

# The Stirling Heads



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The text of this booklet is based upon that of *The Stirling Heads*, a monograph produced by the Commission in 1960 but now out of print.

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## Summary

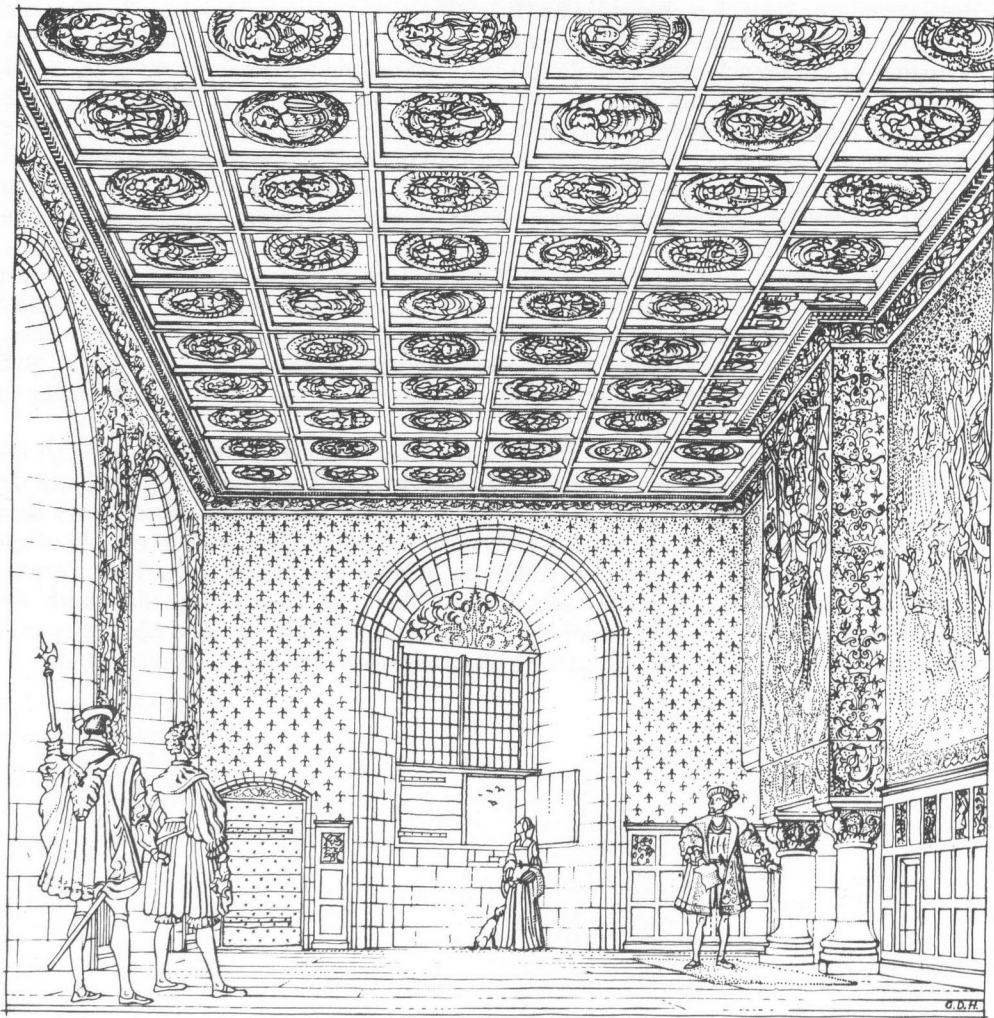
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The Stirling Heads are a series of carved oak medallions which formerly decorated the ceiling of the King's Presence Chamber within the palace at Stirling Castle. This palace was erected by James V shortly before his death in 1542, and its completion marked the end of an ambitious royal building-programme involving work at several major castles and palaces, including Holyroodhouse, Linlithgow and Falkland. During the course of these operations Scottish architecture was for the first time subjected to direct Renaissance influence on a significant scale, for following the king's second French marriage in 1538 craftsmen of the French court school were sent to Scotland for employment in the royal works. The Stirling Heads, like the similar medallions of stone at Falkland and the classical sculpture that adorns the exterior of the palace of Stirling itself, are one of the clearest manifestations of this initial and short-lived phase of Scottish Renaissance art.

Although it has commonly been supposed that the medallions represent the kings and queens of Scotland, the subject-matter is, in fact, a good deal more varied than tradition allows. Some of the figures wear the costume of the period and have highly distinctive facial characteristics, and these may indeed portray contemporary members of the court circle. Others, however, clearly represent historical or mythical personages, while a third group, comprising full-length figures rather than busts, includes Biblical characters. Whether the Heads were arranged at random, or grouped in accordance with some overall scheme of design, is uncertain, and about one quarter of the original complement of fifty-six Heads is now missing.

Following the partial collapse of the ceiling of the Presence Chamber in 1777 all the fittings were dismantled, some of the Heads being destroyed while others passed into the custody of the Stirling magistrates and various private individuals. Forty years later Mrs Jane Graham, wife of the deputy-Governor of Stirling Castle, made a study of the surviving examples, publishing the results in a book of engravings entitled *Lacunar Strevelinense*. Most of the Heads subsequently found their way into the Smith Art Gallery and Museum, Stirling, where they remained until quite recently, when they were again brought back to the castle together with others which had been in private hands.



*Conjectural reconstruction of the King's Presence Chamber, Stirling Palace.*

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## Descriptive List

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Apart from Nos. 12, 17 and 37, which are preserved in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, all the surviving Heads are now at Stirling Castle. Nos. 39 and 40 were destroyed in 1940 (cf. p. 19). In this list the maximum diameter of the complete medallion, or length of the fragment, is given at the end of each entry.



- 1 A man with moustache and beard, wearing a fanciful visored helmet which incorporates the hind-quarters of an animal (0.74 m).



- 2 A man with moustache and beard, wearing a flat cap with turned-up brim at back and sides, and in front a high-standing peak in which there is set a precious stone. He is probably intended to be an Oriental, a subject frequently found in contemporary engravings (0.79 m).



- 3 A man with moustache and beard, in fanciful visored head-gear. He wears a heavily stylised costume, the principal feature of which is the square-cut neck (0.74 m).



- 4 A man in armour. He wears a fifteenth-century sallet with the visor up. Representations of helmeted warriors such as this are found in many other medallion heads of the period (0.76 m).



- 5 One of a series of five medallions (Nos. 5-6 and 30-32) in which the figures wear a loosely fitting garment, reminiscent of the toga, which is tied at the shoulder with a conspicuous knot. Most of them have curly hair, moustaches and beards. They are probably intended to represent the heroes of Classical antiquity or perhaps the Roman emperors (cf. pp. 28-29). In No. 5 the border of the medallion is in the form of a serpentine animal which the figure grasps with both hands; No. 30 appears to be a representation of the same subject in reverse by a different carver (0.81 m).



- 6 The only beardless figure in the group of Classical personages discussed under No. 5 (0.76 m).



- 7 A man wearing a square-necked tunic with puffed sleeves; the hair is bound with a fillet and behind the head appears an aureole. This may be a representation of Apollo (cf. p. 29) (0.79 m).



- 8 A boy wearing a square-necked tunic decorated with a device in the form of a winged cherub's head behind which there are two animals, apparently locked in combat. The sketch in *Lacunar Strevelinense* (xxxviii) shows a number of fragments which presumably formed part of the border of the medallion, but these are now lost (fragment, 0.66 m).





9 A man with moustache and beard, and bobbed and waved hair. He wears a flat cap in which the front portion of the brim appears to be gathered at the centre with an ornament. The remainder of the costume is highly stylised, with the exception of the undergarment, which has a frilled neck and vertical pleats. This figure was identified by Blackwood<sup>1</sup> as James I, on the grounds of its supposed resemblance to a print of that monarch reproduced in John Jonston's *Inscriptiones Historicae Regum Scotorum* but the attribution is not convincing (0.76 m).



10 A man wearing a close-fitting cap, cut away in the front to show the hair which also appears below the brim; over the crown there is a lappet. He wears a cape with downturned collar over an undergarment which has an ornated round neck and two fanciful slashes (0.76 m).



11 A youth with wavy hair, wearing a bonnet, with downturned brim, which is placed vertically at the back of the head and rests on the shoulder; it is secured by a band under the chin. A running band of ornament outlines the crown, from the lower end of which there hangs a tassel. His garment, now imperfect, consists of a series of ornamented folds which follow the curve of the rounded neck. This medallion has been subjected to considerable patching; Mrs Graham's sketch in *Lacunar Strevelinense* makes it clear that the background was originally pierced, while in her time rather more of the figure appears to have been preserved (0.76 m).



- 12** A man with moustache and beard, and wearing a caul. On his head there is a flat bonnet, showing the underside of the brim, which is decorated with a band of running ornament. He wears a collarless doublet, open at the neck and turned back to show the shirt, which is gathered to a frilled and rounded neck. The doublet body is slashed and has puffed sleeves, gathered at shoulder and elbow; the elbow pieces are slashed and the lower sleeves, which are both puffed and slashed, finish in a closely fitting cuff.

It has been suggested<sup>2</sup> that this carving represents James V, and there is no doubt that it bears a general resemblance to that monarch as he is depicted in portrait paintings and in the 'bonnet piece' coinage of the last years of his reign. In the case of the paintings, however, this comparative material is itself secondary, and there is no proved portrait of the King done from the life; while the likeness that appears on the 'bonnet pieces' seems to have more in common with the figure portrayed in No. 13 (*infra*) than with the subject of the present medallion. The identity of the figure must therefore remain uncertain (0.74 m).



- 13** A man, bare-headed and with moustache and beard. He wears a cloak with standing collar, and a low square-necked tunic which appears to fasten down the front with round buttons; the neck and edges of the tunic are outlined with ornament. The shirt is gathered to a narrow ruff and rounded neck, and over it there is a plain chain which ends below the tunic (0.71 m).



- 14** A young man wearing a fanciful costume; his curly hair streams out behind him. The brim of the cap is in two halves, the front half turned up and the back down. The garment is round-necked and the sleeves, which are gathered horizontally, are slashed (0.79 m).



- 15** A bare-headed youth with tightly curled hair. The costume, which is imperfect, appears to have included an overgarment, a low doublet and an undershirt. The curved top and front edges of the doublet are outlined with ornamentation, as is the rounded neck of the pleated shirt (fragment, 0.69 m).



- 16** A woman whose hair is parted in the centre and shows beneath a rounded undercap. The head-dress has straight lappets and an elongated peak from which a fold falls to the shoulder. The overgown, the sleeves of which are not seen, has decorated edges and puffed shoulders; it is open to show a dress, which has a broad straight band of decoration below the breasts. The undergarment is of lighter material and has a high rounded neck with a string of beads immediately below the edging. Blackwood's identification of this subject as Queen Margaret Tudor<sup>3</sup> is unconvincing, but cf. No. 17 (0.74 m).



- 17 A woman wearing an English hood decorated with a lozenge-shaped jewel over the ear. The gown has a shaped collar which continues under the arms; it is extravagantly puffed from shoulder to elbow and displays a turned-back ruffle, belonging to the under-sleeve, at the wrist. The gown opens down the front with a broad lacing, while the neck is low and the skirt appears to go out sharply from the narrow waist. The straight ornamented edge of an undergown is visible, supported by two straps from the shoulders. There is also an under-bodice of lighter material which has a high rounded neck and a narrow collar.

In her hands the woman carries a dog wearing a collar. The greyhound was one of the favourite badges of the early Tudors and it is possible, therefore, that this is a portrait of Margaret Tudor, Queen of James IV and mother of James V. On the other hand, it is worth pointing out that none of the other Heads in this group bears symbols or badges (cf. p. 28), and the dog may be nothing more than an ornamental device such as is not infrequently found in contemporary portrait-paintings (0.74 m).



- 18 A young woman with four braided tresses, wearing a fanciful head-dress. The gown has wide puffed and slashed sleeves which narrow at the cuff and show the frill of the undersleeve. The low front of the slashed bodice is chevron-shaped and the undergarment, of a lighter material, is gathered to a low rounded neckline (0.69 m).



- 19 A woman wearing a close-fitting, turban-like head-dress. The costume, which appears to have been partly fanciful, is incomplete, but evidently included an undergarment of fine fabric having a low rounded neck, edged with ornament, and a diamond-shaped jewel between the breasts (fragment, 0.58 m).



- 20 A woman wearing a fanciful head-dress (cf. No. 3) and costume, the principal feature of the latter being the high square neck. Upon the breast there is an ornamental device in the form of a winged cherub's head (cf. Nos. 8 and 26)(0.74 m).



- 21 A woman with hair parted in the centre, drawn back and bound with a fillet; she wears a fanciful costume which leaves the breasts exposed (fragment, 0.53 m).



- 22 A man with moustache and beard, wearing a flat bonnet with a downturned brim; this may originally have been ornamented with a plume or feather, the socket for which remains. The costume, which is somewhat stylised, takes the form of a heavily slashed, round-necked doublet reminiscent of the garb of the early sixteenth-century German mercenaries or *Landsknechte*. The shirt is gathered to a chain edging at the neck and to ruffs at the wrists (0.76 m).



- 23 A man, bare-headed but with moustache and beard. The costume is similar to that of No. 22 (0.76 m).



- 24 A man with moustache and beard, wearing a cap the brim of which is in two halves, being turned up at the front and down at the back (cf. No. 14). His cloak is open and has shoulder-facings; the edges are turned back, and there is a fastening across the front which partly obscures the high square neck of the doublet. The doublet is ornamented down the centre front, and across the breast there hangs a chain composed of large oval links. The shirt is gathered to a high rounded collar (0.71 m).



- 25 A woman, wearing a fanciful head-dress which consists of a gable-like front and a reticulated cap with a tassel; her hair falls over the right shoulder in a long braid. The bodice of the dress is high and square-necked, the waist is encircled with a belt knotted at the centre, and the sleeves are puffed. There are indications of a wide skirt. Round her neck she wears a broad chain which disappears below the bodice (0.69 m).



- 26 A woman, wearing a fanciful head-dress which consists of a gable-like front and a close-fitting cap ornamented with leaves, and showing a diaper pattern at the top of the head. The cap seems to have ended in a tassel with two ribbons. The bodice has an ornated square neck, puffed and slashed sleeves, and a narrow belt at the waist, from which a full gathered skirt begins to go out. The undergarment has a high plain rounded neck, and over it there is a twisted chain which hangs below the bodice. Upon the breast there is the device of a winged cherub's head (cf. Nos. 8 and 20)(0.69 m).



- 27 A woman, her loosely falling hair parted in the centre and apparently secured at the nape of the neck. She wears a bodice of light material, gathered to a beaded collar, and with a high rounded neck. The V-shaped opening at the neck is fastened by a knotted drawstring (0.71 m).



- 28 A woman wearing a folded English hood, which has a jewelled gable. The hair is waved at the temple and gathered at the nape of the neck. The sleeves of the gown are puffed from the shoulder, narrow below the elbow, and show the ruffle of an undergarment at the wrists; two large wings are attached to the sleeves. The bodice of the gown is square-necked and belted at the waist, from which the gathered skirt appears to go out. The undergarment has a high rounded neck with a narrow ornamented collar. A narrow chain disappears beneath the bodice, while a larger rectangular-linked chain hangs over the gown below the breasts (0.71 m).



- 29 A woman wearing a fanciful head-dress reminiscent of a Phrygian cap, below which her hair shows at the back. The gown has a square-cut neck below the breasts, the shoulder is winged, and the sleeve is open at the back to show an undergarment which is pulled out between four cross-lacings. There are two slashes near the cuff, beneath which there appears the frill of the undergarment. This is of a lighter material and is gathered to a high round frilled neck.

The illustration in *Lacunar Strevelinense* (ii) shows her holding a flower in her hand, but this is now broken off at the stem (0.79 m).



- 30 Compare No. 5, of which this appears to be a reverse copy by a different craftsman (0.71 m).





- 31 This figure is distinguished from others in the group (discussed under No. 5) by the mask that adorns the right shoulder. The toga is gathered at the left shoulder by a cord, and there is a round-necked undergarment (0.71 m).



- 32 Discussed under No. 5 (0.74 m).



- 33 A naked man sitting astride and wrestling with a lion, wrenching the beast's jaws apart with his hands; two other lions approach, one on each side of the central figures. The scene could represent either Hercules and the Lion, or Samson and the Lion, and both subjects appear frequently in the engravings of the period. In view of the possible identification of No. 34 as Hercules, the figure depicted here is perhaps more likely to be Samson (0.71 m).



- 34 A man with moustache and beard, wearing a square-necked tunic with shoulder-  
straps, belted at the waist, below which a  
billowing skirt falls to below the knees.  
From the belt there hang bases, which are  
pleated and open in the front, and stretch  
to mid-thigh.

The shirt, which is gathered to a round  
neck, has wide elbow-length sleeves, gathered  
at the shoulder. In his left hand he grasps a  
kidney dagger, while in the other he holds a  
large wooden club which rests upon the right  
shoulder. The club suggests that the figure  
represents Hercules (0.69 m).



- 35 A woman wearing a plumed hat in such a  
way as to show the under-side of the wide  
brim. The upper part of the garment is loose  
and has a rounded neck, the sleeves being  
puffed at the shoulders; it appears to  
terminate at the waist, the lower part of the  
figure being covered with loosely flowing  
draperies. In her right hand she holds what may  
have been a sword, but of this there now remains  
only the pommel; the original blade seems at  
some time to have been broken off and  
subsequently replaced by the present blade,  
which is of metal. Her right hand evidently  
grasped some other object, all trace of which  
has now disappeared. It has been suggested<sup>4</sup>  
that the carving may perhaps be a representa-  
tion of Judith with the head of Holofernes.

This medallion differs in some respects  
from the other Stirling Heads, being smaller  
in size and carved in lower relief (fragment,  
0.56 m).



- 36 A fool or jester attired in the picturesque costume of his profession. He wears a hood, closely outlining the face and decorated with asses' ears at the sides and with a bell at the peak. The edge of the hood, which falls over the shoulders, terminates in points, as do the swinging skirts of the close-fitting tunic. Below, he wears tight-fitting hose and knee-length leather boots. Bells are affixed to the points of the hood and skirts, to the front of the tunic, to the wrists, and to the tops of the boots.

This seems to have been a favourite subject among the sculptors of the period<sup>5</sup> (0.69 m).



- 37 A dancing *putto* with ribbons (0.71 m).



- 38 A dancing *putto* with ribbons (0.71 m).



- 39 A man with moustache and beard, wearing a plumed cap and a cloak which has a narrow collar and is secured at the breast by a ring-fastening. A lion crouches upon his shoulders. The subject is presumably an allegorical one (destroyed, 1940).



- 40 A woman wearing a fanciful head-dress somewhat similar to those of Nos. 25 and 26. The gown has a square-cut neck with a chain ornamentation which continues down the centre front. The sleeves are puffed and perhaps slashed, and there is a knotted belt at the waist. The undergarment, which is of a lighter material, is gathered to a round neck, and there is a chain which disappears below the bodice. In her right hand she holds a flower (destroyed, 1940).

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## The Palace of Stirling

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The series of medallions known as the Stirling Heads, which formerly decorated the royal apartments of James V's palace at Stirling, are among the finest examples of Scottish Renaissance wood-carving now extant. James V was a great builder and did much to influence the development of architectural taste in Scotland. The close links between Scotland and France, strengthened by the King's marriages, first to Madeleine de Valois and then to Mary of Guise, led to the introduction of French craftsmen, who brought to the Scottish court the ideas and mannerisms of Classical architecture as understood in contemporary France. It is in the palaces of Falkland and Stirling, which were largely remodelled or rebuilt by James V in the last years of his reign, that the principles of Renaissance design first appear in Scottish architecture on a considerable scale.

The palace of Stirling<sup>6</sup> stands upon the highest point of Stirling rock and within the inner bailey of the castle. It was begun in 1540 and was largely completed by the time of James's death in December 1542. The building originally comprised four ranges, or quarters, built round an open courtyard, but the west quarter was demolished during the seventeenth century. The state rooms, however, were contained within that portion of the palace which survives, the King's apartments occupying the principal floor of the north and east quarters and the Queen's apartments that of the south quarter. After the palace ceased to be occupied as a royal residence in the early 17th century it was for long used to accommodate troops, and this led to the dispersal of most of the original fittings, including the Heads themselves and a small group of oak panels of similar style, now preserved in the Smith Institute, Stirling. The handsome carved stone chimney-pieces were allowed to remain, and likewise a few plain oak doors, but for the rest our knowledge of the original appearance of the royal apartments, and, more particularly, of the position occupied by the Stirling Heads, is dependent upon the accounts of writers who visited the palace before it was utilised as a barrack, or who derived their information from those who had been familiar with the rooms before their spoliation.

Macky,<sup>7</sup> writing in 1723, says 'In this Palace is one Apartment of Six Rooms of State, the noblest I ever saw in *Europe*, both for Heighth, Length and Breadth: And for the Fineness of the Carv'd Work, in Wainscot and on the Cieling, there's no Apartment in *Windsor* or *Hampton-Court* that comes near it . . . And in the Roof of the Presence-Chamber, are carv'd the Heads of the Kings and Queens of *Scotland*'. John Loveday of Caversham, who visited the castle nine years later, describes the apartments of the palace as 'large & handsome, roof'd—most of 'em—with Irish Oak, in large Sq. Pannels; Two of these Cielings farther set-off with ye well carv'd Busts (in Irish Oak too) of ye Kgs. & Queens of Scotland, as I suppose'.<sup>8</sup> Loveday's reference to a pair of ceilings, when other observers saw only one, is puzzling, and can perhaps best be explained by supposing that the room in question was sub-divided by a partition at the time of his visit.

In 1817 there was published in Edinburgh, under the title *Lacunar Strevelimense*, a volume containing descriptions and engravings of thirty-eight of the Stirling Heads, together with an account of their recent history. This book, which remains the principal source of information for the original location of the medallions, was in large measure the

work of Mrs Jane Graham, wife of General Graham, the deputy-Governor of Stirling Castle, and sister of Susan Ferrier the novelist. The text appears to have been prepared by the publisher, William Blackwood, the founder of Blackwood's Magazine and a keen student of antiquity, who concludes his account by suggesting that contemporary designers should apply themselves to the study of the Heads, in the hope that 'they may, in some degree, contribute to eradicate that taste for Chinese frippery, which has of late become so prevalent in all our internal decorations'.<sup>9</sup> Mrs Graham was herself responsible for the majority of the illustrations, and there is no doubt that the publication of her book stimulated interest in the carvings and led to an increased concern for their preservation. William Blackwood's account of the original disposition of the Heads and of their subsequent dispersal deserves quotation. Writing of the palace of Stirling, he says 'one apartment in this quadrangle went by the name of THE KING'S ROOM, or, THE PRESENCE. The roof of this apartment was completely covered by a series of rich carvings in oak, which were long regarded with wonder and admiration by visitors from a distance, and with a more affectionate species of veneration by the people of Stirling. The great weight of these ornaments occasioned the fall of one or two compartments of the roof about the year 1777; and, as the idea of repairing the whole (a business which might have been accomplished at a very trifling expense) was altogether inconsistent with the spirit of the times, the roof was immediately pulled down, and the room itself converted into a supplemental barrack. The oaken carvings, each of which had formerly occupied a centre of one of the square compartments into which this roof had been divided, were on this occasion dispersed among a variety of individuals'.<sup>10</sup> A number of the Heads, which had found their way into Stirling jail, appear to have been rescued by the direct intervention of Mrs Graham and were subsequently hung in the court-room in Broad Street; others passed into her own possession.

In the *Lacunar Strevelinense* there is a perspective drawing by Edward Blore of the interior of the King's Presence Chamber as it appeared before the destruction of the ceiling. Blore cannot himself have seen the ceiling, but no doubt Mrs Graham was able to find a number of people in Stirling who would remember it well enough to give the artist some idea of its general appearance. Blore's sketch is a careful one, and although it exaggerates the total number of Heads, it corresponds fairly well with the earlier descriptions of the ceiling already quoted. In the absence of more detailed information, this sketch has accordingly been used as the basis for the conjectural reconstruction of the Presence Chamber that appears on p. 4, the proportions of the room having been corrected by a fresh survey.

The drawing indicates that the ceiling was divided into sixty compartments, but the chimney-breast that projects from the south wall of the room reduces the size of four of the compartments to such an extent that they are unlikely to have contained Heads. Assuming, however, that each of the remaining compartments contained a medallion, there were originally fifty-six Heads—eighteen more than were located and described by Mrs Graham. Two more Heads have since come to light, while the remaining sixteen that are likely to have been in existence in 1777 presumably perished, or were lost sight of, within forty years of that date. In Mrs Graham's time, thirteen of the Heads were in the possession of the magistrates of Stirling, ownership of the remainder being divided amongst eight private individuals. It is unnecessary to trace the subsequent history of the

Heads in detail here.<sup>11</sup> Apart from three which are in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, all those that survive are now on exhibition within the palace, where it is ultimately intended to restore the ceiling of the King's Presence Chamber, making use either of the original carvings or of replicas. Two of the Heads described by Mrs Graham were destroyed in a fire at Dunstaffnage House, Argyll, in 1940; they are included here for the sake of completeness, and, since no photographs of them are known to exist, the engravings that appeared in *Lacunar Strevelinense* have been reproduced in scale with the other illustrations.

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## The Structure of the Medallions

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The carvings, which are of oak,<sup>12</sup> have an average diameter of 0.74 m, the largest complete example measuring 0.81 m and the smallest 0.69 m. In each case the main body of the medallion is made up of three boards placed side by side, each board being from 0.23 m to 0.25 m wide and from 0.05 m to 0.08 m thick; the joints, which appear to have been secured by glue only, may be seen in the photographs of Nos. 16, 22 and 29. The great majority of the Heads, however, are in part constructed in two-ply, an additional board or block having been placed over the middle board to enable the carver to model the central portion of the medallion in high relief. Nail-holes in the borders of the carvings indicate the manner in which they were affixed to the ceiling, while in some of the figures the pupils of the eyes are represented by nail-heads. Many of the medallions have suffered damage at one time or another and a number of them appear to have been patched up within the past century or so; in some cases small fragments of the original work have been replaced by fresh pieces of wood. In five instances (Nos. 8, 15, 19, 21 and 35) the central portion of the medallion alone remains, the outer boards having been removed or destroyed. It is probable that the ceiling was originally painted, and several of the Heads do, in fact, bear distinct traces of colouring. On the other hand, some, if not all, of the surviving colouring may be of a later date, since it is reported in *Lacunar Strevelinense* that, when the ceiling was dismantled in 1777, a number of the Heads 'found their way into the common jail of Stirling, where the taste of the prisoners found means thoroughly to disguise them, by means of white-lead and vermilion complexions, yellow hair, and gaudy uniforms'.<sup>13</sup>

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## The Carvers

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A study of the extant medallions suggests that they are not all the work of the same hand. On grounds of style they may be divided into two main groups, those of the first group (Nos. 1-21) being distinguished by their better finish, by their high relief, and by the extremely vigorous and spirited execution of the figures. Those Heads that have pierced backgrounds (Nos. 1-4, 6, 9-11, and 16) are of a particularly high standard. The medallions of the second group (Nos. 22-38) vary a good deal in quality, and few of them

approach the standard of the first group. In many cases the modelling of the figures is rather stiff and they lack vitality.

It seems likely, therefore, that at least two carvers worked upon the Heads, but unfortunately the disappearance of the building accounts for the erection of the palace of Stirling makes it impossible to identify these men with any degree of certainty. They must be sought, however, from among the craftsmen known to have been in the employ of the Royal Works at this period, and a study of such records as remain suggests the names of three men, any of whom might have been entrusted with the work. The best-known name is that of John Drummond of Milnab,<sup>14</sup> who was master-carpenter and master-gunner<sup>15</sup> to both James V and Mary, Queen of Scots. He is styled king's carpenter as early as 1527 and is known to have taken part in building operations at Holyrood and Falkland in the 1530s and to have visited France in 1538. A history of the Drummond family, compiled in 1681, states that 'he wrought for King James the Fyft the fine timber work in the Castle of Stirlin'.<sup>16</sup> The second name is that of Robert Robertson, carver.<sup>17</sup> He appears in the building accounts for Holyrood and Falkland, and in 1537-8 was responsible for 'the complet syling [panelling?] of the quenis grace inner chalmer' in the latter building.<sup>18</sup> In 1541, at just about the time at which the Heads are likely to have been carved, Robertson was appointed 'principale ourseare and maister of all werkis concernyng his craft and utheris within the castell of Striveling'.<sup>19</sup>

Both Drummond and Robertson were evidently Scots; but the third name is that of Andrew Mansioun, a Frenchman, who is variously described as carver, wright and gunner. It is on record that in 1539 Mansioun was responsible for the construction of the royal apartments in the 'littil new bark' then being built for James V, and for other carved detail about the ship.<sup>20</sup> In 1540, following the birth of a son and heir to the King, Mansioun was employed to carve 'my lord prince cradyll'.<sup>21</sup> He was evidently particularly skilled in the execution of fine detail, and appears to have worked in metal and stone as well as in wood, for in 1542 he is known to have engraved coats of arms upon pieces of the royal artillery,<sup>22</sup> while after the King's death, in December of the same year, he was responsible for some of the ornamental detail of the royal tomb and for the lettering.<sup>23</sup> Ten years later he was employed by Edinburgh Town Council to erect new choir-stalls in St Giles' Church, while in 1562 he was appointed master-wright and gunner-ordinary to the Queen.<sup>24</sup> Mansioun must have been a comparatively young man in the early 1540s and may well have been one of the group of French craftsmen that had been sent to Scotland at the time of James V's second marriage.<sup>25</sup> If so, he is more likely than either Drummond or Robertson to have been a master of the Renaissance style that is so characteristic of the Stirling Heads.

Since so little contemporary Scottish woodwork survives, it would be surprising if the hand of any of the Stirling carvers could be traced with certainty elsewhere. It is possible, however, that the Drummond panels,<sup>26</sup> now preserved in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland,<sup>27</sup> and in the Commendator's House, Melrose, are in part the work of one of the craftsmen responsible for the Heads. There is also a close link between the Heads and the contemporary stone sculptures that adorn the palace of Stirling. Some of the shaft-corbels that support the columned figures of the principal façades, for example, might well be by the same hand as the best of the Heads, and the same can be said of the chimney-piece capitals within the state apartments themselves.



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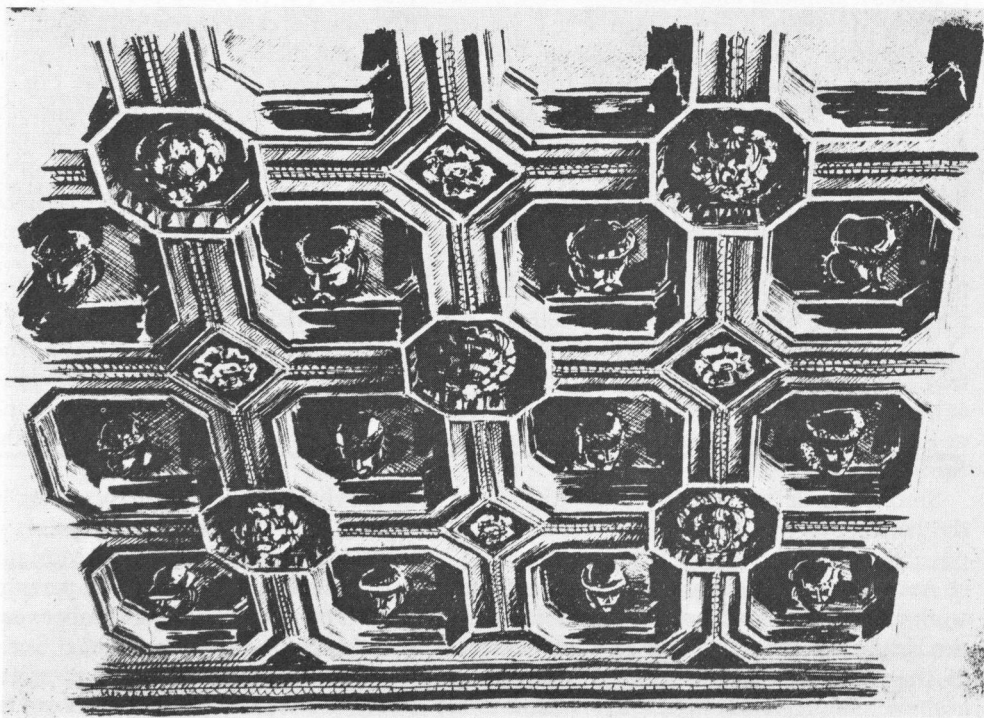
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## Medallion Heads

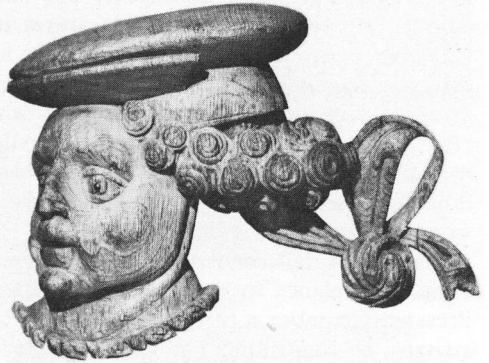
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The medallion head, usually a human head or bust set within a circular frame, such as a wreath of fruits and flowers, was a favourite decorative motif of Renaissance designers and was extensively used for both external and internal embellishment of buildings of the period. In France, medallions of stone or terra-cotta were especially popular as a device for the adornment of façades, as well as for the enrichment of lesser architectural features such as the pediments of windows and doorways, while one of the earliest and most notable examples of their use in this way in England is the fine series of terra-cotta plaques at Hampton Court, which date from about 1521.<sup>28</sup> The Hampton Court medallions were the work of an Italian craftsman, while some of the earliest Scottish examples, the stone busts that decorate the courtyard façades of Falkland Palace, were probably carved by a Frenchman.<sup>29</sup> When employed in schemes of internal decoration the medallions were usually of wood; they were used in many different ways but were perhaps most frequently incorporated in furniture or panelling, some of the best-known English examples of the period being those from the Waltham Abbey Room,<sup>30</sup> where the whole wall-surface was covered with woodwork containing medallion heads. The group of



*Conjectural reconstruction of the ceiling of the Ambassadors' Chamber, Wawel Castle, Cracow.*



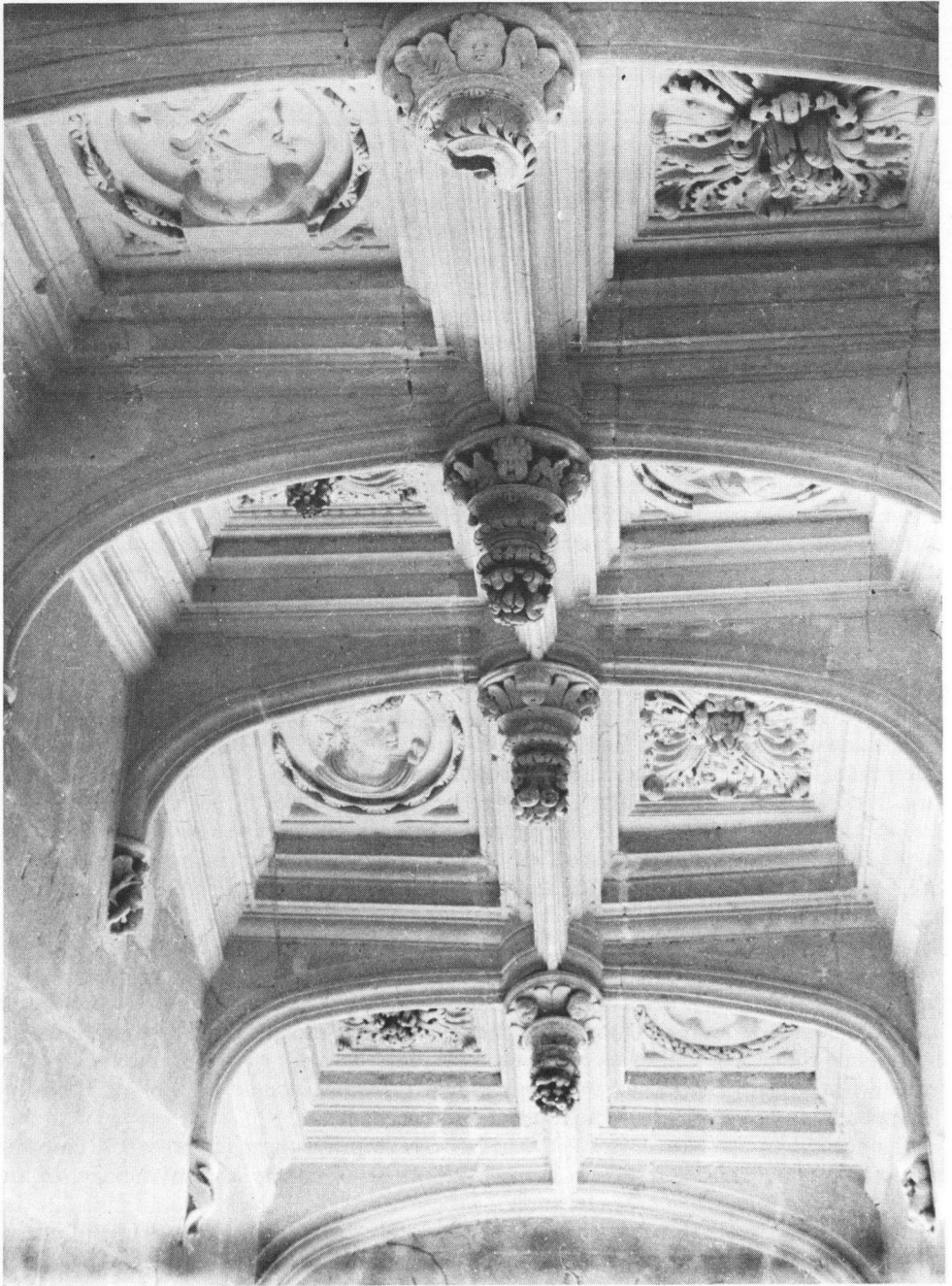
*Two of the Warwel Heads with (top) details of two of the Stirling Heads.*

oak panels from Stirling Palace mentioned above (p. 20) no doubt formed part of a similar scheme of decoration, and other Scottish examples of sixteenth-century date survive elsewhere.<sup>31</sup>

The Stirling Heads, however, are on a much bigger scale than carvings such as these, and, as already demonstrated, were originally incorporated in a ceiling—an unusual method of employing medallion heads at that period, although they frequently appear in the ornamental plaster-ceilings of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Compartmented ceilings having features in common with that of the King's Presence Chamber are found elsewhere in Britain at about this time, a good example being the ceiling of the Great Watching Chamber at Hampton Court (*c.* 1535), which is divided into geometrically-shaped panels, some of which contain wooden badges.<sup>32</sup> Remarkably enough, however, the closest known parallel to the Stirling ceiling is to be found at the opposite end of Europe, in the royal castle of Wawel, in Cracow, where Sigismund I of Poland erected a magnificent coffered ceiling, decorated with nearly two hundred carved wooden heads, in 1531–5.

Both in overall conception and in certain of its details this ceiling<sup>33</sup> (p. 24) bore a close resemblance to the one with which the Scottish king was soon to embellish his Presence Chamber at Stirling Castle, and just as James V may well have employed foreign artisans, so Sigismund I is known to have entrusted the bulk of the work to an East German carver, Sebastian Tauerbach, who was brought from Breslau for service in the Polish Royal Works. Both groups of Heads exhibit a similar variety of subject matter, some of the figures in each being represented in contemporary dress, and others in costume indicating that they portray subjects drawn from history or legend. Indeed, some of these latter resemble each other so closely as to suggest that the Wawel and Stirling carvers made use of similar source-material, namely engravings and wood-cuts of German origin. The Polish king and his master-craftsmen are thought to have been influenced by the design of a ceiling in the Castel Nuovo at Naples, where Sigismund's wife, Bona Sforza, had spent her childhood. James V's architect, however, is more likely to have modelled his ceiling upon French examples of the period such as the one at Azay-le-Rideau (*c.* 1518–28), where the stone ceiling of the principal staircase<sup>34</sup> (p. 27) is divided into square compartments each of which contains a carved medallion head within an ornamental border.

Medallion heads of the period represent a wide variety of subjects. Some are merely ornamental and portray figures in fanciful costumes, or warriors with decorative helmets, while others represent particular characters such as the heroes and heroines of antiquity or the Roman emperors. Many of the subjects were drawn from contemporary engravings, always a fruitful source of inspiration for Renaissance craftsmen. There is, for example, in the Victoria and Albert Museum, a series of four medallion heads<sup>35</sup> which originally decorated a cupboard door; in this case the carver took as his model a group of medallions<sup>36</sup> which is incorporated in an ornamental frieze by the German engraver Virgil Solis. Occasionally, however, the heads were intended to be portraits of contemporaries, usually those of individuals having some connection with the building in which the medallions were to be incorporated. At Haddon Hall, Derbyshire, for instance, there are panels carved with portraits of Sir George Vernon and his wife together with the date 1542, while panels from Beckingham Hall, Essex, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, incorporate portraits of Robert Beckingham and his family dating from 1546.<sup>37</sup>



*Ceiling of the principal staircase at the castle of Azay-le-Rideau, Indre-et-Loire.*

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## The Iconography of the Stirling Medallions

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It is against this background that the iconography of the Stirling Heads must be considered. The subject presents many difficulties, not the least of which is the complete absence of information as to the original arrangement of the medallions in the ceiling. Furthermore, as already suggested, it is probable that some sixteen Heads, or between a third and a quarter of the total number, have disappeared without record. There is thus scarcely sufficient evidence to enable us to grasp the general scheme of the design, if such there was, and the subject-matter of the carvings must be deduced from a study of the individual Heads that remain. Eighteenth-century travellers, such as Loveday and Macky, assumed, or were given to understand, that the busts were those of the kings and queens of Scotland, and this tradition has persisted up to the present day. William Blackwood, with more caution, considered that they 'were intended at least in a great number of instances, to represent individual personages in the Court'.<sup>38</sup> He attempted to identify a number of the carvings, but these attributions are, with one or two exceptions, unconvincing. No complete solution of the problem can be offered here, but a fresh study of the Heads suggests that, in subject-matter, they fall into two main groups, each of which will now briefly be considered. More detailed information and some further suggestions as to the identification of individual carvings will be found in the Descriptive List (pp. 5-19).

The chief characteristic common to the medallions of the first group (Nos. 9-19, 22-28 and 40) is that the figures appear to wear the fashionable dress of the period. One noticeable feature of the ladies' costume is the popularity of the English hood, a characteristic which accords well with Estienne Perlin's statement of 1551-2 that the Scots 'do not differ from the English, either in dress, conditions and stature'.<sup>39</sup> In a number of cases (e.g. Nos. 26 and 28) the costume depicted is somewhat fanciful, but artistic licence of this sort is a feature of contemporary portrait-painting and seems to have been common at the time.<sup>40</sup> A second characteristic of the carvings of this group is that the majority of the figures have carefully modelled and quite distinctive features (e.g. Nos. 13 and 16). It may therefore be supposed that they are intended to be portraits of contemporaries, but with one possible exception (No. 17) none of the Heads has any distinguishing badge or symbol, such as is frequently found in the paintings and sculptures of the period, and by which the portraits might be identified. Nor, unhappily, do there survive more than a very few authentic representations of contemporary figures with which the Heads might usefully be compared. Unless more information comes to light, we can do little more than agree with William Blackwood that the carvings probably include portraits of the royal family and of other members of the court of James V.

The second group (Nos. 1-8, 20-21 and 29-39) comprises those figures whose costume suggests that they either represent subjects drawn from history and mythology, or are merely fanciful or picturesque. In some of these Heads (e.g. Nos. 5-6 and 30-32) the costume appears to have been modelled fairly closely upon the antique, while in others the influence of contemporary fashions, as reflected for example in the square neck-line (e.g. Nos. 7 and 20), is apparent. The subjects portrayed have something in common

with those of contemporary medallion-heads elsewhere, and, like them, may derive from engravings. If so, however, the direct source of inspiration has yet to be identified, although it appears likely to be German in origin. No. 7, for example, which may represent Apollo, bears a resemblance to an engraving of this subject by Virgil Solis,<sup>41</sup> while the costumes and decorative borders found in other Solis engravings of the same type have affinities with corresponding details of the Stirling Heads. Again, Nos. 5-6 and 30-32, which appear to portray figures of Classical antiquity, may be compared with a series of engravings of the Roman emperors by H S Beham<sup>42</sup> which was used to illustrate a number of books at this period. The subject was a very popular one amongst sculptors, and busts in very much the same style occur elsewhere, as for example in the panelling of the Waltham Abbey Room.<sup>43</sup>

Six of the medallions within this group (Nos. 33-38) contain full-length figures instead of busts. Three of them, which appear to depict Samson and the Lion (No. 33), Hercules (No. 34), and perhaps Judith with the head of Holofernes (No. 35), may have formed part of a series of the heroes and heroines of antiquity, while the other figures consist of a jester (No. 36) and two dancing *putti* with intertwined ribbons (Nos. 37-38). The latter may represent 'lovers' knots', in which case the medallions were probably so arranged in the ceiling as to link portrait medallions of man and wife.

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## References

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- 1 *Lacunar Strevelinense, A Collection of Heads Etched and Engraved after the Carved Work which formerly decorated the Roof of the King's Room in Stirling Castle* (1817), 8.
- 2 Perhaps first by Blackwood in *Lacunar Strevelinense*, 7.
- 3 *Lacunar Strevelinense*, 8.
- 4 By Mrs E Frankfort of the Warburg Institute, London.
- 5 Cf. for example A Gardner, *Minor English Wood Sculpture* (1958), 30 and pls. 115, 120 and 121.
- 6 A full account of this building was published by the Royal Commission on the Ancient Monuments of Scotland in its *Inventory of Stirlingshire* (1963) i, 196–205.
- 7 (J Macky), *A Journey through Scotland. Being the Third Volume which completes Great Britain*, (1723), 187–8.
- 8 *Diary of a Tour in 1732*, Roxburghe Club (1890), 124.
- 9 *Lacunar Strevelinense*, 17.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 4–5.
- 11 More information may be found in the *Transactions of the Stirling Natural History and Archaeological Society* (1924–5), 166–71.
- 12 Fragments from two of the Heads were examined by Mr P S Green of the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, and Mr J E Cousens of the Department of Forestry in the University of Edinburgh, and in each case the wood was found to be the native species of oak. As this species is found on the Continent as well as throughout the British Isles, the provenance of the timber from which the Heads were carved is uncertain.
- 13 *Lacunar Strevelinense*, 5.
- 14 Cf. *Accounts of the Masters of Works*, i (1529–1615), xxxvi and index.
- 15 For the association between the trades of carpenter and gunner, cf. *ibid.*, xxxv.
- 16 The Honourable William Drummond, *The Genealogy of the Most Noble and Ancient House of Drummond* (1831), 62.
- 17 *Accounts of the Masters of Works*, i (1529–1615), xxvi.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 214.
- 19 *The Register of the Privy Seal of Scotland*, ii (1529–42), no. 4191.
- 20 *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland*, vii (1538–41), 189.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 307.
- 22 *Ibid.*, viii (1541–6), 127.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 143.
- 24 *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh* (1528–1557), 174; *Accounts of the Masters of Works*, i (1529–1615), xxxvi.
- 25 Cf. for example *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland*, vii (1538–41), 48 and 184.
- 26 Illustrated in *Memorial Catalogue, Heraldic Exhibition, Edinburgh* (1891), pl. liii.
- 27 Catalogue nos. KL36 and KL 37.

- 28 Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England), *Inventory of Middlesex* (1937), 32-3.
- 29 Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments (Scotland), *Inventory of Fife* (1933), lvii and No. 238.
- 30 Now preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Cf. *The Panelled Rooms, VI, The Waltham Abbey Room* (Victoria and Albert Museum publications, 1924).
- 31 E.g. at Pitfirrane Castle, Fife, and in Bishop Stewart's pulpit at King's College Chapel, Aberdeen. The latter are illustrated in *Logan's Collections*, Spalding Club (1941), 126 and 145-6.
- 32 Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England), op. cit., 35. Mention may also be made of two contemporary medallion heads of unknown provenance now preserved at House of Dun, Angus, which likewise appear to have been incorporated in a ceiling.
- 33 Fully described and illustrated by Anna Misiąg-Bocheńska, 'O głowach wawelskich i przypuszczalnych ich twórcach', in *Studia do Dziejów Wawelu*, i (Kraków, 1955), 139-93. Cf. also J G Dunbar, 'Carved Heads to adorn a Ceiling', in *Country Life*, 6 September 1962.
- 34 Illustrated e.g. in H Saint Sauveur, *Châteaux de France, Région de la Loire* (n.d.), pl. 40.
- 35 Victoria and Albert Museum nos. 798-'95 and 799-'95.
- 36 Victoria and Albert Museum Engravings E. 1791-1923.
- 37 *The Panelled Rooms, VI, The Waltham Abbey Room* (Victoria and Albert Museum publications, 1924), 16.
- 38 *Lacunar Strevelinense*, 6.
- 39 P Hume Brown, *Early Travellers in Scotland* (1891), 76.
- 40 Joan Evans, *Dress in Mediaeval France* (1952), 66.
- 41 Included in the Victoria and Albert Museum collection (E. 1791-1923). Reproduced in R Berliner, *Ornamentale Vorlageblätter des 15. bis 18. Jahrhunderts*, pl. 180.
- 42 F W H Hollstein, *German Engravings, Etchings and Woodcuts c. 1400-1700* (1954- ), iii, 221.
- 43 *The Panelled Rooms, VI, The Waltham Abbey Room* (Victoria and Albert Museum publications, 1924), pl. vi.



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Enlargements of any of the photographs of the Stirling Heads can be obtained on application to the Secretary, Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, 54 Melville Street, Edinburgh EH3 7HF.

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