Letter of the Scots to Pope John XXII (the ‘Declaration of Arbroath’)

The version that was most widely available in medieval Scotland

*This translation is of the version that a certain Alan of Montrose included in a collection of documents on Scottish independence that he compiled sometime between 1320 and about 1370. This became the most widely disseminated version of the Declaration until 1680.*

There are references in the Declaration to the Holy Land, the crossing of the Red Sea by the Children of Israel, and to Scotland being on the edge of the world. This can be brought to life an interactive way via a map from the same period as the Declaration itself, at <https://www.themappamundi.co.uk/>. This is a website about the ‘Map of the World’ produced around 1300 for Hereford Cathedral. This shows how people at the time saw Jerusalem as at the centre, and Scotland as at the limits of the known world.

**Translation**

To the most holy father and lord in the name of Christ, John, Pope of the Holy Catholic church of Rome, we his humble and devoted sons send kisses on his holy feet and all kinds of respect:

Duncan, Earl of Fife,

Thomas Randolph, Earl of Moray, lord of Man and Annandale,

Patrick Dunbar, Earl of March,

Malise, Earl of Strathearn,

Malcolm, Earl of Lennox,

William, Earl of Ross,

Magnus, Earl of Caithness and Orkney,

and William, Earl of Sutherland;

Walter the steward of Scotland,

William Soulis, the butler of Scotland,

James Douglas,

Sir David Brechin,

David Graham,

Ingram Umfraville,

John Menteith, guardian of the earldom of Menteith,

Alexander Fraser,

Gilbert Hay, the constable of Scotland,

Robert Keith, the marshal of Scotland,

Henry Sinclair, keeper of the king’s stores,

John Graham,

David Lindsay,

Patrick Graham,

John Fenton,

William Abernethy,

David Wemyss,

William Muschet,

Fergus Ardrossan,

Eustace Maxwell,

William Ramsay,

Alan Murray,

Donald Campbell,

John Cameron,

Reginald Cheyne,

Alexander Seton,

Andrew Leslie

and Alexander Straiton,

and all the other important people, and everyone else in the kingdom of Scotland.

We know, most holy father and lord, from reading about the achievements of peoples in the past written down long ago, that our nation, the Scots, was marked out from other nations for its many qualities. They travelled from the lands of Greece and Egypt by the Tyrrhenian Sea and the Pillars of Hercules, and stayed in Spain for a very long time, living among the fiercest peoples. Throughout all this time our nation could not be overpowered by anyone else, even by the most brutal peoples.

The Scots came from Greece and Egypt one thousand two hundred years after the Children of Israel’s crossing of the Red Sea, and won for themselves through many victories and very many hardships the places in the west where they now live. They achieved this after first driving out the Britons and totally destroying the Picts, and they still live there even though they were often attacked by the Norwegians, Danes and English. We held all of them off, and were always free from control by anyone else, as is stated in old history books.

One hundred and thirteen kings from our own royal line have reigned in our kingdom with no-one foreign coming in-between.

If the qualities and merits of the Scots were not obvious for other reasons, they shine out clearly from the fact that the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, our Lord Jesus Christ, after his Suffering and Resurrection, called on them to be nearly the first to become Christians, even though they are settled on the most distant ends of the Earth.

Christ did not wish them to be converted to Christianity by anyone other than by the first of his apostles to be called on by him (although the second or third in rank), namely the most gentle Andrew the brother of holy Peter. And Christ wished Andrew to take care of the Scots for ever as their patron.

Now, the most holy fathers who were the popes that came before you, considering these matters carefully, supported the Scottish king and people with many favours and countless rights because they were the property of the blessed Peter’s brother, Andrew.

In this way, our people lived until recently under the pope’s protection free and in peace until the mighty ruler Edward king of England (the father of Edward who is king now), pretending to be a friend and ally, attacked our kingdom when we were without a king, in an unfriendly way. He did this to us even though we were not involved in any evil and treachery, and even though we were not used to fighting wars or being attacked.

No-one can write about what he did, or understand it properly if they have not seen it for themselves: his unjust actions, killings, acts of violence, looting, burning, imprisonment of church leaders, burning of monasteries, robbing and killing of monks, and all Edward’s other outrageous and countless acts which he committed against the kingdom of Scotland, sparing no-one on account of their age or sex, religion or rank.

We have been set free from so many countless evils, with the help of Christ who looks after wounds with healing and cures, by our most energetic ruler, king and lord Sir Robert Bruce, who (like another Maccabee or Joshua) suffered pain and exhaustion, hunger and danger with a cheerful spirit, with the aim of freeing his people and inheritance from the hands of our enemies. He has become our ruler and king thanks to God’s purpose, Robert’s rightful succession to the throne according to our laws and customs (and we intend to keep our laws and customs even if we die as a result), and because we have given him our consent and agreement, as appropriate.

Because he is the man who saved our people, we are bound to follow him (not only because of what he has achieved but because he expects this of us by right) so that we can keep our freedom. And we mean to stick by him whatever happens.

But if he should give up what he has begun, and wish to put us or our kingdom under the control of the English or their king, we would immediately do our best to get rid of him as our enemy and as someone who has undermined both his right as king and ours as a kingdom, and we would make someone else our king who would be able to defend us properly.

Because as long as a hundred of us remain alive, we will never be put under English authority in any way.

It is not, though, for glory in war, riches or fame that we fight, but only for the laws of our fathers and for freedom, which no respectable person lets go of except with their life.

As a result, most holy father and lord, we beg you on our knees with urgent prayers, and from our hearts, that you remember with truth in your heart and pity in your mind, that there is no bias or favouritism between Jew and Greek, Scot or English in the eyes of God whose deputy you are for the whole world. And when you look with fatherly eyes on the troubles and difficulties brought by the English on us and on the church of God, we trust that you will remind the king of the English that he should be satisfied with what he has already (especially because England at one time used to be enough for seven or more kings), and that you will tell him to leave us Scots in peace. We live after all in a small country, Scotland, beyond which no-one lives, and we want nothing except what is our own.

We are genuinely willing to do whatever we can for the king of England, as long as this respects our position, if this will bring about peace for us.

It is necessary for you, holy father, to do these things. You see how non-Christians rage savagely against Christians (as is deserved by the sins of Christians), and how the borders of Christendom are being pushed back day by day. Far be it for us to say that you have seen how it reduces your holiness’s reputation if any part of the church suffers from weakness or wrongdoing during your time as pope.

Let the threat to the Holy Land therefore rouse those Christian rulers who, making excuses, pretend they are unable to go to help the Holy Land because of wars they are having with their neighbours. The real reason that holds them back is that in warring with their smaller neighbours they hope for weaker resistance and to make gains.

But God, who is aware of everything, knows very well how cheerfully we and Robert our lord king would go to the Holy Land, if the king of the English would only leave us in peace. We solemnly declare and make this known to you as Christ’s deputy, and to all Christians.

But if your Holiness believes too easily what the English are saying, and places complete trust in them, and if (much to our disappointment) you do not stop favouring the English, then we believe you will be blamed by God for the killing of bodies, the wiping out of souls, and the other tragedies which will happen, committed by the English on us and us on them.

Therefore we are and will be ready to make peace about all these things in which we owe you obedience as pope.

We trust the defence of our case to God as Supreme King and Judge, handing over our troubles to Him and strongly trusting that He will inspire courage in us and will reduce our enemies to nothing.

May God the Most High keep you well for his holy church, and may you be holy and healthy for a very long time to come.

This letter is sent from our monastery at Arbroath in Scotland on 6 April, in the year of grace One Thousand Three Hundred and Twenty in the fifteenth year of King Robert’s reign.