

## A COSMOPOLITAN COURT

### THE MOORS AT THE RENAISSANCE PALACE



STIRLING  
CASTLE

The history of the palace is about the people who passed their lives within its walls – from kings, queens and courtiers to servants and soldiers. New research by John Harrison has revealed that when the court was present during the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, the castle and palace would have been surprisingly cosmopolitan. Indeed, the freelance historian has discovered what may be the first clear evidence of Africans at Stirling’s royal court. Mr Harrison has been investigating *The Bread Book*, an account of who received loaves from the royal kitchens throughout 1549 when the palace was the main residence of Scotland’s queen mother, and future regent, Mary de Guise.

On most days a loaf was granted to the Morys – or Moors – who Mr Harrison believes were probably either black Africans or Arabs originating from North Africa. “This is a fascinating glimpse of the diversity of the royal court at Stirling in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century. It was quite cosmopolitan at the time, with the French Mary de Guise at its head, and surrounded not just by Scots but by people from Spain, the Rhineland and what is now Belgium. There were a few English, but they were mostly prisoners. Just who the Moors were, and what they were doing, is difficult to say. They were quite low in the court hierarchy, but were part of the household and getting bread at royal expense.”

Hints have survived that there may have been Africans in Scotland even earlier, such as a poetic reference to ‘the Lady with the Meikle Lips’, in a poem by Dunbar, who has been assumed to have been black. These references are mostly rather uncertain, and may have other explanations. The importance of *The Bread Book* is its clarity at a time when record-keeping was still relatively thin. Just as fascinating is what *The Bread Book* adds to our understanding of how the court was run, and who had access to the queen. It seems that rather than acting like England’s Tudors often did, and taking her main meals in private, deep within the network of royal apartments, Mary de Guise dined in the Queen’s Outer Hall.

“Quite a wide range of people had access to her, not ordinary farmers but lots of people who were fairly well-to-do, which is important as she was working hard to build and protect the interests of her young daughter – Mary, Queen of Scots. Mary

de Guise was an intelligent, decisive woman and a smart operator. In modern terms she was networking, building contacts, hearing news, being seen and generating support. Just as important is that this tells us that she was part of a tradition that allowed a queen to work in this way.”

The years around 1549 were of enormous importance in Scottish history. Government was controlled by the Earl of Arran, who was regent, and the young Mary, Queen of Scots had been sent to France for her own safety as Scotland was facing repeated military aggression from England. Mary de Guise, as widow of James V and with an important influence on access to French money and troops, was hard at work building her political strength. This is reflected in the lists of people she entertained such as Arran, the Argylls, the Gordons of Huntly and the Kennedys of Cassillis. The records studied by Mr Harrison also show that Mary de Guise would lay on the very best cuisine for honoured guests. Some were even treated to sweets like gateaux – a great luxury at a time when sugar was an expensive rarity.

According to Mr Harrison there were also specific practical advantages in following the French style and eating in the outer hall of the palace. “It had the easiest access to the kitchens and was also the largest space. And once everyone had finished eating the tables could be cleared away to make space for dancing and entertainment.”

- The research was commissioned by Historic Scotland which is gathering as much information as possible about court life in the mid 16<sup>th</sup>-century to tell the palace story to visitors.
- John Harrison’s research has been published as a paper entitled ‘*The Bread Book and the Court and Household of Mary de Guise*, in Scottish Archives, the journal of the Scottish Records Association. Visit [www.scottishrecordsassociation.org/](http://www.scottishrecordsassociation.org/).
- The Lady with the Meikle Lips, may have been the Black Lady of a James IV pageant in Edinburgh. There are also references to 'Moors' in pageants, but these are thought to have been Scots who were costumed and 'blacked up'.
- In the 1590s, during the reign of James VI, a Moir (Moor) was associated with the table of the queen’s master household.
- The bread being allocated would have been white rolls called pain de bouche, which was for the upper echelons who at ‘at the queen’s board’ and which would have been made daily by a dedicated baker. Then there was pain commun for other folk, which was probably light brown, wheaten loaves.
- The range of people provided with bread by the court was wide. It could include lords and ladies, military officers, either Scottish or mercenaries from overseas, servants, muleteers and even the man ‘who dichts the place’ – the palace cleaner.

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