

The Apprentice Pillar

What?

The extraordinary 'Apprentice Pillar', as it is known today, is probably the most famous and unique feature at Rosslyn Chapel. It is a column of stone, ornately decorated with vines that climb up its trunk in a helix pattern. The top of the pillar is bursting with a profusion of different plants, and at the bottom are eight dragons encircled around the base, chewing on cords that come out from the pillar.

How?

The pillar is made from sandstone, and was carved using simple tools such as a mallet and chisels. There is a famous story about how the pillar was made by an apprentice boy, hence its name 'Apprentice Pillar' (see over the page for more on this story).

Where?

The pillar is at the south east corner of the Chapel, partitioning the smaller Lady Chapel from the main part of the building.

When?

The pillar dates from between the founding of the Chapel in 1446 and 1484, when building work stopped.



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Why?

The precise meaning of the pillar is a puzzle that has teased many brains over the last 500 years. One theory is that the pillar represents the mythical Tree of Life, which connects and nourishes all forms of life. This tree is a widespread idea, found in many cultures and traditions around the world.

In Christianity and Judaism, the tree is the source of eternal and infinite life and it stood in the paradise that was God's Garden of Eden. (Eternal and infinite mean outside the world of time and space as we know it, with no end or limit.) In Norse myth, the tree is called Yggdrasil, and there is a dragon underneath called Niðhöggr which is trying to destroy all life by gnawing through the tree's roots.

The Apprentice Pillar seems to be honouring both traditions – the Chapel is a Christian church designed for Christian worship and the pillar is surrounded by carvings referencing the Bible – in fact, the Chapel has been described 'A Bible in Stone'. Just as the Tree of Life was in God's Garden of Eden, surrounded by all the life God created, so the pillar stands in the Chapel surrounded by Biblical carvings and depictions of flourishing plant life.

However, the eight dragons gnawing the roots at the bottom suggest that the pillar is also the Norse tree Yggdrasil, and this may be because Sir William St Clair, the founder of the Chapel, had Norse ancestry and was very proud of it. He and his forebears were Princes of Orkney, which was Norse before it became part of Scotland, and the origins of the St Clair family itself were Scandinavian.

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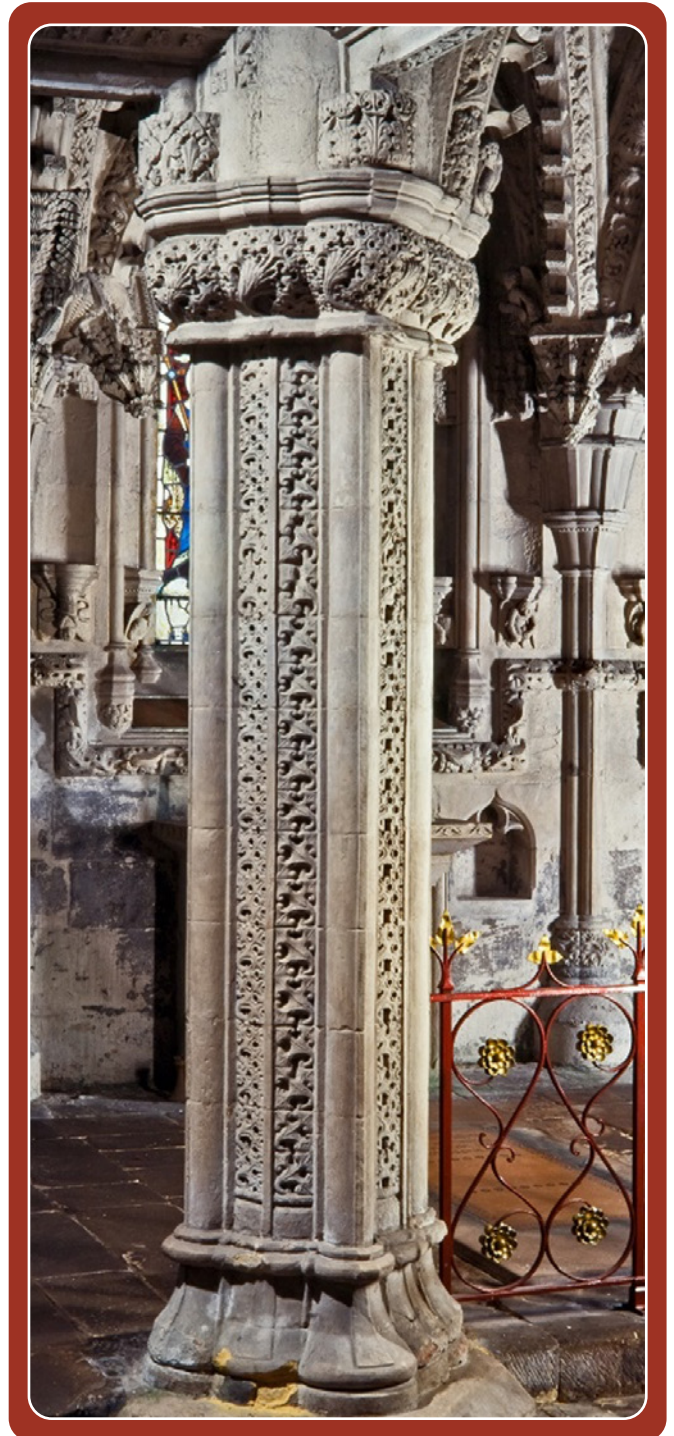
A Tale of Jealousy and Murder

The two pillars

On the other side of the Chapel is another ornately carved pillar, popularly called the 'Mason's Pillar'. Unlike the Apprentice Pillar however, the plants do not climb in energetic spirals, but in rigid vertical rows. While the Mason's Pillar is a fine example of stone carving, the Apprentice Pillar is generally held to be a more beautiful and superior work of art.

Background info

In medieval times, a skilled craftsman was called a Master. A Master was at the top of his profession, and respected for his work. This master would train up young boys in his trade, and in time they might become Masters too. This took a long time and a lot of hard work. When these boys were in training, they were called 'apprentices'. An apprentice would start his training young, at the age of about thirteen, and he would be at the beck and call of his Master until he was twenty one years old.



The "Mason's Pillar"

A Tale of Jealousy and Murder

The story goes . . .

There was once a Master Mason in charge of building Rosslyn Chapel. This Master Mason had an idea of how marvellous the Chapel could be, and he planned to make a beautiful pillar decorated with all sorts of wondrous leaves and vines. But when his pillar was finished, he was dissatisfied. He knew it could have looked even better – more beautiful and more alive – but it was his own skill and craftsmanship that had fallen short.

What he needed to do, he felt, was to travel abroad and see the amazing cathedrals of Europe. If he could study them, he would be able to come back with the knowledge needed to create the pillar of his dreams for Rosslyn Chapel. Sir William St Clair gave him permission to travel, and he left.

He was gone a long time. Years, in fact. And while he was gone, a lowly apprentice boy had a vision, in which he realised how this amazing pillar could be made. He set to work, and created the feat of stone carving that you see today – the famous 'Apprentice Pillar'.

When Master Mason returned, he felt he finally had it in him to create the pillar he wanted. Into Rosslyn he came, full of ambition and plans. Imagine his feelings, when he saw the Apprentice Pillar, standing there already in all its glory! And then imagine his anger when he discovered that it was not even a craftsman of high status who had made it, but a lowly apprentice! He flew into a rage of jealousy, picked up his mason's mallet, and struck the young apprentice on the head, killing him outright.

His fellow craftsmen and Sir William were appalled. The Mason was taken to trial for the murder and was hanged according to the law



'Apprentice's head' carving

of the time, but the other masons felt this punishment was not enough. They created an image of the young apprentice's head, with the gash on his forehead, and placed it on the Chapel wall as a memorial. And they made an image of Master Mason as well, and placed it where his gaze would rest on the Apprentice Pillar for eternity.

Is it true?

Probably not. The murder story of a mason and apprentice exists in many medieval cathedrals and churches across Europe, not just at Rosslyn.

Furthermore, the pillar was called the 'Prince's Pillar' before it became known as the Apprentice Pillar. However this story has been told at Rosslyn since at least the 17th century, so it certainly has a long association with the building. Who knows for sure?

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