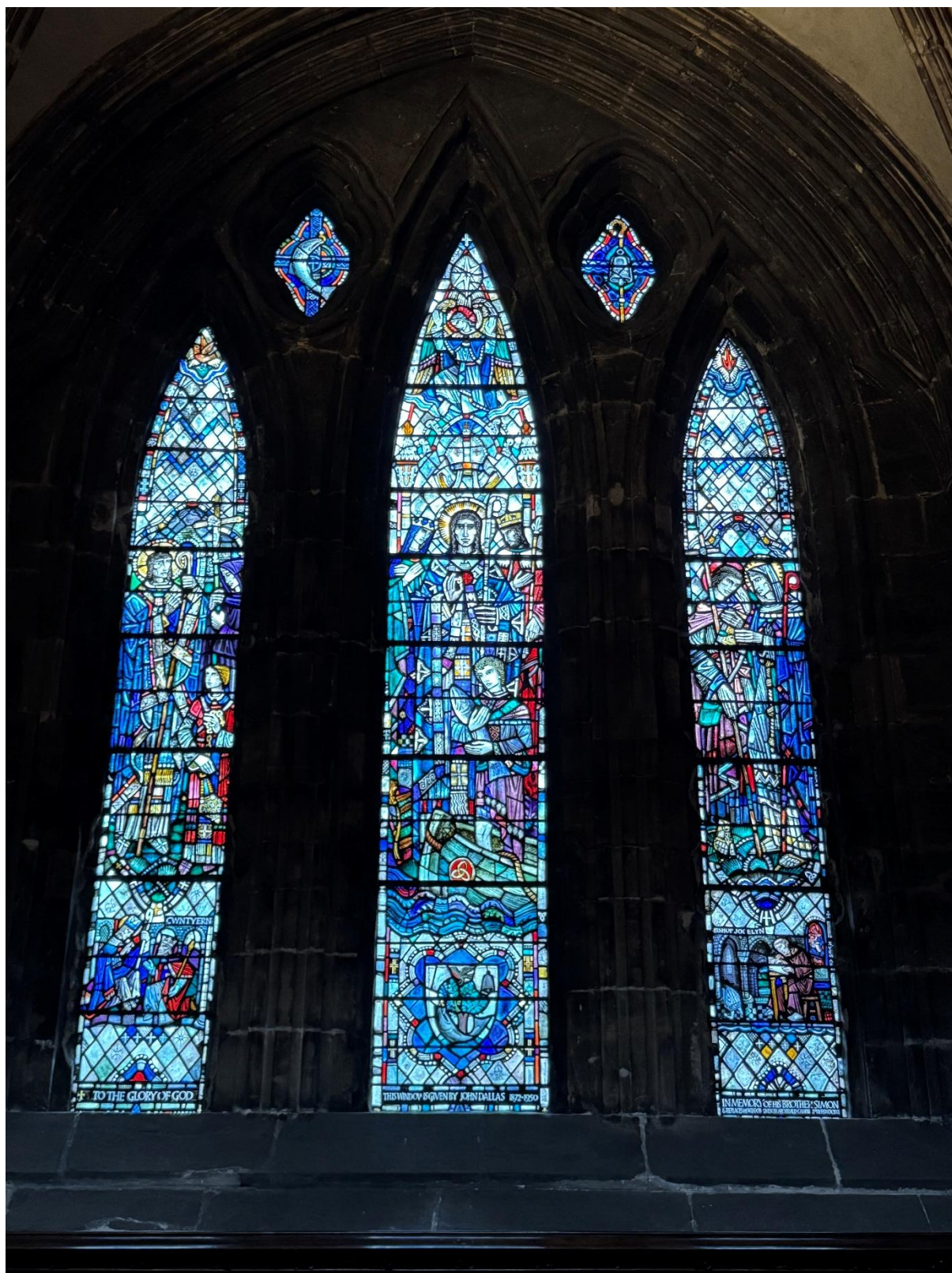
⁴⁴ <https://glasgow.gov.uk/article/6027/The-City-Crest>

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⁴⁵ All photos in appendices 2 and 3 taken by Stephen Taylor, 07 March 2025.





Appendix 4: Modern secular use of St Kentigern's story in Glasgow:





WE
ST

4x 330ml
CANS

St
MUNGO

Pure Heavenly
LAGER

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